THE VICTORIAN AUTOMATON: TECHNOLOGY, AGENCY, AND FICTION

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation attends to the complex figure of the automaton in Victorian fiction. The metaphorical potency of this figure is based upon its conceptual instability; as either a machine that imitates the movements of a living being or a living being behaving mechanically, the automaton is an illusory, paradoxical entity that hyperbolizes the gap between what appears as autonomous movement and the obscure sources of that movement. This conceptual instability proves useful in nineteenth-century literary efforts to discover the nature of human agency in a world grown mechanically systematic and epistemologically opaque. At the heart of this investigation is the automaton as a textual phenomenon, an example of figurative language that thematizes the operation of narrative itself.

By paying attention to the figurative work performed by the textual automaton, this dissertation complicates previous cultural and literary accounts that reduce the automaton to a symbol of technophobic anxiety centered upon the dehumanizing effects of industrial development. I explore a group of texts that instead evoke the technological register of the automaton to interrogate the manner in which human agency had been positioned as the foundation of existential meaning and knowledge of the world. In so
doing, I supplement recent critical work on the relationship between technology and literary representation. I also contribute to discussions of how the Victorians conceptualized knowledge, particularly subjective knowledge of the human mind.

Finally, I offer a new perspective on the way in which narrative mechanics encode a concern with agency on the levels of both form and content. In this study, the Victorian automaton emerges as an emblem of the volatile imaginative boundary between the categories of human and machine; as a textual tool for addressing the mechanisms that facilitate or limit subjective, scientific, political, and creative agency; and as a symbolic figure that short-circuits conceptual closure, narrative neatness, and efforts to establish certainties about the constitution of human being.
Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge the guidance and unflagging support of Jill Matus, in whose office the idea for this project began. Alan Bewell and Audrey Jaffe have been insightful readers of, and influences on, this dissertation. I would also like to extend special thanks to my external examiner, Mary O’Connor, whose comments on and encouragement of the project were much appreciated, and to Danny Wright and Heather Murray for their thoughtful, suggestive responses to this work. The University of Toronto’s Department of English at large has supplied community and inspiration: I would like to thank John Baird, Nick Mount, Paul Stevens, Lynne Magnusson, Marlene Goldman, and Elizabeth Harvey for their good humour and unfailingly good counsel. Carol Percy, Katie Larson, and Jane Freeman have been professional and personal champions. Sangeeta Panjwani, Tanuja Persaud, Marguerite Perry, and Clare Orchard have been essential. Members of the Nineteenth-Century Reading Group and the Works in Nineteenth-Century Studies group, both based in the Department of English at the University of Toronto, provided inestimable feedback on my writing, as did participants in the Science and Culture Reading Group under Cannon Schmitt’s steadfast leadership. Librarians at the Robarts, Pratt, and Fisher libraries, as well as at the Library of Congress and British Library, were vital resources. Catherine Morrow at Library of Northern Ireland, Belfast was especially generous in her efforts on my behalf. Members of the Victorian Studies Association of Ontario, especially Anne Clendinning, Barbara Leckie, Matthew Rowlinson, and the inimitable David Latham, have been models of scholarly collegiality. This dissertation was written with financial support from the Social Sciences
and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the English Department at the University of Toronto.

I cannot fully express my appreciation to the friends I’ve made over the course of my graduate school experience. Eddie Kent, Daniel Martin, Gregory Brophy, Karen Bourrier, and Connie Crompton are gentlepeople and scholars. Andrea Charise and Simon Reader make food as well as they construct arguments. Claire Battershill, Cillian O’Hogan, and Tony Antoniades are possessors of infinite jollity. Alisha Walters has been an irreplaceable conference confederate. Emily Simmons, Erin Ellerbeck, Nick Bradley, Alexandra Rahr, Andrew Adams, Alan Galey, Jenny Kerber, Eric Carlson, Jean Cichon, Ted McCoy, and Dominique Keller have enriched my life in more ways than I can count. Petra Hroch, Carolyn Veldstra, and Dustin Atlas have been co-conspirators of the highest order. Daniel Newman has been a friend, an ally, and a fount of shockingly good ideas. Derek Douglas’s support has been immeasurable. Reecia Orzech’s timing is as impeccable as her advice is sound. Lila Knighton is entirely one of a kind. Robert McGill’s enthusiasms for literature and for living remain inspirational. This dissertation owes its completion to Jen Esmail’s friendship. I dedicate this to my family—Breid, Pat, Eoin, Neasa, Oisin, and Jen—who have been sources of boundless love and cheerful encouragement.
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Introduction: The Victorian Automaton

The explicit subjects of fiction are not the only subjects of fiction.

—Elaine Freedgood, The Ideas in Things

An important narrative turn in *Jane Eyre* (1847) takes place in the gardens of Thornfield Hall, in a scene set at the suggestive time of dusk on “Mid-summer-eve” (332). The sun-gorged hills are cooling in the settling dew, the air is scented with jasmine and rose, and Jane finds herself nearly overcome by the sensory excesses of this botanical surfeit. She is soon similarly overcome by the brooding, cigar-perfumed Edmund Rochester. In one of his more astonishingly manipulative moments, Rochester leads Jane to believe that he must send her away to a place called “Bitternutt Lodge” in Ireland on account of his impending union with Blanche Ingram. Rochester then blithely suggests that he and Jane sit and “talk over the voyage and the parting quietly, half-an-hour or so” (336). The distraught Jane, succumbing to a “vehemenance of emotion,” is compelled to confess the powerful nature of her feelings for her place of employment and for Rochester himself (337). Rochester responds to this confession by asking Jane to stay at Thornfield after all. Having not yet realized that she is on the receiving end of one of the most sadistic marriage proposals in Victorian fiction, Jane erupts into the following protest:

Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you,—and full as much heart! (338).

The significance of this moment in *Jane Eyre* lies in the fact that it is Jane’s first declaration of autonomy in the face of Rochester’s heretofore unchallenged dominion over Thornfield and all of its inhabitants. The novel has been building to such a declaration by tracing Jane’s progression through various stages of intellectual, spiritual, and affective development. As a result, this confrontation with Rochester, coming as it does at a weighty moment of seasonal maturation and diurnal transition, is not entirely a surprise.
What might be less expected in this scene is Jane’s invocation of the automaton as the figure around which her assertion of selfhood is constructed. An automaton, after all, is a machine built to imitate the movements of a living being, often constructed with the springs of that movement hidden so as to produce the illusion of autonomous operation. *Jane Eyre* shows little interest in machines; the novel as a whole is not particularly invested in exploring England’s industrial landscape, nor does it attend to many of the technological developments that gave shape to the contours of modern life during the first half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the reference to a machine amid the organic fecundity and affective excess of this scene approaches the incongruous. Why might Jane reference this particular technological object, of all things, in the heat of her impassioned outburst?

The first clues to the meaning of Jane’s automaton can be found in the passage itself. Here, the automaton is a figure of lack, a machine “without feelings,” or a heart, or a soul. Though it might seem obvious to describe a machine as something that cannot feel, the significance of Jane’s appeal to the automaton lies in the conceptual space opened up by this definition. In its resemblance to the human in form and movement, the automaton promises to make salient some essential set of differences between the mechanical and the human: what exceeds the limits of the machine, by this logic, is what can be counted as the purview of the human. For Jane, “poor, obscure, plain, and little” as she is, this modest, minimal account of the human is as daring a subjective claim as she can manage (338). It is only by establishing the automaton as a negative formulation of subjectivity, in other words, that Jane can locate the ground upon which to assert a positive formulation of her own selfhood.

At the outset of her protest against Rochester, Jane simply identifies what she is not, and what she is not is a machine. It is her very ability to articulate this distinction, to give voice to her heart and to her soul in a moment of critical, self-conscious disavowal, that seems to mark Jane as something more than an assemblage of mechanical functions. This distinction from the automaton forms the basis of Jane’s more radical claim that she and Rochester are equals, at least in their spiritual and affective aspects. “I am a free human being with an independent will,” she further contends, “which I now exert to leave you” (338). In this way, the automaton holds in place the edges of a selfhood that Jane
initially imagines in terms of an oppositional relationship to all the machine represents. The automaton thus provides Jane with a strange but important purchase on her own autonomy that is based upon the machine’s constitutive lack of the same. Just as it forms the ground for Jane’s claim to selfhood, however, the figure of the automaton also consolidates Jane’s recurrent anxiety about being seen as something less than human by those upon whom she depends for her very basic living. Jane’s suspicion that Rochester thinks of her as a kind of mechanical object derives in no small part from his tendency to dehumanize those who impinge upon his own freedom. A pointed example can be found in Adele, the young Parisian who may or may not be Rochester’s daughter. In an explanation of how he has come to be Adele’s grudging guardian, Rochester describes rescuing the youngster after her mother’s death: “I e’en took the poor thing out of the slime and mud of Paris, and transplanted it here, to grow up clean in the wholesome soil of an English country garden. Mrs. Fairfax found you to train it; but now you know that it is the illegitimate offspring of a French opera-girl, you will perhaps think differently of your post and protégée” (218). Rochester’s reduction of young Adele to a plant-like “thing” as a result of her questionable birth, her impoverishment, and her status as an orphan is a cruel challenge to Jane’s sympathy for the child that exploits Jane’s own precarious, abject position as an impoverished orphan.

Rochester’s demeaning portrait of Adele is not the only instance in which the boundary between subject and object is blurred to dehumanizing effect in Jane Eyre. Jane is first sensitized to the feeling of being considered sub-human while living at Gateshead-hall as a child, where she finds herself excluded from the familial dynamic. Though a close relation of the Reed family, Jane is not one of them, and she retroactively interprets her estrangement from them in terms of a “thingness” that anticipates Rochester’s description of Adele:

They were not bound to regard with affection a thing that could not sympathise with one amongst them; a heterogeneous thing, opposed to them in temperament, in capacity, in propensities; a useless thing, incapable of serving their interest, or adding to their pleasure; a noxious thing, cherishing the germs of indignation at their treatment, of contempt of their judgment. (73)
The absence of an affective connection with anyone in the Reed family at Gateshead leaves Jane feeling like “an uncongenial alien,” and it is this sense of fundamental disconnection from family and community that lies beneath her paranoid reference to the automaton in her confrontation with Rochester (74).

From this perspective, Jane’s resistance to being misrecognized as an automaton is a repudiation of her long-standing sense of being somehow less than human, of feeling like an object rather than a subject. Her declaration of autonomy before Rochester is an important moment for the many critical takes on *Jane Eyre* that emphasize Jane’s power of self-creation, her self-discipline, and her self-mastery, including Elaine Freedgood’s assertion that the novel is “something of an owner’s manual for the modern self” (46). And yet, the illusory quality of the automaton haunts Jane’s declaration. Though the automaton gives the impression of operating independently, albeit without the faculties of feeling or a soul, its actions are determined by the mechanical circuits that drive its movement and by the mechanic who built those circuits. In the same way, Jane’s apparent self-reliance disguises the network of social and personal forces that motivate her affective being and her decision-making process. Her very sensitivity to being “dependent and friendless” in the world, for example, has been shaped by the work of those negligent caretakers whose reach she continually strives to escape (73).

Furthermore, her declaration of autonomy is a reactionary response to Rochester’s merciless manipulation of her economic and emotional vulnerability. Finally, Jane’s outburst is the outcome of her inability to contain her own emotions at the prospect of having to leave Thornfield: she speaks “almost involuntarily” and falls to weeping “with as little sanction of free will” (336). The illusory aspect of the automaton draws attention to the fact that the fantasy of subjective autonomy for Jane is just that—a fantasy.

Although Jane converts her affective lability into insurance against the charge of being an unfeeling machine, her outpouring of emotion connects her in a paradoxical way to several further mentions of the automaton in the novel. The unexpected arrival of Richard Mason at Thornfield causes Rochester to repetitively stutter the man’s name “in the tone one might fancy a speaking automaton to enounce its single words” (284). This reduction of Rochester, the ultimate figure of paternalistic domination in the novel, to an impoverished, mechanical imitation of a human being is as trenchant as it is poignant.
Later, as St. John Rivers struggles to suppress his unrequited feelings for Rosamond Oliver in order to turn down an invitation to dinner with her, he speaks “almost like an automaton: himself only knew the effort it cost him thus to refuse” (461). Like Rochester, Rivers is a despotic figure who pressures Jane into adopting a course of life that she must resist in order to discover and assert her own sense of self; his capitulation to a mechanical performance of speech momentarily levels the strident missionary and the orphan governess. In both of these instances, more importantly, the seemingly mechanical quality of the automaton-effect is the result of an excess, rather than an absence, of emotion. A performance of automatism, these examples suggest, might belie the fullness of an affective life just as easily as it counterfeits a willful one.

In *Jane Eyre*, therefore, the automaton is a complex, contradictory figure, laced with irony and reversal. It is at once an index of stunted, attenuated subjectivity and the grounds upon which that abbreviated subjectivity can be expanded. It represents an absence of affective life with as much facility as it marks moments of overwhelming emotion. It positions the human subject as an abject isolate while simultaneously positing the human subject’s immersion in sociality as a primary constitutive aspect of that isolation. It disrupts any useful sense in which a subjective interior might be conceptually disentangled from exterior structures of social power and existential circumstance. Finally, the automaton suggests that a provisional definition of subjectivity is mandated by the very fact that the boundary between subject and object is always a matter of context, exigent and ephemeral.

I offer a reading of *Jane Eyre*’s evocations of the automaton by way of introduction to this project in order to establish the metaphorical potency of the figure. Although a great deal of critical attention has been paid to Jane’s speech to Rochester, the destabilizing figurative operation of the automaton in that speech remains under-read. If the automaton in the passage is noticed at all, it is generally taken to indicate a simple antithesis of Jane’s desire and willfulness. M. A. Blom, for example, understands the automaton as referencing a mechanistic subjectivity that signals Jane’s unconscious “misgivings about a union which threatens her selfhood” (390). For Ruth Yeazell, Jane’s mention of the automaton forms an uncomplicated part of her “vehement declaration of equality” to Rochester (132). Sandra Gilbert sees Jane’s automaton as a similarly
straightforward assertion of selfhood, part of “the indecorous demeanor with which she confesses her feelings to Rochester while rebuking what she considers his indifference” (356). Even those analyses that view Jane’s rebellious proto-feminism with some suspicion, particularly in the wake of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s critique of Jane’s transformation into a bourgeois “individualist,” fall short of recognizing the automaton’s role in complicating the notion of human agency in the novel (244). In her analysis of *Jane Eyre* as “archetypal feminist document,” Bette London argues that Jane’s “outspoken self-assertion” is actually “the effect of scrupulous observance of a position of silent self-abnegation” (198, 203). Jane’s outburst to Rochester “comes as the culmination and necessary consequence of Jane’s enforced self-suppression, her performed automatism” (203). Despite London’s carefully substantiated claim that *Jane Eyre* is “as much a study in subjection as in subjecthood,” the automaton in her analysis remains otherwise inert (199).

How, then, might this moment of critical orientation serve as a starting point for the development of a more nuanced understanding of the automaton in Victorian fiction? To what extent can Jane’s automaton be considered representative? What other figurative meanings attached to the Victorian automaton remain to be explored? From where does the ambiguous, volatile polysemy of the automaton derive? In a fundamental sense, this dissertation aims to contribute to recent debates about the ways in which Victorians conceptualized knowledge, particularly subjective knowledge of the human mind. I explore how the automaton—the mechanical semblance of a living being—was used as a figurative tool with which to assess affective, scientific, political, and aesthetic ways of knowing others and the self in the increasingly technological environment of Victorian Britain. As a built figure that superficially resembles a human being but disguises within itself the mechanical principles of its own movement, the automaton is both an emblem of creative production and a reminder that external appearance can bear a dissembling relationship to internal motivation. The automaton, from this perspective, represents the possibility of revealing the objective laws that govern natural phenomena, of creating a world in which rational thought transcends biological imperative, and of holding human will and agency as ultimate sources of meaning, knowledge, and historical change. At the same time, however, the automaton signals the futility of imagining that certain limits of
human knowledge can be overcome: despite all the technological, social, and scientific innovations of the nineteenth century, the figure of the automaton was deployed by writers as a reminder that human beings remained radically unknowable to one another and to themselves. At the heart of this investigation is the automaton as a textual phenomenon, an example of figurative language that abets imaginative expression and thematizes the mechanical operation of narrative itself.

By paying attention to the epistemological work performed by the figurative automaton, I complicate previous cultural and literary accounts that reduce the automaton to a symbol of technophobic anxiety centered upon the dehumanizing effects of modern industrial development. I explore a group of texts that instead evoke the technological register of the automaton in order to trace the radical alterity of human subjectivity through a specific interest in the operation of individual agency. This exploration stands at the intersection of a number of critical veins: the turn towards an interest in material objects or “thing” theory, as instantiated by Arjun Appadurai’s edited collection, The Social Life of Things (1986);¹ the study of nineteenth-century technology’s cultural character, as evinced in the works of Leo Marx, Herbert Sussman, and Friedrich Kittler;² and explorations of the Victorian mind-body problem, articulated most recently in literary terms in texts such as William Cohen’s Embodied (2009) and Anna Neill’s Primitive Minds: Evolution and Spiritual Experience in the Victorian Novel (2013).³

¹ The critical interest in the lives of things has also been promulgated by Lorraine Daston’s edited collections, Biographies of Scientific Objects (2000) and Things that Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science (2004). The theoretical framework for exploring nineteenth-century things has been constructed in words such as Asa Briggs’s Victorian Things (1989), Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory” and A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature (2003), and Elaine Freedgood’s The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel (2006). In “The Material Turn in Victorian Studies,” Lyn Pykett provides a succinct overview of how this critical interest has developed over the last several decades.
³ The emergence of the mind-body relationship as an object of examination in the nineteenth century is analyzed in many studies interested in the disciplinary formation of psychology in that century, a small survey of which would include Jenny Bourne Taylor’s works, beginning with In the Secret Theatre of
The automaton finds a qualified frame for elaboration each of these critical veins. In the first place, the automaton is a material object possessed of a long history, and so it seems prime for investigation according to Freedgood’s thing-based literary method “in which the historically and theoretically overdetermined material characteristics of objects are sought out beyond the immediate context in which they appear” (5-6). At the same time, the critical orientation of object studies and “thing” theory remains closely tied to the object’s worldly function as commodity, a classification which the automaton resists. As Catherine Liu explains, the automaton “is a preindustrial, nonproductive machine that still has a relationship to the machines of the Ancients. It inspires both automation and mass production, but it ends up as one of the Industrial Revolution’s mechanical victims. Its obsolescence is guaranteed by the virtual impossibility of its mass reproduction” (x). Neither a proper figure of consumption nor a recognizable result of commodity production, the automaton slips the reins of object-ness and lingers in a space defined as much by imagination and fantasy as by material historicity.

The automaton’s equivocal status as textual “thing” mirrors its complex relationship to the category of “technology.” The automaton is a machine, of course, in the sense that it is composed of moving parts driven by the application of mechanical power. However, the uniquely representative function of the automaton separates the figure from the machines, systems, and efficiencies of which Victorian technology is comprised. In Andrew Zimmerman’s estimation, the automaton “cannot be classified as equipment in the same way as a machine for commodity production can, for it does not possess the structure of ‘in-order-to.’ . . . The automaton is not a means of production (or of anything else, for that matter), but rather an aesthetic object” (16). Even more significantly, the automaton challenges accounts of Victorian technology that emphasize the nineteenth-century shift from conceiving of the world as “solid matter” to thinking about that matter as “flowing energy,” in Lewis Mumford’s terms (217). Whether with regard to the telegraph or telepathy, the global circulation of resources or automatic

writing, critical interest in technology of the period has recently and rightly attended to the flow of information, matter, and energy engendered by Victorian machines. The automaton, by contrast, is a resistant node in these technological currents, a figure of subjective impassivity, an individuated marker of psychic distress that is predicated on transient moments of non-flow. As I explain below, part of the automaton’s signifying power in this period is based upon the fact that it is an archaic machine, and so the figure’s incomplete conceptual compatibility with more modern technological developments is not entirely surprising. Still, the automaton’s cultural character as a technological object in the Victorian era is illuminated usefully, if only partly, by comparison with other critical treatments of that period’s technological stratum.

Finally, the automaton sits squarely amid various threads of investigation into how Victorians conceived of the relationship between the human mind and the human body. The phenomena of conscious and unconscious mental processes formed the focus of the emergent discipline of psychology in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a varied set of intellectual projects that, in Rick Rylance’s terms, constituted “a mosaic always in the process of completion” (21). The automaton metaphor proved irresistible to formulators of models describing the interaction of body and mind that somehow produced the thinking self, as Chapter Three of this dissertation will demonstrate. However, the very flexibility of the figure made this metaphor an ambivalent one; in its simultaneous invocation and refusal of material coherence and imaginative volubility, the automaton buttressed and undermined efforts to stabilize conceptions of human psychology. Together, these three critical veins combine to structure a theoretical framework for this dissertation that views the automaton as at once an object, a technological artefact, and a conceptual marker of psychological explorations of human consciousness. The remainder of this introduction will position the Victorian automaton in terms of the historical and critical contexts that inform and illuminate its imaginative, cultural, and symbolic figuration in the period.

**A History of the Automaton**

The conceptual history of the automaton is a long and varied one, with origins in the jointed figurines, articulated masks, and talking statues that have been found in
ancient tombs and ruins throughout the Middle East, Africa, and the Pacific Rim (J. Cohen 340, Price 10-11). These simple figures are the precursors of more sophisticated mechanical devices developed through classical antiquity. As detailed by the proto-engineer Hero of Alexandria in works such as Pneumatica and Automatopoetica, these devices constitute a category of self-moving machines that are now known as automata: whistling birds, hissing serpents, dancing figures, musical organs, trumpet-players, and mythic figures performing heroic or theatrical actions, all moved by the ingenious and occult application of wind, water, and fire (Xagoraris 24-34). Historian of technology Derek de Solla Price reads into these early mechanical contrivances an effort to simulate, comprehend, and dominate the natural world that represents a fundamental human drive towards instrumental reasoning: “We suggest that some strong innate urge toward mechanistic explanation led to the making of automata, and that from automata has evolved much of our technology, particularly the part embracing fine mechanism and scientific instrumentation” (10).

These material artefacts have their imaginative counterparts in classical Greek texts that describe automata both divine and mythic. Apollonius’ Argonautica, for example, describes the indefatigable Talus, last survivor of a race of “brazen” men, who is appointed by Zeus to guard Crete by running thrice-daily around the island (Bruce 3).

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4 The study of automata as a wide-ranging cultural phenomenon has its origins in the early twentieth century and in a foundational two-volume catalogue published in 1928 by French historians Alfred Chapuis and Edouard Gélys, called Le Monde des automates: Étude historique et technique. This work was translated into English in 1958 as Automata: A Historical and Technological Study and has been followed by other historically expansive studies of the figure, including John Cohen’s Human Robots in Myth and Science (1966), Max Von Boehn’s Puppets and Automata (1972), a collection edited by Harry M. Geduld and Ronald Gottesman called Robots, Robots, Robots (1978), and, most recently, Minsoo Kang’s Sublime Dreams of Living Machines (2011).

5 Pneumatica was translated into English by Bennet Woodcroft in 1851 as The Pneumatics of Hero of Alexandria. Automatopoetica has yet to appear in English translation. The standard modern reference for this work is Wilhelm Schmidt’s 1899 German translation in the first volume of his Heronis Alexandrini Opera quae supersunt Omnia.

6 From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the word “automaton” was a catch-all term that described any self-moving machine, including astronomical and figure clocks (Mayr 21). By the nineteenth century, “automaton” had narrowed semantically to refer more specifically to mechanical imitations of living beings. The word “android” refers to the sub-set of these machines that are made to resemble a human being. Although “android” dates back to the medieval period, however, it is used only rarely before the twentieth century (Kang 99). For this reason, I will follow cultural and critical convention by using “automaton” to describe mechanical humans.

7 For a properly detailed overview of material and mythic classical automata, see A. G. Drachmann’s The Mechanical Technology of Greek and Roman Antiquity, Derek J. de Solla Price’s “Automata and the Origins of Mechanism and Mechanistic Philosophy,” Sylvia Berryman’s “Ancient Automata and Mechanical Evolution,” and the first chapter of Minsoo Kang’s Sublime Dreams of Living Machines.
The eighteenth book of Homer’s Iliad depicts the inventor-god Hephaestus at work on a series of self-moving tripods that are designed to ferry comestibles to the great feasting tables of Olympia (18.434-44). Aiding Hephaestus in his work are several handmaids “all cast in gold” who are “a match for living, breathing girls” (18.489). These golden figures are endowed with intelligence, the power of speech, and a capacity for self-direction, all traits which set them apart from the less-sophisticated tripods and which establish them as very early literary representations of machines that resemble humans in form and function (18.490-91). Merely mortal inventors are represented in classical texts by Daedalus, the “fabulous artificer” who is said to have built animated statues to guard his labyrinth, statues that needed to be tethered “in order to prevent their running away” (J. H. Miller 66; Brewster 317-18). These imaginative representations of intelligent mechanical beings suggest an enduring connection between godly powers of animation and technological imitations of the same.

James A. Francis links Homer’s “automaton handmaids” to the metallic figures depicted on Achilles’ shield, also crafted by Hephaestus. Francis argues that the automata and the shield are early examples of a sophisticated ekphrastic exploration of “the conception and process of both verbal and visual representation” (3). Importantly, for Francis, “the figures themselves and their poetic descriptions make them both real and representational at the same time,” suggesting that ancient ekphrasis is, contrary to scholarly convention, “filled with movement on several levels, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes subverting the narrative, often calling into question the very processes of sight, language, and thought” (10, 6). Francis’s analysis is indicative of a recent literary interest in the representational complexities of the automaton, a trend which suggests that automata might yet have an interesting role to play in further elaborations of how narrative or the operation of textual representation is conceived.

Mythic automata also appear in philosophical discussions of the day, most notably in Aristotle’s discussion in the Politics of the proprietary relationship between master and slave. Aristotle distinguishes between animate and inanimate instruments in order to qualify the grounds upon which a slave might be considered a possession: “instruments are of various sorts; some are living, others lifeless; in the rudder, the pilot of a ship has a lifeless, in the look-out man, a living instrument” (1.4.§2). These “living instruments” are
necessary to the maintenance of the master’s life and so constitute a special category of
tool or possession. Aristotle’s analysis of this relationship includes a curious, tangential
thought that contemplates the hypothetical implications of self-moving, non-human
instruments in terms of this master-slave relationship:

For if every instrument could accomplish its own work, obeying or anticipating
the will of others, like the statues of Daedalus, or the tripods of Hephaestus,
which, says the poet, ‘of their own accord entered the assembly of the Gods’; if,
in like manner, the shuttle would weave and the plectrum touch the lyre without a
hand to guide them, chief workmen would not want servants nor masters slaves.

(1.4.§3)

This fantasy of mechanical servitude anticipates by many centuries the emancipatory
rhetoric that would become a regular feature of pro-technological polemicism beginning
in the late eighteenth century. Aristotle’s prescience on this matter has been observed by
many: “Not only is he perhaps the earliest Western philosopher to contemplate the
possibility of artificial, intelligent labor,” writes Kevin LaGrandeur, “but his ideas of
human technical capacity arguably underlie all following consideration of that topic”
(“Do” 7). What I find even more striking in this passage of the Politics, however, is the
equivocation introduced by the imaginary self-moving instruments. The “if” phrase—“if
every instrument could accomplish its own work”—simultaneously justifies the necessity
of considering slaves as possessions (every instrument cannot accomplish its own work,
after all) and places in suspension the entire system of slavery being justified in this
passage by imagining an alternative to that system (what would a world without servants
or slaves look like?). As we will see, this ambiguous rhetorical effect remains common to
many representations of the automaton.

During the Middle Ages, automata appeared frequently in the burgeoning
romance genre in Europe. E. R. Truitt describes the function of human automata in
medieval French romances as follows:

Throughout the romances, automata are found at liminal spaces—thresholds,
bridges or tombs. Their functions are surveillance and discipline, which signal not
only the liminal status of the automata themselves, but also the ways in which
they enforce boundaries of epistemological legitimacy and morality. (172)

Truitt suggests that these figures signify in metafictional ways, arguing that automata are
here aligned with “a self-conscious interrogation by philosophers and poets of the
legitimacy of mimetic representation and the methods used to represent nature” (171).
The appearance of automata in poetry, that is to say, can be seen as a reflection upon the
legitimacy and morality of the poetic enterprise itself. These poetic automata were
matched by evolutions in mechanical materiality; the Middle Ages also bore witness to
the arrival in Europe of the clockwork technology that had already been flourishing for
several centuries in the Middle East, India, and China (Price 16-7). Not only did these
imported clocks use elaborate mechanisms to measure the regular progression of time,
but they also incorporated any number of moving figures and other animated elements
into their design to mark important temporal divisions. The development of European
clockwork proceeded apace from this point, and the craft of clockmaking came to
represent both the pinnacle of technological innovation by humankind and the awesome
regularity and cyclical behaviour of nature as overseen by God. In this way, the
idealisation of orderly, proper behaviour that had once been the purview of fictional
automata was replaced by the idealisation of the orderly, proper, and predictable
movements of the real automata that appeared as part of these clocks. Indeed, the church
was one of the early adopters of clockwork, using the technology to standardise the

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8 Truitt’s catalogue of medieval fictional automata includes copper figures that stand guard over the dead, a
forged youth who plays music that restores the compassion and good humour of all who hear it, and a metal
woman who holds a mirror up to visitors to her chamber in order that they might see a “true reflection of
their appearance” and thus make any adjustments to their hair or clothing needed to avoid embarrassment
or social censure (167-74). These examples demonstrate the emergence of a consistent pattern of
connection between mechanised figures and the operation of proper, disciplined conduct, as noted by
Truitt: “Automata, in this instance, are defenders both of courts and of courtly behavior, simultaneously
enforcing and enacting perfectly disciplined behavior in the moral and aesthetic realms” (175).
9 In his description of a “typical Islamic clock” from this time, Price makes the following observation about
its internal movements: “The circular motion may be used to animate automata, moving their heads or
bodies or rotating their eyeballs, or to turn a globe or stereographic map of the heavens and perhaps also, by
appropriate gearing, models of the sun and moon placed upon the heavenly representation” (16).
10 The modern incarnation of what is known today as the “argument from design” can be traced to ideas
that took shape during this same period, particularly in the writing of Nicole Oresme (c. 1320-82).
According to Otto Mayr, Oresme’s was a well-circulated articulation of the idea that “the relationship
between the universe and its creator is identical to that between a clock and its clockmaker” (Mayr 38). See
Mayr’s Authority, Liberty & Automatic Machinery in Early Modern Europe for a detailed history of the
machina mundi tradition.
timing of religious services and to reiterate the value of regular, disciplined behaviour (Bedini 30). Gradually, the automata that adorned the clocks became valued as marvels in their own right, and by the early 1530s, human automata were being produced as pieces independent of clocks (31).

Alongside the development of the technical ability to create sophisticated movement in human figures came a philosophical questioning of what this ability implied about those biological processes that encompassed life, as it was understood at the time. Insofar as automata represented the successful imitation of life, one resulting implication was that life must be just as ordered, rational, and replicable as clockwork. The ability of machines to imitate life, in other words, led to the obverse suggestion that life might best be understood in terms of those machines (Dear 59). In literature, this suggestion can be found in Hamlet’s reference to his body as a machine and to bad actors as poorly constructed imitations of humanity, analogies leading Scott Maisano to conclude that Shakespeare’s play depicts human beings as “outwardly indiscernible from both actors and automata” (2.2.23, 3.2.30-32; “Infinite” 71). Similarly, Spenser’s Talus, that “war-machine and wondrous spectacle” of The Faerie Queen’s Book V (1596), serves to “delineate and enforce the physical and epistemological perimeters of the human subject” by embodying a mechanically inhuman operation of law, affectless justice, and military discipline (McCulloch 61; Wolfe 230). However, it was not only the individual human body that could be thought of in mechanical terms but also the collective bodies of political, national, and martial formations. During the sixteenth century, for example, Dutch armies adopted the concept of training soldiers like machines, using repetitive drill systems to promote “the instilling of self-control, restraint, and moderation both in the behaviour of individual soldiers and in the collective units made up of them” (Dear 60).

A young René Descartes experienced this idealisation of machine-like order and discipline first-hand while serving in a French regiment of the Dutch Prince Maurice of Nassau’s standing army in 1618. Descartes’s subsequent travels to Germany, a place where intricately designed clocks and automata were “especially favoured” in the seventeenth century, further increased his exposure to machine life (Sage 59). The influence that both these literal and figurative automata may have had upon the development of Descartes’s “scandalous materialism” has been debated by scholars, but
it is clear that the core of Descartes’s thought hinges upon a mechanistic conception of the physical, material world (Sage 59). Descartes would go on to become the first modern thinker to explicitly formulate the idea that the life processes of all living creatures could be reduced to the operation of currents and reflexes obeying the same rational and predictable laws as govern all of the material universe. Peter Dear analyses the metaphors with which Descartes details the inner workings of the living body, noting that “he used machines, and especially automata, as models of intelligibility” (59). Life, for Descartes, was “a phenomenon to be elucidated in terms of self-contained, self-moving machines” (59). Philosophers and scientists including G. W. Leibniz, Thomas Hobbes, Thomas Willis, Giovanni Borelli, and Robert Boyle give the automaton a similarly analogical role in their respective writings, leading Minsoo Kang to describe the automaton as the “central emblem of the mechanistic worldview” that flourished in the seventeenth century (116).

The eighteenth century marks a high point in the material history of the automaton, even as it represents an unstable moment in the historical fortunes of mechanistic philosophy.11 Led by Jacques Vaucanson and Pierre and Henri-Louis Jaquet-Droz, mechanically oriented craftsmen produced sophisticated automata that wrote, drew, played various musical instruments, danced, and replicated human life on an unprecedented scale.12 Vaucanson, in particular, built his machines with a critical eye towards the limits of mechanistic explanations for living phenomena. As Jessica Riskin explains, “Vaucanson’s automata were philosophical experiments, attempts to discern which aspects of living creatures could be reproduced in machinery, and to what degree, and what such reproductions might reveal about their natural subjects” (“Defecating” 601). Riskin describes Vaucanson’s cultural milieu as defined by a “profound uncertainty about the validity of philosophical mechanism” and sees in Vaucanson’s machines a

11 The “thoroughgoing materialism” of Julien De La Mettrie’s L’Homme machine (1747) is often considered to represent the farthest possible extension of mechanistic philosophy, after which the intellectual and political trends in Europe retreated from positions as extreme as La Mettrie’s denial that humans are any more soulful than are animals (Thomson x). Aram Vartanian’s La Mettrie’s L’Homme machine: A Study in the Origins of an Idea remains the authoritative text on La Mettrie’s place as a transitional figure in eighteenth-century philosophy.
12 See Jessica Riskin’s “The Defecating Duck, or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life,” and “Eighteenth-Century Wetware,” along with Steven Schaffer’s “Enlightened Automata,” for more on the general history of eighteenth-century automata.
“simultaneous enactment of both the sameness and the incomparability of life and machinery” (611, 610). The tension between the aspects of mechanism and vitalism evinced by the automaton in this period reached something of a fever-pitch in the figure of Wolfgang von Kempelen’s Automaton Chess-Player (1769), nicknamed “the Turk” for the “eastern” garb with which it was clothed (Cook 240). Despite Kempelen’s assertion that his machine was a “mere bagatelle,” the nine-decade career of the chess-player was characterized by unending argument about whether or not the “automaton” functioned with the aid of a human hidden in its works (qtd. in Cook 243). As the phenomenon of the chess-player suggests, the automaton of this period includes the qualities of duplicity and deception in its arsenal of associations.

Recent cultural criticism of the eighteenth century has become increasingly interested in the way that literature of the day turned these equivocal aspects of the automaton to imaginative purposes. Kang emphasizes the use of references to springs, engines, and machines in descriptions of coitus in John Cleland’s Fanny Hill (1748-49) in order to forward an argument about “the powerful hold of the man-machine idea on the imagination of the period” (139). Likewise, Liu analyses the mechanical sexuality characterized by “hyperreasonable, intellectual detachment” in Laclos’s Dangerous Liaisons (1782) (158). Deidre Lynch draws attention to the manner in which Frances Burney “people[s] her fiction with characters who appear as automatons”; Lynch sees in those automaton-characters a “compelling spectacle of activity severed from agency” and a literary exploration of “how the work of self-making could be work outside the self’s control” (192). Alex Wetmore identifies recurring analogies between “sentimental protagonists and automatic machines” in the works of Laurence Sterne, Tobias Smollett, and Henry Mackenzie, arguing that this interest in the relationship between feeling and mechanism can be detected on the level of narrative form in these novels (38-39). By the end of the eighteenth century, John Tresch claims, “romanticism’s emphasis on subjectivity, passion, and invisible powers often went hand in hand with the development of mechanical science and the introduction of new technologies,” such that “[m]achines were frequently presented as symbols and tools for the realization of mind, soul, or spirit

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13 Julie Park, in “Pains and Pleasures of the Automaton,” and Claudia L. Johnson, in Chapter Six of Equivocal Beings, also attend to the significance of the automaton in Burney’s writing.
in the world” (“Machine” 90-91). From the time of its first appearance in literature to the beginning of the Victorian era, then, the automaton had accumulated an extraordinarily diverse and complex set of material, philosophical, and imaginative layers.

Critical Appraisals of the Nineteenth-Century Automaton

Despite the recent surge of interest in the figure as it appears in other historical periods, the nineteenth-century automaton has yet to be sufficiently investigated by cultural scholars, particularly with respect to the analysis of literary or textual representations of automata. Certainly, there exist general, large-scale histories of automaton technology that include references to the nineteenth-century automaton, such as those written by Christian Bailly and Silvio Bedini, but these tend to focus on the automaton as a purely material or technological object. The long historical reach of other studies which focus on the wider cultural significance of automata tends to disengage those studies from the particularizing details of specific cultural genres and time periods. John Cohen’s Human Robots in Myth and Science (1966), for example, is the first major English-language study of representations of artificial human life in both science and literature, covering a time span that begins in antiquity and ends in the early twentieth century. As a result, Cohen’s treatment of “Robots in Fiction” consists of a fifteen-page catalogue of briefly annotated references to literary works that contain automaton-like characters, with slightly longer treatments of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s writing and Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s L’Eve Future (1886). Such a survey is an invaluable reference tool in terms of its historical scope, but it offers little by way of specifics about how the automaton was conceptualized in a nineteenth-century context. Even Gaby Wood’s Living Dolls: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life (2002), which limits its range to automata built since the eighteenth century in Europe and America, struggles to escape the weight of historical detail in its attempt to elaborate upon the philosophical implications suggested by increasingly sophisticated mechanistic representations of life.

14 See Tresch’s The Romantic Machine for a larger account of the automaton’s ambiguous positioning in Romantic science and philosophy.
Minsoo Kang’s recent *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination* (2011) claims to address this issue of cultural specificity. Kang’s explanation of the fundamentally captivating quality of the automaton turns on a constitutive boundary-crossing element that accounts for the automaton’s ability to seem both dead and alive, mechanical and organic, technological and supernatural, dangerous and submissive, among other binary sets. The semantic flexibility of the automaton means that different aspects of its inherently disruptive character are emphasized under different historical conditions. Kang insists that the automaton encompasses both positive and negative figurative fields, arguing that “for a full understanding of the automaton motif in the Western imagination as a whole, one must take into account both aspects of the mechanical entity, to see how the object functioned in different historical contexts as the representation of *both* human empowerment and oppression, liberation and subjugation, transcendence and debasement” (305).

Despite Kang’s insistence on the importance of attending to particular historical contexts when taking stock of the automaton’s long symbolic life, *Sublime Dreams* ultimately succumbs to the seduction of totalizing, macro-level generalizations; Kang’s treatment of the Victorian automaton recapitulates the idea that an industrial palette dominates all images of mechanism produced in the nineteenth century. For Kang, the cultural significance of the Victorian automaton can be summarized in a sentence: “As the Industrial Revolution transformed the physical, economic, and social environment of western Europe in a rapid and radical fashion, there was an outpouring of literary portrayals of steam- or electricity-driven machines taking on characteristics of living creatures” (225). By contrast, this dissertation will argue that the Victorian automaton encompasses a range of nuanced concerns about the nature of human subjectivity that moves beyond purely industrial anxieties.

There also exist several monographs relating to more specific histories of the automaton that stop short of, or even pointedly exclude, a discussion of automata in the Victorian age. Otto Mayr’s *Authority, Liberty and Automatic Machinery in Early Modern Europe* (1986), for one, is an exhaustive study of how and why clockwork garnered such incredible attention and popularity in Europe beginning in the fourteenth century. Mayr relates the evolution of increasingly sophisticated and intricate clockwork technology,
including automata, to the growth of authoritarian order in Europe and argues that the emergence of liberalism in Britain can be directly linked to a disparaging attitude in that country towards the perceived limitations and drawbacks of clockwork technology. However, Mayr’s study ends in eighteenth-century Britain with “the rise of liberalism in practical politics” and the emerging dominance of more complex metaphors involving the concepts of balance and feedback in eighteenth-century British literature (xviii).

While Mayr’s argument has something of a natural end in the rise of liberalism in eighteenth-century Britain, Allison Muri’s The Enlightenment Cyborg (2007) makes what appears to be a more deliberate move to avoid discussing the nineteenth-century automaton. Muri’s text explores the figure of the “man-machine” between 1660 and 1830, omits any discussion of that figure’s fate in the Victorian era, and continues with an investigation into twentieth-century depictions of the cyborg. The omission of much of the nineteenth century is never fully explained, although Muri goes so far as to acknowledge the ways in which that period might seem to be an obvious point of investigation for her project:

Even if one were to reflect on the cyborg’s position in the context of larger historical movements, the logical conclusion might be that the nineteenth century—age of modernity, of manufacture and medicine, of the motor and the engine, of electric machines and electric communications networks—has a more obvious relationship to the postmodern cyborg than does the pre-industrial Enlightenment. (5)

Despite the fairly compelling nature of this “logical conclusion,” Muri goes no further into an explanation of why the Victorian era, in particular, is left out of her discussion. Instead, Muri continues on to defend her choice to make the less “obvious” connection between Enlightenment philosophy and technology, on the one hand, and the postmodern cyborg, on the other.

Muri repeatedly insists on the difference between the automaton and the cyborg: “The cyborg is not like a machine; nor can it be defined through automata or unprogrammed prosthetic devices or gender boundaries. The cyborg is an organic machine that is steered or governed by a homeostatic mechanism. The conception of the cyborg is the moment of the human being as a machine, defined, powered, governed, steered, and motivated by the same forces as machines” (19). As I will demonstrate in the chapters to follow, the validity of this distinction in the nineteenth century proves to be a matter of some debate.
Nonetheless, Muri’s argument in *The Enlightenment Cyborg* is based upon several points that are germane to an exploration of the nineteenth-century textual automaton. Muri analyses the extent to which twentieth-century discussions of the cyborg figure have relied upon simplistic interpretations of a small, non-representative number of Enlightenment texts in order to assemble a shallow notion of how thinkers of the past understood the relationship between bodies, minds, and technology. This reliance upon texts leads Muri to contemplate the textual nature of the cyborg, asking “are notions of cyborg identity primarily constructed through textual tradition and therefore subject to the whims of theoretical vogue rather than the relationships of actual machines and real bodies?” (14). In posing this question, Muri establishes a clear hierarchy of intellectual import in which textual tradition, with its susceptibility to voguish “whims,” is subordinated to something that lies outside of textual tradition, something involving “actual machines and real bodies.” Textual tradition, in this dichotomy, generates a notion of cyborg identity that is in some way false, suspicious, or otherwise untrustworthy, while the study of “actual machines and real bodies” carries with it the weight of authenticity. In this project, I would like to undo this perjoration of the ways in which texts circulate and combine to construct specifically textual phenomena. Instead, I contend, the textual tradition of the nineteenth century produced an automaton that is worthy of attention because of its difference from “actual machines and real bodies.”

Even more striking is the neglect of the automaton in works by historians and literary critics who are explicitly interested in nineteenth-century technology and machines. Although much attention has been paid to the cultural and literary importance of nineteenth-century technology in the wake of foundational works such as Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) and Herbert Sussman’s *Victorians and the Machine* (1968), the automaton remains a neglected figure. This lack of sustained investigation into the automaton from a technological perspective can be related to a conception of the Victorian automaton as an archaic mechanism, limited in scope and application relative to the epoch-making development of the steam engine and the factory. In *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*, for example, Anson Rabinbach predicates his analysis of the figurative language used to articulate modern ideas about industrial labour on a clear distinction between the simple, Newtonian mechanics that
characterized technology until the eighteenth century and the complex, internal
dynamism of nineteenth-century invention. In Rabinbach’s words, “the nineteenth-
century machine, modeled on the thermodynamic engine, was a ‘motor,’ the servant of a
powerful nature conceived as a reservoir of motivating power” (52). Older machines, by
contrast, remained dependent upon “an external source of motivating power” for their
action, and automata belong squarely in that class of more primitive technology (52).
Rabinbach characterizes automata as notable primarily for their failure to embody much
more than “an anticipation and an idealization” of the industrial technology that would
appear in the nineteenth century (58). Automata are “technical fictions” from
Rabinbach’s perspective and should therefore be considered as curiosities that resemble,
but that are not, modern machines (52).

Tamara Ketabgian reiterates the gesture of distancing the automaton from the
nineteenth-century engine in her Lives of Machines: The Industrial Imaginary in
Victorian Literature and Culture (2011). In this work, Ketabgian argues in favour of
“more nuanced notions of industrial metaphor and technology” that recognize the
complexity, flexibility, and instability of figurative machines in Victorian fiction.
Ketabgian then relegates automata to an older category of technology defined by the
“static Hobbesian watches of the Enlightenment” and abandons them in her analysis as
“mechanisms that were largely admired as toys, curiosities, and figures of stunning
artistry” (2, 50). This separation of automata from more advanced machines is curious,
especially given the close genealogical link between automata and the large-scale
industrial machines that were developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth
centuries.

As it turns out, this critical de-centering of the automaton mimics one aspect of a
rhetorical move performed by early nineteenth-century industrial writers themselves. For
these writers, the scale, power, and usefulness of a new generation of machines could
best be illustrated by comparison with the smaller, less sophisticated, and more
idiosyncratic automata of yesteryear. The proto-computing engineer Charles Babbage, to
take but one example, credits his childhood fascination with automata for his life-long

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16 Rabinbach takes his cue from Michel Serres’s Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy, which posits this fundamental split between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century machines.
interest in developing machine intelligence (*Passages* 17). Babbage would eventually buy one of the “irresistible” automata he viewed as a child and christen her “The Silver Lady” (365). In his home, Babbage confirmed the archaic charm of automata by placing “The Silver Lady” on display alongside a fragment of his sophisticated calculating machine, the Difference Engine, by way of juxtaposing the past and the future of technological invention.\(^\text{17}\)

Sir David Brewster’s *Letters on Natural Magic* (1832) offers yet another glimpse of the nostalgia with which automata were viewed by scientists and industrialists alike in the early part of the century. Brewster’s self-declared aim in *Letters* is to combat the “deplorable indifference to all that is grand and sublime in the universe” by demonstrating at once the susceptibility of the human mind to illusion and manipulation and the mind’s power to overcome the tricks of the senses and penetrate the most complex operations of the natural world (94). The centuries-old history of automata is key to Brewster’s argument, as these figures had long been used by scientists and swindlers alternately to explain and to obfuscate the wondrous workings of the world for fame and profit. Brewster expounds upon what he sees as the most significant aspect of these automata, and he seamlessly links technological developments of the industrial age with this history of making. Though automata of the past were, indeed, “[i]ngenious and beautiful” creations, Brewster regrets the machines’ lack of useful function, lamenting the fact that “the principal object of their inventors was to astonish and amuse the public” (336).

However, Brewster is able to redeem automata by emphasizing their importance in fostering mechanical skill and inventiveness in their creators: “The passion for automatic exhibitions which characterized the eighteenth century gave rise to the most ingenious mechanical devices, and introduced among the higher orders of artists habits of nice and accurate execution in the formation of the most delicate pieces of machinery” (336). For Brewster, this incubation of mechanical proficiency serves as an index to a self-preserving “power of genius” that is fundamental to human identity:

\(^\text{17}\) See Chapter Two for an in-depth account of the future-oriented dimension of Babbage’s interest in machine intelligence.
Those mechanical wonders which in one century enriched only the conjurer who used them, contributed in another to augment the wealth of the nation; and those automatic toys which once amused the vulgar, are now employed in extending the power and promoting the civilization of our species. In whatever way, indeed, the power of genius may invent or combine, and to whatever low or even ludicrous purposes that invention or combination may be originally applied, society receives a gift which it can never lose; and though the value of the seed may not be at once recognized, and though it may lie long unproductive in the ungenial till of human knowledge, it will some time or other evolve its germ, and yield to mankind its natural and abundant harvest. (336)

In Brewster’s estimation, automata extend the potential of human genius in several dimensions. In the first place, machines inspired by automata allow for further exploration into the realm of creative innovation by shouldering the burden of labour both physical and mental: Brewster cites John Duncan’s tambouring machine, James Watt’s “statue-turning machine,” and Babbage’s calculating machinery as examples of contrivances that had been rendered so effectively self-governing as to appear autonomous in their operation, thus capable of saving untold numbers of human work-hours (337). Babbage’s calculating machine, in particular, could “compute and print a great variety and extent of astronomical and navigation tables, which could not be done without enormous intellectual and manual labour, and which, even if executed by such labour, could not be calculated with the requisite accuracy” (342). In the second place, Brewster’s automata maintain and safeguard the products of human genius through time, suggesting an asynchronous view of history in which individual genius and the fertile cultural substrate that would nurture the results of that genius might fail to converge temporally. Automata, from this perspective, stand patiently outside of time, awaiting the moment when that “ungenial till of human knowledge,” at last, collects on the mechanical promise of older days.

If Babbage and Brewster both describe the archaism of automata with an unmistakable fondness, other writers of the period take a decidedly less sentimental position on the value of the figures. In one of the century’s best known defenses of industrialism, *The Philosophy of Manufactures* (1835), chemist Andrew Ure discusses the
relationship between automata of the past and the factory technology of the present. A catalogue of automata both mythic and material features prominently in the opening pages of Ure’s volume, a text that Maxine Berg calls “an extraordinary and blatant panegyric in apology for the factory system” (181). Ure quickly rejects any claim that these “celebrated” mechanical devices might have on the collective consciousness of a nation, condemning the devices for catering to trivial tastes: “Ingenuity has been long exercised on such combinations, chiefly for public amusement or mystification, without any object of utility. . . . Self-acting inventions like the preceding, however admirable as exercises of mechanical science, do nothing towards the supply of the physical necessities of society” (9, 11). By contrast, Ure sees in the modern factory a realization of all the productive possibility that mechanical genius has to offer: “It is in a cotton mill . . . that the perfection of automatic industry is to be seen; it is there that the elemental powers have been made to animate millions of complex organs, infusing into forms of wood, iron, and brass an intelligent agency” (2).

However, even such a resolute realist as Ure finds it difficult to resist the figurative pull of automata. Although he rejects these devices as being “without any object of utility,” the language of the automaton saturates Ure’s subsequent descriptions of factory work (9). He admits an interest in the “processes that may be employed, to give to portions of inert matter, precise movements resembling those of organized beings” (9). He bemoans the difficulty of “training human beings to renounce their desultory habits of work, and to identify themselves with the unvarying regularity of the complex automaton” (15). Finally, Ure limits the kinds of industrial operations to be included under the title of “factory” in terms that reconstitute the rhetorical significance of the automaton in his text, declaring: “I conceive that this title, in its strictest sense, involves

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18 Ure’s catalogue includes the talking statue of Memnon, the flying pigeon of Archytas, Albertus Magnus’s automaton, Abbé Mical’s brass heads, Vaucanson’s flute player, drummer, and digesting duck, and “Maelzel’s” chess player (9-11). The practice of listing a catalogue of well-known automata through history by way of introduction to the subject is very old and has taken on the character of a mechanical repetition compulsion. In a meta-exemplar of this cataloguing phenomenon, Kang devotes substantial attention (and two tables) to documenting this practice in The Sublime Dreams of Living Machines.

19 The physicist and physiologist Hermann von Helmholtz was to distill this relationship between automaton technology and “automatic industry” into an even more precise formulation when, in 1847, he declared that “nowadays we no longer attempt to construct beings able to perform a thousand human actions, but rather machines able to execute a single action which will replace that of thousands of humans” (qtd. in Bedini 41).
the idea of a vast automaton, composed of various mechanical and intellectual organs, acting in uninterrupted concert for the production of a common object, all of them being subordinated to a self-regulated moving force” (13). In these industrial treatments of the figure, the automaton is at once a machine and not a machine, an index of the technological but only insofar as it emphasizes a border between a technological past and present. The automaton is an unassimilable element in this world of mechanical modernity, an archaism, a leftover.

Although I would argue that the automaton’s status as an obsolete technology frees the figure for even wider imaginative uses in the Victorian age, the small amount of existing criticism on the Victorian automaton in literature tends to remain focused on the automaton in its industrial iteration. Charles Dickens, with his abiding interest in the imbrications of selfhood and social structure, remains the focus of this criticism. This should come as no surprise; Dickens’s writing has long been understood to play upon the increasingly blurred lines between people and things in the Victorian world. As Helmut Viebrock notes, “Dickens loves to exploit the potential mechanism in human beings and the potential dynamism in mechanical things and processes” (401). This effect is especially remarkable when it comes to Dickens’s talent for characterization; his novels are populated by what Katherine Inglis calls “mechanical and metallurgic characters” or what Sussman and Joseph describe as “a multitude of robotic examples” of automatized humans (6, 622).

The “mechanical and metallurgic characters” in Dickens include the prosthetic bodies of Captain Cuttle, Carker, Mrs. Skewton, and Silas Wegg; the mechanically repetitive functions of Quilip, Panks, Flintwich, and the automaton piano player hired by the Podsnaps; the mechanical propensities of Doyce; the hyper-rational utilitarianism of Bitzer; and machines such as the “melancholy mad elephants” of Coketown and Mrs. Jarley’s automaton nun (Hard Times 106). Scholars have taken Dickens to be using these automaton-characters as commentaries on the industrial landscape that had developed in England over the first half of the nineteenth century. Herbert Sussman, for example, describes Dickens as a writer whose “imagination had so absorbed machine technology that he could use it as vehicle rather than tenor, as a complex symbol for the combination of industrial mechanization and mechanistic thought that he, like Carlyle, saw as the
shaping principle of Victorian life” (61). For Sussman and Gerhard Joseph, the “characteristically comedic form” of these characters derives from Dickens’s treatment of “the self of the industrial age” (620). For Viebrock, the “comic or rather grotesque effect” of Dickens’s writing results from his trademark confusion of mechanized humans and humanized machines (401). More significant than the rehearsal of the link between the automaton and industrialism in this criticism is the accepted notion that Dickens’s fiction metabolizes and dispatches the threat of the mechanical human by asserting the redemptive power of non-mechanical human qualities such as sentiment. In Inglis’s words, the “endemic automatism” of Dickens’s fictional worlds is inevitably remedied via “mythic and material practices of reconstitution” (20). Sussman and Joseph note the recurring “centrality” of a “free, autonomous individual subjectivity” in Dickens’s novels (622). I would like to supplement this existing work on Dickens’s automata with an examination of the automaton in fiction that, like Jane Eyre, explores the constitution of human subjectivity outside of a strictly industrial context. My interest, here, is in texts that engage with post-Victorian-industrial experiences of technology and that offer complicated notions of individual exceptionality and human transcendence as Dickens does. The Victorian automaton, I hope to show, opens out upon questions relating to technology and its relationship to cultural representation, to bodies and their liabilities, to minds and their mysteries, to desire and its limits.

**Automata and Agency in Victorian Fiction**

As material for this dissertation, I have chosen texts for which an examination of the automaton figure serves a useful hermeneutic function by illuminating under-read aspects of those texts. In order to demonstrate the wide appeal of the automaton’s signifying register in the period, I have also selected texts that exemplify a range of genres: I offer readings of a sensation fiction novel, two scientific romances, a non-fictional scientific debate, a meta-realist novel, and a roman-à-clef. Finally, all the works I explore in this project have in common a link between the automaton’s polysemy and the problem of textually representing the limits of human agency. Whether that limit is imagined as a matter of intersubjective, scientific, political, or aesthetic being, the automaton is closely aligned with moments of agential failure. The metaphorical potency
of the automaton at once connects and distinguishes between moments of agential limit in these disparate works.

In my first chapter, “‘The Meaner Mechanism of the Human Machine’: Automata and Agency in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret,” I argue that Robert Audley’s repeated misrecognition of other characters as automata is a projection of his own struggle to understand the motivations underlying his reluctant transformation into a detective. Audley feels beholden to a series of ethical and affective demands—obligation to a friend, familial responsibility, masculine prerogative, inherited impulse—that take on the feeling of an inexorable force in his life. Steeped as it is in the language of machines and modernity, Braddon’s novel articulates a suspicion about the efficacy of individual agency in a world grown systematic and opaque. As a figure that gives the appearance of independent movement while disguising the overdetermined sources of that movement, the automaton serves as an index of frustrated subjectivity in Lady Audley’s Secret that opens out upon the frustrations of narrative agency itself. I suggest that Braddon’s novel depicts the narrative structure of sensation fiction, a genre stigmatized for its “mechanical” plots, as a space in which the imperatives that limit individual agency can be explored and re-enacted.

My second chapter, “Mechanical Motivations and Technological Ends in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s The Coming Race and Samuel Butler’s Erewhon,” explores a cluster of texts that displace contemporary anxieties about the increasingly negligible boundary between humans and machines onto speculative narratives. By describing theories of techno-human evolution that were disseminated in the decade leading up to the novels’ publication, I offer some context for the depiction of technological futures in Bulwer’s and Butler’s texts. The Coming Race and Erewhon reposition the future of techno-human evolution into their narrative pasts and place mechanical humans at the centre of their respective projects. The Coming Race, I argue, uses the figure of the automaton to challenge notions of human exceptionalism and to hold in suspension the potential for humanity to develop into a more sophisticated species, while Erewhon turns from explicitly critiquing mechanistic philosophy to implicitly suggesting that its readers are biddable machines. Both novels illustrate the disintegration of the differences between humans and machines when the future direction of those differences is imagined.
The dissolving boundary between the human and the machine remains at stake in my third chapter, “‘Absolute Machines’: The Conscious Automaton Debate.” Here, I move away from fictional texts in order to examine the role that the automaton plays as metaphor in Thomas Henry Huxley’s “On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata” and in the ensuing scientific responses to Huxley’s argument. By analyzing the figurative pliability of the automaton in these journalistic exchanges, I argue that the Conscious Automaton debate is, to an extent that has previously gone unrecognized, a debate about the role that imaginative language such as metaphor and analogy should play in scientific investigation. The devolution of the debate into arguments about the definition of the automaton reveals the cultural potency of that figure at the time. The debate also ensured that the automaton would remain an emblem of uncertainty, of the limits of knowledge, and of the unstable role played by language in articulating new ideas about the constitution of the human body for the rest of the nineteenth century.

The link between self-knowledge and agency forms the basis of my fourth chapter, “‘Keep Me at It Like a Steam Engine’: Mechanical Subjectivity in George Gissing’s New Grub Street.” Gissing’s novel, I argue, establishes an initial opposition between the figure of the automaton and the self-reflexive, self-motivating liberal character that stands as the ideal subjective type of the later Victorian era. As the narrative of New Grub Street unfolds, however, the distinction between the automaton and liberal character is gradually eroded, resulting in a critique that reveals the modern liberal subject to be founded on the same instrumentalizing logic as is the automaton. A key element in this critique is the continual failure of characters in the novel to understand what motivates their behaviour and the behaviour of others. The repeated misreading of intention, desire, and affect that transpires between and within characters casts doubt upon the coherence of the novel’s emblem of modern subjectivity—the signature. As a mark of autonomous agency, the signature supposedly externalizes and makes legible the opinions and intentions of a self-conscious, cogitating, authorial subject. New Grub Street, however, complicates this relationship by revealing the impossibility of being an entirely self-knowing subject and by detailing the various ways in which subject and signature can be divorced. Gissing ultimately asks whether embracing the mechanical functions of personal and social relationships—being a “mere
machine”—can be a route to a viable subjective position. By interrogating the liberal individual’s contradictory grounds of existence in this manner, *New Grub Street* understands literary and subjective production to be similar processes, linked through the instrumental exigency of means and ends.

My final chapter, “‘Just a Singing-Machine’: The Making of an Automaton in George du Maurier’s *Trilby,*” investigates the imbrication of creativity, mesmerism, and the automaton in a protagonist whose conscious mind seems only minimally relevant to her function as the corporeal focal-point of a spectacular aesthetic performance. In my reading of du Maurier’s novel, I aim to reconstruct the evolution of Trilby from carefree grisette to entranced public spectacle by suggesting that her transformation into a “singing machine” is more a function of her social constraints, psychological injuries, and thwarted desires than it is related to the power of her mesmeric master, Svengali. This reading challenges conventional critical accounts of *Trilby* and draws attention to the manner in which depictions of creative agency in the Victorian era often bear gendered weightings in their ascription of causes and effects. As an emblem of unconscious instrumentality and a figure animated through the exertion of external force, the automaton resonates throughout *Trilby* to symbolize the complex nature of individual agency and the limits thereof.
Chapter One
The “Meaner Mechanism of the Human Machine”: Automata and Agency in Mary
Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*

Let us now take technology, fate, chance—all things mechanical and human that rule us, although we ourselves both constructed them and gave them their power over us—let us contemplate them as one and then dream.

—Margaret Visser, *Beyond Fate*

Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) is counted amongst a triumvirate of wildly successful novels—alongside Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860) and Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861)—that confirmed the features of an emergent literary genre in the 1860s: sensation fiction. In its depiction of a moldering aristocratic family infiltrated by a beautiful young woman, and of the forensic pursuit and indictment of that beautiful young woman’s past by her step-nephew, *Lady Audley’s Secret* imagines bigamy, identity theft, arson, and murder as crimes that could be perpetrated upon even the most eminent and refined of households. The novel opens with an account of how Sir Michael Audley comes to marry a fascinating young “instructress” of unknown provenance, Lucy Graham (47). At the same time, Sir Michael’s nephew, Robert, is reunited with George Talboys, a school friend who has just returned to England after three and a half years of gold-digging in Australia. George is seeking a reunion of his own, hoping to reconcile with the beautiful wife and baby son he deserted in an impulsive act of self-pity after a fight over family finances. A newspaper notice announcing the death of Helen Talboys, George’s wife, puts paid to that hope for reconciliation, and George is left in a state of paralyzing grief. As part of an effort to distract George from his cares, Robert invites him for a visit to Audley Court to meet his uncle and his uncle’s new bride, but a few days into this visit, George disappears without a trace. The mystery that begins with the question of what has happened to George quickly devolves upon the

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20 Henry James, in an oft-cited phrase, sounded the moral alarm about sensation fiction in domestic terms when he described the genre as “introducing into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors” (593). Elaine Showalter historicizes this same idea with her contention that sensation fiction made its mark by “translating the fantasies of the Gothic imagination into Victorian domestic realism” (2). See also Anthea Trodd’s *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel* for a broader treatment of the cultural concerns that attended nefarious happenings within private spaces in the era.
connection between Lucy Graham, now Lucy Audley, and the apparently deceased Helen Talboys, née Helen Maldon.

Mid-way through *Lady Audley’s Secret*, Robert Audley has a fateful meeting with Clara Talboys, sister to the missing George. In his subsequent meditation upon this symbolically charged encounter, Robert compares his initial, unfavourable impression of Clara with his current, revised opinion of her: “I took her for a stately and heartless automaton; I know her now to be a noble and beautiful woman” (226). Robert’s reasons for first thinking of Clara as a species of machine in this scene seem clear. In Robert’s estimation, Clara displays no obvious emotion upon hearing the details of her brother’s suspicious disappearance. She also appears to be operating in thrall to her father, Harcourt, whose control over the putatively human inhabitants of his mansion is absolute and whose adherence to the tenets of a mechanical rationality is uncompromising. Robert thus interprets Clara’s limited physical animation as machine-like indifference and decides that she must be “as heartless as her father” (212).

In the context of this scene, the invocation of the automaton seems unremarkable; Robert uses the figure to characterize a human being who appears bereft of agency and feeling. Equally unremarkable is the romantic convention that prescribes Robert’s substitution of a “noble and beautiful woman” for the “stately and heartless automaton” he first sees in Clara: once he discovers the considerable depths of her emotional being, Robert promptly succumbs to the erotic power of that emotional being and revises his initial impression of her. In the context of the novel as a whole, however, Robert’s use of the term “automaton” and his motivation for renovating his opinion of Clara form part of a much larger investigation into the nature and scope of human agency in a world grown instrumental, inexorable, and unknowable through the advances of technological modernity. In this chapter, I will argue that *Lady Audley’s Secret* articulates a suspicion about the extent to which self-governance and individual will can be considered definitive constituents of personhood when placed against a backdrop of overdetermining social, cultural, and technological forces. Encompassing concepts as diverse as fate, ethical obligation, bureaucratic exigency, familial responsibility, masculine prerogative, or inherited impulse, this varied vocabulary of supra-individual “force” subtends and exceeds the story of bigamy, murder, and madness that centers on the moral *lusus naturae*
that is Lady Audley. The automaton is a key figure in the novel’s anatomization of human agency. As a built machine of massive ingenuity, on the one hand, the automaton represents the seemingly unlimited capacity of human imagination, creativity, and will. As a form defined by its ability to reiterate a series of externally determined movements, on the other hand, the automaton is an eerie reminder that what appears as autonomous action might be anything but. The automaton thus sits at the intersection of personal motivation and impersonal force in Lady Audley’s Secret and oversees the novel’s translation of an older conceptual model that understood individual will as inevitably curtailed by fate, Providence, or some other transcendental force into a new model that understands this same sense of subjective limit in secular and technological terms. Ultimately, Lady Audley’s Secret also implicates the narrative form of sensation fiction itself as a mechanical force that compels the lives of the characters it creates and that synopsizes the impossibility of being the author of one’s own existence in a world that has become systematic and opaque.

**Sensation Fiction and Technology**

Sensation fiction flourished in Britain in the 1860s, capitalizing upon a voracious readerly appetite for stories of crime and villainy that had similarly underwritten the popularity of gothic fiction, the Newgate novel, penny dreadfuls, and theatrical melodrama in earlier decades of the century. The outrageous and scandalous nature of these stories supplied the primary sense in which this new genre was understood to be “sensational.” In its secondary sense, the term “sensation” also registered a widespread contemporary interest in the physiological basis of the genre’s effect on readers. Sensation fiction was thought to derive its effects by directly “electrifying the nerves of

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the reader” through its dramatic plot turns, a notion that invested the form with material, somatic force (Mansel 488-89). If critics of the genre have subsequently demonstrated less interest in the physiological aspect of this literary “sensation,” scholarly investigations into sensation fiction continue to be captivated by a narrative formula seen as dedicated to “the gradual unravelling of some carefully prepared enigma” (“Enigma” 1428). Sensation novels are “novels with a secret,” to use Kathleen Tillotson’s well-known phrase, and the uncovering of this secret has important formal implications (xv). According to Patrick Brantlinger, a characteristic feature of sensation fiction is “an apparent disintegration of narrative authority, caused by the introduction of secular mystery as a main ingredient of plots” (“Sensational” 2-3). Brantlinger describes this formal investment in mystery as a way in which “the conventions of fictional realism come to be punctuated with question marks” in sensation writing (11). From this perspective, sensation fiction combines formal predictability with epistemological instability, producing a paradoxical narrative attachment to the knowable unfolding of an ultimately unknowable world. A concern with narrative discovery is an important element in other fictional and non-fictional genres of the Victorian era, of course, but sensation fiction hyperbolizes the issue by making epistemological uncertainty a constitutive one.

From the moment of its consolidation as a genre, furthermore, sensation fiction has been associated with an especially acute articulation of technological modernity. If an explosion in newspaper production provided the non-stop flow of salacious source material for sensation fiction, a concurrent boom in railroad travel supplied that fiction’s audience (Brantlinger, Reading 146; Daly 48). A “[r]ailway-reading” market drove the production of book editions in cheap, “yellow-back” form, offering travelers “a tremendous selection to suit every taste but the crudest and the most cultivated” (Altick, English 301, 299). Nicholas Daly argues that sensation fiction did more than simply entertain modern travellers; the genre also worked “to acclimatize its readers to railway

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22 See Rebecca Mitchell’s Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference, George Levine’s Dying to Know, and Peter Garratt’s Victorian Empiricism for complementary treatments of Victorian epistemological concerns as articulated in fictional and non-fictional works.
time and space” (7).  

Daniel Martin likewise describes sensation fiction as coming of age in “a literary marketplace that increasingly demanded that readers of popular fiction feel the pace of life in the railway age with every turn of a page” (131).

As well as spurring the demand for sensation fiction, technology also forms a significant subject of sensation fiction: Daly identifies the sensation novel as “the first subgenre in which a Bradshaw’s railway schedule and a watch become necessary to the principal characters” (47). The telegraph, the newspaper, and other indices of modernity comprise further plot elements involved in the negotiation of secrecy and identity that lies at the heart of the genre. Technology can therefore be understood as both a constitutive and a thematic element of sensation fiction, and, indeed, *Lady Audley’s Secret* is rife with the signs and symptoms of technological modernity. Steamships carry aspects of the story from around the globe, collecting riches from the antipodes and traumas from Cawnpore. Lady Audley proves to be cunningly adept in making the most of trains and telegraphs to launch her new identity and to protect that identity once it is besieged by Robert’s detective efforts. Along with the contributions made by modern contrivances to the details of its plot, the novel’s descriptive language also tends towards the mechanical. Just before George Talboys faints at the newspaper announcement of his wife’s death, he hears “a great noise as of half-a-dozen furious steam-engines tearing and grinding in his ears” (77). Lady Audley’s charming platitudes tend towards “stereotyped speech” (154), and one particularly striking scene is described by the narrator as something that would inevitably be “photographed” upon the impressionable brain of a painter (308). The temper of the time is articulated overwhelmingly in terms of engines

23 Here, Daly builds upon D. A. Miller’s analysis of sensation fiction’s disciplinary function in *The Novel and the Police*. In Miller’s estimation, sensation fiction ultimately asserts the hegemonic conventionality of the heteronormative family unit.

24 Characters travel to and/or from Australia, Russia, the United States, Germany, and Belgium in the course of the novel’s events. The culturally destabilizing effects of the Indian Rebellion (1857) also reverberate throughout *Lady Audley’s Secret*: see Lillian Nayder’s “Rebellious Sepoys and Bigamous Wives: The Indian Mutiny and Marriage Law Reform in *Lady Audley’s Secret*,” and Christopher Herbert’s *The War of No Pity*, pages 239-272, for extended investigations of this historical register. For a reading of the novel that attends to imperial rather than domestic effects, see Nancy Knowles and Katherine Hall, “Imperial Attitudes in *Lady Audley’s Secret*.”

25 Lucy Audley’s physical and informational mobility is central to her various schemes, but Daly emphasizes the more general importance of mobility in sensation fiction: “The novels depend on the rapid succession of diverse locations, at the same time that the distance between these locations is erased. Alternating locations are not of course *unique* to these novels, but only in the world of sensation crime do they become essential” (47).
and instruments, cogs and wheels. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, according to Henry James, “Modern England—the England of to-day’s newspapers—crops up at every step” (593). Robert’s reference to an automaton in his disparaging dismissal of Clara is, in one sense, part of this technological register of descriptive language in the novel. In an even more compelling sense, Robert’s automaton signals a specific concern with the nature and operation of human agency in a world rife with machines and bureaucratic systems.

The connection between *Lady Audley’s Secret*’s interest in agency and its investment in a techno-imaginary register is manifold. First, the very scale and conditions of industrial growth in the first half of the nineteenth century meant that the world to be known, in terms of its places, objects, ideas, and people, was growing larger than was possible for any single individual to comprehend, as a number of critics have noted. In *The Invisible Hand and British Fiction, 1818-1860*, for example, Eleanor Courtemanche depicts the fictional world of the nineteenth century as “a vast, exciting, but fundamentally unknowable social system” in which characters are charged with managing “an increasing sense of ungraspable social complexity” (4, 10). An unknowable world is a liability for the free operation of human agency, in that agency is predicated upon a knowledge of the possibilities available to a given agent at any given moment. For Lady Audley and other sensational villains, however, this social opacity also offers a uniquely modern opportunity to operate under the radar of public stricture and the dictates of law. During her confession of how the foundations for her identity-altering scheme were laid, Lady Audley describes taking advantage of the characteristically large and therefore anonymous nature of metropolitan life to effect her escape from the restraints of her old life: “I determined to go to London and lose myself in that great chaos of humanity” (362). In this way, the material complexity of the

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26 This line of critical argument owes an intellectual debt to Raymond Williams’s analysis of fiction’s “knowable communities” in *The Country and the City* (165-181). Courtemanche sees an unknowable aspect of the social world as the early-to-mid-Victorian novel’s “distinctive epistemological format”: The novel’s focus on the individual point of view is both its strength and its weakness in this regard: its strength, because it can depict the relation between “knowledge” in general and a subject who not only knows but feels, decides, and acts on that knowledge, thereby creating and changing it; its weakness, because individual mortals suffer from an inevitable limit on the amount they can know. As individual subjects, we can never actually know society as it exists in its totality. (11)
A second link between agency and technology in *Lady Audley’s Secret* can be found in the novel’s understanding of how the technological conditions of modernity render relationships between individual subjects instrumental. The most famous Victorian articulation of this idea occurs in Thomas Carlyle’s “Signs of the Times” (1829), in which Carlyle claims that the incursion of technology into human lives results in changes more profound than mere alterations to external or material circumstances:

> Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions—for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character. (444)

Carlyle’s concern in this passage with a general loss of “faith in individual endeavour” connects the effects of broad-scale advances in industrial, political, and social technologies to an enervation of individual agency in this Age of Machinery. “Only the material, the immediately practical, not the divine and spiritual, is important to us,” Carlyle explains in his enumeration of the “outward establishments” through which all interactions between people are filtered in the modern world (453, 448). “Expediency and Utility” are the tenets according to which all living work, from religious worship to aesthetic production and moral accounting, is aligned (455). In a system made inhuman through its reduction of people to cogs in this “Machine of Society,” Carlyle notes, “it is the ‘force of circumstances’ that does every thing; the force of one man can do nothing” (447, 454).

This lack of faith in individual “force” brought about by an obsession with machine power and technocratic social organization resonated in various ways.

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27 Samuel Taylor Coleridge was an important and influential forbear of Carlyle in this regard. As Catherine Gallagher explains in *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, Coleridge was an early promoter of the idea that “commercial societies (of which industrial communities were an extreme example) weakened people’s faith in free will and encouraged all kinds of mechanistic and deterministic modes of thought” (21). However, the wide renown of “Signs of the Times,” along with his subsequent coining of the word “industrialism” in *Sartor Resartus*, made Carlyle the era’s foremost critic of technological determinism.
throughout the Victorian cultural sphere. The very fact that the internal workings of human beings were susceptible to the influence of “machines and mechanic furtherances” suggested an alarming possibility about what might be a fundamentally mechanical aspect of human constitution, and much writing from the first half of the century struggles with the implications of this suggestion (Carlyle, “Signs” 442). The entire genre of industrial fiction explores the profound ways in which machines affected the minds and bodies of those labourers tasked with their operation. However, the industrial novel was in decline by the end of the 1850s, as was the shocking newness of large-scale mechanical innovation, which means that *Lady Audley’s Secret* and other sensation novels mark a transitional moment in the cultural metabolism of technological progress. Nicholas Daly follows Alain Corbin in characterizing the decade of the 1860s as “a watershed in European history insofar as it saw the modification of the habitus to fit the contours of modernity, including the creation of ‘new thresholds of the tolerable’ and new corporal regimes” (4). It is the consequences of what Corbin calls a “modernization of subjectivity” for the notion of human agency that are anatomized in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and that contribute to the outlook underwriting Robert Audley’s vision of Clara Talboys as an automaton in their first meeting (qtd. in Daly 4). The automaton in this novel is a symbol of the disjunction between a subject’s imbrication in a material world of influences and susceptibilities, and the mystery of that subject’s inner motivation. At the same time, the automaton signals the mechanizing effects of a technocratic social organization founded upon a materialist understanding of the human self. Robert’s projected automaton stands in for his suspicion that he and other characters in the novel are subjectively constituted by a nexus of deterministic forces in which the exercise of individual agency is a severely limited affair. The manner in which *Lady Audley’s Secret*

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29 See Gallagher’s *Industrial Reformation* for an extended argument about industrial fiction’s ideological exhaustion by this time. In “‘Judged by a Purely Literary Standard’: Sensation Fiction, Horizons of Expectation, and the Generic Construction of Victorian Realism,” Richard Nemesvari goes so far as to claim that “by 1860 the Victorian novel was on the verge of an epistemological crisis” and argues that the debate over sensation fiction was “crucial in constructing a horizon of [generic] expectation that shaped not only the rest of the nineteenth century, but the twentieth as well” (“Judged” 15, 27).
thematizes interiority as a state conditioned by material and external elements thus anticipates concerns over the constitution of human mentality that will later become the focus of the Conscious Automaton debate. To elucidate this reading of the novel, a close analysis of the figures and tropes that converge in the automaton’s multivalent representation of subjective and objective compulsion is in order.

Motivation and the Modern Man

From a critical perspective, Robert Audley is generally taken to be the detective hero of the novel—a self-moving agent who unravels the mystery and rights the irredeemable wrongness that is Lady Audley. In order to trace and contain the proliferation of identities created by the woman who has married his beloved uncle, Robert must undergo a subjective renovation of his own; he begins the novel as a feckless ne’er-do-well who is transformed through his detective quest into becoming a stalwart, heteronormative defender of the Audley family’s honour. What goes unquestioned in this narrative arc is the role that Robert’s own will plays in this transformation and in his detective quest as a whole. Though critics such as Ann Cvetkovich and Pamela Gilbert do leaven their account of Robert’s triumphant sleuthing with attention to the doubt and hesitation that Robert expresses about his role in the story, his function as the plot’s prime mover remains undisputed. In Cvetkovich’s estimation, for example, Robert’s embrace of the detective function ultimately “exorcises the threat . . . and consolidates the patriarchal family” (56). The issue of what, specifically, motivates Robert’s mission to solve the novel’s mystery remains under-explored, and it is here that an entry point to the ambivalent portrayal of individual agency in Lady Audley’s Secret can be found.

To approach this problem of Robert’s motivation requires a closer examination, first, of Robert himself and of the way in which he is positioned as a lazy and unambitious figure at the outset of Lady Audley’s Secret. In his authoritative work on Braddon, Sensational Victorian, Robert Lee Wolff goes so far as to wonder at Robert’s basic ability to participate in the narrative proper of this novel:

30 This transformation is well-trodden critical ground. See Robert Lee Wolff’s Sensational Victorian, Vicki Pallo’s “From Do-Nothing to Detective,” Herbert G. Klein’s “Strong Women and Feeble Men” and Martin’s “Railway Fatigue and the Coming-of-Age Narrative in Lady Audley’s Secret” for a representative sample of how Robert’s assimilation into heteronormative productivity has been understood.
In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, MEB was asking its readers to overlook a good many improbabilities. Could Robert Audley, the barrister whom Miss Braddon had described as too “lymphatic” to practice his profession, and who spent his time smoking and reading French novels, have summoned up the energy and determination to carry out his arduous inquiry? (5)

The novel’s introduction of Robert seems to bear out Wolff’s concern. The first sentence to describe Robert simultaneously suggests and suspends his potential as a career man: “Robert Audley was supposed to be a barrister” (71). Robert’s reasons for becoming a “supposed” barrister serve to further indict his lack of motivational force, as he has entered the profession only because “he found it, after due consideration, more trouble to oppose the wishes of these friends, than to eat so many dinners, and to take a set of chambers in the Temple; he adopted the latter course, and unblushingly called himself a barrister” (71). Robert appears to be inertia personified, a condition confirmed by his predilection for French novels and Turkish tobacco. As David Skilton writes, “Audley’s failing according to Victorian standards is a quite ‘Continental’ lack of moral concern and energy in relation to the serious issues of life” (xiv).  

Despite the narrative insistence upon his indolence, there is something in Robert’s character that complicates this initial accounting of his “listless, dawdling, indifferent, irresolute” qualities (Braddon, *Lady* 71). Robert is likeable, witty, and popular. His generous nature is demonstrated by his nonchalant co-signing of a friend’s bill, a nonchalance that extends through Robert’s paying of said bill to the not-insubstantial tune of “a couple of hundred pounds” (73). One of his defining quirks is his “habit of bringing home stray and benighted curs, who were attracted by his looks in the street” (72). This “habit” could be read as yet another indolent acceptance of the world’s vagaries on Robert’s part but for a revelation later in the novel that he has actually fought for ownership of one of those unfortunate beasts, a dog that he has taken “vi et armis from a

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31 In “Robert Audley’s Profession,” Simon Petch traces the novel’s grounding of stable social identity in the concept of professionalization, pointing out that “Robert Audley’s pursuit of Lady Audley’s past is also his own quest for a professional future, and his investigation of Lady Audley’s secret is the means to the establishment of his own identity as a professional man” (1).

32 On the moral dimensions assigned to concepts of work and idleness in the mid-century, see Rabinbach’s *The Human Motor*, especially pages 28-35.
These details suggest that Robert is certainly capable of feeling sympathy towards others and of acting decisively upon those feelings. Significantly, however, these examples of Robert’s engagement with the world are all reactionary ones, in the sense that they are responses to externally imposed conditions rather than what might be thought of as self-initiated actions. In the midst of accusing him of inveterate selfishness, Robert’s cousin Alicia sums up this reactive element of his character: “you would let a man hit you, and say ‘Thank you’ for the blow, rather than take the trouble to hit him again; but you wouldn’t go half a mile out of your way to serve your dearest friend” (148). Early in the narrative, then, Robert acts only when and as he needs to in order to maintain what he considers to be the enjoyable conditions of his life. In this way, his apparent passivity is an index of his privileged and unfettered social position as a young gentleman of means.

The same spirit of reactive rescue demonstrated in Robert’s adoption of the dogs comprises an essential aspect of his response to meeting with the strayed and straying George Talboys, especially once Robert bears witness to George’s shock at seeing his wife’s death notice in the Times. Robert’s response to George is an empathetic one, especially considering Robert’s supposedly constitutional “indifference”: “The big dragoon was as helpless as a baby; and Robert Audley, the most vacillating and unenergetic of men, found himself called upon to act for another. He rose superior to himself and equal to the occasion” (78). Cvetkovich and Richard Nemesvari, among others, have attended to the homoerotic overtones of Robert’s affective engagement with George in order to argue for the importance of the sexual domain in untangling the novel’s ideological investments. While Robert’s compassionate response to George

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33 As the footnote to this passage in the Broadview edition of the novel explains, “vi et armis” can be translated as “with compelling force” (146). The irony of describing Robert as being possessed of “compelling force” becomes clear as the novel’s analysis of his motivation develops.

34 For Cvetkovich, Robert’s homoeroticism is the occluded and ironic means by which he becomes “the bearer of social values” in the novel, because the novel eventually privileges the affective operation of “male power” (59). Following theorists of nineteenth-century sexuality such as Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Richard Dellamora, Nemesvari understands a nascent cultural conception of homosexuality as “being formulated at almost the exact historical moment sensation fiction first achieved notoriety” and argues that “sensation fiction tended to present sexual irregularities as motivating the crimes which drove its plots” (“Robert” 515). In Nemesvari’s estimation, Braddon depicts Robert Audley as “driven by repressed homoerotic desires” in order to expose “the self-interested and self-protective denial which underlies Victorian patriarchal society” (516). Jennifer S. Kushnier sees in the novel’s treatment of
may, in fact, stem partially from the sort of homosocial or homoerotic foundation proposed by critics, the outcome of this affective connection is not reducible to a question of erotic desire. Instead, Robert’s sense of being responsible in some way for George, based as it is upon Robert’s emotional responsiveness towards those being “ill-used” or in an otherwise “helpless” condition, is the avenue by which Robert is forced to contemplate the nature of his involvement with his social world. This world, as portrayed in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, is complex, tangled, and full of irresistible forces. Robert soon learns the truth of a dictate laid down by Braddon’s mentor, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who cautions that a man “cannot live in himself or for himself, however egotistical he may try to be. Every desire he has links him with others. Man is not a machine,—he is a part of one” (qtd. in J. Reed 240). If Bulwer here envisions the social world as a machine constituted by the proliferating entanglements of individual desires, *Lady Audley’s Secret* complicates Bulwer’s vision by characterizing as mechanical the desires or motive forces that drive human beings into those entanglements in the first place. In other words, what begins as Robert’s sympathetic interest in a friend opens out over the course of the novel onto a mechanistically inflected exploration of the limits of individual will and agency.

Robert spends the next year tending to the grief-stricken George, who has been rendered “submissive as a child” in the wake of his wife’s supposed death, and who “mechanically” responds to Robert’s various efforts to distract and cheer the man (88, 79). George embodies a particularly abject model of agency as he looks to Robert for direction in his bereaved state, a model that establishes a demand for care through its ostensible passivity. It is on what is supposed to be a restorative fishing trip to the village of Audley for George’s benefit, in fact, that the unfortunate ex-dragoon goes missing, an event that sets the novel’s mystery in motion. However, the affective engagement that prompts Robert’s hunt for George’s whereabouts soon takes on the feeling of an immutable force that compels him to take on increasingly complex and difficult work. In his search, Robert travels from Audley Court to London to Southampton to Liverpool and back to Audley Court again, subjecting himself to the exhausting effects of the railway

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*Robert’s homosociality a critique of the “elite public education” system in Britain which condoned homoeroticism and homosexuality in its students (62).*
circuit. He undertakes a number of uncomfortable and increasingly confrontational interviews in his attempts to unearth new information. He places newspaper advertisements for George on two continents. He is beset by worry and by a need to answer a question that grows ever more insistent in his mind: “How is it all to end?” (179). As his role as impromptu detective becomes more involved, then, Robert grows increasingly frustrated by the fact that his life now seems governed by an undefined, unopposable power.

Importantly, given the amount of critical attention focused on the matter of Robert’s sexuality, his resentment at having his equanmous existence disrupted in this way quickly cancels out the sorts of homoerotic feelings for George that critics have ascribed to him. “I wish I’d never felt any friendliness for the fellow,” Robert reveals in an outburst of frustration; “I feel like a man who has an only son whose life has gone wrong with him. I wish to Heaven I could give him back his wife, and send him down to Ventnor to finish his days in peace” (121). Even more critically, Robert soon realizes that George’s disappearance involves his uncle’s new wife and that this search for George threatens Sir Michael Audley’s happiness and reputation. Sir Michael “had been a second father to the young man, a generous and noble friend, a grave and earnest adviser; and perhaps the strongest sentiment of Robert’s heart was his love for the gray-bearded baronet” (234). Accordingly, Robert balks at the thought that he should become the architect of the elder man’s devastation (234). Robert’s sympathy for George has thus resulted in his becoming progressively ensnared in a mesh of ethical exigencies that prove difficult to untangle.

At first, Robert’s frustration is vented in terms of the specific investigation, as evinced by his impatience at being forced to wait “an hour and a quarter for a slow train to take him to his destination” while giving chase to George (131). Soon, however,

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35 For an extended treatment of Robert’s place in the history of “Victorian anxieties about railway travel within the context of competing social discourses about the fatigued and nervous modern body,” see Martin’s “Railway Fatigue and the Coming-of-Age Narrative in Lady Audley’s Secret” (131).

36 In challenging the conclusions of this critical approach, my intention is not to disavow the importance of recognizing Robert Audley’s unconventional masculine identity but to argue that Robert’s non-normative feelings for George are an insufficient explanation for the motive force that turns Robert into something akin to a conscious automaton.

37 I read Robert’s distress at causing his uncle grief in a more literal way than does Cvetkovich, who sees Robert as becoming “enmeshed in an Oedipal rivalry with his uncle” (60).
Robert’s dissatisfaction with the case is directed at a larger force that circumscribes his entire sense of self:

“Why do I go on with this,” he said, “when I know that it is leading me, step by step, day by day, hour by hour, nearer to that conclusion which, of all others, I should avoid? Am I tied to a wheel, and must I go with its every revolution, let it take me where it will? Or can I sit down here to-night and say I have done my duty to my missing friend, I have searched for him patiently, but I have searched in vain?” (183)

This passage describes some of the contradictions that simultaneously structure and subvert the notion of individual agency in the novel. In the first place, Robert articulates a certainty that his investigation is leading him to a terrible conclusion even while contemplating the fact that the exact content of that conclusion remains unknown to him. He describes this unwanted-if-unknown conclusion to be one of a multitude of outcomes, which should allow him the possibility of arriving at other conclusions. This possibility is foreclosed, however, by Robert’s feeling of being “tied to a wheel,” an expression that evokes both the unalterable progression of the wheel of fate and the torturous revolutions of a Catherine Wheel. The image of rotational movement rehearses Robert’s conception of his search as comprising a “radius” that he fears will grow “narrower day by day” until it inevitably “draws a dark circle round the home of those I love” (135, 153, 179). Robert also imagines the investigation as forging an oppressively encircling chain and asks whether he must “go on adding fresh links to that fatal chain until the last rivet drops into its place and the circle is complete?” (183). Despite the totalizing reach of this cyclical imagery, however, Robert expresses his relationship to the movement of the wheel in uncertain, resistant terms. He feels compelled to “go with its every revolution” but then wonders whether he must “let” the wheel take him “where it will” (183). The first of these expressions precludes the involvement of any agency on Robert’s part, while the second sees Robert as having some choice in whether or not to submit to the wheel’s motion. Finally, the entire passage is formulated as a series of questions, placing all of

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38 In her discussion of metaphors associated with the concept of fate, Margaret Visser describes the sense in which figurative circularity combines movement with stasis: “Wheels and rings effect a reconciliation between utterly opposite concepts, contradictions in terms: circular shapes express not only movement but also stillness” (18). As we will see, a sense of meaningless, repetitive, reiterative movement lies at the heart of Robert’s subjective frustration.
these ideas in rhetorical suspension. The overall effect of this alternating assertion and disavowal of agency is the establishment of Robert’s unsettling doubt about his own sense of motivation, a doubt that only grows as the case progresses.

The sense of inexorable movement in Robert’s life, the apparent futility of his resistance to that movement, and his inability to understand the source of that movement are encompassed in the “stronger hand” imagery that comes to dominate the second volume of the novel. The first mention of this “stronger hand” takes place as Robert, meditating over belongings that George has left behind in London, tries to decide upon his next action. In this scene, Robert feels “anxious to keep to the strict line of duty; fearful to swerve from the conscientious discharge of the strange task that had been forced upon him; and reliant on a stronger hand than his own to point the way which he was to go” (183). The affective imperative that has driven him thus far is here expanded into less personal notion of “duty,” and the reference to a “stronger hand” suggests a sense of pressure that is both synecdochally human and uncannily detached.

Robert’s feeling of estrangement from the force that compels his actions is amplified in subsequent references to this “stronger hand.” In the course of interviewing the shifty Captain Maldon, father to George’s supposedly dead wife, Robert is again struck by the sense of being moved by some kind of external impetus. Robert observes: “Whatever the mystery may be, it grows darker and thicker at every step; but I try in vain to draw back or to stop short upon the road, for a stronger hand than my own is pointing the way to my lost friend’s unknown grave’” (192). The pitifully defensive reaction of Mr. Maldon to Robert’s interview is terrible enough to reduce Robert to tears, both for Maldon’s sake and in anticipation of the similar effect that the same news will have on Sir Michael: “‘Why do I go on with this?’ he thought; ‘how pitiless I am, and how relentlessly I am carried on. It is not myself; it is the hand which is beckoning me further and further upon the dark road whose end I dare not dream of’” (196). The significance of this exchange lies not simply in the fact that the “stronger hand” metaphor predominates in Robert’s interpretation of his interaction with the world at this moment but also in the way that Robert identifies the “hand” as something other than “himself,” as an alien source of motivational power. Again, ambiguity inheres in this description; Robert is at once “relentlessly” carried by that force and, in a more passive formulation,
merely “beckoned.” Robert apologizes to Maldon and repeats a version of the phrase that rapidly approaches the status of refrain in the novel: “A stronger hand than my own beckons me on. . . . I must go on” (197).

In literary terms, Robert’s bind would appear to be a familiar one. Expressions of the uncanny providential agency that employ the trope of the “invisible hand” date back at least to Defoe’s Moll Flanders (1722), well before Adam Smith adapted and secularized the phrase for his economic ends. Indeed, to this point in Braddon’s text, these “stronger hand” references have been aligned with a traditionally Christian emphasis upon the role that duty and selfless responsibility play in what John Reed identifies as “the most basic and forthright conventional Christian diagram of submission of the will as true freedom” (277). The full passage in which the first “stronger hand” reference appears makes this Christian valence explicit:

[Robert] rested his elbows on his knees, and buried his face in his hands. The one purpose which had slowly grown up in his careless nature until it had become powerful enough to work a change in that very nature, made him what he had never been before—a Christian; conscious of his own weakness; anxious to keep to the strict line of duty; fearful to swerve from the conscientious discharge of the strange task that had been forced upon him; and reliant on a stronger hand than his own to point the way which he was to go. Perhaps he uttered his first earnest prayer that night, seated by his lonely fireside, thinking of George Talboys. When he raised his head from that long and silent reverie, his eyes had a bright, determined glance, and every feature in his face seemed to wear a new expression.

“Justice to the dead first,” he said, “mercy to the living afterwards.” (183) In this passage, the dictates of divine purpose seem to reconcile Robert to the need for definitive action of some kind. However, the hypothetical and ambiguous formulation of the phrase that follows the mention of the “stronger hand”—“Perhaps he uttered his first earnest prayer that night”—signals the unsteady ground upon which the influence of Providence rests in this novel. The cruel and mercilessly instrumental position that Robert is forced to occupy in his conversation with the unfortunate Maldon proves more than the would-be barrister can stomach, and the horrified manner in which Robert
disavows any intentional involvement with those proceedings would seem to complicate his readiness to accept the workings of this apparently divine plan. As it turns out, *Lady Audley’s Secret* shares Robert’s reluctance to embrace the concept of a singular model that might explain Robert’s sense of being driven by a “stronger hand.”

The coherence of what might lie behind the “stronger hand” that dictates Robert’s investigative progress is complicated by the sheer profusion of invisible, unseen, or otherwise de-corporealized hands functioning in various ways in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. For instance, the operation of chance in the novel is guised as a metaphorical hand of cards dealt to or by different characters (284, 378). Similar abstractions are reified in images such as the “iron hand of difficulty” with which Clara is faced, the “hand of treachery” that Robert pursues, and the hands into which various responsibilities are placed (222, 374). “Autumn’s destroying hand” inevitably ousts the “soothing hand” of peace that reigns over the verdant grounds of Audley Court in the springtime (138, 44). A sardonic narrative touch inflects the credit bestowed upon the “hand of genius” that designed the drafty, rickety, and doomed Castle Inn (161). Written hands are strange or familiar to varying degrees of incrimination throughout the novel (101, 185, 424). Most significant is the multiplicity of mysterious hands that plague the novel with their disembodied representations of violence and crime, from “the kindred hand” that stands in for the murderous propensities of rural England to the unknown “other hand” that steals letters out of Robert’s apartment, and from “the hand that wronged” George Talboys to the “powerful hand” that leaves its marks upon Lady Audley’s wrist (91, 182, 197, 123). While the figure of the hand in each of these expressions serves to personify and constrain various agencies, it also erases the differences between them, obscuring the exact source and identity of each of the forces involved.

Also at play in the novel is the notion that Robert’s constitutive temperament might be contributing to his sense of being overcome by unyielding motivational pressure. As the narrator explains, “[w]ith Mr. Robert Audley’s lymphatic nature, determination was so much the exception, rather than the rule, that when he did for once in his life resolve upon any course of action, he had a certain dogged, iron-like obstinacy that pushed him on to the fulfillment of his purpose” (124). From this perspective, the “stronger hand” that drives Robert is a force both internal and exceptional, the result of a
“once in his life” experience that can be neither extended to explain Robert’s actions in other domains nor generalized to account for the actions of other characters in the text. The extent to which Robert might be driven by an internally produced obsession or “monomania” is broached by several characters, including Robert himself, who asks: “What if I am wrong after all? What if this chain of evidence which I have constructed link by link is woven out of my own folly? What if this edifice of horror and suspicion is a mere collection of crochets—the nervous fancies of a hypochondriacal bachelor? . . . Oh, my God, if it should be in myself all this time that the misery lies” (271). This doubt over whether Robert’s feeling of unremitting force is a pathological operation of his own constitution or the result of some menacing external drive is a recurring concern throughout the novel’s treatment of agency.

Agency and Its Alternatives

Amidst this proliferation of hands, Providence, fate, and individual constitution are reduced to each being only one of many possible forces that drive human action. Robert’s troubled and resistant relationship to any traditional understanding of motive force is brought into full relief when he decides to visit George’s father, a “heartlessly-indifferent” man who has complacently “washed his hands of all responsibility in his son George’s affairs” because of George’s decision to marry Helen Maldon against his father’s will (186). Despite having already “abandoned all thought of assistance from the man who, in the natural course of things, should have been most interested in George’s fate,” Robert turns back to Harcourt Talboys as Robert’s internal conflict over the case grows acute (186). Robert’s intention in visiting Harcourt Talboys is to take matters out of the hand of Providence, as it were, and deposit them into Harcourt’s own hands, such that it is Harcourt who “shall decide what is next to be done” (204). By doing so, Robert pursues a solution to his problem that is based upon a known, secular quantity—Harcourt’s relationship to his son—rather than upon an unknowable theological conception that renders Robert’s obeisance to duty a non-negotiable matter. The move is a disingenuous one, as Robert seems certain that Harcourt’s lack of interest in his son’s plight will provide the excuse Robert needs to disburden himself of his own ethical entanglement with George.
Harcourt Talboys’s indifference to George’s whereabouts is part of the elder man’s hyperbolic effort to construct an ordered, controlled route through the vagaries of human life. The grounds and estate belonging to the senior Talboys immediately suggest a mechanical order of precision and exactitude. The avenue leading to the Talboys mansion is marked by a single sharp corner that “would have been made to describe a curve in any other man’s grounds” (209). The square corners and straight lines of the mansion itself are matched by “straight-limbed fir-trees that grew in rows” on the property and by a lawn that is “chiefly ornamented with dark, wintry shrubs of a funereal aspect, which grew in beds that looked like problems in algebra” (208, 209). This uncanny study in domestic geometry becomes an expression of near-industrial hostility when the sounds of the estate are added to its visual dimensions: the “stern-looking barred fence” makes a “clanking noise” as Robert Audley passes through it, and it is anchored by a “great iron tooth which snapped at the lowest bar of the gate as if it wanted to bite” (208). Upon completion of its duty, the entrance-bell of the mansion flies “back into its socket with an angry metallic snap” (209). These images recall a muted, domesticated echo of the “technological sublime” that Herbert Sussman identifies at work in industrial and mechanical imagery from the early nineteenth century (29-30). The immediate significance of these images is the extent to which they imply the determining force of technological rationality itself, rather than the subjective tastes of an individual human being, at work on the Talboys estate.

The interior of the mansion is similarly severe in aspect, as the entrance hallway shines “with the same uncompromising polish which was on every object within and without the red-bricked mansion” (209). That the contents of Harcourt Talboys’s mansion are functional objects, not merely decorative ornaments, is made clear in a descriptive

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39 The Talboys mansion recalls Gradgrind’s Stone Lodge in Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854):

A great square house, with a heavy portico darkening the principal windows, as its master’s heavy brows overshadowed his eyes. A calculated, cast up, balanced, and proved house. Six windows on this side of the door, six on that side; a total of twelve in this wing, a total of twelve in the other wing; four-and-twenty carries over to the back wings. A lawn and garden and an infant avenue, all ruled straight like a botanical account-book. (15)

Dickens’ influence on Braddon has been documented by many critics, including Brantlinger in “What is ‘Sensational’ About the ‘Sensation Novel’?” and Hughes in *The Maniac in the Cellar*.

40 Sussman’s first example of the “technological sublime” is a pre-1800 painting by Philip James de Loutherbourg: “In this painting of an early iron foundry, flames rise through the narrow valley, their source hidden to increase the sense of mystery. The smoke swirls into and mingles with the overhanging clouds to suggest a fearful power in technology that matches the primeval power of the wooded cliffs” (30).
phrase announcing that “[a] barometer and an umbrella-stand were the only adornments of his entrance-hall” (209). The definition of “object” here might even be extended to include some of the perfunctorily human inhabitants of the mansion, such as the servant who “had the appearance of having outlived every emotion to which humanity is subject” (209). It is not particularly remarkable, then, that Robert Audley subsumes Clara Talboys in among these other hyper-rationalized “objects” of the Talboys mansion, especially given the apparent single-mindedness with which she attends to her very functional “plain work” upon “calicoes and flannels” while Robert relates the circumstances of George’s disappearance (210). 41

Unsurprisingly, Harcourt Talboys himself is marked by the same kind of rigid construction that defines his domestic space: as the narrator notes, “there were no curves in his character” (205). Instead,

his mind ran in straight lines, never diverging to the right or to the left to round off their pitiless angles. With him right was right and wrong was wrong. He had never in his merciless, conscientious life admitted the idea that circumstance might mitigate the blackness of wrong or weaken the force of right. (205)

To this end, the elder Talboys is a study in a perverse, Gradgrindian version of the rationality that he supposes to govern civilized, modern, enlightened discourse of the mid-nineteenth century. Reason offers a clear pathway to knowledge, and knowledge is a truth that must remain unassailed by human caprice. By marrying his beautiful wife without his father’s approval, George has wronged Harcourt. The elder man’s rational response to such wronging is to expunge the offensive element from the carefully governed system of his life; neither wile nor emotional whim will succeed in throwing him from this established course. The ruling relationship between emotion and humanity is set out in a plain set of metrics here. According to Harcourt, the strength that is derived from his unwavering allegiance to rational thinking stands apart from the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that inhere in the shifting sands of human emotion.

Harcourt’s existential heuristic is based upon the materialist principles that underwrite what Carlyle sees as the era’s “faith in Mechanism” (“Signs” 452), or what Sussman has more recently identified as the “scientific habit of mind,” which, in its

41 Elaine Freedgood describes calico as “a low-priced and utilitarian textile” (57).
Victorian formulation, can be understood as “the desire to reduce the complex operations of the natural world, of society, and of the psyche to a few simple, quantitative laws” (231). Taken to its extreme, this “habit of mind” accepts the dispassionate consistency of a machine as the ideal to which human behaviour should attain, a tendency that Gorman Beauchamp has termed the “mechanomorphic imperative” (62). While the advantages of this approach ostensibly include a conception of the world as predictable and knowable, its disadvantages lie in the lack of affective connection and transcendental meaning encompassed by this perspective. By attempting to obey the dictates of Harcourt’s rigid rationalism, then, Robert adopts an understanding of the world that is rule-bound but that lacks the comforting possibility of either affective depth or a sense that some benevolent being is tending the providential helm.

In keeping with his strict rules of mechanical rationalization, Harcourt proves intractable on the issue of his wayward son, and Robert’s concern about George is met with dismissal from the elder Talboys, who tells him: “If you go on, you go on for your own satisfaction, not for mine” (216). Robert seizes the opportunity to relinquish any question of his own satisfaction and declares: “from this moment I wash my hands of this business” (216). It would appear, at this point in the narrative, that Robert has succeeded in thwarting the impetus of the “stronger hand” and has freed himself from the mysterious directive that was so distressing to him. Harcourt Talboys’s renunciation of interest in his son’s fate is Robert’s release, and the latter’s feelings on the matter are unequivocal:

“Thank God!” thought Robert Audley—“thank God! It is over. My poor friend must rest in his unknown grave; and I shall not be the means of bringing disgrace upon those I love. It will come, perhaps, sooner or later, but it will not come through me. The crisis is past, and I am free.”

He felt an unutterable relief in this thought. His generous nature revolted at the office into which he had found himself drawn—the office of spy, the collector of damning facts that led on to horrible deductions.

He drew a long breath—a sigh of relief at his release. It was all over now. (218)
This passage represents the completion of a complex transaction of will and agency. Robert, unhappy with the driving subjective force that seems to be in operation to this point in the novel, has managed to extricate himself from the situation only by acceding to the mechanistic authority that lies behind Harcourt Talboys’s “stronger hand.” Robert has therefore accomplished his primary aim, which was to avoid harming his family by revealing Lady Audley’s criminal actions, but this accomplishment is predicated upon the abdication of his own agency. Thus, the extent to which Robert has truly profited by his substitution of Harcourt’s rigid world-view for some other guiding hand remains unclear.

It is at this precise moment, the moment at which Robert believes himself to be free of his ethical responsibility towards George, that the assimilative function of Clara Talboys properly becomes part of the narrative, thus closing the brief window in which Robert’s efforts to control the nature of his affective and ethical involvement in the world around him appear to be successful. Clara confronts Robert as he leaves the Talboys house in order to disabuse him of his belief in her heartlessness towards George. By the end of this confrontation, Robert is determined to take up the case once again. This encounter is generally subsumed into the critical discussion of Robert’s homoerotic attachment to George; it is here that the heteronormative substitution of Clara for Robert’s true interest, George, is said to be accomplished. Indeed, Robert’s entire relationship with Clara is usually read in these very terms. In Nemesvari’s estimation, for example, Clara presents a solution to Robert’s culturally inappropriate feelings for George: “Clara provides Robert with the perfect object of transference and offers him the opportunity to turn his ‘illicit’ homosocial desire for George in a socially acceptable direction” (“Robert” 524). In this account, Clara “becomes the mediating point in a triangulated relationship” between the two men, thus functioning to “cement the homosocial bond between Robert and George even as she camouflages its potentially homosexual nature” (524). However, to reduce Clara’s role to a placeholder of heteronormative assimilation in the text is to miss out on another mode of compensatory logic at play in this encounter between Robert and Clara. From the broader perspective of the novel’s exploration of agency, Clara becomes a mediating point between Robert’s various and conflicted ideas about what motivates him in his search for George.
It is true that Robert’s first proper glimpse of Clara’s face recalls George to his mind, but Robert seems more struck by the intensity of Clara’s emotional register than by her resemblance to her brother:

Robert Audley now saw her face clearly for the first time, and he saw that she was very handsome. She had brown eyes, like George’s, a pale complexion (she had been flushed when she approached him, but the colour faded away as she recovered her breath), regular features, and a mobility of expression which bore record of every change of feeling. He saw all this in a few moments, and he wondered only the more at the stoicism of her manner during his interview with Mr. Talboys. (219)

Robert’s realization of Clara’s emotional depth is followed by her expression of a need for action: “I shall go mad unless I can do something—something towards avenging his death” (219). Clara then explains her apparently heartless response to Robert’s interview with Harcourt by describing that heartlessness as a function of her lack of agency with respect to George’s position in Harcourt Talboy’s estimation. “How should any one think that I loved him,” she asks, “when I have never had power to win him a welcome beneath that roof, or a kindly word from his father?” (219).

Clara has thus delivered a triple assault upon Robert’s sympathies. She has shown herself to be possessed of a deep loyalty to her brother, she seems certain about the path she wishes to take with respect to discovering George’s fate, and yet she finds herself unable to follow that path in the face of a more powerful determinant in her life. The basis of Robert’s interest in, or attraction to, Clara lies not exclusively in her resemblance to George, therefore, but in her resemblance to Robert himself. Both characters feel subjectively limited by forces outside their control. Clara follows up her admission of powerlessness with a surprisingly potent appeal to Robert, asking that he “see vengeance done” in the name of her lost brother: “You will do this, will you not?” (221). Robert’s reaction to this request is instant and telling:

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42 Clara’s declaration establishes a formulaic expression of the relationship between thwarted action in Lady Audley’s Secret and madness: an inability to influence the external world according to one’s own desires leads to an affective condition that is identified with “madness,” even if this version of madness resists clinical verification or diagnosis.
A gloomy shadow spread itself like a dark veil over Robert Audley’s handsome face.

He remembered what he had said the day before at Southampton—“A hand that is stronger than my own is beckoning me onward upon the dark road.”

A quarter of an hour before, he had believed that all was over, and that he was released from the dreadful duty of discovering the secret of George’s death. Now this girl, this apparently passionless girl, had found a voice, and was urging him on to his fate. (221)

The contradictory nature of Clara’s sense of agency becomes apparent as she demands an answer to her appeal: “I ask you to avenge my brother’s death. Will you do so? Yes or no?” (221). Upon hesitating to give such an answer, Robert is met with a declaration of subjective intent on Clara’s part to get the job done herself:

“I will travel from one end of the world to the other to find the secret of his fate, if you refuse to find it for me. I am of age; my own mistress; rich, for I have money left me by one of my aunts; I shall be able to employ those who will help me in my search, and I will make it to their interest to serve me well. Choose between the two alternatives, Mr. Audley. Shall you or I find my brother’s murderer?” (221-22)

Despite the passionate strength of her resolution, Clara’s expression of agency here remains curiously curtailed. She will travel to the ends of the earth, but only if Robert’s refusal to do so necessitates such travel. Her inherited wealth, a convenient accident of birth, is an instrument by which she imagines exerting her influence in the world through others who will “serve” her. Her demand that Robert make the decision about how she is to proceed suggests at once a strong and paradoxically contingent expression of will. What Clara is asking of Robert is to admit his investment in the efficacy of subjective

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43 Clara’s determination to walk to the ends of the earth to find her brother echoes Robert’s own early assertion that he would “go to the very end of the world” in his search for George (123). In Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861), Barbara Hare expresses a similarly complicated declaration of agency while in conversation with Archibald Carlyle:

“I think you must be becoming a convert to the theory of dreams yourself, Barbara; you are so very earnest,” smiled Mr Carlyle.

“No, not to dreams; but I am earnest for my dear brother Richard’s sake. Were it in my power to do anything to elucidate the mystery, I would spare no pains, no toil; I would walk bare-footed to the end of the earth to bring the truth to light. If ever that Thorn should come to West Lynne again, I will hope, and pray, and strive, to be able to bring it home to him.” (288)
desire, but to do so by setting aside his own desires and doing, instead, the bidding of another. This is just what Robert has done in his exchange with Harcourt Talboys. Now, Robert is being asked to repeat this abdication of agency in the service of the very end he has been trying to escape. When pressed to choose between his “two alternatives,” Robert makes the choice that permits him to protect his now-slightly-ragged belief in his own sense of autonomy. He takes up Clara’s challenge: “‘Miss Talboys,’ said Robert, after a pause, ‘your brother shall not be unavenged. He shall not be forgotten’” (222). This exchange establishes an equivalence between the influences of fate, familial loyalty, and romantic attachment, in the sense that all three produce a similarly restrictive effect upon individual autonomy.

At this point in the text, Robert finds himself right back where he began at the outset of the mystery of George’s disappearance, demonstrating the emergence of an inevitable, cyclical revolution on the level of plot in Lady Audley’s Secret. The escape that Robert seeks from a vaguely Providential “stronger hand” in the logic of secular materialism has proven wildly unsuccessful, and he finds himself in the clutches of an even stronger “hand.” The cosmic power of determination that Robert had laid at the feet of Harcourt Talboys seems to have reasserted itself in the figure of Harcourt’s daughter, George’s sister. The stronger hand that has been guiding Robert becomes Clara’s hand, and the vaguely menacing aspects of that abstracted stronger hand are here translated into, and limited by, the conventions of romantic attachment. Significantly, Clara’s assimilative function is as much generic as it is sexual; in her performance as the emotional, vulnerable, loyal, defiant-yet-uncertain Victorian woman, Clara is so exceedingly formulaic a character that she accentuates the artificial, constructed nature of this particular plot twist. Though she might not be an actual machine, she belongs to her father’s hyper-rationalized domestic realm for a reason: she is little more than an assemblage of social and narrative operations, suggesting that Robert might have been correct in his initial estimation of Clara as “a stately and heartless automaton” (226).

44 The rest of this passage depicts more of Robert’s alternating assertion and abdication of will: “‘I do not think that any professional aid which you could procure would lead you as surely to the secret of this mystery as I can lead you, if you are patient and trust me.’ ‘I will trust you,’ she answered, ‘for I see that you will help me.’ ‘I believe that it is my destiny to do so,’ he said, solemnly” (222-23).
Robert’s immediate reaction after leaving Clara, “half-bewildered” as he feels, is to depersonalize his experience in order to contemplate the general nature of human happiness (224). It is telling that in the wake of his exposure to Harcourt Talboys’s hyper-rational world, Robert’s musings on happiness tend towards the mathematical: “Let any man make a calculation of his existence, subtracting the hours in which he had been thoroughly happy . . . and surely he will laugh in utter bitterness of soul when he sets down the sum of his felicity, and discovers the painful smallness of the amount” (225). This embittered, parodic invocation of Jeremy Bentham’s felicific calculus signals Robert’s frustration at having his recent efforts to maximize his own pleasure thwarted. Even to indulge temporarily in this utilitarian valuation of human experience, Robert discovers, is to yield a result of bleak futility. He therefore disavows the possibility of calculating upon, or planning for, the purposeful pursuit of contentment in life: “As if any joy could ever by built up out of such and such constituent parts! As if happiness were not essentially accidental” (225).

This shift into a discussion of the aleatory represents yet another change in Robert’s mode of conceptualizing the motive force that drives him. If Providence suggests the guiding intelligence of an omniscient being, and if a coolly utilitarian accounting of the situation offers no more freedom on account of the depressing overdetermination of mechanical rationality, then the operation of chance is an explanation for events that escapes meaning entirely. However, Robert doesn’t dwell on the nature of the accidental for long. He subsumes the success or failure of matrimony under the umbrella of the accidental, but his thoughts inevitably slip back into the comfortable groove of fatalism:

45 Carlyle explains the source of this bleak result in more detail in “Signs of the Times”:

[We shall find that this faith in Mechanism had now struck its roots deep into men’s most intimate, primary sources of conviction; and is thence sending up, over his whole life and activity, innumerable [sic] stems—fruit-bearing and poison-bearing. The truth is, men have lost their belief in the Invisible, and believe, and hope, and work only in the Visible; or, to speak it in other words: This is not a Religious age. Only the material, the immediately practical, not the divine and spiritual, is important to us. The infinite, absolute character of Virtue has passed into a finite, conditional one; it is no longer a worship of the Beautiful and Good; but a calculation of the Profitable. (452)

46 In a letter to Bulwer, Braddon signals her awareness of what literature can and cannot tolerate by way of accident: “That question about the inadmissibility of accident in art is always terribly perplexing to me. Why not admit accident in a story when almost all the great tragedies of real life hinge upon accident. . . . I know of so many tragedies that seem to have arisen out of accident, and yet I feel that you are right, & that art must be something above the experience of real life” (Letter 12, 26).
Look at marriages! Who is to say which shall be the one judicious selection out of the nine hundred and ninety-nine mistakes? . . . That girl on the kerbstone yonder, waiting to cross the street when my chariot shall have passed, may be the one woman out of every female creature in this vast universe who could make me a happy man. Yet I pass her by—bespatter her with the mud from my wheels, in my helpless ignorance, in my blind submission to the awful hand of fatality. (225-26)

Here, the obdurate momentum of rotational movement returns, although Robert’s position relative to the turning wheel of fate has changed slightly—instead of being tied to a wheel, he is ensconced in a Hansom cab that is, at least temporarily, “his.” Observing that his story would look very different had Clara rushed out of the house just a few minutes later than she did, Robert wonders at the implications of this encounter: “What an incalculable difference this may make in my life! When I left that house, I went out into the winter day with the determination of abandoning all further thought of the secret of George’s death. I see her, and she forces me onward upon the loathsome path—the crooked by-way of watchfulness and suspicion” (226). This sense of Clara as both a romantic interest and an oppressive force perpetuates Robert’s struggle to find his subjective footing: “I accept the dominion of that pale girl,” he explains; “I recognize the power of a mind superior to my own, and I yield to it, and bow down to it. I’ve been acting for myself, and thinking for myself, for the last few months, and I’m tired of the unnatural business” (227-8). Robert attempts to maintain some sense of the potency of his own will by emphasizing his active submission to Clara, but this confusion of connections between happiness, accident, marriage, fate, and Clara suggests the extent to which comprehension of his own motivating forces eludes him.

Robert’s train of thought is interrupted by his cab driver, who asks for payment. This intrusion of economic exigency into Robert’s mediation results in an outburst of pent-up frustration that is channeled through the narrator’s voice:

The cab stopped in the midst of Robert Audley’s meditation, and he had to pay the cabman, and submit to all the dreary mechanism of life, which is the same whether we are glad or sorry—whether we are to be married or hung, elevated to the woolsack, or disbarred by our brother benchers on some mysterious technical
tangle of wrong-doing, which is a social enigma to those outside the Middle Temple.

We are apt to be angry with this cruel hardness in our life—this unflinching regularity in the smaller wheels and meaner mechanism of the human machine, which knows no stoppage or cessation, though the mainspring be forever broken, and the hands pointing to purposeless figures on a shattered dial.

The idea of the world as machine was not a new one in 1862, of course. Historian Otto Mayr dates the expression “machina mundi” or “world machine” back to the poetry of Lucretius in the first century B.C.E. (39). This image was given an updated form in the mid-fourteenth century when Nicole Orseme articulated the concept of “Clockmaker God,” a figure who skillfully assembles the world out of a series of impeccably crafted parts, just as a clockmaker builds a clock, and who leaves that world to run according to the logic of its originary construction. The idea of the “Clockmaker God” emphasizes the intelligence and meaning with which the world was imbued in this founding act of creation, an understanding which would eventually form the basis of the “argument from design” debate that flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.47

What is particularly striking about Braddon’s depiction of “the smaller wheels and meaner mechanism of the human machine” is its emphasis upon the broken mainspring of this clockwork world. This is a world bereft of its primary cause, its locus of meaning, its original source of motive energy.48 Nowhere does the reassuring order or intelligibility associated with earlier versions of the world-as-machine metaphor appear. The angry frustration described in this scene echoes that associated with the clock that adorns the tower at Audley Court: “a stupid, bewildering clock, which had only one hand—and which jumped straight from one hour to the next—and was therefore always

47 For more on clockwork metaphors in Europe, see Otto Mayr, especially pages 28-101. The relationship between the “Clockmaker God” and the “argument from design” is explored in Samuel L. Macey’s Clocks and the Cosmos and in the entry entitled “Watchmaker God and Argument from Design” in Macey’s edited collection, Encyclopedia of Time. The argument from design was given its most famous nineteenth-century articulation in William Paley’s Natural Theology (1802).
48 Rachel A. Bowser identifies a connection between the “shattered dial” and Robert’s frustration in the novel but reads the abundance of misbehaving clocks as a concern with the phenomenology of time. Bowser links time with the surfaces of objects in Lady Audley’s Secret and argues that “the status of surfaces, what they mean or how they refuse to mean, is the problem to be fixed” (77).
in extremes” (43). In its archaism, this old, one-handed clock, ill-suited to the fine temporal tolerances of modernity, marks the pending obsolescence of Audley Court and the knowable, pastoral community attached to it. Without a minute hand, the intelligibility of the clock’s indication of time is limited: “That stupid clock, which knew no middle course, and always skipped from one hour to the other, pointed to seven as the young men passed under the archway; but, for all that, it was nearer eight” (102). In these two depictions of clockwork mechanism, one devoid of meaning and the other limited in intelligibility, the novel refracts an image of an epistemologically truncated world.

**Raging Against the (Gendered) Machine**

The imbrication of hands and clocks in these descriptions, of transcendental meaning and supra-individual motive force, of spiritualized teleologies and secular works of humankind, links the problem of agency to the register of the mechanical in this novel; the operations of subjective motivation that feel so oppressive to Robert are articulated in mechanical, materialist terms. Lady Audley’s Secret depicts the world as a totalizing system of cause and effect that complicates and confounds the efficacy with which individual agency can be locally expressed. Robert’s solution to finding himself so subjectively bound is to settle upon a focal point for his frustration—a focal point supplied by Clara’s secular stronger hand. Robert’s subsequent response to this world of impersonal pressure takes on an unequivocally gendered tenor:

> Whoever heard of a woman taking life as it ought to be taken? . . . She gets up early and sits up late, and is loud, and restless, and noisy, and unpitying. She drags her husband on to the woolsack, or pushes him into Parliament. She drives him full butt at the dear, lazy machinery of government; and knocks and buffets him about the wheels, and cranks, and screws, and pulleys; until somebody, for quiet’s sake, makes him something that she wanted him to be made. (228)

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49 Eva Badowska emphasizes the “catachresis of clock hands” that identifies “the clock as the locus of machine culture” in the novel (161). However, Badowska makes no connection between the clock at Audley Court and the “shattered dial” imagery in the “meaner mechanism of the human machine” passage. 50 Braddon’s depiction of the broken mainspring and shattered dial anticipates Wilkie Collins’s more extended treatment of a badly behaving mechanism in Major Milroy’s automaton clock in Armadale (1866). See Lisa M. Zeitz and Peter Thoms, “Collins’s Use of the Strasbourg Clock in Armadale,” for an in-depth treatment of clockwork metaphor in that novel.
This evocative image of women at the helm of political machinery opens out onto a startlingly misogynistic rant that channels Robert’s rage at having his subjective aims thwarted by Clara: “‘I hate women,’ he thought, savagely. ‘They’re bold, brazen, abominable creatures, invented for the annoyance and destruction of their superiors. Look at this business of poor George’s! . . . And now I find myself driven into a corner by another woman, of whose existence I had never thought until this day’” (229). In the context of the mechanical imagery that comes to the fore in this scene, the double sense in which “brazen” might be read is significant, especially given Robert’s description of women as “invented” creatures.51

Robert’s depiction of women as at once domineering in their influence and artificial in their construction reflects his growing fear that his own agency is mechanical and constrained, a fear that is projected onto several female characters who are represented as repetitive-motion machines in the second half of *Lady Audley’s Secret*. In this projection, Robert channels mid-century generalizations about the relationship between men, women, and machines. As M. Norton Wise describes in his discussion of machinery and gender in Victorian Britain, “while woman’s work was associated with mechanism, with the repetitive motion of shafts, pulleys, belts, spinning machines, and looms moving forever in a cycle, men were the metaphorical engines driving and controlling the system of production” (170). But if, in Robert’s imagination, women are as unyielding as the machines they ply, it is he who feels more and more like an automaton—a figure whose every action is determined by someone else. In realizing that he is not, himself, the “metaphorical engine” driving his own life, Robert is both feminized and mechanized, according to this cultural logic.

The first of these mechanized women is the incomparable Tonks, whose very status as a person is initially misrecognized by Robert. Upon being told by Mrs. Vincent that in order to verify the date of Lucy Graham’s arrival in that establishment, “we must consult Tonks—Tonks is sure to be right,” Robert wonders “who or what Tonks could be; a diary, perhaps, or a memorandum-book—some obscure rival of Letsome” (253).

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51 The word “brazen” has long been associated with forged or artificial human figures, especially with respect to the legend of Roger Bacon’s oracular “Brazen Head.” Dickens regularly plays with the humanly crafted and inhumanly rigid resonances of the word in his references to brazen instruments and brazen faces throughout his writing, including in his description of the “Brazen Head” who serves as the judicial mouthpiece of the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit* (1857).
Tonks turns out to be, at least superficially, a human, who “was no age in particular, and looked as if she had never been younger, and would never grow older, but would remain for ever working backwards and forwards in her narrow groove, like some self-feeding machine for the instruction of young ladies” (254). Tonks delivers a telling indictment of Lucy Graham on the question of whether or not Lucy was useful during her time at Mrs. Vincent’s: “‘Oh no!’ replied Miss Tonks, with a chilling accent, ‘you never said she was useful. She was only ornamental; a person to be shown off to visitors, and to play fantasias on the drawing-room piano’” (255). This image of Tonks in her groove, scorning all that can’t be rationalized into usefulness, places her firmly in the ranks of those caught up in the “meaner mechanism of the human machine.” Mrs. Barkramb, the landlady of the house in which Helen Maldon last resided with her father, subsists in the same kind of mechanical existence as does Miss Tonks. Mrs. Barkramb, “whose mind ran in one narrow groove, and whose life during the last twenty years had been an unvarying round of house-letting,” is a creature of long-standing habit, a woman whose definitively repetitive life has rendered her machine-like (265-6).

The female character most consistently aligned with automata, however, is Helen/Lucy herself. When Robert imagines George falling in love with Helen Maldon, he pictures his friend as a naïve victim of her feminine fascination, an innocent who has “no more familiar knowledge of the creature than he has of the far-away satellites or the remoter planets; with a vague notion that she is a whirling teetotum in pink or blue gauze, or a graceful automaton for the display of milliners’ manufacture” (265). This passage recalls an earlier description of Lucy on a piano stool at Audley Court, wherein she “twirled round upon this revolving seat, making a rustling with her silk flounces, as Mr. Robert Audley’s name was announced; then, leaving the piano, she made her nephew a pretty mock ceremonious curtsey” (119). Lucy’s “wax-doll beauty,” her tendency toward “stereotyped” speech, and her occasional lapses into a “strange, semi-mechanical manner” suggest something of the inhuman in her otherwise impeccable performance of femininity (279, 154, 331). Of course, the fact that Lucy’s beautiful and carefully-crafted

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52 More encircling imagery follows this characterization of George: “The far-away creatures whom he had seen floating about him, beautiful and indistinct, are brought under his very nose; and before he has time to recover his bewilderment, hey presto! the witchcraft has begun; the magic circle is drawn around him, the spells are at work, the whole formula of sorcery is in full play, and the victim is as powerless to escape as the marble-legged prince in the Eastern story” (265)
exterior disguises the operation of her internal springs of action is a conventional observation to make about her portrayal in this novel, but the specifically mechanical resonances of these depictions are significant. Through these, Lucy is connected to the history of female musical automata and to the debates about the construction of feminine identity that attach to this history. Lucy is especially reminiscent of Olimpia, the beautiful automaton who ensnares the protagonist’s heart and mind in E.T.A Hoffmann’s “The Sand-Man” (1817). In this story, the “splendidly dressed” Olimpia, with her “angelically beautiful face” and repetitive way of speaking, fascinates Nathanael immediately and fatally, although other characters in the story suspect Olimpia of hiding “some secret at the bottom of it all” (190, 212). The revelation that Olimpia is not what she seems to be has devastating consequences for Nathanael, who takes up a mad refrain: “spin round, wooden doll” (216, 220). The nature of Lucy’s automatism is of a more subtle type than is Olimpia’s, however. In place of Olimpia’s machine parts, Lucy, Mrs. Barkramb and Tonks are all constituted by the levers of economic exigency, chance, and the limited scope of employment available to women in the mid-century.

The implications of attending to questions of the mechanical with respect to Lucy Audley are significant because of the extent to which Lucy’s motivation has been the focus of critical treatments of Lady Audley’s Secret. The springs of action that drive her nefarious behaviour are supposedly revealed in Lucy’s own confession that she is “a MADWOMAN,” but the novel debunks this idea just as vehemently as she proffers it (354). Dr. Mosgrave, the medical man whose professional worth is measured by the minute and who has subsumed his own personality to the needs of his patients, diagnoses

55 Although Braddon’s engagement with French fiction of the period has been well-documented, less attention has been paid to her interest in German writers such as Hoffmann. The relationship between Robert, George, and George’s sister, Clara, hews uncannily close to the relationship between Nathanael, Lothair, and Lothair’s sister, Clara, in “The Sand-Man.” Robert and Nathanael both momentarily accuse their respective, highly-rational Claras of being automata. Both narratives depict a beautiful, mysterious, mechanical woman of suspicious origin as posing a threat to the security of a close, pseudo-familial unit. Both stories end with a hyperbolically fecund scene of unlikely domestic contentment. Braddon was familiar with Hoffmann’s work, as she later attempted an adaptation of his Doppleganger; see Wolff, Sensational Victorian.
56 This complicates Voskuil’s argument that Lucy functions as a “passionate agent” in the narrative (625).
Lucy as being entirely sane.\textsuperscript{57} Furthermore, the novel suggests several possible explanations or reasons or motivations for her behaviour: poverty, heredity, and ill-treatment at the hands of her irresolute husband. What is most interesting about the novel’s treatment of Lucy is the circumspect way in which her actual crimes are represented. Though her raging outbursts and threats against Robert seem to confirm Lynn Voskuil’s claim that Lucy is a “passionate agent,” the functional power of that passion is equivocal (625). In the scene that describes her setting the fire at the Castle Inn, for example, Lucy is depicted as being strangely absent. Her hand touches the key to Robert Audley’s room “as if unconsciously” (Braddon, \textit{Lady} 333). Her agency in lighting the fire is similarly obscured: “She was obliged to place the flaming tallow candle very close to the lace furbelows about the glass, so close that the starched muslin seemed to draw the flame towards it by some power of attraction in its fragile tissue” (334). Here, the muslin seems more actively involved in starting the conflagration than does Lucy, although the muslin’s “power of attraction” is surely a refraction of Lucy’s own irresistibility. Her attempted murder of George is described in similarly cautious terms: she does not actually push him into the well but merely “removes the spindle” that was supporting his weight. She recalls: “It was then that I drew the loose iron spindle from the shrunken wood, and saw my first husband sink with one horrible cry into the black mouth of the well.”\textsuperscript{58}

Rather than demonstrating her to be a “passionate agent,” then, Lucy’s dependence upon accident and happenstance reveals her to be a product of circumstance, a condition made ever more clear as the novel progresses. Her most outrageous plans—including the use of Matilda Plowson’s death as an occasion to fake her own and her effort to burn down the Castle Inn with Robert Audley inside it—are ideas that are triggered in Lucy’s mind by other characters (365, 318). Lucy seems to be caught in the same subjective bind as is Robert; she has a sense of what she wants to see happen in her

\textsuperscript{57} In “Disclosure as ‘Cover-up’: The Discourse of Madness in \textit{Lady Audley’s Secret},” Jill Matus demonstrates the extent to which Braddon’s novel “reveals how Victorian notions of morality and constructions of maternal madness coalesce in defining the ‘right’ woman by representing her ‘other’ in terms of a specifically gendered pathology” (335).

\textsuperscript{58} Christopher Herbert takes note of these very details but fails to link them to a larger problem of agency in the novel. In his single acknowledgment of the techno-imaginary register in the novel, Herbert dismisses Robert Audley’s compulsive identification with mechanical being as a “spell of philosophical nihilism” (271).
life, but she is forced to make the best of wherever the world carries her. Her sense of being subject to external motivating forces is confirmed by the increasing terror and panic with which she views clocks, those markers of interminable progress that further link her sense of subjective restriction to Robert’s (347). Her final declaration of defeat captures the complicated way in which she understands her life to be both determined and a gamble of sorts: “Has my beauty brought me to this? Have I plotted and schemed to shield myself, and laid awake in the long deadly nights trembling to think of my dangers, for this? I had better have given up at once, since this was to be the end. I had better have yielded to the curse that was upon me, and given up when George Talboys first came back to England” (396). Her beauty, her curse, and her husband are all details of circumstance that hem and impel her desire. Madness, for Lucy Audley, is a direct result of the frustrated relationship between individual will and “the unbending obstinacy of the outward world” (226).

If Lucy’s rage is at losing the game despite her best efforts, what is to be made of the “successful” outcome of Robert Audley’s attempts to exert his will in the world of the novel? Throughout the novel, Robert’s biggest fear is that he will be the means by which pain and suffering will descend upon his uncle: “He was for ever haunted by the vision of his uncle’s anguish, for ever tortured by the thought of that ruin and desolation, which, being brought about by his instrumentality, would seem in a manner his handiwork” (270). Indeed, this is exactly the sort of objectified position that Robert eventually occupies, as he finds himself possessed by “a cold sternness that was so strange to him as to transform him into another creature—a pitiless embodiment of justice, a cruel instrument of retribution” (286). Just as he has been driven by a concatenated force outside himself, Robert becomes the “strong hand” that drives a “barbed arrow” into Sir Michael’s “tortured heart” and that literally and figuratively arrests Lucy Audley (366, 352). This entirely interconnected sense of subjective agency, in which all desires and aims are both mechanically constructed and constitutive of the way that intersubjectivity works in the novel, is hyperbolized in the novel’s extended stutter of an ending.
Problems of Concluding *Lady Audley’s Secret*

For Robert, the incarceration of Lady Audley in a “foreign mad-house” represents an end to his unwitting role in this terrible story, for “not until then would the dreadful burden be removed from him and his duty done” (387). Indeed, Robert attempts to author a clean close to Lady Audley’s life once she has been delivered to the Belgian *maison de santé*, telling her: “You will lead a quiet and peaceful life, my lady, such a life as many a good and holy woman in this catholic country freely takes upon herself, and happily endures unto the end” (396). Lady Audley, unsurprisingly, proves less than willing to condone the neat public narrative that Robert has constructed for the benefit of his uncle’s honour. She retaliates using the only means remaining to her: she tells Robert the story of what she has done to George Talboys.

Lady Audley’s graphic description of how George Talboys’s body came to lie “at the bottom of the old well, in the shrubbery beyond the lime-walk” utterly overwhelms Robert, who is left “with no power to distract his mind, even for a moment, from the image of that lost friend who had been treacherously murdered in the thicket at Audley Court” (397, 399). Far from finding “his duty done” by depositing Lady Audley in Belgium, Robert is, once again, plunged back into the problem of George’s fate and faced with a series of difficult decisions. Should he reveal this new confession to his uncle, which would properly justify Robert’s dogged pursuit of Lucy but which would also bring further suffering upon the elder man? Should he mount an effort to retrieve George’s body, which would permit a proper burial for his friend but which would also trigger a coroner’s inquest and the shameful public revelation of Lucy’s crime? Should he tell Clara that he knows what has happened to her brother, which would ease Robert’s conscience but which would cause her irredeemable grief?

Lucy’s stunning revelation is just the first of a series of premature endings that are each, in turn, undone once another character brings a further piece of the investigative puzzle to Robert. Just as Robert decides he will keep Lucy’s revelation a secret, for instance, Luke Marks reveals that George escaped from the well, injured but alive, and decided to go back to Australia. No sooner does Robert decide that he will follow Luke’s lead to Australia to find George than George himself turns up to explain that he hadn’t gone to Australia at all, but to New York. George has returned to see Robert and pay
tribute to the latter’s determining influence: “I yearned for the strong grasp of your hand, Bob; the friendly touch of the hand which had guided me through the darkest passage of my life” (444). The final few pages of the novel describe the famously unsatisfying ending that depicts Robert as a successful solicitor, father, and husband to Clara, Sir Michael living next door, and George as a doting uncle in a pastoral scene set in a “fairy cottage” (444). What emerges throughout this series of endings is one final explanation for the force that has driven Robert throughout his detective quest: not individual constitution, not Providence, not familial duty, not the shrewishly mechanical actions of women, but the demands and dictates of narrative agency.

The idea that narrative itself might be the force drawing Robert onwards through *Lady Audley’s Secret* is noted by Kathleen Tillotson, who, in a passing comment in her foundational essay on the sensation fiction genre, suggests that the hand drawing Robert on is “obviously Miss Braddon’s” (xv). In fact, Braddon might be considered as one of the “bold, brazen, abominable” female creatures who dictate the terms of Robert’s life while also being mechanically constructed. Braddon regretted the dehumanizing demands of popular authorship, “which force one into over-strained action in the desire to sustain the interest” (Letter 3, 13). In a series of letters to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, she describes how she had “learned to look at everything in a mercantile sense, & to write solely for the circulating library reader, whose palette [sic] require strong meat, & is not very particular as to the quality thereof” (Letter 4, 14). Braddon corroborates the contemporary sense of sensation fiction as a market-driven production: “I know that my writing teems with errors, absurdities, contradictions & inconsistancies [sic],” she writes in 1862, “but I have never written a line that has not been written against time—sometimes with the printer waiting outside the door” (Letter 1, 10). Braddon apparently wrote the first chapters of *Lady Audley’s Secret* overnight after discovering that the lead serial due to appear in the inaugural issue of a journal launched by her partner, John Maxwell, entitled *Robin Goodfellow*, fell through at the last minute.59 In April 1863, Braddon confessed that she had written “the third & some part of the second vol of ‘Lady A.’ in less than a fortnight, & had the printer at me all the time” (Letter 3, 12). She also described her writing process

59 See Jennifer Carnell’s *The Literary Lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon*, pages 160-164, for more detail on the circumstances of *Lady Audley’s Secret*’s production.
in mechanical terms, complaining in May 1863 of how exhausted she felt by her
unending work: “I go on grinding & grinding until I feel as if there was nothing left in me
but the stalest & most hacknied [sic] of ideas” (Letter 4, 14). If Braddon can be imagined
as writing from a place of subjective constraint somewhat equivalent to Robert’s, then,
the conventionality of Lady Audley’s Secret’s final ending takes on an element of
authorial wish-fulfillment: the very artificiality of this section admits its status as a
fantasy of conclusion. What becomes apparent in this fantasy is the difference between
the author-automaton, who is driven to write an ending that will spawn a demand for
more of her stories, and the character-automaton, who is permitted to relax in a quiet
idyll, finally free of the force that has plagued him throughout the novel.

As compelling as the notion of Braddon as a writing machine is, I would like to
qualify Tillotson’s suggestion by arguing that Braddon’s own authorial agency is less
immediately at stake in the novel’s metafictional investigation of force than is narrative
agency more generally. Lady Audley’s Secret depicts narrative as something
fundamentally repetitive and reiterative. The novel is laced with references to other
fictional and historical tales, both in terms of narration and in the language with which
characters communicate with one another, such that Catherine Gallagher calls the novel a
“book about books” (Industrial 108).60 Robert self-reflexively describes his ironized role
as detective-hero of the novel in the terms of fictional convention; he is “the hero of a
French novel” when he feels that he is becoming bewitched by his new aunt, and he is
like a “ghost-haunted hero of a German story” in his obsession with the hunt for George
(94, 278). Robert’s warning to Lucy early in their acquaintance is drawn from his
familiarity with dissipated French fiction: “You have no sentimental nonsense, no silly
infatuation, borrowed from Balzac, or Dumas fils, to fear from me.” (169). Alongside the
implicit intertextual references to Dickens and Hoffmann, Robert gestures explicitly
towards the origins of the sensation genre by describing contemporary fiction as a source
of information and loin-girding:

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60 Braddon’s interest in intertextual influence is given most explicit form in the character of Sigismund
Smith in The Doctor’s Wife (1864), Braddon’s adaptation of Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. Smith
listens to Isabel Sleaford’s recitations of passages written by her “pet authors,” and then, the narrator
explains, “I am sorry to say that the young man, going to work at Colonel Montefiasco next morning,
would put neat paraphrases of Bulwer, or Dickens, or Thackeray into that gentleman’s mouth, and invest
the heroic brigand with the genial humour of a John Brodie, the spirituality of a Zanoni, and the savage
sarcasm of a Lord Steyne” (28).
“I haven’t read Alexander Dumas and Wilkie Collins for nothing,” he muttered. “I’m up to their tricks, sneaking in at doors behind a fellow’s back, and flattening their white faces against window panes, and making themselves all eyes in the twilight. It’s a strange thing that your generous hearted fellow, who never did a shabby thing in his life, is capable of any meanness the moment he becomes a ghost.” (406)

Robert’s progress through his detective quest is continually paced and contextualized through references to other narratives, emphasizing the reiterative quality of the tale at the level of both theme and plot.

Despite the narrative claim that she “hated reading, or study of any kind,” Lucy proves to be another very well-equipped story expert in Lady Audley’s Secret (90). Her relationship with her maid, Phœbe, is mediated through the yellow-backed novels they read together, as evident in their ironic discussion of a French story in which the secret of a beautiful woman’s crime is “revealed through one of those strange accidents by which such secrets always are revealed in romances” (139). Continually conscious of the conventions of fiction, Lucy dismisses Robert’s suspicions about her by classifying George’s disappearance as “rather a romantic story, but by no means an uncommon one” (285). She also uses fiction to mitigate the severity of her own criminal activities, explaining: “My worst wickednesses have been the result of wild impulses, and not of deeply laid plots. I am not like the women I have read of, who have lain night after night in the horrible dark and stillness, planning out treacherous deeds, and arranging every circumstance of an appointed crime” (311). Lucy’s story, in fact, threatens to exceed the boundaries of a single text, as she “suffered agonies that would fill closely printed volumes, bulky with a thousand pages, in that one horrible night. She underwent volumes of anguish, and doubt, and perplexity” (326). This bibliographic excess of affect stands out sharply against a contrasting attenuation of George’s life, which Robert describes as having “ended as suddenly as a story ends when the reader shuts the book” (246).

61 The reference to Phœbe on her wedding day as being easy to mistake for “the ghost of some other bride, dead and buried in the vaults below the church” (143) provides another intertextual connection to Hoffmann’s “The Sand-Man,” which references “the legend of ‘The Dead Bride,’” popularized by Goethe as “Die Braut von Korinth” in 1797 (Hoffmann 209n1).
Similarly, Robert later laments “how great a leaf had been torn out of his life, now that the dark story of George Talboys was finished” (400).

Sensation fiction was seen by many contemporary reviewers as a degraded form of artistry that belonged more properly to the realm of industrial production than to the ranks of the literary. In his famous excoriation of the genre, H. L. Mansel describes the work of the sensation novelist in terms that are equally mechanical and dismissive:

No divine influence can be imagined as presiding over the birth of [the sensation novelist’s] work, beyond the market-law of demand and supply; no more immortality is dreamed of for it than for the fashions of the current season. A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public want novels, and novels must be made—so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season. And if the demands of the novel-reading public were to increase to the amount of a thousand per season, no difficulty would be found in producing a thousand works of the average merit. They rank with the verses of which ‘Lord Fanny spins a thousand such a day;’ and spinning-machines of the Lord Fanny kind may be multiplied without limit. (483)

Mansel’s account of the conditions under which sensation fiction was produced resonate eerily with Robert’s complaints about the overdetermining social conditions that govern his existence. The loss of faith in a transcendental power, the abstraction of human will into a deindividuated force, the sense of a large-scale system that functions independently of any individual decision, and the language of mechanism that saturates Mansel’s account of fictional production all have their equivalences in Robert’s own understanding of his predicament. Robert’s feeling of being forced on by a “stronger hand” through the narrative is even rendered in algorithmic terms in Mansel’s description of sensation fiction as a game:

Each game is played with the same pieces, differing only in the moves. We watch them advancing through the intricacies of the plot, as we trace the course of an x or a y through the combinations of an algebraic equation, with a similar curiosity to know what becomes of them at the end, and with about as much consciousness of individuality in the ciphers. (486-87)
This idea of Robert as a “piece” moving through the intricacies of a formulaic plot resonates with the language of the automaton in the novel, implying that literary character might well be considered as a merely operational piece of narrative programming.

Braddon’s novel was treated with particular contempt in terms of this mechanically formulaic aspect of its plot: “The author of Lady Audley’s Secret has appreciated the popular taste, and constructed a story as wild in its incidents as any romance ever issued from the Minerva press, but modern in its machinery, and in the language in which that machinery is described” (“Lady Audley’s Secret” 1196). The focus on action or “intricacies of the plot,” rather than character, was seen as a type of creative infirmity. As Henry James opined, Braddon produced “not stories of passion but stories of action” (594). This issue of the mechanics of plot has been given an updated treatment in critical writings about sensation fiction that focus on the issue of form, including Brantlinger’s analysis of sensation narrative as constituted by plot progression interrupted in some way by a fractured narrative authority, by the withholding of information rather than the revelation of it, and by the use of “mystery” as a defining generic feature (Brantlinger, “Sensation” 2). In “The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction,” Jonathan Loesberg argues that little by way of theme is shared amongst novels classed as sensation fiction “since, when looked at closely, they show themselves to be almost deliberately thematically indeterminate” (116). Instead, Loesberg identifies a “principle of inevitable sequence” that underwrites sensation fiction’s suspenseful plot structure. In Loesberg’s estimation, sensation fiction hyperbolizes the operation of this “mounting sequence” by detaching or “unlinking” narrative themes from plot structure in key moments of sensational effect (129, 130). As a result, it is “that sense of inevitable sequence rather than any explanation of it that is the common ground of sensation fiction’s plot structure” (127). I would argue that Lady Audley’s Secret is, in fact, an exception to Loesberg’s generalization, and that the novel’s thematic treatment of the multiple, varying modes of influence or mechanical motivation that drive a conscious agent is an extended investigation of what produces “that sense of inevitable sequence” in a literary narrative.  

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62 The Minerva Press, operated by William Lane, was a well-established publisher of sentimental fiction in the mid-nineteenth century. Mansel describes the Minerva Press as “that synonym for the dullest specimens of the light reading of our grandmothers” (484).
In its exploration of the limits placed on human agency in an age of disorienting technological governance, *Lady Audley’s Secret* anatomizes the various forces that impinge upon individual will, updates the figurative language available to describe subjective imperatives, and considers narrative structure itself as a space in which these imperatives are explored and re-enacted. The automaton stands at the center of this exploratory discourse, signalling the illusory, limited sphere of individual action and emphasizing the aptness of eccentric, circuitous, or repetitive movements rather than progressive, rectilinear ones in charting the evolution of fictional life. As the next chapter will explore, the figural automaton continues this disruptive work in fictional iterations of technologically shaped subjectivities that explore the implications of joint human-machine evolution in an imagined future that proves to be as epistemologically challenging as is the present in sensation fiction.
Chapter Two
Mechanical Motivations and Technological Ends in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s
*The Coming Race* and Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*

Upon being discovered by a native denizen of the underworld into which he has stumbled via a crack in a mining shaft, the American narrator of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1871) is brought to a nearby building for examination. The narrator takes awestruck note of the ancient Egyptian and Greek resonances of the building’s architecture, the subtle technology that illuminates the building’s interior, and the pleasant sounds and smells that linger within. In the midst of this unnervingly refined space, the narrator encounters a mysterious entity: “A figure, in simpler garb than that of my guide, but of similar fashion, was standing motionless near the threshold. My guide touched it twice with his staff, and it put itself into a rapid and gliding movement, skimming noiselessly over the floor. Gazing on it, I then saw that it was no living form, but a mechanical automaton” (41). The otherworldly people with whom the narrator has made contact are a scientifically and socially advanced civilization called the Vril-ya, who use automata to “answer the ordinary purposes of domestic service” (46). The narrator is repeatedly struck by the sophistication of these automata and by the difficulty he feels in distinguishing these machines from living beings. The automata of the Vril-ya “are so ingenious . . . that they actually seem gifted with reason. It was scarcely possible to distinguish the figures I beheld, apparently guiding or superintending the rapid movements of vast engines, from human forms endowed with thought” (111). The encounter between Bulwer’s narrator and the Vril-ya’s automata is the inaugural English-language description of a servant class of humanoid machines that would become a key interest of science-fiction writing in the twentieth century. In its depiction of an ontological instability in the boundary between humans and machines, this scene emblematizes an unease that shapes *The Coming Race* as a whole. More specifically, the narrator’s inability to perceive what differentiates mechanical from human life in this highly evolved civilization focalizes an anthropological concern about how, in the Victorian era, technological progress was eroding the doctrine of exceptionalism that had previously underwritten conceptions of humanity.
Published one year after The Coming Race, Samuel Butler’s Erewhon (1872) depicts another discovery of a previously unknown civilization, this one hidden beyond an imposing mountain range in an undisclosed English colony. Amongst the Erewhonians, machines have been outlawed for the past four hundred years as per the directive of an influential philosophical text which warned that technology would one day evolve to “supplant the race of man” (97). Humankind, argued this unnamed philosopher, had already suffered a significant derogation as a result of its close relationship to machines: “Man’s very soul is due to the machines; it is a machine-made thing: he thinks as he thinks, and feels as he feels, through the work that machines have wrought upon him, and their existence is quite as much a sine quâ non for his, as his for theirs” (207). From this perspective, humanity had already become a class of automata, subsumed by the superior and totalizing logic of the machine. Only a total insulation from the nefarious influence of the mechanical could reverse this relationship and circumvent the possibility of eventual human obsolescence, and so machinery has been demonized and prohibited in that remote, isolated place. Although Erewhon’s fantasy of technological erasure might seem to share little by way of ideological investment with The Coming Race’s technologically exalted super-humans, Butler’s novel demonstrates a remarkably similar anxiety about the increasingly negligible difference between machine life and the qualities that had once defined the privileged place of the human among living things.

The Coming Race and Erewhon are together classified as Victorian exemplars of a satirical utopian literary tradition, one that found its quintessential expression in Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726), and as important proto-science-fiction texts. Both are regularly described as apologues, as fabular attacks on social attitudes that have been lightly clothed in the palliative guise of narrative fiction (Sinnema 10; Mudford 13). Both share a conservative attachment to values and abilities that are understood to distinguish the character of different social classes (Sinnema 23; Mudford 19). Both demonstrate a typically Victorian concern with the nature of social and individual progress, a concern considerably inflected by Darwinian ideas about biological evolution. What has not yet

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63 The Coming Race is also considered to stand as the “crowning achievement” of literary treatments of the “hollow earth theory” (Sinnema 9). This tradition includes Ludwig Holberg’s A Journey to the World Under-Ground (1741) and John Cleves Symmes’s Symzonia, A Voyage of Discovery (1820) (Sinnema 8-10).
been critically elaborated, though, is the significance of the unsteady, ambivalent, and often contradictory depictions of the human as a mechanical being in *The Coming Race* and *Erewhon*. Certainly, these novels have been read, in the most general of terms, as belonging to what Peter Mudford calls “the long tradition of protest against the new mechanical age” (14). My contention, however, is that the specific textual and contextual articulations of this protest demand closer reading in order to understand the complexity of the Victorian response to a changing sense of the ultimate capacity and potential of human development. In the decade leading up to the publication of these novels, technology was increasingly understood to be a material force that played, and would continue to play, an important role in human development. Along with this understanding came a realization that technological development was taking place on a scale and at a rate that could no longer be easily theorized or anticipated. The oddly displaced futures described in *The Coming Race* and *Erewhon*, I argue, attempt to contain anxieties that stem from the radically open potential of joint technological-human development; the link between the temporal structure of these narratives and their interest in mechanized humans is more than incidental. The automaton, however, a machine that simultaneously represents the technological past and suggests a future state of the human, complicates this effort at containment by demonstrating the impossibility of stabilizing any kind of ahistorical, unchanging definition of the human. If *Lady Audley’s Secret* anatomizes the external forces that contribute to the constitution of individual agency, *The Coming Race* and *Erewhon* dramatize the process of becoming an automaton on the level of species. Rather than depicting a straightforward repudiation of philosophical materialism and technological determinism, then, Bulwer’s and Butler’s texts confront the terrifyingly unknowable outcome of techno-human imbrication.

**Machine Being in the 1860s**

As the representation of mechanically inflected human interactions in *Lady Audley’s Secret* demonstrates, the idea that the world and its inhabitants could be productively imagined in machine-related terms was no longer the sole purview of industrial polemicists or philosophical materialists. The publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, with its “matter first” depiction of evolutionary
process, added substantial argumentative heft to the popular debate about the value of mechanistic models of life (Levine, “Reflections” 227). In the final pages of _Origin_, just a few paragraphs removed from his better-known “entangled bank” finale, Darwin looks forward to a time when his radical rethinking of speciation will be the accepted ground upon which the discipline of natural history is based:

> When we no longer look at an organic being as a savage looks at a ship, as at something wholly beyond his comprehension; when we regard every production of nature as one which has had a history; when we contemplate every complex structure and instinct as the summing up of many contrivances, each useful to the possessor, nearly in the same way as when we look at any great mechanical invention as the summing up of the labour, the experience, the reason, and even the blunders of numerous workmen; when we thus view each organic being, how far more interesting, I speak from experience, will the study of natural history become! (392)

In its recasting of the watch-discovered-by-traveller conceit that structures William Paley’s _Natural Theology_ (1802), this passage confirms Darwin’s departure from a design argument based upon the inventive aegis of a single, omnipotent creator. More to the point, however, this passage naturalizes the image of an archetypal “great mechanical invention” that represents an aggregate of human effort, both mental and physical. To align the process of natural selection with the emergence of a technical object from the work performed by a multiplicity of human beings is to bring ever closer the forces that were understood to shape organic and technological life. This passage

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64 This passage offers a counterpoint to the widely held conviction that “there are no mechanical images in Darwin’s writing at all” (Levine, “Reflections” 237). Levine bases his version of this claim on his reading of a chapter of Robert Richards’s _The Romantic Conception of Life_, in which Richards posits Darwin as being of a markedly non-mechanical Romantic type. Richards actually makes the more qualified assertion that Darwin “never referred to or conceived natural selection as operating in mechanical fashion” (534).

65 Paley’s influence on Darwin was profound. Darwin describes his exposure to Paley’s writing in his early studies as “the only part of the academical course which, as I then felt and as I still believe, was of the least use to me in the education of my mind” (“Autobiography” 47). See Otto Mayr, especially 122-36, for an account of how Paley’s clockwork emblem for the argument from design can be considered “an anachronism, an epilogue to a story that had ended almost a hundred years earlier” in scientific writing. For a fascinating overview of how Paley’s watch anecdote came to be incorrectly associated with the figure of the savage, see M. J. Edwards’s “Butler’s Savage, Paley’s Watch.”

66 Karl Marx identified this rhetorical effect in the first volume of _Capital_ (1867), explaining that Darwin has directed attention to the history of natural technology, i.e. the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which serve as the instruments of production for sustaining their life. Does
defines technology as an assemblage of human effort, imagination, and labour that functions as an important anthropological marker, something that measures human progress in epistemic terms. At the same time, the volatility of Darwin’s “summing up” metaphor allows a reading of this passage that posits the making of such a “great mechanical invention” as, in fact, what defines the essence of the human. This correlation of biological human essence with technological production is an embryonic glimpse of what Henri Bergson would later identify as the defining feature of his Homo Faber: a conception of human intelligence, “considered in what seems to be its original feature,” as “the faculty of manufacturing artificial objects, especially tools to make tools, and of indefinitely varying the manufacture” (Bergson, Creative 146). In this mid-Victorian moment, however, the move away from imagining technology in purely instrumental terms to thinking about mechanical being in deterministic terms was still in process. What, then, might it mean to imagine technology escaping its role as a subordinate marker of human progress and becoming, instead, an autonomous agency that shapes the direction of that progress? As this chapter will demonstrate, the question emerges in the 1860s as part of an important transition to a post-Victorian-industrial conception of the role that technology might play in human development, a transition that can be mapped through a number of other comparative articulations of the relationship between humans and machines in that decade that devolve analogically upon the automaton.

Babbage’s Machine Mind

Charles Babbage (1791-1871), trained as a mathematician and famed as an inventor, is renowned for his work on several machines designed to carry out complex

See Tamara Ketabgian’s Lives of Machines for an exploration of Marx’s technological imagination, especially 19-29.

Bergson’s exploration of technological making as a defining quality of the human is reiterated and recalibrated in later twentieth-century philosophies of technology such as those represented by Martin Heidegger in “The Question Concerning Technology” and by Hannah Arendt’s nuanced distinction between labour and work in The Human Condition.
mathematical calculations. For several decades beginning in the early 1820s, Babbage developed plans for two iterations of what he called his Difference Engine, a machine that could compute the notoriously tedious logarithmic calculations required for the production of navigational and astronomical reference tables. From the mid-1830s onward, Babbage also envisaged an even more sophisticated machine, an Analytical Engine, which could be programmed to execute operational algorithms and to perform multiple calculations simultaneously. Babbage is considered to be “computing’s Victorian patriarch” for his work in imagining what were the forebears of our modern computers: machines that could quickly, accurately, and reliably substitute “mechanical performance for intellectual process” (Menke 25; Henry Thomas Colebrooke qtd. in Schaffer, “Babbage’s” 203). 

The more immediate significance of Babbage’s Difference Engine, however, lies in its conceptual shift away from the effort to replicate the actions of the human body and towards a focus on reproducing the actions of the human mind. As Doron Swade notes, “it is a landmark in terms of the human activity it replaced” (46-47).

Babbage’s influence on the conceptual development of industry in Britain in the early decades of the nineteenth century was profound. His best-selling, widely translated *On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures* (1832) updates Adam Smith’s division of labour by anatomizing the levels of skill required for different tasks and posits everything from the making of a nail to the value of individual character as being the

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68 Babbage’s calculating machines belong to a long history of efforts to mechanize human reason. Previous models include Blaise Pascal’s calculator, developed between 1642-1645, Gottfried Leibniz’s idea of a conceptual language in *De arte combinatorica* (1666), and Charles Stanhope’s “Demonstrator” (~1800). See William Asprey’s “Logic Machines” for more details. Swift satirizes these efforts in a notable episode of *Gulliver’s Travels* set in the Academy of Lagado, where a machine produces combinations of “Words of their Language in their several Moods, Tenses, and Declensions, but without any Order,” from which great thoughts are assembled (171). Babbage was immediately influenced by Gaspard de Prony’s organization of humans into a streamlined system for producing metric conversion tables in France. Babbage saw in de Prony’s system an approach resembling “that of a skilful person about to construct a cotton or silk-mill, or any similar establishment” (*Economy* 195).

69 A fuller account of the engines and Babbage’s place in the development of modern computing can be found in Anthony Hyman’s *Charles Babbage: Pioneer of the Computer*, David Channell’s *The Vital Machine*, 117-122, and Doron Swade’s “‘It Will Not Slice a Pineapple’: Babbage, Miracles and Machines.”

70 Although Otto Mayr draws important attention to the cultural power of self-regulating mechanisms epitomized by the invention of the steam-engine governor in 1788, these mechanisms fall short of an explicit imitation of human mental process (139-95). For an account of Babbage’s efforts, alongside those of John Herschel, to algorithmically represent brain functions, see William J. Ashworth, “England and the Machinery of Reason 1780 to 1830,” 43-44.
result of an interdependent system of rationalized processes. In *Economy*, Babbage tends towards mechanical and mathematical descriptions of these processes, an inclination that Joseph Bizup calls a “drive to abstraction” (59). Along with those of chemist and factory apologist Andrew Ure, Babbage’s visions of the world organized as a mechanical system have been counted as “the first, and certainly the most widely-received, political economic theories that represent capitalist relations of production in the context of mechanized industrial factories” (Zimmerman 6).

In his highly rationalized analysis of industrial and economic practices, Babbage is generally understood to have popularized what Elizabeth Green Musselman describes as an “inductive hierarchy” of social organization, wherein “machines and less trustworthy individuals produced the simplest goods (facts), whose manufacture and synthesis were managed by an elite class of natural philosophers” (34). Musselman contends that this separation of basic tasks from sophisticated processing and analysis had its analogues in models that conceptually divided the mechanical universe from God and the body from the mind: “In all these hierarchies, the higher authority (God, the mind, the factory manager, the philosopher) transcended simple mechanical and inductive laws. . . . In numerous scenarios in industrial society, then, we find intelligence managing, automatons doing—all in the service of economy and morality” (34). Intelligence, here, remains an important marker of the difference between humans and machines, a capability that transcends merely rational, mechanical processes.

However, it is on the very issue of intelligence-as-management that categorical divisions in Babbage’s ideas break down. While Babbage was certainly invested in seeing labour organized according to hierarchies of physical and mental skill, the extent

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71 In Babbage’s own words,

[...]he value of character, though great in all circumstances of life, can never be so fully experienced by persons of small capital, as by those employing much larger sums: whilst these larger sums of money for which the merchant deals, render his character for punctuality more studied and more known. Thus it happens that high character supplies the place of an additional portion of capital; and the merchant, in dealing with the great manufacturer, is saved from the expense of verification, by knowing that the loss, or even the impeachment, of the manufacturer’s character, would be attended with greater injury to himself than any profit upon a single transaction could compensate. (*Economy* 219)

72 For a discussion of how Babbage’s conception of the world as a “social machine” contrasted and competed with the contemporary notion of the social whole as an organic body, see Mary Poovey’s *Making a Social Body*, especially 37-40. For an account of the shift in conceptions of political economy based upon the circulation of grain to a focus on “the mechanized production of commodities,” see Zimmerman, 7.
to which intelligence could be located in any single aspect of those hierarchies is limited. As Simon Schaffer has argued of the industrial debates in which Babbage was involved throughout the 1830s and 1840s, “[d]efining the site of intelligence was a key political task,” a task which foundered on “an unresolved contradiction between stress on the subordination and thus mechanization of workers’ intelligence and on the coordination and thus cerebration of their labour” (“Babbage’s Intelligence” 222). Indeed, the dissolution of difference between mechanical and intellectual processes featured prominently in Babbage’s writings about machines. In explaining the precise workings of his calculating engine, for example, he admits that “the analogy between these acts and the operations of the mind almost forced upon me the figurative employment of the same terms” (qtd. in Schaffer, “Babbage’s Intelligence” 207). The Analytical Engine, in particular, was described as possessing the faculties of memory, anticipation or foresight, and advanced analytic abilities—the same faculties that were so valued in the managers and foremen of industry (Schaffer, “Babbage’s Intelligence” 207-10, 224). Babbage’s sense of the world as a rational unfolding of predictable, determinate laws meant not only that humans could be thought of in terms of machines or machine parts but also that machines could be imagined to perform one day the same intellectual functions as humans do.

In 1864, Babbage revisited and expanded these ideas about the potential equivalences between human cognition and machine intelligence in what would be his final monograph, Passages from the Life of a Philosopher. Uninterested in writing his own life story, Babbage explains, he nevertheless felt a pressing need to set down a biography of his computational engines so as to preserve their origin stories for posterity. Babbage’s personal tales of action and adventure are useful, he claims, only insofar as they serve as pabulum for general readers:

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73 An extended treatment of the “intelligence” of the Analytical Engine would not be complete without attention to the role played by Ada Byron, Countess of Lovelace, in elaborating the philosophical implications of Babbage’s machine. Babbage credits Byron with delving into “all the very difficult and abstract questions connected with the subject” and with realizing “[t]hat the whole of the developments and operations of analysis are now capable of being executed by machine” (Passages 136). As Andrea Austin explains of Byron’s paradigmatic shift in thinking about the engine’s capabilities, “[i]t is precisely her expansive vision, a movement from the science of analysis to its social function that allows her to depict the machine not primarily as singular and in operation, but in relationship with the human” (203).
The remarkable circumstances attending those Calculating Machines, on which I have spent so large a portion of my life, make me wish to place on record some account of their past history. As, however, such a work would be utterly uninteresting to the greater part of my countrymen, I thought it might be rendered less unpalatable by relating some of my experience amongst various classes of society, widely differing from each other, in which I have occasionally mixed.

(vii-viii)

Along with this derisory affront to the imagination of the English reading public, the language of intelligent machines abounds in Passages. Babbage describes his “much-abused Difference Engine” as “a being of sensibility, of impulse, and of power” and favourably compares its mathematical performance to that of Benjamin Disraeli in his role as Chancellor of the Exchequer under Lord Derby’s prime ministerial office (110). Babbage’s Engine could “not only calculate the millions the ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer squandered, but it can deal with the smallest quantities; nay, it feels even for zeros. It is as conscious as Lord Derby himself is of the presence of a negative quantity, and it is not beyond the ken of either of them to foresee the existence of impossible ones” (110). The Difference Engine “knows what it wants” as it proceeds through its operations, and its legacy lies in the fact that it forms “the first great step towards reducing the whole science of number to the absolute control of mechanism” (121, 148).

Here, the Engine senses, feels, knows, and is “as conscious” as a human being, all the while triumphing morally over a more fallible specimen of that species. Of course, this supposedly objective account of the Engine’s abilities is working in service of Babbage’s bitter, personal grudge against Benjamin Disraeli, whose professional duties during his brief stint as Chancellor of the Exchequer included turning down Babbage’s request for more governmental funding for the Difference Engine (A. Hyman 230-31). Babbage’s own ferocious intellect and his affective baggage combine to produce the animating force behind both the Engine and its narrative, complicating his overarching commitment to reducing the world to a complex of rational laws. In this anecdote, the line between

74 In Passages, Babbage sums up Disraeli’s lack of mechanical imagination and his fiscal parsimony with an esoterically withering epithet: “The Herostatus of Science, if he escape oblivion, will be linked with the destroyer of the Ephesian Temple” (111). See A. Hyman’s Charles Babbage: Pioneer of the Computer for a longer account of the feud (230-31).
mechanical intelligence as a purely logical function and affect or consciousness as properties that belong solely to the realm of the human is dissolved in Babbage’s ambiguously metaphorical language.

In constituting this “first great step” towards mechanizing mathematics, the Difference Engine also represents a necessary step in the development of Babbage’s more advanced Analytical Engine, a description of which involves one of several references to evolutionary discourse in *Passages*. Nearly thirty years earlier, Babbage explains, he regularly deployed a “beautiful fragment” of his Difference Engine to perform a “portentous party trick” which began with the machine producing a long sequence of regularly spaced numbers (Schaffer, “Babbage’s Intelligence” 225). At a certain point, the machine would suddenly change its operation to generate a series of numbers that were each 10,000 digits apart. To its audience, this change in the machine’s behaviour appeared unpredictable, spontaneous, or even miraculous. In fact, Babbage would then reveal to his onlookers, this change was one he had programmed into the machine. The point Babbage wanted to make with this trick was that seemingly incomprehensible events “are not the breach of established laws, but they are the very circumstances that indicate the existence of far higher laws” which fall outside the limits of current human understanding (*Passages* 391). Not a transcendent force of being, then, but increasingly complicated laws might explain various phenomena of the world. Babbage recalls this demonstration in *Passages* in order to remind his readers that he had, decades ago, suggested that this mechanical lesson “offered a striking parallel with, although at an immeasurable distance from, the successive creation of animal life, as developed by the vast epochs of geological time” (389). One of Babbage’s early audience members was none other than Charles Darwin who, as Schaffer notes, “learnt his lesson and set out to use Babbage’s system as an analogue for the origin of species by natural law without divine intervention” (“Babbage’s Intelligence” 225-26). Darwin’s mechanical metaphor in *The Origin of Species* takes on even greater suggestiveness in this context, if his

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75 Babbage repurposes this argument from a similar elaboration he made in the *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* (1837), in which he responded to William Whewell’s theological argument against mechanical philosophy by attempting to “mediate the designing nature of classical natural theology and the grinding regularity of determinism with his calculating machine” (J. Richards 59). For an account of Babbage’s success (or lack thereof) in selling his techno-theological argument, see Joan L. Richards, “The Probable and the Possible in Early Victorian England,” and Walter F. Cannon, “The Problem of Miracles in the 1830s.”
conception of natural, organic development is understood to have been derived from a mechanical display of algorithmic progression.

Aside from this shameless invocation of his prescience on matters biological, Babbage’s demonstration of systemic evolution in Passages is significant for the way in which it inflects his discussion of machine development. The Analytical Engine, in 1864, existed only as a series of plans and drawings and remains so to this day. Babbage therefore adopts alternating descriptive and prophetic modes of describing the engine and its capabilities: the operation of the machine is explained in the present tense, while the implications or consequences of the machine’s existence are expressed as futurisms. “As soon as an Analytical Engine exists,” Babbage notes, “it will necessarily guide the future course of the [mathematical] science” (137). In another assertion, Babbage contrasts his mortal limitations with the machine’s potential expansiveness: “If I survive some few years longer, the Analytical Engine will exist, and its works will afterwards be spread over the world” (449). The specter of finitude apparent in this poignant contrast between the inescapable ephemerality of human life and the as-yet-unproven possibility of mechanical endurance is given an even more forceful formulation in Babbage’s discussion of the limitless power of his engine: “It is impossible to construct machinery occupying unlimited space; but it is possible to construct finite machinery, and to use it through unlimited time. It is this substitution of the infinity of time for the infinity of space which I have made use of, to limit the size of the engine and yet to retain its unlimited power” (124). If Darwin opened up an epically vast time scale upon which the

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76 London’s Science Museum built a working model of the improved Difference Engine No. 2 to celebrate the bicentenary of Babbage’s birth in 1991. See Swade for details. Aside from small sections built by Babbage’s son, Meccano mechanic Tim Robinson, and Swade, the Analytical Engine remains unconstructed. John Graham-Cumming currently heads a project called “Plan 28” which has as its aim the production of a complete Analytical Engine.

77 Occasionally the two modes are combined, as in this description of the Analytical Engine’s use of the Jacquard loom’s punched-card memory system:

Thus the Analytical Engine first computes and punches on cards its own tabular numbers. These are brought to it by its attendant when demanded. But the engine itself takes care that the right card is brought to it by verifying the number of that card by the number of the card which it demanded. The Engine will always reject a wrong card by continually ringing a loud bell and stopping itself until supplied with the precise intellectual food it demands.

It will be an interesting question, which time only can solve, to know whether such tables of cards will ever be required for the Engine. (Passages 122)

78 “The whole history of the invention has been a struggle against time,” Babbage is said to have complained about the existential limits within which he was forced to work (qtd. in Schaffer, “Babbage’s Intelligence” 209).
evolution of organic species could be understood to have taken place, Babbage imagines
the temporality of machine development along similarly epic lines. In this way, Babbage
constructs a future-oriented conception of cognizing machines that will both subsume and
outlast human efforts and competences.

In the course of describing his computing work in *Passages*, Babbage connects
his life-long fascination with the intelligence of machines to his similarly long-standing
interest in automata. As a child, Babbage was enthralled by two unfinished automata he
saw during a visit to John Joseph Merlin’s “Mechanical Museum” in London.79 The first
of these figures “used an eye-glass occasionally, and bowed frequently, as if recognizing
her acquaintances” (17). The second automaton was, in Babbage’s recollection, “an
admirable danseuse, with a bird on the fore finger of her right hand, which wagged its
tail, flapped its wings, and opened its beak. This lady attitudinized in a most fascinating
manner. Her eyes were full of imagination, and irresistible” (17). The irresistible
imaginative qualities of this second automaton persisted; Babbage would eventually
purchase the machine and christen her “the Silver Lady” (365).80 In *Passages*, Babbage
uses the Silver Lady to bring into anecdotal relief the conceptual differences between its
rudimentary, eighteenth-century mechanism and the sophisticated workings of his
calculating machine. The Silver Lady and the Difference Engine became features of the
social events that were hosted at Babbage’s residence, each attracting a different kind of
audience:

A gay but by no means unintellectual crowd surrounded the automaton. In the
adjacent room the Difference Engine stood nearly deserted: two foreigners alone
worshipped at that altar. . . .

Leaning against the doorway, I was myself contemplating the strongly
contrasted scene, pleased that my friends were relaxing from their graver pursuits,
and admiring the really graceful movements produced by mechanism; but still

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79 See Richard Altick’s *Shows of London* for a discussion of Merlin’s reception in England, especially 72-76. Babbage also competed against Kempelen’s chess-playing automaton in 1820, comparing the chess-player unfavourably with Merlin’s machines: “the movement of his head and arm is not elegant and not so
good as many of Merlin’s figures” (qtd. in Strauss, “Automata” 134).
80 Merlin died in 1803. Some of his mechanical stock came under the ownership of a would-be exhibitor
and exporter of ingenious mechanisms named Weekes. Weekes’s devices were auctioned off upon his
death in 1834, which is likely the auction to which Babbage refers when he describes purchasing the Silver
Lady. For more on Weekes’s exhibition, see Altick’s *Shows*, 350-52.
more highly gratified at observing the deep and almost painful attention of my Dutch guest, who was questioning his American instructor about the mechanical means I had devised for accomplishing some arithmetical object. (426)

From his threshold position, Babbage bears witness to the lasting charms of a machine that imitates the human body over and above those of a machine that out-performs the human mind. For Babbage, the Silver Lady is a remnant of an older, simpler sense of the human as a comprehensible physical machine. The Difference Engine, on the other hand, suggests an emergent, dynamic mechanical order that offers little by way of existential consolation. Its potential applications, its possible forms, its future functions remain unknowable, as do its implications for human distinction and development. With this anecdote, Babbage illustrates the enduring imaginative and affective gravity of the automaton while placing that figure firmly in the technological past.

Babbage’s thinking machines form the focus of several reviews of Passages that reveal an abiding cultural interest in the significance of affect, consciousness, and will as determiners of the human in the face of this emergent sense of cognition as an ultimately mechanical operation. A review in the Spectator, which counts the calculating engines as a species of “intellectual automata,” emphasizes Babbage’s own mechanical tendencies. Babbage’s descriptions of the trials he has suffered while attempting to bring the Difference Engine to life, “though they do not fail to suggest personal feeling, do so rather as a self-registering barometer suggests variable states of the weather than as words usually suggest pleasure or pain” (“Mr. Babbage’s” 824, 823). The suspicion that his emotional capacity approaches that of a barometer reveals the extent to which mechanical intelligence and mechanistic affect were conflated by reviewers in Babbage’s case. By contrast, another Spectator review describes Babbage’s genius as a function of how his machines illuminate “the exact point of divergence between subordinate automatic intelligence and the human intellect which invented it” (“Metaphysics” 816). Entitled “The Metaphysics of an Automaton,” this review focuses on Babbage’s account of his plan to build an automaton that could play “tit-tat-to” as proof of the concept that “in principle at least, all games of skill could be played by automatons constructed on the same general theory as his Calculating Machines” (816). The philosophical complication in Babbage’s plan occurs when the automaton must select between several different
moves that would result in the same outcome, in which case “no reason existed within the machine to direct his choice” (*Passages* 469). Babbage solves the problem by programming an arbitrary rule according to which the automaton makes its selection based upon the number of games it has played.

The writer of “Metaphysics of an Automaton” makes much of the fact that in this particular situation, Babbage’s automaton flounders “exactly where what metaphysicians call the ‘liberty of indifference’ would come into play” in humans (816). This moment of mechanical incapacity provides an opportunity to suggest that something other than a merely rational capacity distinguishes humans from machines:

> Mr. Babbage’s ingenious experiments constitute a very curious demonstration that the more mechanical, the more automatic, is the action of the intellect, the freer from error will be the operations it performs; that the intellectual automaton is for its purposes the superior of the intellect, because it has neither freedom nor consciousness to disturb its operations; but that where the automaton gets into difficulties is exactly at the point which the reigning school of philosophy wish to ignore altogether,—the point where freedom and self-consciousness enter together into mental life. (817)

However, this point at which “freedom and self-consciousness” intervene definitively in mental life remains markedly unspecified in the review, which has already admitted the extent to which many “wonderful intellectual efforts are done in complete unconsciousness” (817). The review also concedes the fact that Babbage’s arbitrary rule for the game-playing automaton has its equivalent in the arbitrary customs that govern “good society”: “We all know that there is no intrinsic reason why tail-coats are worn in the evening and frock-coats in the morning, and on that very account the rule is more stringent, and its infringement graver, than in the case of rules of social courtesy for which there is good reason” (816). Without these “*étiquettes,*” the reviewer explains, “caprice, and confusion, and anarchy” would probably reign, and so “an arbitrary rule is laid down in such cases which soon gets more honour and respect than even rules with a bottom to them” (816). So much for the triumphal unfurling of human freedom and self-consciousness in the face of mechanical intelligence; it would appear that the apparent freedom of will and consciousness that attends the most refined of human cultural
expression is as programmatically elaborated and obeyed as are the rules of “tit-tat-to” for the automaton.

These early responses to Babbage’s *Passages from the Life of a Philosopher* demonstrate the ambivalences that attached to the figure of the human machine in the 1860s. In the reviews, Babbage himself is at once a kind of instrument and the zenith of human creative agency. His machines, both extant and hypothetical, threaten to match or surpass human intellectual function while also being used to mark the blurrier boundary between the domain of the human and that of the machine. If memory, anticipation, and rational decision-making could be performed by machines, then will, affect, and self-consciousness come under increasing pressure to function as vital markers of the human. As other writings from the period confirm, however, these mental faculties were not so easily sheltered from the domain of mechanical influence. In fact, what emerges from such discussions in this decade is a sense of individual will, affect, and self-consciousness as faculties that were increasingly understood to be superfluous, vestigial, or ineffectual in distinguishing humans from other kinds of being that operated under the domain of rational law and order—including machine being.

In an 1865 article called “Machinery and the Passions” that appeared anonymously in *The Cornhill Magazine*, William Cyples details the manner in which he understood human development to be affected by the technological conditions of the day. Cyples begins by arguing that “modern civilization” can be defined not by the emergence of technical, scientific, and material advancement but by a change in the constitution of the human: “By civilization we do not so much mean alterations of our surroundings as a modification of ourselves” (541). After describing a series of phenomena in support of his claim that “the human passions . . . are undergoing a progressive decline,” Cyples comes to his main point: this “modification of human disposition,” he suspects, is due to a “mechanic reformation” of human “passions” or affect (541, 542).

Unlike Carlyle’s earlier, more famous articulation of the influence of machinery on the human constitution in “Signs of the Times,” Cyples attaches no overt opprobrium to his own iteration of this idea. If Carlyle’s polemic insists on maintaining a strict separation between the operation of an internal subjective register and an external, material world, Cyples imagines these two fields to be mutually imbricated. In fact,
machines emerge as positively valued constructs in Cyples’s argument specifically because of the affective neutrality they model for human beings:

A steam-engine has no passions. Boilers only get heated by the process of putting fire underneath them. Pistons do not arbitrarily turn stupid, and occasionally stick fast out of sheer willfulness. Valves have no moral sense, and never indulge in anger. The mechanical amiability of machinery is, in fact, perfect; its patience does not tire; unceasingly, night and day, it obeys. (542)

This “mechanical amiability” is admirable; these machines have “a kind of quality which we can only liken to self-respect; and in their behaviour they are inflexibly just” (542).

This notion of the machine as a regular, productive, energetic, dependable simulation of idealized behaviour to which humans should aspire was long-standing by 1865, after having been given particular attention in what Gorman Beauchamp has labelled the “mechanomorphic imperative” of pro-industrial writing in the early decades of the nineteenth century (62). What is significant about Cyples’s update to this “mechanomorphic imperative” is its projection of human development into a post-industrial future shaped positively by machines. Passions, Cyples explains, function according to a threshold model of activation, such that “personal contact, or, at least, a process of individualizing the objects of [the passions], is requisite to excite them” (546). In the modern domain of rationalized, systematic organization, however, triggering the requisite affective threshold becomes difficult because “the scale of commercial operations has grown so large, and social dealings in many ways have become so indirect, that this sense of personality, or any possibility of individualizing those with whom you have to deal, is greatly limited” (546). For those living in this instrumentalized world, “[a]ll sense of personal dealings is vanishing out of our commercial transactions; they are becoming merely intellectual calculations with which the emotions have little to do” (546). Certain overheated emotions were becoming

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81 Cyples’s description of how “passions” function is a condensation of scientific models that explained the connection between nerve stimulation and mental experience. In the fifth edition of his *Principles of Human Physiology* (1855), W. B. Carpenter describes the emotions as a combined product of the action of the cerebrum and sensory ganglia (581-589). For Herbert Spencer, emotions were produced by a succession of psychical changes that either were or were not strong enough to achieve conscious expression (584-611). In *The Emotions and the Will* (1859), Alexander Bain explains emotions as being the result of a “diffusive wave” of nerve action (35).
obsolescent in commercial relations between people, with the result—according to Cyples—that these emotions were tending towards atrophy in all human relations.

Cyples is cautiously interested in the outcome of this attenuation of emotional function in humans. The effects of “mechanical amiability” might result in a salutary tendency in human behaviour; by adopting a rational and moral approach to interaction with inanimate objects, humans might understand life as “more and more an intellectual process” and treat one another with the “self-respect” and “inflexibly just” aspect that machines demonstrate (547, 542). Machines act consistently, repeal efforts at emotional manipulation, and demand a consistency of energetic attention. In this, machines model an interactional, if not ethical, ideal that is based in regular, rational behaviour. “[H]ere, at last,” writes Cyples, “we have a series of transactions daily going forward, to which man is a party, which must be conducted according to the rules of pure reason” (543). Interactions with machines can teach us to better interact with humans, in other words, because there exists some fundamental parity between the categories of machine and human in play. As Cyples explains, “I venture to think it a most suggestive reflection, that the inflexible conditions of the management of machinery exactly embody the principles of scientific morality” (543). Continual exposure to this material instantiation of “scientific morality” will, he hopes, result in a cumulative degeneration of excessive emotional expression:

I submit that the introduction of machinery, the diminution of the sense of personal dealing out of commercial transactions, and the perfecting of our administrative system, establishing everywhere the triumph of the laws, are what may be termed mechanical influences operating with gradually increasing effect in enforcing a comparative inaction of the passions. . . . Men will necessarily grow milder, and life will be embellished by the quieter feelings, purified and enlarged, while the rougher, turbulent emotions will die away. (547)

By drawing emotions into the fray, Cyples’s thoughts thus compound Babbage’s claim that machines are capable of superior cognitive operation than are humans. Rational thought and behaviour may develop at the cost of human “passion,” but the desirable nature of this eventuality is corroborated by the aims of other, more culturally valued modes of belief and philosophy; the rough, turbulent “defensive instincts” that comprise
contemporary human emotional reactions to Cyplis’s world “are eradicable, as most systems of ethics have assumed more or less distinctly, and the Christian scheme completely” (547).

Positively spun assessments of technological modernity such as Cyplis’s were met with robust contesting arguments, including those of Matthew Arnold, who published the first essay that would become his *Culture and Anarchy* in *The Cornhill Magazine* only two years after “Machinery and the Passions” appeared there. However, I would like to trace the non-fictional interests in futurity, machine cognition, and human development exemplified by Babbage and Cyplis through those interests’ fictional iterations in *The Coming Race* and *Erewhon*. It is important to recognize that Bulwer’s and Butler’s literary efforts are not the weird isolates they are sometimes understood to be, lonely flashes of a genre yet to be born, or eccentric outcroppings of strange minds. These two short novels emerge directly out of a contemporary concern with the role that machinery has played and will continue to play in human evolution. Several themes vital to this concern echo those of Babbage’s and Cyplis’s writings, including the increasing sophistication with which machines were understood to perform not merely physical but also mental operations, a growing sense of depersonalization and individual isolation in the world, and the use of the automaton as a mediating figure that simultaneously anchors and explodes the grounds of human exceptionalism.

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82 In this essay, called “Culture and its Enemies,” Arnold recasts Carlyle’s concern about the outward tendencies of the age in terms of the specific anxieties of the period:

What is freedom but machinery? what is population but machinery? what is coal but machinery?
what are railroads but machinery? what is wealth but machinery? what are, even, religious organizations but machinery? Now almost every voice in England is accustomed to speak of these things as if they were precious ends in themselves, and therefore had some of the characters of perfection indisputably joined to them. (“Culture” 41)

Arnold doesn’t argue that industrial capitalism needs to be shut down, necessarily, but he wants to ensure that another generation isn’t “sacrificed” to it: “culture admits the necessity of the movement towards fortune-making and exaggerated industrialism, readily allows that the future may derive benefit from it, but insists, at the same time, that the passing generations of industrialists,—forming, for the most part, the stout main body of Philistinism,—are sacrificed to it” (*Culture* 72). The Oxfordians of which Arnold counts himself a member have ridden the waves of political and social change by maintaining what he calls their own “communications with the future,” an openness to possibility that treats the future as a “banquet” of sorts (75). Arnold’s orientation towards the future, as well as his contention that right thinking can avoid becoming mechanically inflected, is later thematized in *The Coming Race* and *Erewhon*. 
The Human Machine and *The Coming Race*

Charles Babbage’s bold suggestion that his “thinking machines” represent technological capabilities extending infinitely into an unknowable future is moderated by a proleptic mode of writing in which his Analytic Engine remains an entirely hypothetical machine. This kind of fictional futurism can be seen as a deferral of anxiety about a present moment in which the human already seems automaton-like; Babbage’s narrative strategy effaces any explicit consideration of how humans and machines resemble and mutually constitute one another in his contemporary moment. The automaton is involved in a similar deferral of anxiety in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race*. The novel tells the story of an American merchant who discovers an entrance to a subterranean world that is home to the advanced civilization of the Vril-ya. The Vril-ya and the unnamed human narrator share a distant ancestry, but the two groups have taken divergent evolutionary paths. The Vril-ya have developed the physical and cognitive ability to control “vril,” their term for a unity of “natural energetic agencies” that the narrator likens to “electricity, except that it comprehends in its manifold branches other forces of nature, to which, in our scientific nomenclature, differing names are assigned, such as magnetism, galvanism, &c” (54). The ability to control this unified energy field is the result of millennia of simultaneous biological and technological development. The Vril-ya have evolved to have bigger thumbs, thicker palms, a unique nerve in the hand, and a constitutionally strong will, all of which are called upon to facilitate their manipulation of vril (93-94). The actual interface between the Vril-ya and vril is technological: a “Vril Staff” or other mechanical prosthetic is required to concentrate and direct various aspects of vril. Of this staff, the narrator notes that “its machinery is as exquisite as its effects are marvellous” (91). Through their bio-technological command of vril, the Vril-ya have established a state of political, social, cultural, and ecological equilibrium in which poverty, illness, emotional extremes, and self-serving ambition have all been eradicated. In a fictional recreation of Cyples’s ideal model for human interaction, the narrator explains that for the Vril-ya, happiness “is the end at which they

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83 For an illuminating discussion of how Bulwer portrays contemporary understandings of physical first principles, especially Herbert Spencer’s efforts to conceptualize a unifying “persistence of force” across phenomena natural, political, and economic, see Barri Gold’s *Thermopoetics: Energy in Victorian Literature and Science*, 71-112.
aim, not as the excitement of a moment, but as the prevailing condition of the entire existence; and regard for the happiness of each other is evinced by the exquisite amenity of their manners” (86). Unfortunately, this ethical munificence is limited in its application; the Vril-ya have no compunction about destroying other populations that threaten their harmonious existence. Most alarming, from the narrator’s perspective, is the possibility that this super-human race will some day emerge from their subterranean world to eradicate above-ground humanity, as the Vril-ya entertain a long-held belief that they are “destined to return to the upper world, and supplant all the inferior races now existing therein” (88).84

The threat posed by the Vril-ya’s biological and technological superiority over humanity is refracted through The Coming Race’s long-scale and oddly displaced evolutionary timeframe. The potential for the progressive evolution of humans and technology is forecast in the Vril-ya; the developmental path followed by the Vril-ya might still be possible for the narrator’s version of humanity. However, the very existence of the Vril-ya, and their commitment to a subterranean version of Manifest Destiny, is the limit that negates the possibility of humanity ever realizing that potential: the Vril-ya will undoubtedly emerge and destroy humanity before that species can fulfill the promise of their future selves. In this way, the novel holds its vision of human development in abeyance. This paradox is enabled by the suspended temporal structure of the novel, in which the evolution of the human into a super-race has already taken place in the Vril-yan past.

As a machine that is at once an archaism and an uncanny glimpse of human-machine relations to come, the automaton serves as the conceptual fulcrum around which this techno-anthropological anxiety in The Coming Race is negotiated. Automata are a constant presence in the novel—the Vril-ya use automata “in all service, whether in or out of doors”—and the narrator is continually aware of their proximity and involvement in daily routine in this technology-infused world (111). In a large living area belonging to the narrator’s host, for example, four automata stand “phantom-like at each angle in the

84 Bulwer’s satirical refraction of Darwin’s evolutionary theory in The Coming Race has been critically elaborated by Patrick Brantlinger in Taming Cannibals (180-202) and by Virginia Richter in Literature after Darwin (163-215). The extent to which the Vril-ya can be read in the context of British anxieties about the growing cultural power of America is given nuanced attention in Lillian Nayder’s “Bulwer Lytton and Imperial Gothic: Defending the Empire in The Coming Race.”
wall,” ready to act as domestic aids. In the lavish surrounds of his host’s “country-seat,” the narrator and his guides are received, attended to, and served by automata in a luxurious scene that the narrator likens to something he has “often on summer days dreamily imagined” (131). In contrast to the narrator’s perception of these mechanical figures as oneiric specters, automata are commonplace tools for the Vril-ya, designed for the improvement of everyday life and animated through the power of vril. As a closer examination of the figure will reveal, the automaton also serves in *The Coming Race* as a measure against which the machine-like aspects of both the narrator and the highly advanced Vril-ya are compared and contrasted.

Automata, and the machine class of which they form a part, provide freedom from labour-based servitude for the Vril-ya. As the narrator observes of their underground world, “those problems connected with the labours of a working class, hitherto insoluble above ground, and above ground conducing to such bitterness between classes, were solved by a process the simplest,—a distinct and separate working class was dispensed with altogether” (154). The Vril-ya are able to dispense with a working class by developing and disseminating all manner of specialized technology, thereby releasing citizens from physical drudgery while maintaining a venue for intellectual or managerial work: “Machinery is employed to an inconceivable extent in all the operations of labour within and without doors, and it is the unceasing object of the department charged with its administration to extend its efficiency” (63). In a satirical take on the claims made by early Victorian industrial apologists, machinery in this subterranean world is tended by diligent, conscientious, responsible, self-actualized Vril-ya children, who organize themselves into functional work units and who leave this working world when they reach a marriageable age (63-64). Automata and machinery in *The Coming Race* are neither purely ornamental nor ends in themselves but, instead, the instruments with which the equilibrated, egalitarian social world of the Vril-ya is maintained. The emancipatory function of automata represents the extent to which the Vril-ya are in perfect control of

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85 Andrew Ure’s first-hand account of child labourers in cotton mills is indicative of the claims made by pro-industry writers with respect to child welfare: in Ure’s estimation, these children “seemed to be always cheerful and alert, taking pleasure in the light play of their muscles,—enjoying the mobility natural to their age. The scene of industry, so far from exciting sad emotions in my mind, was always exhilarating. . . . The work of these lively elves seemed to resemble a sport, in which habit gave them a pleasing dexterity. Conscious of their skill, they were delighted to show it off to any stranger” (301).
their technology, a fantasy that bears a strikingly inverse relationship to Arnold’s depiction of contemporary Britons. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold bemoans a widespread “faith in machinery,” a faith “most absurdly disproportioned to the end which this machinery, if it is to do any good at all, is to serve; but always in machinery as if it had a value in and for itself” (63). Arnold, like Carlyle before him, predicates the ideal relationship between people and machines upon a clear separation of internal organicism and external mechanism. The Vril-ya, with their seamless integration of the biological and the technological in the service of the good life, offer a counterpoint to this ideal by demonstrating that “perfection as an inward condition of the mind and spirit” need not stand in opposition to the cultivation of “mechanical and material civilization,” as Arnold claims (63).

Despite the liberating aspect of automata for the Vril-ya, these figures prove to be a source of anxiety and frustration for the narrator. Towards the end of *The Coming Race*, the narrator contemplates a furtive return to his above-ground home. Escape proves impossible, however, even when the Vril-ya are themselves in a state of somnolent inanimation, on account of the narrator’s inability to understand or operate the vril-based technology around him:

Nor even in the Silent Hours, when the household was locked in sleep, could I have let myself down from the lofty floor in which my apartment was placed. I knew not how to command the automata who stood mockingly at my beck beside the wall, nor could I ascertain the springs by which were set in movement the platforms that supplied the place of stairs. (160)

The “mocking” automata in this scene are a reminder of the narrator’s abject impotence in the face of these simultaneously archaic and advanced machines, and of his useless self-consciousness about this fact. Without the ability to control Vril-yan mechanisms, the narrator finds himself without agency of any kind. Here, intellectual capacity, emotional response, and will are inextricably linked, marking the narrator as human while also revealing his vulnerability in a context that denies human exceptionalism.

The narrator’s frustration with the automata is a culmination of the distressing fact that he finds himself as pliable in the hands of the Vril-ya as are the “ingenious” mechanical figures (111). From the moment of his initial encounter with an inhuman-
seeming Vril-ya who instantly transforms the narrator’s terror into “a sense of contentment, of joy, of confidence,” the narrator’s mind is repeatedly manipulated and adulterated according to his hosts’ desires (40). The entrancing power of vril is used to ease the pain of the narrator’s physical injuries and to put him into a restorative sleep, to extract from him a glossary of his own language, and to condition him such that he is more capable of communication with the Vril-ya: it is only through “repeated trances, if they are so to be called,” that the narrator’s mind “became better prepared to interchange ideas with my entertainers, and more fully to comprehend differences of manners and customs, at first too strange to my experience to be seized by my reason” (42, 49, 56). These salutary applications of vril are supplemented by scenes in which the narrator is comically rendered unconscious whenever he becomes agitated, obstreperous, or upset (48, 147). Upon learning that the Vril-ya consider his language and mental structure to be both less complex and less capacious than their own, for example, the narrator attempts a silent disavowal:

At this I secretly demurred; and having had, in the course of a practical life, to sharpen my wits, whether at home or in travel, I could not allow that my cerebral organisation could possibly be duller than that of people who had lived all their lives by lamplight. However, while I was thus thinking, Zee quietly pointed her forefinger at my forehead and sent me to sleep. (55)

The narrator’s “cerebral organisation” might, indeed, be of the sharpest order in the context of above-ground humanity, but in the world of the Vril-ya, it is only marginally enough to set him apart from the category of machine.

That the narrator is reduced to something like an automaton in these scenes is confirmed in a moment that demonstrates Zee’s absolute control of mechanical matter, a control that provokes “a profound terror” in the narrator (93). In a museum that houses “curious specimens of the ignorant and blundering experiments of ancient times,” an equivalence between the narrator and inanimate machinery is made explicit:

Zee inspired me with a profound terror—a terror which increased when we came into a department of the museum appropriated to models of contrivances worked by the agency of vril; for here, merely by a certain play of her vril staff, she herself standing at a distance, she put into movement large and weighty
substances. She seemed to endow them with intelligence, and to make them comprehend and obey her command. She set complicated pieces of machinery into movement, arrested the movement or continued it, until, within an incredibly short time, various kinds of raw material were reproduced as symmetrical works of art, complete and perfect. Whatever effect mesmerism or electro-biology produces over the nerves and muscles of animated objects, this young Gy produced by the motions of her slender rod over the springs and wheels of lifeless mechanism. (93)

The terror that the narrator feels here derives at least in part from his realization that he is made to “comprehend and obey” commands in the same way as are these examples of “lifeless mechanism.” The mesmeric references that attach to these descriptions of the narrator as in thrall to the power of vril have been discussed by critics to some length, and, indeed, mesmerism’s emblematic display of the mind’s mechanical tendencies would seem to account for the narrator’s discomfort. What is of particular interest about the function of vril in The Coming Race for a discussion of automata in the novel, however, is its consolidation of all aspects of lived experience—mental as well as physical—into a unified energy field, emphasizing the extent to which the technological and the organic have been completely integrated in the progressive civilization of the Vril-ya.

The unified field theory that underwrites the concept of vril in the novel makes no distinction between living bodies and pieces of mechanism, and Zee is similarly untroubled by such distinctions. All particles in the universe are “constantly in motion and constantly acted upon by agencies,” Zee explains, so all elements comprised of those particles are in some way susceptible to external influence:

If a heap of metal be not capable of originating a thought of its own, yet, through its internal susceptibility to movement, it obtains the power to receive the thought

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86 These critics find ample justification for such a reading in Bulwer’s long association with Chauncey Hare Townsend and other key figures in the British mesmeric scene, as well as in Bulwer’s fictional depictions of mesmerism in works such as Zanoni (1845) and A Strange Story (1861). See Alison Winter’s Mesmerized for a brief account of Bulwer’s mesmeric advocacy (148, 221). With respect to The Coming Race, however, Bulwer explicitly attempted to shift the focus of his depiction of vril away from mesmerism, claiming that he “did not mean Vril for mesmerism, but for electricity, developed into uses as yet only dimly guessed,” and going so far as to suggest “omitting all about mesmeric passes, etc” in the novel in order to clarify the issue (“To John Forster” 170).
of the intellectual agency at work on it; and which, when conveyed with a
sufficient force of the vril power, it is as much compelled to obey as if it were
displaced by a visible bodily force. It is animated for the time being by the soul
thus infused into it, so that one may almost say that it lives and it reasons. (94)
This passage opens up a confusing lack of distinction between the human and the
mechanical for the narrator, who considers himself capable of “originating a thought” but
who is also “compelled to obey” the dictates of his powerful hosts. What is more, the
narrator is in various ways aware of how mechanized his existence is and how much
closer he hews to machine life than to agential being in the world of the Vril-ya.87 Take,
for example, a scene that describes the narrator’s efforts to escape a scenario in which he
has been set as bait in order to lure an enormous reptile out of a lake so that a young boy,
Taë, can destroy the monster:

Instead of obeying the command, I made a bound, and was about to take fairly to
my heels, when Taë touched me slightly on the shoulder, and, fixing his eyes
steadily on mine, I was rooted to the spot. All power of volition left me.
Submissive to the infant’s gesture, I followed him to the crag he had indicated,
and seated myself there in silence. Most readers have seen something of the
effects of electro-biology, whether genuine or spurious. No professor of that
doubtful craft had ever been able to influence a thought or a movement of mine,
but I was a mere machine at the will of this terrible child. . . .

I was alone; and turning my eyes with an indescribable sensation of horror
towards the lake, I kept them fixed on its water, spell-bound. (116)
This is an emblematic description of the narrator’s self-conscious automatism: he is
aware of what is happening to him, but his ability to generate his own will or volition is
gone. In this scene, self-awareness is a negligible property in terms of what functionally
separates the narrator from machines in this underground world. On the one hand,
humanity inheres in the narrator’s ability to self-reflect and to generate thought; on the
other, this cognition seems entirely insufficient to rank him as non-mechanical in the
context of the Vril-ya’s advanced existence.

87 The narrator is also aware that he is thought of as a species of pet by many, including the child, Taë
(120).
Criticism of the novel has tended to overlook this aspect of the narrator’s bind in the underground world in favour of a reductive reading of the Vril-ya as themselves automaton-like. Jennifer Judge, for example, describes the Vril-ya as being mindlessly bound by the tenets of their technologically determined civilization: “[f]ar from being ‘tremulously alive,’ the Vril-yans are merely stoical automata” (148). For Judge, *The Coming Race* is a meditation upon contemporary models of habit as theorized by scientific writers such as Alexander Bain, W. B. Carpenter, and Herbert Spencer, models which identify the neurological efficiencies represented by habit as the route to human perfection and as the means by which human mechanization is made complete. In Judge’s estimation, “[t]he transformation of habit into an overriding coercive power . . . magnifies the undignified fact that the vaunted will of the Vril-yas is not free, but utterly mechanical” (147). Judge cites a Vril-yan explanation of the operation of custom by way of support for her argument that volition in this advanced civilization is “stronger than it is free”: “We are all formed by custom—even the difference of our race from the savage is but the transmitted continuance of custom, which becomes, through hereditary descent, part and parcel of our nature” (132). The Vril-ya have become enslaved by their perfectionist customs, according to Judge, and *The Coming Race* can been read as a condemnation of physiological models of habit that promote the evolutionary benefits of routine; to aim for perfection is to veer too closely to becoming a machine, by this reckoning. The narrator’s resistance to the world of the Vril-ya is a mark of his ineluctable, irreducible individuality, and this individuality is what ultimately rescues him from the “blandness” of Vril-yan existence.

The problem with arguments that position the Vril-ya as being interchangeable with their servant class of automata in this way is that individual members of the Vril-ya race are the only characters in the novel who demonstrate the exertion of free will. Towards the end of the narrative, for example, Taë chooses not to carry out his assigned task of executing the narrator when he comes to understand just how terrified the narrator is of dying. The child first offers to die alongside the narrator, in the hopes of making the man more comfortable with his end. Upon realizing that the narrator’s cultural

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88 See Athena Vrettos’s “Defining Habits: Dickens and the Psychology of Repetition” and Adam Crabtree’s “Automatism and Secondary Centers of Consciousness” for in-depth treatments of how habit was understood to function as a process auxiliary to human evolution in the mid-Victorian period.
understanding of death is so different from his own that no amount of consolation will soothe him, Taë decides to advocate for the narrator’s life against the wishes of a community that sees the narrator as a dangerous and destabilizing element requiring expulsion from their sophisticated social system (162-64). Similarly, the magnificent Zee chooses to disregard the final ruling of the Vril-ya community and her unrequited romantic interest in the narrator in order to provide safe passage for the man back to his above-ground world (165-67). Both of these acts are the ethical decisions of sophisticated, sensitive, and empathetic characters who are capable of seeing and comprehending the narrator’s perspective on their world. The Vril-yan conception of how habit and convention function as a kind of best practice for their community allows space for individual Vril-ya to weigh and balance those conventions in the light of particular circumstances.

The narrator, by contrast, is able only to react with mind-numbing panic to his experience and to regurgitate the increasingly ridiculous-sounding polemics of his American homeland in his interactions with the Vril-ya. He cannot imagine Zee’s erudition and power as anything but a challenge to his culturally constructed sense of masculinity (124). No sooner is the importance of egalitarian social structures to a fair and balanced world explained to him than he begins to fantasize about how he might leverage a princess’s attention into an above-ground-style seizure of Vril-yan political power (147). The narrator is as spell-bound by his own cultural customs as he is by the vril staff, which means that he is just as much an automaton in his own world as he is in the Vril-yan one. This literalization of the narrator’s automatism in a world run by a race so perfect that they seem to be machine-like in their operations complicates any clear line between traits that might otherwise be deemed either human or mechanical. The triangulation of the narrator with respect to the affectively restrained but rational and willful Vril-ya and the non-agential automata created by those Vril-ya signals a suspicion about the extent to which self-consciousness, affect, and agency will continue to define the human in a future left wildly undetermined by the unknowable developments of technological progress. I would now like to turn to Samuel Bulter’s Erewhon in order to attend to another literary revelation of how human autonomy is rendered provisional in the context of unpredictable human-technological co-evolution.
Narrative Mechanics in *Erewhon*

Despite its enduring popularity, Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (1872) remains critically mired in its reputation as an eccentricity, a novel notable for its ambitious satirical survey of mid-Victorian mores but hamstrung by a “gratuitous plot” and an overall “absence of high imagination” (Zemka 462; Mudford 7). Two main grievances underlie this critical slighting. The first complaint is *Erewhon’s* similarity to *The Coming Race* (1871), an issue that confused its original readership, which took Butler’s novel to be some variety of sequel to Bulwer-Lytton’s best-seller, thus generating excellent early sales for *Erewhon*. The similarities between the two novels are, admittedly, striking: both stories feature handsome, physically robust narrators who use alcohol to manipulate psychologically vulnerable informants into revealing the entrance to a heretofore undiscovered world. Both narrators travel alone into these worlds, without any obvious route of return, and find themselves at the mercy of a civilization whose origins may be explained biblically. In both tales, the narrators wear watches that feature as a point of cultural exchange between their own and the new peoples. Both narrators eventually attract the hostility of their host civilization and are forced to escape these mysterious worlds with the help, or in the company, of women with whom they have fallen in culturally inappropriate love. Butler was forced to address these “little points of similarity” in his preface to the second edition of *Erewhon*, wherein he claims that he had written most of his novel “before the first advertisement of *The Coming Race* appeared” (29).

The extent to which these parallels should necessarily condemn *Erewhon* to being a work of reduced merit is debatable. As Patrick Parrinder points out, a number of the thematic and narrative features shared between *The Coming Race* and *Erewhon*—the protagonist’s isolation from his own culture, the crossing of a forbidden boundary, the presence of a symbolically-loaded monster figure, a movement from death to rebirth—are also common to a cluster of works that can be categorized as Victorian satirical utopian

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89 *Erewhon* has remained continually in print since its first publication (Parrinder 8).
novels. To continue to give *Erewhon* the critical cold shoulder on this point, then, is to ignore the larger cultural investments that are evident in these narrative resonances.

The second aspect of *Erewhon* that has drawn considerable critical fire is its ostensible lack of overall coherence or unity. Jan Jedrzejewski describes “Butler’s constant shifting from one fictional mode to another: from the realism of the opening to the transparent parody and satire of the chapters on the Colleges of the Unreason, from the utopian vision of the narrator’s first arrival in Erewhon to the dystopia of the scene of the trial.” (419). In his putatively meliorative introduction to the novel, Peter Mudford disclaims such discontinuity as a “weakness” that “dislocates . . . the reader’s involvement” (9). Darko Suvin pulls even fewer punches on the matter, declaring that the novel “might have been written by the Erewhonian professor of Inconsistency and Evasion” (9).

When *Erewhon*’s narrative disunity isn’t suffering such direct assault, the supposedly inconsistent characterization of the novel’s unnamed narrator often is. Sue Zemka describes the narrator as “in turn a religious chauvinist, a fool, and an enterprising adventurer” who careens between “savvy insight and bumptious provincialism” as the story unfolds (441). Mudford notes the narrator’s “lack of emotional depth” and regrets that the depiction of his marriage in the novel “remains one of social convenience rather than passion or sacrament. It lacks the blood of an important event” (10).

In this section, I would like to suggest an alternative critical perspective on *Erewhon*, one based upon the novel’s interest in the mechanical aspects of human motivation, and one which highlights the under-explored fact that the final pages of the novel reveal it to be, essentially, an investment prospectus designed to convert readers into shareholders. By showing the narrator of the tale to be a careful curator of readerly attention, I argue that at this fraught, early-1870s moment of imagining an unknowable future of human-technological imbrication, *Erewhon* metaphorizes the concept of psychological automatism. Rather than exclusively attending to the complex, satirical encoding of Victorian culture within the depiction of Erewhon, then, I would like to

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90 Along with *The Coming Race* and *Erewhon*, this cluster includes Hudson’s *A Crystal Age* (1887) and H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895).
91 Lee Elbert Holt, writing in 1944, reminds us that the often unacknowledged revisions and additions Butler made to the novel in order to extend its copyright in 1901 contribute significantly to this perception of “unevenness of style and interest” (23).
examine the meta-narrative construction of the story. By exploring how the narrator engages with other characters and with his own motives, how the novel elucidates the springs of human motivation, and how these elements reveal a particularly instrumental relationship between the narrative and its implied readers, I hope to demonstrate that *Erewhon* understands all humans as being automata of a sort and that the novel anticipates the volatile debates about human automatism which followed closely upon its publication.

The first depiction of the narrator’s interaction with other humans in *Erewhon* comes by way of an encounter with “a sort of chief of the natives” called Chowbok (45). Imagined in a typically dehumanizing frame of colonialist reference, Chowbok is described as being lazy and conniving, turning his knowledge of English and his favour amongst the local missionaries to his own alcohol-seeking ends. If one “wanted to get anything out of” Chowbok, the narrator explains, grog was “the best bribe to offer him” (45). Chowbok’s presence at this stage of the story is a function of the narrator’s expansionist impulse to seek his fortune beyond a range of seemingly impenetrable mountains. As the only member of the sheep-shearing operation with knowledge of the area, Chowbok is a potentially valuable resource for the purposes of this quest. “I resolved to question him,” the narrator declares, “and get as much information from him as I could. I did so” (45). The extent to which Chowbok is reduced to being a mere repository of information in this interaction is highlighted by the fact that he has never actually been to the mountain range in question. His knowledge about the mountains is not personal or experiential but collective and sedimentary, derived from “traditions among his tribe” (45). Chowbok is thus envisioned as a kind of knowledge container from which the narrator must extract or retrieve his desired information.

This reduction of Chowbok to an instrument of potential profit for the narrator means that their relationship takes on a transactional quality, disguising the fundamental power imbalance between the two. Chowbok wants the narrator’s grog. The narrator, on the other hand, wants long-held, traditional, possibly sacred knowledge about the land in order to invade and profit from it. The deep inequality of this exchange is obscured by the way in which the narrator positions Chowbok as being a wily, capable negotiator. At first, Chowbok even manages to outsmart the narrator, as he “feigns consent” to the
exchange of grog for information and then feigns sleep when the narrator demands that his end of the bargain be upheld (45). This incident suggests that Chowbok is a seasoned scammer, thereby providing advance justification for the narrator’s subsequent treatment of the man: “I was angry, for I had to go without my own grog and had got nothing out of him; so the next day I determined that he should tell me before I gave him any, or get none at all” (45). In their next encounter, the now-wary narrator explicitly places the two on even transactional ground: “Chowbok pretended to expect his grog at once, though we both of us knew very well what the other was after, and that we were each playing against the other, the one for grog the other for information” (46).

In this second round of negotiations with Chowbok, the narrator describes his own bartering approach in extremely suggestive terms. After battling with the native man for “more than two hours,” the narrator becomes certain that Chowbok is on the verge of submission. The narrator likens this moment of certainty to the otherwise tedious experience of churning milk into its far more valuable form, butter: “at last one tells by the sound that the cream has gone to sleep, and then upon a sudden the butter comes” (46). This odd analogy not only transforms Chowbok into a comestible but also depicts the narrator’s supposedly rhetorical negotiation in relentlessly physical terms: “I had churned at Chowbok until I perceived that he had arrived, as it were, at the sleepy stage, and that with a continuance of steady quiet pressure the day was mine” (46). This application of “steady quiet pressure” upon Chowbok emphasizes the material effect of outside influence upon the man and anticipates the pressure-on-levers account of human motivation described later in the novel’s synopsis of the so-called “Book of the Machines.”

The narrator’s “churning” of Chowbok produces some unexpected results. Giving way before the narrator’s manipulative efforts, Chowbok slips into a trance-like state and performs or embodies what he knows of the mysterious region: “Then there came from his lips a low moaning like the wind, rising and falling by infinitely small gradations till it became almost a shriek, from which it descended and died away; after that, he jumped down from the bale and held up the extended fingers of both his hands, as one who

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92 Of course, the ultimate imbalance here lies in the fact that the whole story is the narrator’s; the reader has no access to any sense of what Chowbok might want. This situation is tantalizingly complicated by Chowbok’s unexpected reappearance as a Reverend with his own story to tell at the end of the novel.
should say ‘ten’” (47). Chowbok is distressed by having broken some clear prohibition against revealing this information, even though the narrator “did not then understand him” (47). Such distress only counts as triumph for the narrator, who takes Chowbok’s discomfort as evidence that he has managed to extract everything Chowbok knows: “All I could feel sure of was, that he had a meaning that was true and awful to himself. It was enough for me that I believed him to have given me the best he had and all he had” (47-48). The content of the knowledge container that is Chowbok, in other words, doesn’t seem as immediately important as the fact that the narrator has successfully scraped the barrel clean. However, something else is revealed in the narrator’s responsiveness to Chowbok’s indecipherable intimations, and that is his own responsiveness to external influence: “This kindled my imagination more than if he had told me intelligible stories by the hour together. I knew not what the great snowy ranges might conceal, but I could no longer doubt that it would be something well worth discovering.” (48). This volatile moment of equivalence between the narrator and Chowbok, in which their shared internal susceptibility to external influence threatens to collapse the difference between colonial subject and colonized object, is quickly stabilized by Chowbok’s apparent submission to the narrator: “he seemed to have become afraid of me, and acted as one who was in my power” (48).

Chowbok’s “consent” to the terms of the narrator’s demands in this instance is limited: the narrator finds himself abandoned and alone as soon as he discovers the route into Erewhon that Chowbok has been attempting to hide from him. What I would like to posit here, however, is that the particular ethical stance adopted by the narrator in his negotiating encounter with Chowbok—a stance that defines human relationships as fundamentally transactional—serves as an explanatory model for the instrumental manner with which the narrator interacts with all kinds of other participants in *Erewhon*. This transactional logic becomes something of a pattern when the narrator meets the young, beautiful daughter of the warden in whose jail he spends the first three months of his time in Erewhon. Only the second character to be named in the novel, Yram is soon made the focus of the narrator’s manipulative advances:

Having set the stew upon the table, she retired with a glance of pity, whereon (remembering pity’s kinsman) I decided that she should pity me a little more. She
returned with a bottle and a glass, and found me sitting on the bed with my hands over my face, looking the very picture of abject misery, and, like all pictures, rather untruthful. As I watched her, through my fingers, out of the room again, I felt sure that she was exceedingly sorry for me. Her back being turned, I set to work and ate my dinner, which was excellent. (86)

Here, the narrator is entirely open about his deception of the young woman and about the self-satisfying results of that deception.

Aside from providing him with care and attention, Yram is yet another source of knowledge and cultural information for the narrator, placing her in a position of equivalence with Chowbok. The narrator is eager to learn the Erewhonian language and has been provided with an instructor to do just that. Yram, however, turns out to be more useful than the assigned instructor for the narrator: “The man came to teach me every day, but my real dictionary and grammar were Yram; and I consulted them to such purpose that I made the most extraordinary progress” (87). Yram is thus reduced to a set of reference tools in a sense that is strongly reminiscent of the narrator’s conception of Chowbok as a native knowledge archive. In many ways, however, Yram is even more important to the narrator’s well-being and survival than Chowbok was, as the narrator is well aware. He cultivates the relationship accordingly: “I felt so kindly towards her, and was so entirely dependent upon her for almost all that made my life a blessing and a comfort to me, that I took good care not to vex her, and we remained excellent friends” (88). Although his affection and appreciation for Yram seem genuine in this passage, the narrator feels no compunction in leaving her as soon as he is released from quarantine and offered an audience with the King and Queen of Erewhon. His is an entirely pragmatic mode of action, and the narrator admits no responsibility for Yram’s romantic interpretation of his attention to her: “She had made up her mind that I was to remain always in the town, even after my imprisonment was over; and I fancy had resolved to marry me though I had never so much as hinted at her doing so” (94). The narrator continues to take “good care not to vex her” by exchanging locks of hair and promises of reunion with Yram, all out of something that reads as practical convenience. Just as grog seems “the best bribe” for Chowbok, then, the narrator seems to have figured out that a
performance of affective attachment is the best way to maintain access to Yram’s store of information about Erewhon’s values and beliefs.

We see the full range of the narrator’s pragmatically persuasive abilities in action as the narrative progresses, and especially as he plans to escape Erewhon. He uses the pension he has been allotted to buy cooperation and influence. He exerts his influence upon the Queen of Erewhon in a manner that recalls his butter-churning analogy when he tricks her into unwittingly providing the tools of his escape. Of the Queen, he writes that he “so worked upon her curiosity that she promised to get leave for me to have a balloon made and inflated” (243). The narrator convinces others that his desire to build the balloon is to attempt a placating intervention with the drought-causing sky god. Nor is his persuasive force limited to inhabitants of Erewhon, for that matter: he tells a number of (admittedly justified) creative untruths to the Italian captain who first saves his life, then again to the British captain who returns him to England. The narrator thus demonstrates a consistently instrumental engagement with those he meets in his travels.

A remarkable feature of the instrumental approach with which the narrator engages other characters in Erewhon is the very transparency of that approach. This transparency admits of a certain intimacy with the novel’s implied readership by assuming that readers should find nothing particularly exceptional about his behaviour. After all, as the narrator explains after feigning unhappiness in front of Yram, “I am not a great hypocrite” (qtd. in Holt 26). Equally available to the reader is the matter of the narrator’s own motivation for undertaking such a challenging and dangerous expedition in the first place: he is entirely open about the defining influence of the profit motive upon his life. The narrator’s adventurous, exploratory urges are inextricably bound up with—indeed, triggered by—the possibility of finding fortune in the mountains: “I could not help speculating upon what might lie farther up the river and behind the second range. I had no money, but if I could only find workable country, I might stock it with borrowed capital, and consider myself a made man” (43). His compulsive curiosity is entirely self-interested, and this self-interest is expressed in terms of capitalist speculation.

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93 As Holt explains, this line was altered in the 1901 revision to read “I am not a much greater hypocrite than other people” (26).
However, there exists an important sense in which the narrator does not seem in full control of this expansionist internal drive. We have already seen the effect that Chowbok’s trance-like revelation has upon the narrator’s desire to travel into the unknown mountainous region. Rather than approaching the project in a conscious, measured way, the narrator seems obsessed by the unknown possibilities of what might lie “over the range”: “I could not keep these thoughts out of my head as I would rest myself upon the mountain side; they haunted me as I went my daily rounds, and grew upon me from hour to hour, till I resolved that after shearing I would remain in doubt no longer, but saddle my horse, take as much provision with me as I could, and go and see for myself” (43). Here, capitalist enterprise appears as a potent colonizer of the unconscious, haunting the narrator with abstract thoughts of unspecified, and therefore conceptually boundless, wealth. The narrator appears to be psychically overpowered by these ideas: “These thoughts filled my head, and I could not banish them” (44). So compelling is this abstracted question of profit that it quickly comes to define the meaning of the narrator’s life: “The more I thought, the more determined I became either to win fame and perhaps fortune, by entering upon this unknown world, or give up life in the attempt. In fact, I felt that life would be no longer valuable if I were to have seen so great a prize and refused to grasp at the possible profits therefrom” (57). The narrator’s behaviour accords well with Arnold’s notion of “commercial immorality,” or the “melting away of habits of strict probity before the temptation to get quickly rich and to cut a figure in the world” (Culture 149). If his own existence can so easily be quantified in terms of prizes and profits, it is perhaps unsurprising that the narrator perceives others around him through the same metric of value.

The narrator’s reductive valuation of his own life and the lives of others does not mean that he is entirely devoid of human feeling, however. Upon finding himself alone and isolated in the wild, liminal space between his old farming grounds and Erewhon, the narrator remembers “deriving comfort even from the sight of my blankets, and the sound of my watch ticking—things which seemed to link me to other people” (59). The narrator even thinks of Chowbok in his loneliness, though any potentially sentimental aspect of that meditation is quickly translated into the language of use-value: “I thought of Chowbok, and felt how useful he had been to me, and in how many ways I was the loser
by his absence, having now to do all sorts of things for myself which he had hitherto done for me, and could do infinitely better than I could” (63). The narrator’s regret at being without Chowbok, coupled with an existential reckoning brought about by being in a vulnerable position in unfamiliar territory, is converted into regret over missing the opportunity to fully capitalize on all the possibilities that Chowbok offered him: “the conversion of Chowbok might in some degree compensate for irregularities and shortcomings in my own previous life, the remembrance of which had been more than once unpleasant to me during my recent experiences” (63). The narrator’s affective life and the mental apparatus which governs his motivation here appear as conflicting aspects of his subjective self.

The specter of profit lies in perpetual readiness to colonize or overtake the narrator’s thoughts, and this explains how quickly his intentions, even ostensibly spiritual ones, become co-opted by the speculative imperative. Upon meeting the inhabitants of Erewhon, who are reminiscent of Europeans rather than of Chowbok’s “tribes of savages,” the narrator is struck by the thought that the Erewhonians might be “the lost ten tribes of Israel”: “Was it possible that I might have been designed by Providence as the instrument of their conversion?” (75). There exists something of the disingenuous in the narrator’s willingness to be instrumentalized in this manner, especially given how seamlessly his thoughts turn to the self-interested implications of such a circumstance:

My heart beat fast and furious as I entertained the thought. What a position would it not ensure me in the next world; or perhaps even in this! What folly it would be to throw such a chance away! I should rank next to the Apostles, if not as high as they—certainly above the minor prophets, and possibly above any old testament writer except Moses and Isaiah. For such a future as this I would sacrifice all that I have without a moment’s hesitation, could I be reasonably sure of it. (76)

Cannily, the narrator keeps his options open on this last point by remaining ever-attuned to alternate possibilities for profiting by the Erewhonians:

I should have liked to have persuaded half-a-dozen of them to come over to England and go upon the stage, for they had most of them a keen sense of humour.

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94 This last line resonates in distinct ways if the narrator is seen to be appealing to the potential investor that lies within the implied reader of his tale.
and a taste for acting: they would be of great use to us. The example of a real gentleman is, if I may say so without profanity, the best of all gospels: such a man upon the stage becomes a potent humanising influence, an Ideal which all may look upon for a shilling. (158)

The irony of selling such a “potent humanising influence” in this way seems entirely lost upon the narrator at this moment, but what is interesting here is just how far from his original plan he has strayed. His initial goal of finding arable land that might support his sheep farming operation has transformed into a scheme to export whole groups of people for the purposes of religious conversion and/or public exhibition. Land, sheep, and people have become entirely fungible resources for the narrator, and the difference between spiritual profit and financial profit seems entirely negligible.95

What is not negligible in this novel is the importance of money, a point upon which values belonging to Erewhon and to the narrator converge. Erewhonians measure the value of their citizens in precise, clear terms: “their way of reckoning and classifying men is by the number of foot pounds which they have money enough to raise, or more roughly by their horse-power” (92). The narrator’s host during his time in Erewhon’s metropolitan centre, Mr. Nosnibor, is introduced as “a man of at least 500,000 horse-power” (92). Earning money, as the narrator explains, “means ‘doing good’ to society” (178). Money is “the symbol of duty” for the Erewhonians, “the sacrament of having done for mankind that which mankind wanted” (179).96 The true philanthropist in Erewhon is he “who makes a colossal fortune in the hosiery trade, and by his energy has succeeded in reducing the price of woollen goods by the thousandth part of a penny in the pound” (179). Though the narrator is initially shocked by such thoughts, he begins “to see things in a new light,” and concludes that the Erewhonians have reasoned properly on this issue, noting: “It has been said that the love of money is the root of all evil. The want

95 “We have already seen how these things,—trade, business, population,—are mechanically pursued by us as ends precious in themselves, and are worshipped as what we call fetishes” (Arnold, Culture 169).
96 The mediating role of money in all aspects of Erewhonian life, including the affective and familiar, is given specific attention in the narrator’s account of his experience there. Take, for example, the narrator’s explanation of why parents have such poor relationships with their children in Erewhon: “Money is at the bottom of all this to a great extent. If the parents would put their children in the way of earning a competence earlier than they do, the children would soon become self-supporting and independent” (177).
of money is so quite as truly” (179). This tangled set of premises demands unravelling.

In keeping with Erewhon’s ostensibly inverted Victorian value system, money is understood to function as a kind of *a posteriori* evidence of moral merit. Of the rich man, the Erewhonians remark “[h]ow very much he must have done for society before society could have been prevailed upon to give him so much money” (179). However, the measure of that rich man is the amount of power—in literal, material “foot-pounds”—that he is able to leverage with his wealth. The obvious conundrum that emerges here is a question about exactly what type of “prevailing” the rich man is able to exert upon society in order to produce his wealth in the first place, and about the concomitant extent to which power or influence itself is the force classified as “good” in this Erewhonian value system.

Certainly, the narrator seems to turn a fine trade in influence or persuasive power in this novel, and he is interested in both monetizing and moralizing that influence. How, then, does *Erewhon* metaphorize the concept of instrumental relations between humans, and to what extent can that instrumental relationship be conceptualized as a mechanical mode of operation? By way of seeking an answer to that question, let us turn to the “Book of the Machines.”

**Erewhon’s “Book of the Machines”**

To understand why Erewhonians chose to rid themselves of technology some five hundred years before his visit, the narrator is given a copy of the revered book which inaugurated the anti-machinery revolution there. This “Book of the Machines” confirms that the state of technological development achieved by the Erewhonians five hundred years beforehand was on par with the narrator’s contemporary world, as suggested by the “fragments of a great many of our own most advanced inventions” that appeared to be “several hundred years old” in the Erewhonian museum visited by the narrator (82). As in *The Coming Race*, the Erewhonians have already surpassed the narrator’s human species in terms of technological sophistication; unlike the scenario in *The Coming Race*, that development has been abruptly interrupted, leaving the narrator in a position of superior

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97 As Butler wrote elsewhere: “While there is flesh there is money—or the want of money; but money is always on the brain so long as there is a brain in reasonable order” (*Note-Books* 36).
technical knowledge to the Erewhonians. This difference allows for an alternate future possibility for the narrator and his own kind, as the eventuality against which the Erewhonians sought to protect themselves is still very much available to the narrator’s human race. The Book extends Darwinian principles of evolution to technology and suggests that machinery, which had developed at such rapid rates relative to human evolution, would inevitably surpass humans as the dominant species on earth: “Assume for the sake of argument that conscious beings have existed for some twenty million years: see what strides machines have made in the last thousand! May not the world last twenty million years longer? If so, what will they not in the end become?” (199).

In order to claim that the organic principles of evolution are applicable to machines, the writer of the Book collapses the distinction between organic and non-organic life. The locus of this distinction is identified as the faculty of consciousness. This choice is a conventional one, for, as Herbert Sussman has argued, “consciousness, with its qualities of foresight and volition, had throughout the century been the defining characteristic of organic life” (136). The writer of the Book explores the extent to which sensation, emotion, and volition might be understood to operate “mechanically” by asking

whether every sensation is not chemical and mechanical in its operation? whether those things which we deem most purely spiritual are anything but disturbances of equilibrium in an infinite series of levers, beginning with those that are too small for microscopic detection, and going up to the human arm and the appliances which it makes use of? Whether there be not a molecular action of thought, whence a dynamical theory of the passions shall be deducible? Whether strictly speaking we should not ask what kind of levers a man is made of rather than what is his temperament? How are they balanced? How much of such and such will it take to weigh them down so as to make him do so and so? (201)

This description of a human being as an assemblage of levers that can be weighed so as to influence affect and behaviour is reminiscent of the narrator’s wrestling of information from Chowbok in the second chapter of the novel.
The psychological determinism that underwrites this model of the human is amplified later in the Book of the Machines, when the writer reasserts his claims in a less rhetorical way:

A man is the resultant and exponent of all the forces that have been brought to bear upon him, whether before his birth or afterwards. His action at any moment depends entirely upon his constitution, and on the intensity and direction of the various agencies to which he is, and has been, subjected. Some of these will counteract each other; but as he is by nature, and as he has been acted on, and is now acted on from without, so will he do, as certainly and regularly as though he were a machine. (215-16)

Not only is the human imagined as being a machine here, but that machine is imagined as a multiplicity. The writer posits the eye, that focal point of evolutionary disputation, as being “a machine for the little creature that sits behind in his brain to look through” (205). William Harvey’s ground-breaking mechanical model of blood circulation is given a Victorian update as the writer of the Book imagines, in place of Harvey’s pipes and pumps, a cellular metropolis:

It is said by some that our blood is composed of infinite living agents which go up and down the highways and byways of our bodies as people in the streets of a city. When we look down from a high place upon crowded thoroughfares, is it possible not to think of corpuscles of blood travelling through veins and nourishing the heart of the town? No mention shall be made of sewers, nor of the hidden nerves which serve to communicate sensations from one part of the town’s body to another; nor of the yawning jaws of the railway stations, whereby the circulation is carried directly into the heart,—which receive the venous lines, and disgorge the arterial, with an eternal pulse of people. (206)

“We are misled,” the writer ultimately concludes,

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98 For a brief account of Harvey as a transitional figure in the development of mechanical models of the human body, see Channell’s The Vital Machine, 30-45.
99 Holt draws attention to the fact that some of this analogy was added to the second edition of the novel: “Here and there are revisions made for the first time in the second edition of 1872, as for instance the comparison in Chapter XXIV of the railway station of a large city to the heart of a living organism. The four concluding paragraphs of Chapter XXV were likewise added in the second edition” (37).
by considering any complicated machine as a single thing; in truth it is a city or a society, each member of which was bred truly after its kind. We see a machine as a whole, we call it by a name and individualize it; we look at our own limbs, and know that the combination forms an individual which springs from a single centre of reproductive action. (212)

The physical and psychological unity of the human being, from this perspective, is an illusion that obscures the provisional aspect of how various parts or elements organize into a whole.100 As well as being ultimately unassimilable, these parts remain independently responsive to valences and attractions that originate outside the putatively integral human. Thus, a fundamental tension exists between a model of human consciousness based upon the efficacy of internally produced desire or will and a model that admits the impact of external contingency, necessity, or pressure. The automaton will become the figure that mediates between these competing models in the psycho-physiological debates that unfold with such energy through the 1870s, as I will detail in Chapter Three. In Butler’s novel, however, this tension remains unresolved, with the Book of the Machines interrupting any attempt to see the human as an autonomous, transcendent whole.101

Critics of the novel have, on a related note, generally refuted the physical and psychological unity of *Erewhon* by treating the “Book of the Machines” as an exceptional element, both unassimilable with the rest of *Erewhon*’s narrative and deserving of more serious critical attention. “In *Erewhon,*” writes Sussman, in a typical articulation of this viewpoint, “the ‘Book of the Machines’ is a separate text set off from the main narrative” (161). Such an approach makes much of the fact that Butler published the original kernel of the “Book of the Machines” in 1863, as an article entitled “Darwin Among the

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100 Butler’s incipient panpsychism, later articulated in texts such as *Unconscious Memory* (1880), is an obvious point of reference here.

101 Though Butler makes no explicit reference to automata in *Erewhon,* the role that automata play in mediating between these competing models is clear in notes that Butler wrote while planning a sequel, *Erewhon Revisited:*

Let automata increase in variety and ingenuity till at last they present so many of the phenomena of life that the religious world declares they were designed and created by God as an independent species. The scientific world, on the other hand, denies that there is any design in connection with them, and holds that if any slight variation happened to arise by which a fortuitous combination of atoms occurred which was more suitable for advertising purposes (the automata were chiefly used for advertising) it was seized upon and preserved by natural selection. (*Note-Books* 289)
Machines.” In his preface to the 1901 edition of the novel, Butler identified this article as “the first part of Erewhon written,” and he mentions several other articles written before Erewhon as forming other embryonic elements of the Book (33). As a result, Erewhon is sometimes read as a conceptually inferior frame or setting for the Book, as is made clear in Bruce Mazlish’s question: “Does Erewhon add anything to Butler’s earlier conception or argument?” (“Butler” 232). In Anti-Oedipus, Deleuze and Guattari dispense with the novelistic frame entirely in their celebration of Butler’s mechanical imagination, introducing their discussion as one based upon “[a] profound text by Samuel Butler, ‘The Book of the Machines’” (284).

Some productive exegeses of Erewhon, however, do attempt to make thematic links between the Book and the rest of the novel. Sue Zemka argues that the novel as a whole “pronounces—however prematurely—the death of the humanist subject that animates the utopian myth of idyllic expansion and its imperialist subtext” (442). In Zemka’s estimation, the narrator’s relativist perspective on his adventures is a classically ethnographic one, a perspective that, in the nineteenth century, “maintained belief in the fundamental familial unity of the species man” (451). The narrator’s measured, sympathetic interpretation of Erewhonian customs and beliefs breaks down the concept of constitutive Otherness in the novel, “first, by calling into question the ability to distinguish ethically between different cultural behaviours, and second, by relegating ethics anyway to an evolutionary understanding of social value” (457). Zemka concludes that the “crisis of Erewhon is the discovery, during the course of its mock ethnography, of relativistic and materialistic models of cultural value” (458). This loss of faith in foundational or transcendental concepts of cultural value “dissolves the cultural boundaries of humanness” in Erewhon, a result so “unsettling” that the novel seeks stabilizing, if arbitrary, value-based reassurance in the conservative High Ygrundites, thereby “retrenching behind an admittedly compromised but romantically defended image of hierarchical English cultural authority” (461). The “Book of the Machines,” according to Zemka, then performs “a euphemistic indirection” away from this insoluble

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102 The other articles are “Lucubratio Ebraia,” published 29 July 1865 in the Canterbury, New Zealand Press, an enlarged version of “Darwin Among the Machines” published as “The Mechanical Creation” on 1 July 1865 in the Reasoner, and a piece called “World of the Unborn” that may have appeared in a London newspaper in 1865 (Butler, Preface 33-34).
problem of defining the human in cultural terms by refocusing attention on the question of how to differentiate humans and machines: “Here the threat to the psychic integrity of humanness originates not with the loss of ethical absolutes, but rather with the shift to a biological and material perspective from which organic humanity appears to dissolve into a medley of prosthetic extensions and internal assimilations” (462-63).

The technophobic argument in the Book, as outlined by Zemka, is based on the premise that “machines violate the integrity of the human species with appendages and alterations that are internal and external, physical and psychological” (462). In the context of this violation, the biological boundary that might once have defined the human is dispersed, leaving behind a concept of humanity that is freed of old limits and simultaneously threatened by limits imposed by mechanical or technological life. Zemka concludes that the debate about machines in the Book is an “allegory of the social strife that divides the species” and that the debate reinforces the ascendant nineteenth-century belief that “the will for survival and domination working through all phenomenon [sic] is the sole source of the events and exchanges which comprise history” (468). However, Zemka’s claim that the Book’s argument is an allegory of social division is based upon a reductive treatment of the connections established between humans and machines in the Book and in Erewhon as a whole.

The notion that the Book depicts machines as violent intruders into some sanctified conception of the pure, integral human body ignores the Book’s naturalization of the analogy between the machine and the human body, as well as the specific cultural context in which the novel was written. Machines don’t violate the integrity of human subjectivity in Erewhon, but they do reveal that subjectivity to be provisional, heterogeneous, and permeable. I therefore agree with Zemka’s claim that Erewhon unravels one particular myth of the humanistic subject, but I disagree with her account of how that unravelling happens in the novel. In order to demonstrate an alternative perspective on how the humanistic myth is challenged in this novel, I would now like to shift attention to the complex narrative frame through which the narrator tells of his adventures in Erewhon. Although Zemka’s argument admits the presence of “layered narrative registers” in Erewhon that are “locked together in a logic of ambivalence” (464), it entirely neglects the framing aspect of Erewhon. In fact, the narrator’s return to
England and “subsequent disappointments” there merit only a one-sentence, parenthetical remark in Zemka’s article (468). The fact that the narrator returns to England and then retrospectively casts the entire narrative as an investment prospectus is, in fact, remarked upon in few critical treatments of the novel, but I would like to explore the ways in which this feature opens up entirely different interpretive possibilities for reading *Erewhon*.

“If the reader will excuse me,” begins *Erewhon*, “I will say nothing of my antecedents, nor of the circumstances which led me to leave my native country; the narrative would be tedious to him and painful to myself” (39). This opening line, which admits the existence of the reader before it does that of the narrator, establishes the novel’s narrative as selective, as having been curated with the attention of the reader and the needs of the narrator in mind. The purpose of this selective approach is made apparent on the first page of the novel, when the narrator reveals himself to be in the precarious position of having discovered something of great potential value that must be capitalized upon quickly, before “others with more means than mine should get the start of me” (39). The narrator, in other words, is in need of some start-up cash: “But to this end I must possess myself of a considerable sum of money: neither do I know how to get it, except by interesting the public in my story, and inducing the charitable to come forward and assist me” (39). The narrator’s tale, then, is a purposefully instrumental one, with a clear mandate shaping its telling.

This self-conscious mandate constitutes the framing conceit of the novel, a frame through which the narrator repeatedly interrupts his story-telling in order to draw the reader’s attention to the very *fact* of his story-telling. A somewhat adversarial tone marks the narrator’s early addresses to the reader: he will not tell the reader, for example, any geographical details of his journey to the mysterious site of this would-be fortune, nor will he even reveal what season he experienced at the end of 1868, “lest the reader should gather in which hemisphere I was” (40). Once the narrative proper is underway, the narrator regularly emphasizes both the reader’s remove from the scene of described action and the constructed nature of the narrative itself, as in this aside made just after the completion of the first part of the narrator’s journey towards the mountains:

I felt comparatively happy, but I can assure the reader that I had had a far worse time of it than I have told him; and I strongly recommend him to remain in
Europe if he can; or, at any rate, in some country which has been explored and settled, rather than go into places where others have not been before him. Exploring is delightful to look forward to and back upon, but it is not comfortable at the time, unless it be of such an easy nature as not to deserve the name. (60)

The vague antagonism of these early interventions eventually relaxes, however, and the readerly interpellations settle into several distinct categories. First, the narrator makes a considerable effort to mitigate the potential for suspicion or disbelief on the reader’s part. In setting up his exposition of Erewhon’s odd customs, the narrator vigorously asserts his honesty in the form of an appeal: “the reader . . . is earnestly requested to believe that both in this chapter and in those that follow it I have endeavoured to adhere most conscientiously to the strictest accuracy, and that I have never willingly misrepresented, though I may have sometimes failed to understand all the bearings of an opinion or custom” (101). The earnestness of this expression is diminished only slightly by the near-repetition of this phrase later in the novel, when the narrator again suspects that details of his story might strain credulity: “I fear that the reader will disbelieve this part of my story, yet in no other have I endeavoured to adhere more conscientiously to facts, and can only throw myself upon his charity” (243).103

The narrator also makes explicit attempts to reduce the cultural unfamiliarity of Erewhon by using expository interjections directed at the reader. This kind of gesture would ordinarily lessen the imaginative distance of the reader from the text, but in this case, the narrator inserts these interjections as footnotes. These footnotes, which demand that the reader interrupt the reading process to access the provided information, place the information that belongs outside of Erewhon in a separate textual space. References to Handel, to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and to the everyday behaviour of machinery in England are all made in footnote form (68, 173, 220). In describing a potato-like vegetable referenced in the Book of the Machines, the narrator even uses a craftily meta-referential footnote to triangulate a relationship between the Erewhonian writer of the Book and Samuel Butler, the seventeenth-century metaphysical poet:

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103 This line also offers a semantic link to the narrator’s invocation of “charity” on the novel’s opening page. Here, the economy of attention recalls the economy of speculation.
The root alluded to is not the potato of our own gardens, but a plant so near akin to it that I have ventured to translate it thus. Apropos of its intelligence, had the writer known Butler he would probably have said—

“He knows what’s what, and that’s as high, As metaphysic wit can fly.” (200)

Ultimately, however, this is a narrative wherein details of the story are deliberately and explicitly withheld by the teller of the tale. Often, the narrator claims that these elisions are made to “spare the reader” some lengthy or boring description (73, 80, 94, 125). The literary convention of having descriptive language fail in the beautiful face of a love interest is pressed into service when the narrator first meets Arowhena: “I will not attempt to describe her, for anything that I could say would fall so far short of the reality as only to mislead the reader” (148). Occasionally, no explicit reason at all is given for omitting information, as when the narrator refuses to explain the specifics of Mr. Nosnibor’s embezzlement scheme simply by declaring that “I need not detail them” (108).

Although the Book of the Machines section of the novel is so often treated as a separate element in Erewhon, the narrator’s curatorial presence in this part remains strong and distinctive. Two of the above-mentioned footnotes are included in the section of Erewhon dedicated to the Book, forming a paratextual link that extends throughout the novel as a whole. What is represented as the text of the Book is, in fact, actually the narrator’s translation of the Erewhonian original, or what he calls “a resumé in English of the work” (197). The narrator draws full attention to the fact that the work is, in some important way, his own, introducing the text of the Book by saying: “I have thought it best to insert my translation here” (197). This fact of translation provides a perfect excuse for the narrator to continue his reader-oriented interjections by, for example, offering opportunities for the narrator to summarize the writer’s position (199, 214). At several key points, the narrator concedes conceptual or linguistic defeat, as when he interrupts the Book’s first assertion that humans are reducible to machines to explain that the writer “then became more and more obscure, so that I was obliged to give up all attempt at translation; neither did I follow the drift of his argument” (202). The writer’s depiction of the circulatory system as a city is similarly followed by the narrator’s claim that at this
instant, “the writer became again so hopelessly obscure that I was obliged to miss several pages” (206). A specific parallel drawn between the motivations of an engine and those of an engine driver is met with an admission that the narrator “thought it best to omit” the writer’s “obscure argument upon this subject” (219). Clear expressions of the instrumentally legible human subject repeatedly dissolve away into untranslatable obscurity—according to the narrator.

The narrator also seems to graft an entirely separate text on to the end of the Book, a text that constitutes “the one serious attempt to answer” the arguments posited by the writer of the Book. This grafting is never clearly identified as such, nor does the narrator specify the source or author of this second text, and so the distinctions between the narrator and these two different Erewhonian authors become increasingly difficult to discern. Furthermore, the narrator admits that his translation of the Book is incomplete. After summarizing a portion of the Book that itemizes a phenotypic taxonomy of machines, the narrator admits: “I left the translation of this part of the treatise, which, by the way, was far longer than all that I have given here, for a later opportunity. Unfortunately, I left Erewhon before I could return to the subject; and though I saved my translation and other papers at the hazard of my life, I was obliged to sacrifice the original work” (214). What is presented as the Book of the Machines, therefore, is actually a layered and multiple ventriloquism, abridged and heavily editorialized by the narrator in a way that seems geared towards obfuscating the fullest implications of the Book’s mechanical determinism. The narrator thus assembles a meta-narrative frame that asserts the story’s truthfulness, tantalizingly withholds certain information from the reader, and obscures the suggestion that humans might be influenced in their desires and behaviour in predictable ways. What, exactly, might be the narrator’s intention here?

As it turns out, the purpose of all of this effort by the narrator to selectively direct the reader’s attention in this way is suggested on the novel’s very first page, and again, though in a more gradual way, towards the end of Erewhon, once the narrator is safely returned to England. There, the narrator introduces a scheme “which I propose for the conversion of Erewhon,” a scheme which purports to convert the Erewhonians to Christianity while also selling them as raw labour power to sugar plantations, thereby completing the conflation between financial and spiritual profit that the narrator has been
attempting through the novel as a whole (255). At first, the narrator suggests drawing up a prospectus which withholds some important information about Erewhon:

I propose, therefore, that one of those associations should be formed in which the risk of each of the members is confined to the amount of his stake in the concern. The first step would be to draw up a prospectus. In this I would advise that no mention should be made of the fact that the Erewhonians are the lost tribes. The discovery is one of absorbing interest to myself, but it is of a sentimental rather than commercial value, and business is business. (256)

This suggestion implicates readers in the scheme; by simply reading the narrative, readers are already made privy to the plan and are therefore placed in a position of informational and speculative privilege with respect to the scheme. Very quickly, however, the narrator reveals that the novel, as it stands, already comprises the prospectus in question, and so the readerly implication in the scheme is intensified: several pages after proposing the writing of a prospectus, the narrator trusts “that this book will sufficiently advertise the scheme to insure the subscription of the necessary capital; as soon as this is forthcoming I will guarantee that I convert the Erewhonians not only into good Christians but into a source of considerable profit to the shareholders” (257-58).

The narrator’s end goal in telling his tale is thus made explicit, and the distinction between reader and potential shareholder is collapsed completely:

I feel that comment is unnecessary, and will therefore conclude with one word of thanks to the reader who may have had the patience to follow me through my adventures without losing his temper; but with two, for any who may write at once to the Secretary of the Erewhon Evangelisation Company, limited (at the address which shall hereafter be advertised), and request to have his name put down as a shareholder. (258)

The narrator’s persuasive gambit isn’t finished just yet. After the above bald appeal, he adds a post-script to the narrative, which suggests that time is of the essence, because Chowbok has appeared in London under the title of the Rev. William Habakkuk, and is threatening to reveal the narrator’s “lost tribes” hypothesis to all who will listen. The narrator ends his account of this alarming development with a cryptic appeal: “At the last moment I see a probability of a complication which causes me much uneasiness. Please
subscribe quickly” (260). Over the course of the entire novel, then, the narrator openly articulates the techniques he uses to persuade or manipulate those around him into being useful to him. In the meta-narrative frame of the novel, the narrator uses these same techniques to turn the implied reader into a particular kind of economic subject. Just as he withholds grog from Chowbok or suggests withholding the secret of the lost tribes in his proposed prospectus, the narrator withholds information from the reader. Just as he performs a kind of pitiable fecklessness for Yram, he performs the part of the would-be missionary for the reader. And just as he manufactures a sense of urgency in order to spur Erewhon’s Queen into procuring the materials for his balloon, so, too, does the narrator manufacture urgency at the end of his narrative to compel the reader into investing in his scheme.

At the same time, however, the narrator is unable to disguise his own susceptibility to these same forms of persuasion. His own curiosity and eagerness is whetted by that which is withheld or indecipherable in Chowbok’s limited disclosure of information early in the tale. He is seduced by Erewhon’s earnest moralizing of money. And he seems seized by the very same sense of urgency that he turns upon the reader. The narrator’s instrumentalizing approach to human relations is, in this sense, a symptom of his own instrumentalized position in a system based entirely upon the imperative of modern economic enterprise: the reiterative propagation of capital.

My point in detailing Erewhon’s inner workings in this manner is to suggest that the narrator’s instrumental constitution of and approach to human relationships—including his engagement with the implied reader of his text—count as important articulations of anxiety about the extent to which human desire, affect, and motivation might be determined by forces external to that human subject. Erewhon also demonstrates how human subjectivity was becoming understood as a figure of multiplicity, made up of partial and overlapping mental elements, each of which might represent different kinds of vulnerability to external influence. If The Coming Race attempts to contains the notion of the mechanical human by imagining and then foreclosing upon the possibility of humanity reaching a condition of singular co-existence with technology, Erewhon considers the structure of narrative itself as the site upon which the mechanical human assemblage is investigated and re-deployed. The narrative
is both an account of the disparate influences that shape the subjective life of *Erewhon*'s narrator and the formal unification of those disparate influences into an instrumental engagement with other reading subjectivities. At once a cautionary tale about techno-human imbrication and a metafictional example of how seductive such an imbrication can be, *Erewhon*'s narrative speculates on a future already displaced to a fictional past and on the mechanical, capitalistic priming of its implied readers.

Taken in combination, *The Coming Race* and *Erewhon* illustrate a rapidly disintegrating boundary between the mechanical and the human that emerged out of a growing comprehension of just how unknowable the future-oriented imbrication of the technological and the organic might prove to be. As the next chapter will show, the troubling implications of *The Coming Race*’s techno-human future and *Erewhon*’s heterogeneously constructed human subject were explored throughout the scientific works that form what has been called the “Conscious Automaton” debate. The automaton is the paradoxical, labile figure upon which attempts to stabilize those troubling implications devolve.

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104 The uncertain techno-human future represented by these two novels can be brought into relief by comparison with a chapter from George Eliot’s final publication, *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879). Entitled “Shadows of the Coming Race,” this chapter dramatizes a conversation between Theophrastus and his friend Trost, who is “confident that at some future period within the duration of the solar system, ours will be the best of all possible worlds” (128). The subject of the conversation is whether or not the increasing sophistication of machines will ultimately liberate or enslave humankind. “Shadows of the Coming Race” combines elements of both *The Coming Race*—Theophrastus imagines a “parliament of machines” set a thousand years into the future “in which the manners were excellent and the motions infallible in logic”—and *Erewhon*: Theophrastus also worries that “the process of natural selection” shaping technological evolution “will drive men altogether out of the field” (130-31). Importantly, “Shadows of the Coming Race” does not involve the narrative contortions with which technological futurity is displaced in *Erewhon* and *The Coming Race*; the conversation is imagined to take place in a contemporary moment. The difference between Eliot’s account of technological futurity and that represented in Bulwer’s and Butler’s novels lies in the former’s insistence on human consciousness as a feature that cannot be mechanically replicated no matter how developed technology is destined to become. John Fuerst notes in “Shadows of a Coming Race” a “firm commitment to a distinction between human and machine” based upon the text’s distinguishing human feature of self-consciousness (48). Ortwin de Graef characterizes the assertion of human exceptionality in this chapter as “a scornful recommitment to the center: Theophrastus’s friend Trost angrily dismisses his dystopian vision, insisting that our race will and must act as a nervous centre to the utmost development of mechanical processes” (36).
Chapter Three

“Absolute Machines”: The Conscious Automaton Debate

MAN is a mere automaton—free-will a fable vain:
This dogma in the Magazines I lay down plump and plain—
This Editor, poor man, may sigh, and call my reasoning thin:
But o’er his acts he’s no control,—the article goes in.

—R. K. H.

The above lines form the first stanza of a poem called “An Automatic Lay. By A Musical Box” that appeared in The Spectator in 1892 (401). The stanza is notable for its witty treatment of the so-called “Conscious Automaton” debate, which unfolded primarily in the pages of the best-known journals and magazines of the day and which had at its centre the controversial notion of the human being as a complex, overdetermined mechanism. In “An Automatic Lay,” the reasoning of the writer’s argument against free will might be “thin,” but the demand for more articles on the subject is not, and so the Editor must obey the dictates of a force outside of his own control, ironically corroborating the writer’s assertion that “Man is a mere automaton.” The stanza is remarkable for its identification of scientific journalism as the venue in which the details and diversions of the debate were primarily aired and for the way it recognizes the continued relevance and energy of the debate nearly two decades after it first seized the Victorian cultural imagination. In its formal structure—a pair of fourteeners constitute each quatrain—the poem draws attention to the mechanistic effects of strict prosody while juxtaposing the ballad tradition’s oral beginnings with the form’s technologically abetted ascendancy in the age of print.105 This formal structure also hyperbolizes the poem’s theme: the Editor, driven by the public appetite for Conscious Automaton dogma, is working with as few degrees of freedom as is the writer in hewing to the demands of iambic heptameter. In a final, meta-textual shift of sematic gear, the

105 John Hollander describes fourteeners as being “cut from ballad stanzas” (11). See Abrams for a brief history of the ballad, including its broadside variation and its fortune as a high literary form in the Romantic period (11-12). The orality of the ballad form is also emphasized in the title of the poem, a “lay” being a short narrative song (Abrams 102).
poem’s speaker is identified as being a music box, thus placing the operation of a mechanical contrivance at the heart of this poetic expression. The stanza thus combines the tension between personal conviction and institutional demands with the complex unfolding of figurative language.

This chapter will argue that over the course of the Conscious Automaton debate, the automaton becomes an increasingly abstract discursive site that absorbs competing intellectual claims about the mechanical nature of human beings, moments of ontological crisis about the limits of human knowledge, and questions about the agency of the major players in the debate. By attending to how the figure of the automaton is negotiated by the scientific and philosophical writers who weigh in on the issue, I will demonstrate the extent to which the Conscious Automaton debate is concerned with the role that imaginative language such as metaphor and analogy should play in scientific investigation. Even in the midst of a concerted effort to clarify a definition of the automaton for the purposes of scientific communication, the meanings of the figure proliferate. In this, the most extended public discussion of the automaton in the Victorian era, the figure’s “versatile, unstable” semantic operation only intensifies (Inglis 1). The centerpiece of this chapter is a speech-turned-article by Thomas Henry Huxley that served as a lightning rod for decades of argument over what human traits could or could not usefully be understood in materialist terms. To explain why this speech is so powerful a moment in the history of the nineteenth-century automaton, I will first attend to Huxley’s pragmatic thoughts on the value of figurative language in scientific writing. I will then explore the significance of changes that Huxley made to each of the four printed versions of this speech that he published in late 1874. Finally, I will analyze responses to Huxley’s speech that focus on the definition of the automaton as they challenge Huxley’s ideas. By scrutinizing this non-fictional debate in the detail that I do, I aim to show that the increasingly negligible boundaries between humans and machines anatomized in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *The Coming Race*, and *Erewhon* were especially fraught in scientific writing that attempted to eschew imaginative abstractions. My readings of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *The Coming Race*, and *Erewhon* use the multivalent registers of the automaton figure to illustrate how these fictional works represent the experience of human automatism as a process, as a matter of becoming rather than being. The scientific
writing that makes up the Conscious Automaton debate, by contrast, aims at establishing a fixed, objective account of human consciousness, an aim that becomes commensurate with establishing a stable definition of the automaton. As it turns out, however, the automaton’s figurative complexity interrupts these efforts to establish static materialist benchmarks for human constitution.

The Language of Science

In his 1879 article “Are We Automata?,” William James identifies a lone individual as the instigator of the extraordinary popular interest in the Conscious Automaton, asserting: “Everyone is now acquainted with the Conscious-Automaton-theory to which Prof. Huxley gave such publicity in his Belfast address” (1). The address in question is Thomas Henry Huxley’s infamous lecture to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, delivered on August 24, 1874, and entitled “On the Hypothesis That Animals Are Automata, and Its History.” In this speech, Huxley ostensibly sought to renovate René Descartes’s place in the history of physiology by demonstrating just how accurately the French philosopher had deduced the process through which nerves and muscles mediate between the world inside and the world outside a living being. Huxley then leveraged the prescience of Descartes’s thinking in one arena into support for a related Cartesian chestnut: the idea that animals—and, by Huxley’s measure, humans—are living machines, whose every sensation, operation, and experience can be explained entirely on the basis of physical principles. Huxley claimed that consciousness is epiphenomenal, an inert byproduct of physiological processes that has no more ability to interact with or influence those processes than a steam-whistle can influence the operation of the engine that produces the steam. The address was published in

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106 Huxley’s reputation as a man of wide-ranging scientific aptitudes was evident early in his career: the subjects of his writings range from botany to zoology, embryology to paleontology, microbiology to geology and beyond. He is perhaps best known as “Darwin’s Bulldog,” a moniker earned through his powerful, measured advocacy of Darwin’s evolutionary views, especially during Huxley’s legendary debate against Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, in 1860. For a sampling of the large body of critical work on Huxley’s life and legacy, see Cyril Bibby’s Scientist Extraordinary: The Life and Scientific Works of Thomas Henry Huxley, 1825-1895, Adrian Desmond’s Huxley: From Devil’s Disciple to Evolution’s High Priest, and Bernard Lightman’s Evolutionary Naturalism in Victorian Britain: The ‘Darwinians’ and Their Critics. For a brief, lucid overview of Huxley’s relationship with the periodical press in terms of the evolution debate in particular, see Lightman’s “Victorian Periodicals, Evolution, and Public Controversy.”

107 Though William James wouldn’t introduce the word “epiphenomenon” for several more decades.
November of that year in *The Fortnightly Review*, where a wide reading audience already attuned to Huxley’s materialist leanings encountered his claim that humans are “conscious automata, . . . parts of the great series of causes and effects which, in unbroken continuity, composes that which is, and has been, and shall be” (244).

Huxley’s lecture and its afterlife in printed form represent the most high-profile elucidation of the automaton figure in the Victorian age. Indeed, the resonances of Huxley’s “conscious automaton” can be felt in our own day, as philosophers and psychologists continue to argue over shades of meaning in Huxley’s explanation of mechanical consciousness. In *Consciousness Explained* (1991), for example, Daniel Dennett seeks to clarify Huxley’s claim by arguing that while an epiphenomenon might not be able to influence the behaviour of the organism that produced it, it might nevertheless have “lots of effects in the world” (402). As recently as 2010, by contrast, historian John Greenwood has claimed that while Huxley’s lecture is generally treated as “a classic statement of the doctrine” of epiphenomenalism, “none of the arguments that Huxley advanced provide much support for epiphenomenalism” (276). Greenwood continues on to wonder “whether Huxley held any form of metaphysical epiphenomenalism” at all (276).

Given what appears to be an enduring lack of consensus about what Huxley meant by his “conscious automaton,” what might a reassessment of the nineteenth-century automaton contribute by way of illuminating the foundational issues of his argument? Huxley’s invocation of the automaton in the debate about the materialist aspects of human consciousness, I contend, is an effort to find a figurative placeholder for knowledge that did not, and does not yet, exist: comprehensive knowledge of the constitution and operation of the human mind. However, the inherent flexibility of the automaton as a figure, combined with the highly charged nature of the debate, proved too

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108 Dennett offers an example that demonstrates the continuing importance of analogy as a mode of explanation for scientific ideas: “your shadow has its effects on photographic film, not to mention the slight cooling of the surface it spreads itself over” (402). See N. Campbell’s “What Was Huxley’s Epiphenomenalism?,” especially 363-373, for an extended discussion of Dennett’s role in recent reconsiderations of Huxley’s “conscious automaton” argument. Campbell returns Dennett’s conception of Huxley’s epiphenomenalism to the latter’s steam-whistle example, suggesting that in Dennett’s understanding of what Huxley meant, the steam-whistle has “other physical effects: it produces sound waves, it heats up the air around the whistle, and so on” (364). However, Campbell concludes that Dennett’s argument is inconsistent with “Huxley’s own remarks on the subject” (365).
much for even a thinker as formidable as Huxley to contain, revealing the volatile potential of figurative language in a scientific context that is premised upon the possibility of establishing objective fact.

By the time “On the Hypothesis” was published, Huxley was known as a fierce public representative of “the doctrine that we have no knowledge of any thinking substance, apart from extended substance; and that thought is as much a function of matter as motion is” (“On Descartes” 190). In an 1870 speech to the Cambridge chapter of the YMCA called “On Descartes’ ‘Discourse Touching the Method of Using One’s Reason Rightly and of Seeking Scientific Truth,’” Huxley gives an early hint of how treacherous it could be to try and imagine the operation of the human body via analogy.109 By way of explaining Descartes’s conception of “the necessary result of the structure of the parts” in organic bodies, Huxley paraphrases the French thinker’s argument as follows: “the animal body is an automaton, which is competent to perform all the animal functions in exactly the same way as a clock or any other piece of mechanism” (182). What is significant about this articulation is its metaphorical ambiguity: in this phrase, Huxley first offers a literal conception of the animal body as machine but then tempers that literalness with the suggestion of an analogical relationship between the animal-machine and the clock or other mechanism. This animal body is both a machine and like a machine.

Huxley was no stranger to the use of figurative language in his writing and lectures.110 Indeed, his speech to the YMCA is structured by an extended metaphor that treats the history of thought as “comparable to the leaves, flowers, and fruit upon the innumerable branches of a few great stems, fed by commingled and hidden roots” (166). While the image of human knowledge as a tree was conventional, Huxley makes the conceit his own, calling into play a hypothetical intellectual botanist who might suggest a means of reuniting the “two main branches” of Idealism and Materialism, “which grow in opposite ways, and bear flowers which look as different as they can well be” (“On Descartes” 166). This sort of elaborate deployment of metaphor has led some critics to

109 Other important precursors to the “On the Hypothesis” speech include Huxley’s 1868 speech given in Edinburgh, “On the Physical Basis of Life,” and his 1871 speech to the Metaphysical Society, “Has a Frog a Soul?”
110 See Lightman, Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences, for a detailed account of Huxley’s grudging acceptance of his role as an increasingly popular promoter of science.
describe Huxley as “an artist in prose,” a “beautiful stylist,” and not merely a skilled rhetorician, but “a poet” (Blinderman 49; Anger 50; Gardner 190). For his part, Huxley seems always to keep a pragmatic and instrumentalist view of language in sight, arguing that the particular words used to name a given phenomenon are less important than is the explanatory work that naming might accomplish: “If we find that the ascertainment of the order of nature is facilitated by using one terminology, or one set of symbols, rather than another, it is our clear duty to use the former; and no harm can accrue, so long as we bear in mind that we are dealing merely with terms and symbols” (“On the Physical” 462). Words are like tools, in this understanding, to be wielded or discarded according to their worth as instruments for unveiling nature’s mysteries.

In this statement, Huxley nimbly positions himself with respect to several long-standing philosophical disputes about the arbitrary relationship between language and the physical world, and about the complex relationship between language and thought, knowledge, and the imagination. These disputes date back at least to Locke’s assertion in _An Essay Concerning Human Understanding_ that “[w]ords are sensible signs, necessary for communication,” a communication based upon the “voluntary imposition” of a correlation between word and idea “whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea” (II.i.§1).\(^\text{111}\) When it comes to ideas that lie beyond the purview of that which can be empirically known, such as the fundamental natures of the material and spiritual worlds, Huxley suggests that the “terms and symbols” rendering those ideas communicable are not merely arbitrary but also provisional. “[M]atter and spirit are but names for the imaginary substrata of groups of natural phenomena,” he explains, and these names will undoubtedly change as the comprehension of natural phenomena improves: “the further science advances, the more extensively and consistently will all the phenomena of nature be represented by materialistic formulæ and symbols” (“On the Physical” 461, 462).

Given his pragmatic solution of using approximate language in place of precise information and terminology yet to come, then, what might we read into the ambiguous metaphorical status of Huxley’s statement that “the animal body is an automaton”? For

\(^{111}\) William Keach offers an overview of the development of these arguments from Locke through the Romantics in his “Romanticism and Language.” See also Stephen Land’s _The Philosophy of Language in Britain_.

Huxley, this conception of the body as a mechanism has salutary implications because of the general tractability of machines: “It is because the body is a machine that education is possible. Education is the formation of habits . . . so that acts, which at first required a conscious effort, eventually became unconscious and mechanical” (“On Descartes” 188). The speech to the YMCA also contains an early articulation of Huxley’s belief that Descartes’s model of animals as machines should obtain with regard to humans, too: “I hold, with the Materialists, that the human body, like all living bodies, is a machine, all the operations of which will, sooner or later, be explained on physical principles. I believe that we shall, sooner or later, arrive at a mechanical equivalent of consciousness, just as we have arrived at a mechanical equivalent of heat” (“On Descartes” 191). However, at this moment in 1870, Huxley tempers this idea with some cautious qualification; he takes care to distance himself from “the Materialists” who simply declare that “man is nothing but a machine” by claiming that he can support this Materialist position only if it allows that “[man] is a machine capable of adjusting itself within certain limits” (192). Again, Huxley’s sensitivity to shades of meaning in language use allows for a strategic prevarication in his claims: the body might be a machine, but “man” is more than that machine. Huxley carefully promotes the positive associations of his body-as-machine notion in the realm of education theory while resisting categorization as a materialist.

112 This belief in the virtuousness of habits acquired through repetitive action is much older than Huxley, of course. In “A Mechanical Microcosm,” for example, Peter Dear discusses Blaise Pascal’s articulation of this idea, especially in pages 59-60. Huxley had previously described his conception of education as a mechanically disciplinary process in a speech entitled “A Liberal Education, and Where to Find It” delivered to the South London Working Men’s College in January of 1868:

The man, I think, has a liberal education, who has been so trained in youth that his body is the ready servant of his will, and does with ease and pleasure all the work that, as a mechanism, it is capable of; whose intellect is a clear, cold, logic engine, with all its parts of equal strength, and in smooth working order; ready, like a steam engine, to be turned to any kind of work, and spin the gossamers as well as forge the anchors of the mind; whose mind is stored with a knowledge of the great and fundamental truths of Nature and of the laws of her operations. (498)

This interest in repetitive habit links Huxley’s idea of education to a centuries-old dispute over the value versus the iniquity of religious rituals. Brooke Conti describes the wide use of the automaton motif in Protestant writing by John Donne, Thomas Edwards, and John Milton, amongst others, “to characterize hypocrites, heretics, and others they consider beyond the religious pale” (95). Indeed, the oldest extant automaton figure is a 16th-century monk who walks, beats his chest, and kisses his crucifix, the mechanical repetition of which “corresponds exactly to a trancelike performance of prayer, incantation” (King 266). In Huxley’s day, the nature of the relationship between conscious acts, unconscious acts, and instinct was hypothesized by many, including Carpenter and Darwin. See William Cyples in “Machinery and the Passions” (1865) for an extended Victorian treatment of the idea.
At the same time, Huxley takes the occasion of the YMCA speech as an opportunity to proffer an intriguing thought experiment:

If some great Power would agree to make me always think what is true and do what is right, on condition of being turned into a sort of clock and wound up every morning before I got out of bed, I should instantly close with the offer. The only freedom I care about is the freedom to do right; the freedom to do wrong I am ready to part with on the cheapest terms to any one who will take it of me.

(192-3)

Under the shelter of this hypothetical formulation, Huxley transforms his earlier explanation of the Cartesian animal automaton as being like a clock into an idiosyncratic embrace of the very idea he has just disavowed—the notion that humans might be thought of as machines, too. This irresistible image of Huxley as a kind of clock demonstrates both his knack for analogies that caught the imagination of the public and a hint of the direction in which his thinking would soon proceed. Both of these aspects of Huxley’s writing were noted by Richard Holt Hutton in a response published in The Spectator under the title “Professor Huxley as a Machine”:

We sincerely hope, in spite of the enormous addition to the intellectual resources of the day which such a Huxley-clock would afford, that no great Power will take the Professor at his word, and so deprive us of that inimitable human freshness and personal distinctiveness which constitute the charms alike of the Huxleyan physics and the Huxleyan metaphysics. (Hutton 550)

Hutton then attends to the absurdity of claiming that the freedom to do only right is any freedom at all. He draws particular attention to the way in which Huxley’s clock metaphor undermines that claim, observing that “the object, of course, of all clockwork is to take away from the clock all freedom, whether of going right or wrong, and to make its going right as nearly as possible as much a matter of absolute necessity as its going at all” (550). Hutton’s article continues as a ludic rejoinder to Huxley’s but ends on a thoughtful, prescient note: “There is but one consolation, and that is, that the notion of the broad, fresh, rich, and playful intellect of Professor Huxley as a perfectly regulated piece of clockwork is a notion flagrantly self-contradictory, and on the fact of the matter almost too good a joke to have much weight for what it is, a very serious hint of the tendencies
of his philosophy” (551). Huxley’s clock metaphor might, indeed, be a failure, but it succeeded in attracting light-hearted notice to his argument in the form of Hutton’s response.

This “very serious hint of the tendencies” of Huxley’s philosophy was to remain only that—a hint—for some years. 1874 found Huxley in high demand as a lecturer, and by the summer he was running short on preparation time for his upcoming appearance at the BAAS meeting in August. In a July 22 letter to John Tyndall, Huxley admits to not yet having decided upon the focus of his speech: “I am thinking of taking Development for the subject of my evening lecture, the concrete facts made out in the last thirty years without reference to Evolution. If people see that it is Evolution, that is Nature’s fault, and not mine” (“To J. Tyndall” 131). Here, Huxley’s willingness to draw attention to an idea without admitting any responsibility for doing so anticipates an important rhetorical move in his “On the Hypothesis” speech. By mid-August, however, these plans had been logistically derailed, and Huxley was forced to choose another topic. In a letter to Michael Foster dated August 12, Huxley laments that preparations for his August 2 tribute to Joseph Priestly in Birmingham had impinged upon his efforts to ready his BAAS lecture: “that Birmingham business so cut into my time that I could not get the diagrams I should have wanted done and I was obliged to look out for another topic than development—so I have chosen ‘animal automatism and its history’” (“To M. Foster” 51). If Huxley’s openness to becoming a wind-up mechanism for doing good was delivered in the guise of a thought experiment in 1870, this admission that he was driven to his topic of animal automatism by the exigencies of time and the enormous demand for his services as a lecturer suggests a life already circumscribed by external pressures. But for Huxley, the prospect of giving a speech on this “most awfully scabreux topic” was an exciting one. In fact, Huxley appeared poised and primed for a particular kind of intellectual fight, as revealed in the same letter to Foster: “I am burning to do justice to Descartes (whose name is not even mentioned in that great verbose book of Carpenter) & to Bonnet & Hartley and you shall see how I will dance between the eggs” (51). In

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113 Hutton’s discovery of humour in the notion of Huxley as a piece of clockwork anticipates Henri Bergson’s alignment of automatic movement with the “comic spirit”: “The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” (Laughter 2, 29).
describing his rhetorical approach as a “dance between the eggs,” Huxley signals an awareness of the gap between meaning and saying that is enacted by figurative language.

Huxley’s thirst for intellectual battle went unslaked at first: John Tyndall’s presidential address, with its materialist take on metaphysics, attracted immediate notice and seemed to overshadow Huxley’s efforts entirely. By all accounts, Huxley’s speech, delivered without reference to his notes, received a warm reception at the BAAS meeting on the evening of August 24. Huxley later recollected his experience of the speech in a letter to Ray Lankester:

I knew that I was treading on very dangerous ground, so I wrote out uncommonly full and careful notes, and had them in my hand when I stepped on to the platform.

Then I suddenly became aware of the bigness of the audience, and the conviction came upon me that, if I looked at my notes, not one half would hear me. It was a bad ten seconds, but I made my election and turned the notes face downwards on the desk.

To this day, I do not exactly know how the thing managed to roll itself out; but it did, as you say, for the best part of an hour and a half. (‘To R. Lankester’ 134)

In this image of Huxley as unconscious performer can be found yet another suggestion of the man, himself, as a kind of automaton, wound up and set going in a moment of choosing to disregard his consciously prepared notes on the subject.

A transcript of the speech was published the next day in Belfast’s The Northern Whig that confirms its positive reception: the transcript includes parenthetical identifications of the moments when applause, laughter, or cheering greeted Huxley’s remarks. A second version of the speech appeared the following week in The British Medical Journal, and yet another was featured early in September in Nature, neither of which sparked any particularly outraged reactions. Within weeks of the publication of the

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114 The next two months’ worth of letters to the editors of The Spectator, for example, regularly held forth on the dangerous implications of Tyndall’s “Lucretian apology,” with nary a mention of Huxley.

115 The version of Huxley’s speech printed in The Northern Whig offers a unique perspective on the BAAS audience’s reception of the speech—a reception that has been little acknowledged in criticism of the Conscious Automaton debate. Huxley vetted this transcript mere hours after giving the speech (“To Henrietta” 136). I am indebted to Catherine Morrow, Heritage Services Manager of the Belfast Central Library, for a copy of this article.
speech in the November 1 issue of The Fortnightly Review, however, Huxley had his
dance: this fourth print version launched a small writing industry in Britain based upon
the hailing or haranguing of Huxley’s endorsement of animal automatism.\textsuperscript{116}

A comparison of the alterations that Huxley made to the different versions of the
“On the Hypothesis” article contributes something by way of explanation for why the
Fortnightly Review edition finally sparked the controversy that Huxley so doggedly
sought.\textsuperscript{117} The major difference between the Fortnightly Review version of “On the
Hypothesis” and its predecessors lies in its concluding rhetoric. In the first three iterations
of the speech, Huxley finishes by carefully, elliptically broaching the issue of whether or
not the automaton theory could, or should, be extended to include humans. In the
Northern Whig, British Medical Journal and Nature versions, Huxley anticipates the
method by which his critics will challenge the ideas he has just laid out:

I do not doubt that that fate will befall me which has befallen better men, and that
I shall have to bear in patience the reiterated assertion that doctrines such as I
have put before you have very evil tendencies. I should not wonder if you were to
be told by persons speaking with authority—not, perhaps, with that authority
which is based upon knowledge and wisdom, but still with authority—I should
not wonder if you were told that my intention in bringing this subject before you
is to lead you to apply the doctrine I have stated to men as well as to brutes, and it
will then certainly be further stated that the logical tendency of such a doctrine is
Fatalism, Materialism, and Atheism. (“An Address” 271)

This delicate approach to the issue of automatism in humans is masterful in its
circumspection: Huxley posits that the extension of the automaton model to humankind
will first be suggested by his detractors, and then implanted, as though that were
Huxley’s aim, in the minds of his listeners. In this relay of supposition, Huxley removes
himself from the chain of implication entirely, dismissing any suggestion of human
automatism as libelous ventriloquism. Huxley then buries his own take on the matter in

\textsuperscript{116} In this chapter, I will refer to the Belfast Whig version of Huxley’s speech as “Professor Huxley’s
Lecture” and to the British Medical Journal version as “An Address”; these being the article titles assigned
the speech in these publications. I will refer to the Nature version of the speech as N and to the Fortnightly
Review version as FR, as these two versions share a title.

\textsuperscript{117} The wider and more general readership of The Fortnightly Review compared to that of The Northern
Whig, Nature, and the British Medical Journal is, of course, another important factor in explaining why the
Fortnightly Review version of the article became the best known.
the midst of a subsequent paragraph that has as its focus the moral necessity of demanding and testing the truth of any given proposition: “Undoubtedly, I do hold that the view I have taken of the relations between the physical and mental faculties of brutes applies in its fulness and entirely to man” (“An Address” 271). This phrasing is significant in its omission of any mechanical language. Indeed, in the early versions of the article, Huxley never explicitly refers to humans as “automata” at all. Huxley’s tone is an apologetic one for the remainder of the early iterations of the article: “But now I beg leave to say that, in my conviction, there is no such logical connection, as is pretended, between the doctrine I accept and the consequences which people profess to draw from it” (271). His concluding gesture is to assemble and retreat behind a defensive phalanx of thinkers, from St. Augustine to Kant, who have suggested similar ideas about the extent to which the operation of human consciousness might be considered mechanical in some respect.

Compare this reticence with the Fortnightly Review version of “On the Hypothesis,” from which careful circumspection has been entirely excised and in place of which Huxley leaves an unequivocal declaration: “We are conscious automata, endowed with free will in the only intelligible sense of that much-abused term—inasmuch as in many respects we are able to do as we like—but none the less parts of the great series of causes and effects which, in unbroken continuity, composes that which is, and has been, and shall be—the sum of existence” (FR 577). Gone are the apologetic tone and the defensiveness, replaced by a curious performance of something akin to intellectual automatism: Huxley admits that he would “willingly bring this disquisition to an end” by limiting his discussion to the automatism of animals if only he could hope “that people would go no further” (577). He is driven, in other words, to clarify his position against his will, but he emerges as a defiant champion of that righteous, rigorous, and honest position:

If the view I have taken did really and logically lead to fatalism, materialism, and atheism, I should profess myself a fatalist, materialist, and atheist; and I should look upon those who, while they believed in my honesty of purpose and intellectual competency, should raise a hue and cry against me, as people who by
their own admission preferred lying to truth, and whose opinions therefore were
unworthy of the smallest attention. (577-78)

Leading up to this portentous founding moment in the Conscious Automaton debate,
then, Huxley has demonstrated an intriguing combination of analytical suppleness on the
question of how language functions in the realm of scientific investigation with a
seemingly unselfconscious reiteration of his intellectual life as being overdetermined by
forces outside his control. Whether as a wind-up clock, a marginally conscious conduit of
speech-making, or an unwitting participant in a cultural dialogue that forces him to
expound certain rhetorical positions, Huxley both argues for and enacts a model of the
human as conscious automaton. I will now anatomize the constituent parts of Huxley’s
automaton in order to demonstrate that the debate over conscious automatism was,
fundamentally, a debate about the place of analogy and metaphor in scientific writing.
This demonstration will, I hope, illuminate the potency of the automaton as an
imaginative concept at this rousing moment in Victorian scientific deliberation.

**Huxley’s Automaton**

How, exactly, does Huxley construct and deploy the figurative automaton across
the various versions of his “On the Hypothesis” article? His rhetorical strategy takes as its
first approach Descartes’s own use of the automaton. Huxley identifies five “keystone”
axioms of contemporary physiology that were anticipated in Descartes’s writing: that the
brain is the seat of thought, emotion, and sensation; that animal movement is caused by
the molecular motion of nerve-stuff; that animal sensation is caused by the molecular
motion of brain-stuff; that reflex action is a verifiable phenomenon which takes place in
the absence of volition; and that there exists some sort of physical basis for memory.

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118 The extent to which Descartes can be said to originate the idea of the human-as-automaton has been
richly contested in recent years. See Muri’s *The Enlightenment Cyborg* for an extended treatment of this
debate. Of particular interest is the manner in which literary works of the late 16th and early 17th centuries
have been used to demonstrate the ubiquity of mechanistic ideas during the incubation period of
Descartes’s thinking. For more, on this, see Scott Maisano’s “Infinite Gesture: Automata and the Emotions
in Descartes and Shakespeare” and “Descartes avec Milton: The Automata in the Garden,” in which he
analyses the psycho-physical dualism of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *The Winter’s Tale* and Milton’s
*Paradise Lost* in order to claim that Descartes’s use of a mechanical model of the human is “neither
entirely new nor especially disenchanting” (“Descartes avec Milton” 22). Justin Kolb offers a variation on
these ideas in “‘To Me Comes a Creature’: Recognition, Agency, and the Properties of Character in
Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale.*”
After describing the various empirical ways in which these five propositions had been established since Descartes’s time, Huxley turns to “that famous hypothesis of the automatism of brutes,” according to which Descartes describes animals as operating without souls, mentality, or consciousness:

What Descartes meant by this was that animals are absolute machines, as if they were mills or barrel organs; that they have no feelings; that a dog does not see, and does not hear, and does not smell, but that the impression which thus gave rise to those states of consciousness in the dog gave rise, by a mechanical reflex process, to actions which correspond to those which we perform when we do smell, and do taste, and do see. (“An Address” 269)\textsuperscript{119}

Despite what Huxley admits is a “paradoxical” element in this hypothesis, he argues that this idea “has received as much and as strong support from modern physiological research as any other of [Descartes’s] notions” (269). The notion of animal automatism, in other words, ought to be taken seriously on account of Descartes’s physiological prescience with regard to other points and because of what contemporary empirical science has to offer on this particular score.

However, while Huxley agrees with Descartes’s ultimate claim that “animals are machines,” he parts company with the French philosopher on the question of animal consciousness. For Huxley, the prospect that consciousness might appear in the human species and no other violates “that great doctrine of continuity which forbids one to suppose that any natural phenomena can come into existence suddenly and without some precedent, gradual modification tending towards it” (\textit{N} 365). Instead, Huxley suggests that “it seems vastly more probable that the lower animals, although they may not possess that sort of consciousness which we have ourselves, yet have it in a form proportional to the comparative development of the organ of that consciousness, and foreshadow more or

\textsuperscript{119} Huxley clarifies this account a week later in \textit{Nature}: “What Descartes meant by this was that animals are absolute machines, as if they were mills or barrel organs; that they have no feelings; that a dog does not see, and does not hear, and does not smell, but \textit{that the impressions which produce those states of consciousness in ourselves, give rise in the dog, by a mechanical reflex process, to actions which correspond to those which we perform when we do smell, and do taste, and do see}” (364, emphasis added). In the \textit{Fortnightly Review} version, Huxley replaces this account with a large quotation taken from Descartes’s “Réponses aux Quatrièmes Objections,” along with the following question: “What proof is there that brutes are other than a superior race of marionettes, which eat without pleasure, cry without pain, desire nothing, know nothing, and only simulate intelligence as a bee simulates a mathematician?” (\textit{FR} 564-5).
less dimly those feelings which we possess ourselves” (“An Address” 270). The implication of this argument is a strange one, in that Huxley seems to be suggesting that animals can be both conscious and machine-like, two qualities or states that had previously been understood as mutually exclusive. Huxley explains this implication as follows:

When we talk of the lower animals being provided with instinct, and not with reason, what we really mean is, that although they are sensitive and although they are conscious, yet they do act mechanically, and that their different states of consciousness, their sensations, their thoughts (if they have them), their volitions (if they have them), are the products and consequences of their mechanical arrangements. (270)

Here, Huxley admits the existence of a gap between what is said and what is meant in discussions about an area that remains impervious to scientific observation: the thoughts and volitions of animals. Rather than conceiving of this gap as a liability for his scientific argument, Huxley capitalizes on the usefulness of arbitrary, provisional language for characterizing a realm to which no other access is possible. Huxley’s willingness to embrace language’s semantic mobility in the service of information and terminology yet to come grows especially clear as he elaborates upon his hypothesis that animals are automata.

The procedure by which Huxley collates existing evidence in support of his claim is as follows. He must first acknowledge the epistemological limit against which his argument is faced: “It must be premised, that it is wholly impossible absolutely to prove the presence or absence of consciousness in anything but one’s own brain, though, by analogy, we are justified in assuming its existence in other men” (565). In an attempt to surmount this difficulty, Huxley combines the reported experience of a paralyzed man,

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120 John Stuart Mill is credited with devising this “analogical” solution to the problem of other minds. He does so using an automaton analogy:

Experience, therefore, obliges me to conclude that there must be an intermediate link [between bodies and behavior]; which must either be the same in others as in myself, or a different one: I must either believe them to be alive, or to be automatons: and by believing them to be alive, that is, by supposing the link to be of the same nature as in the case of which I have experience, and which is in all other respects similar, I bring other human beings, as phenomena, under the same generalizations which I know by experience to be the true theory of my own existence. And in doing so I conform to the legitimate rules of experimental enquiry. (“Hamilton” 191)
for whom “the part of the central nervous system which lies below the injury is cut off from consciousness,” with the medical knowledge that pressure or injury “upon the anterior division of the brain” is responsible for the elimination of consciousness. Huxley does so in order to posit that consciousness is based in that anterior division (FR 565).

Next, Huxley asserts the existence of a comparative relationship between “what is true for man” and “what is true for other vertebrated animals” (566). This permits him to turn to the classic physiological experiments involving decorticated frogs performed earlier in the century to describe what happens when the anterior portion of the frog’s brain—the part which, by analogy with the human example, houses vertebrate consciousness—is removed, thereby eradicating the frog’s faculty of consciousness. The frog, essentially, is able to function in all respects, despite demonstrating no obvious sensory awareness of its surroundings. For Huxley, this is proof that “in this case, the frog is not acting from purpose, has no consciousness, and is a mere automatic machine” (567). Frog consciousness is superfluous to the mechanical operations of the frog body, as far as science can tell, and Huxley can conclude that the “habits of a frog, leading its natural life, involve such simple adaptations to surrounding conditions, that the machinery which is competent to do so much, automatically, might well do all” (568). In this way, the hybrid evidence provided by the analogical patchwork of information about man and frog seems to yield a plausible hypothesis about the mechanical operation of mind.

After using the paralyzed man to establish that consciousness extends only to parts of the body connected to the anterior brain, then using the frog to demonstrate that the anterior brain is unnecessary for the complete mechanical operation of a vertebrate body, Huxley calls into play a human example to suggest that what holds true for frogs is again true for humans. This anecdote involving a wounded French soldier was reported by Dr. Ernest Mesnet in L’Union Médicale in July of 1874, retold in the Journal des

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121 Huxley cites Göltz’s 1869 article “Beiträge zur Lehre von den Functionen der Nervencentren des Frosches” as the source for his frog results; he claims to have “repeated Göltz’s experiments, and obtained the same results” (FR 568n1).

122 Experimental physiology in the nineteenth century, particularly in the early part of that century, is awash in “decrerbrated,” “decrorticated,” or otherwise headless animals. Greenwood notes that Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotine began to doubt the humane character of the execution device that took his name after “stories surfaced about the maintenance of conscious mentality after decapitation, including the supposed look of indignation on the face of Charlotte Corday’s decapitated head after her executioner slapped her cheek” (282n15).
Débats on August 7, and brought to Huxley’s attention mere days before the occasion of his BAAS speech. In the 1870 Battle of Bazeilles, the unfortunate soldier in question was injured by “a ball which fractured his left parietal bone” (568). “Soldier F.,” as he is called, is left with two “states” of existence. In the first, he is healthy and functional: “he is intelligent and kindly, and performs, satisfactorily, the duties of a hospital attendant” (569). In the second, he operates seemingly like a “somnambulist,” able to maneuver through spaces with which he is familiar but unable to visually manage new spaces or circumstances. He follows through on routines like walking, smoking, drinking, and going to bed, but “pins may be run into his body, or strong electric shocks sent through it, without causing the least indication of pain” (569). He drinks vinegar or quinine as easily as water and seems unmoved by light or sound. He is, in other words, able to perform routine or habitual actions without impedence but is unresponsive to sensory input from the world around him, with the exception of his sense of touch. As his physician, Dr. Mesnet, claims, “it is by means of the nerves of touch, almost exclusively, that his organism is brought into relation with the external world” (569). In a sense, the soldier can be seen as a literalization of the operation of the automaton figure: just as the automaton references both a machine that seems animate and a human that behaves mechanically, the soldier oscillates between two states that prove resistant to authoritative constraint.

The soldier, just like the frog, seems to have sensory access to the world only through the most direct of the senses. As Huxley explains, the same sense of touch that operates in the soldier’s normal state is “that by which external influences determine the movements of the body, in the abnormal state. But does the state of consciousness, which we term a tactile sensation, accompany the operation of this nervous apparatus in the abnormal state? or is consciousness utterly absent, the man being reduced to a mere mechanism?” (570). An answer to this question is sought in the soldier’s specific ability to reproduce the action of “skirmishing” if prompted:

Now, in this case, the question arises whether the series of actions constituting this singular pantomime was accompanied by the ordinary states of consciousness, the appropriate train of ideas, or not? Did the man dream that he was skirmishing? or was he in the condition of one of Vaucanson’s automata—a
mechanism worked by molecular changes in his nervous system? The analogy of the frog shows that the latter assumption is perfectly justifiable. (570)

The eighteenth-century machines built by Vaucanson stand alongside the frog in joint analogical opposition to the possibility of the man’s “ordinary” state of consciousness. If understood to be taking place in the absence of consciousness, the soldier’s ability to skirmish proves that memory has some physical basis or somatic grounding that allows the body to repeat what it knows without the involvement of volition or will. Huxley details a number of other experiments performed upon the soldier, including several that emphasize the mechanical quality of the man’s ability to write and that form an early account of automatic writing. Ultimately, the impossibility of knowing another’s mind reappears as a limit upon Huxley’s investigation, and Huxley finds himself unable to state definitely that Soldier F. is operating entirely without consciousness. However, Mesnet’s experiments are equally unable to prove the presence of consciousness in the soldier, so Huxley concludes that “the case of the frog goes a long way to justify the assumption that, in the abnormal state, the man is a mere machine” (573).

When mediated by the human-frog rhetorical assemblage, the case of the soldier offers a means of identifying just how much the human body can accomplish in the purported absence of consciousness. For Huxley, Soldier F.’s tale stands as a final vindication of Descartes’s view of animals as automata: “And would Descartes not have been justified in asking why we need deny that animals are machines, when men in a state of unconsciousness perform, mechanically, actions as complicated and as rational-seeming as those of any animals?” (FR 573). As we have seen, however, Huxley disavows Descartes’s claim that animals are unconscious in favour of emphasizing the philosopher’s sense of animals as automata. Huxley’s next move is to extrapolate the evidence obtained in pathological cases such as the soldier’s in order to construct an argument about the condition of consciousness in a normal state of physiological affairs: “It may be assumed, then, that molecular changes in the brain are the causes of all the

123 Although the mania surrounding “automatic writing” is closely associated with the investigations of Frederick W. H. Myers and the Society for Psychical Research in the 1880s, Gregory Brophy has convincingly advocated for thinking about automatic writing as the key concept that anchored a heterogeneous assemblage of “automatic technologies of inscription” in the scriptural economy of the late nineteenth century. See his “Graphomania” for an elaboration of this argument.

124 In this, Huxley follows in the footsteps of Julien Offray de La Mettrie, who had proposed a similar idea a century earlier in L’homme machine (1748).
states of consciousness of brutes. Is there any evidence that these states of consciousness may, conversely, cause those molecular changes which give rise to muscular motion? I see no such evidence” (575). The consciousness of brutes, as Huxley is so careful to specify, is therefore a collateral product of their physical operation, just as the sound of the steam-whistle is a collateral product of the operation of a steam engine. In other words, Huxley disavows the claim that conscious thought has any influence upon the actions of the material body.

Of course, Huxley is far from being the first writer to put forth a mechanistic account of the relationship between consciousness and the body, nor is he the first to do so using an analogy or metaphor. The idea of animal animation being similar to clockwork was given a well-known treatment by Thomas Aquinas, amongst others. In 1805, Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis described thought as a secretion of the brain. In the decade before Huxley’s “On the Hypothesis” appeared, Shadworth Hodgeson described consciousness both in terms of melody and as foam on the crest of a wave (Caston 311-12 n4). Earlier in 1874, Douglas Spalding had anticipated Huxley’s steam-whistle analogy by drawing a parallel between those who believe that volition guides physical action and a hypothetical “superficial observer” who, “ignorant of the construction of the steam-engine, might have for a belief that the movements of a locomotive take their rise in noise and are guided by smoke” (1462). After Huxley, Carpenter describes conscious automaton theory as placing people in “the position of a man who is floating downstream in a boat without oars, towards a dangerous cataract, and can only be rescued by the interposition of some Deus ex machina” (“Part II” 952). William James summarizes Huxley’s theory as suggesting that “feeling is a mere collateral product of our nervous processes, unable to react upon them any more than a shadow reacts on the steps of the traveller whom it accompanies” (1). These creative and figurative expressions all attempt to elucidate a process or relationship that remains opaque, yet none attracted the opprobrium that attached to Huxley’s emblematic use of the automaton figure. As the next section will demonstrate, the automaton’s multiple registers of meaning, along with

125 For Greenwood, the articulation of this idea in Nature is “a clearer statement of his empirical epiphenomenalism” than the one that appears in The Fortnightly Review because it specifies the causal impotence of consciousness only with respect to the “motions of the muscles of the body” (289).
126 Dennett’s debt to William James’s thinking on this score is considerable.
its cultural potency, formed the basis of a number of heated protests against Huxley’s use of the figure in his physiological hypothesis about the nature of human consciousness.

**Problems of Definition**

In his 2010 article on Huxley’s epiphenomenalism, John Greenwood makes a passing comment on the aptness, or lack thereof, of Huxley’s famous term: “Given Huxley’s own treatment of mentality, his characterization of animals and humans as ‘conscious automata’ was not well chosen” (276). What is perhaps most intriguing about this claim is that Greenwood is not the first Huxley commentator to make it. In fact, Victorian responses to conscious automaton theory regularly staked their argumentative territory on the very question of what the word “automaton” really meant. Thomas Laycock, for example, complains that the word “automaton, and its derivatives—automatic, automatism” are “used ambiguously in both cerebral physiology and mental philosophy” (491). Alexander Main is less diplomatic: “In almost every physiological work I have yet read, the word automaton has been found to be employed in a very loose and self-contradictory sense” (431). And for J. H. Bridges, “automaton” was “perhaps the most ill-chosen word that could have been found in the language” to describe the subject and nature of Huxley’s claim (104).

The “ambiguous,” “self-contradictory” and volatile nature of the automaton figure has provided fertile ground for interpreting representations of the mechanical human in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *The Coming Race*, and *Erewhon*. In the putatively objective work of scientific writing in response to Huxley’s hypothesis, however, the automaton’s immense symbolic capacity proves a liability. As a concept long associated with mechanistic debates, the automaton might have appeared in some way ancient, even fossilized. The association between the automaton and the travails of industry, or between the automaton and extrapolated futures in Babbage’s and Cyples’s writing, would have aligned the figure with realm of political economy. Furthermore, the automaton describes an artifact made by the human hand, which wrests any analogical discussion of human cognition, will, or consciousness out of the natural realm and into an ambiguous liminal space somewhere between the natural world and the world of human creation. By reason of this referential ambiguity, the automaton also focalizes a resistance to the use of
metaphor or analogy in scientific communication that became clear in responses to Huxley’s article.

A critic whose use of the automaton figure demonstrates why such resistance might have emerged against Huxley’s argument is W. K. Clifford. Clifford’s reaction to the conscious automaton model comes a mere month after Huxley’s *Fortnightly Review* article, yet it addresses what had already become an explosion of spirited replies to Huxley’s claims. Due to Clifford’s reputation as a respected mathematician, his “Body and Mind” article was taken seriously as a high-profile response in support of Huxley’s position; William James, for one, mentions this article as among a handful that defined the contours of the entire debate. As we shall see, however, the contortions and non-intuitive logic that make up Clifford’s argument mean that his article constitutes a somewhat double-edged support for Huxley.

Clifford’s physio-philosophical commitment is a dualist one, in the sense that he considers the body to be a machine and the mind to be “a stream of feelings which runs parallel to and simultaneous with a certain part of the action of the body” (729).127 Clifford’s resulting definition of the word “automaton” begins on an uncontroversial note. In the midst of describing the body as a “physical machine,” he defines the automaton in terms that set up an analogy between it and the human body: “An automaton is a thing which goes by itself when it is wound up, and we go by ourselves when we have had food” (729). However, Clifford then attempts to claim that the automaton’s needing to be “wound up” does not result from the influence of some outside motivating force. Instead, Clifford insists that the automaton analogy underscores the fact that human beings are, in some way, autonomous, and do not require the application of an external motivating force for their animation: “The distinction between an automaton and a puppet is, that the one goes by itself when it is wound up and the other requires to be pushed or pulled by wires or strings. We do not want any stimulus from without, but we go by ourselves when we have our food, and therefore so far as that distinction goes we are automata” (729). Even taking into consideration the semantic pliability of the automaton, this is a difficult premise to take seriously, given its somewhat contrarian

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127 This tradition of psycho-physical parallelism is most often associated with Leibniz.
claim that needing to be “wound up” does not constitute a need for “stimulus from without.”

Clifford’s conceptual acrobatics seem to be in the service of reconciling his uncompromisingly dualist account of the human with the idea of free will: “The freedom of the will, according to Kant, is that property which enables us to originate events independently of foreign determining causes; which, it seems to me, amounts to saying precisely that we are automata, that is, that we go by ourselves and do not want anybody to push or pull us” (729). Despite the fact that Clifford has admitted food to be an outside source of motivational energy, this idea of freedom suggests that merely physical motivation has no impact or influence on the operation of the mind. Clifford’s separation of mind and body offers a useful clarification of the stakes of his argument here, in that it allows for physical mechanism and freedom of the will to co-exist as disconnected entities: if we limit the discussion to “bodily facts,” claims Clifford, “we must describe ourselves as automata” (729). If, however, the discussion extends to mental facts such as consciousness, he contends that another model obtains.128

One reason for Clifford’s heroics in constructing this unique definition of the automaton becomes apparent when he anticipates the kind of protest his argument will engender:

The objection which many people feel to this doctrine is derived, I think, from the conception of such automata as are made by man. In that case there is somebody outside the automaton who has constructed it in a certain definite way, with definite intentions, and has meant it to go in that way; and the whole action of the automaton is determined by such person outside. (729).

In this statement, Clifford attempts to separate the material automaton from the register in which Huxley’s description of the animal body is supposed to be happening. He also works to distinguish fictional or textual automata from his serious scientific discussion by disavowing any connection of the conscious automaton debate to “that horrible machine,” Frankenstein’s monster: “For, as a matter of fact, we were not made by any Frankenstein, but we made ourselves” (729). Clifford’s resistance to the history of automata and to the

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128 As John Reed notes, “Clifford wanted both worlds—the absoluteness of science, stripped of supernaturalism, and the force of human will contributing to the formation of mankind’s own destiny” (117-18).
automaton in the literary imagination in his gloss on Huxley’s argument is remarkable for its tacit admission of the cultural potency of the automaton and for its muscular effort to escape the vagaries of figurative reference. The issue of who “makes” humans, or of what automata are not “made by man,” remains unclarified in Clifford’s article, as does the question of what an automaton that is not an automaton might be.

In a two-part article that appeared in *The Contemporary Review* in 1875, William B. Carpenter responds to Huxley’s mechanistic sally and Clifford’s energetic embrace of it with a declaration of his own pre-eminent place in Victorian science. Carpenter writes: “From the confidence with which what are asserted to be the inevitable conclusions of Physiological science are now advanced in proof of the Determinist hypothesis, it might be supposed that some new facts of peculiar importance had been discovered, or some more cogent deductions drawn from the facts previously known” (“Part I” 397). Not so, chides Carpenter, who promptly reminds readers that the conscious automaton debate reworks ground that he first tilled: “I find nothing in the results of more recent researches to shake my early formed conviction of the existence of a fundamental distinction . . . between the rational actions of sentient beings guided by experience, and the automatic movements of creatures whose whole life is obviously but the working of a mechanism” (397). This denunciation of the Conscious Automaton debate is significant for its claim that no new factual evidence anchored Huxley’s hypothesis; Carpenter’s criticism admits alternate explanations for the fury of the debate.

By this point in the 1870s, Carpenter had long theorized the existence of unconscious and reflexive capacities in humans, grouping these processes under the heading of what he called “unconscious cerebration.” Carpenter’s interest in the operation of will in these various processes led to his describing people without wills as being like puppets:

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129 Never one to pass up a chance to stake his argumentative ground, Carpenter was quick to make this same point immediately after Huxley’s speech at the BAAS. As reported by *The Northern Whig*, Carpenter “said that the subject of the admirable lecture Professor Huxley had just delivered was one which had occupied his [own] attention during the whole of his scientific life. He had had occasion to go over very much the same ground as Professor Huxley and he had arrived at very nearly the same conclusions” (“Professor Huxley’s Lecture”).

130 As if to drive home his point, Carpenter cites in a footnote on this page his 1837 article called “On the Voluntary and Instinctive Actions of Living Beings.”
It is, in fact, the virtue of the Will, that we are not mere thinking automata, mere puppets to be pulled by suggesting-strings, capable of being played-upon by everyone who shall have made himself master of our springs of action. It may be freely admitted that such thinking automata do exist: for there are individuals whose Will has never been called into due exercise, and who gradually or almost entirely lose the power of exerting it, becoming the mere creatures of habit and impulse; and there are others in whom . . . such Automatic states are of occasional occurrence, whilst in others, again, they may be artificially induced. (*Principles* 554-55)

In the course of reiterating this position in response to Huxley, Carpenter takes a fascinatingly possessive stance with respect to the automaton. For Carpenter, the “distinct centre” of human consciousness is the Ego, which generally exerts control over the material body. “And if,” Carpenter explains, “I assert on the basis of everyday experience, that my conscious Ego can direct my automaton to execute this movement, it is surely no answer to say that because my automaton was competent to do it for itself, therefore my conscious Ego really had nothing to do with it” (“Part I” 413). Here, “my automaton” falls under the jurisdiction of the Ego in the same way that the automaton debate should properly fall under the jurisdiction of Carpenter’s expertise and long experience in the field; Carpenter’s, after all, is the original automaton metaphor.

Carpenter insists on maintaining some role for individual agency in the operation of the human. While he allows that the body might be mechanical in operation, he works to recuperate the role that the Ego plays in directing that machine: “the body is to be considered rather as the instrument of communication between the Ego and what is external to it, than as a self-acting machine, of whose movements our mental states are mere ‘symbols in consciousness’” (“Part II” 943). The alternative, Carpenter posits, is a world filled with individuals working without any kind of self-direction, a creeping “aggregate of automata”:

The welfare of that aggregate of automata which we call society, may require that every individual automaton shall be prevented from doing what is injurious to it; and punishment for offences actually committed may be reasonably inflicted as a deterrent from the repetition of such offences by the individual or by others. . . .
And all our aim will be, to bring the mechanism of each individual automaton, and the whole social machine, into the smooth and harmonious action which we witness in a hive of bees, in which each individual seems impelled to do that, and that only, which contributes to the well-being of the community at large. (“Part II” 957)

For Carpenter, such a world is not merely untenable; it also renders inexplicable the evolution of human social, cultural, and moral institutions. In attempting to reclaim his automaton from Huxley’s argumentative aegis, Carpenter thus amplifies the metaphor from the level of individual to the level of social organization, and he allows the divide between organic and mechanical imagery to be breached in the name of demonstrating Huxley’s rhetorical shortcomings.

Not even Carpenter’s tempered, qualified use of the automaton concept escaped opprobrium, however. In Alexander Main’s 1876 diatribe against the contradictory deployments of the word “automaton” in the conscious automaton debate, Main identifies the primary source of his concern: at times, the word “automaton” “is used as the exact equivalent of the term machine (in its ordinary and popular signification), at others, as equivalent to a machine plus consciousness” (431). Main then singles out Carpenter, in particular, as a perpetrator of this insult: “In his well-known work Mental Physiology, for example, Dr. Carpenter employs the word now in the one sense now in the other. . . . An automaton must be either a machine devoid of consciousness, or it must be a body whose actions are determined by feeling: it cannot be both” (431). Main’s protest against this incoherent use of the automaton hinges upon the intellectual deficiencies that are the inevitable outcome of improper or ambiguous language use: “The inconsistencies into which physiologists and psychologists, who have equally hazy ideas on this subject, are led by this contradictory use of the words automaton and automatic are many and glaring” (432). Main ultimately offers a challenge to Carpenter that emphasizes this problem of language-based uncertainty:

And if Dr. Carpenter is as sure of the soundness of his automatic doctrine as the prominence he gives it in this volume demands that he should be, why does he . . . use so frequently, all through his work, the words ‘as it were,’ when speaking of
apparently mechanical or automatic movements in animals? Full assurance does not deal in such doubtful phraseology. (433)

Main is confident that all of Nature’s workings will eventually be shown to have both subjective and objective aspects, which will dispense with the entire issue of using mechanical language to describe the physical world: “But, in the meantime, without taking this highest ground of all, Philosophy may safely challenge physiology and physiological psychology even to state the automatic theory fully in terms which do not involve a contradiction” (433-34).

Also in 1876, Thomas Laycock dissects the definition of the automaton in an even more specific way and identifies the tension between literal and metaphorical or figurative uses of the term in many of the scientific responses to the conscious automaton debate. After complaining, like Main, about the ambiguous use of the word “automaton” in physiological and philosophical writing, Laycock gestures to the original Greek meaning of the word as “acting of one’s will, of one’s self.” Laycock then points out that the term thus “included the notion of a living mechanism having a self-determining power or capability” (491). This aspect of the definition was later applied “to name a mechanism which is self-acting in the same sense as living things, and more especially as a man is, that is to say, from some hidden apparatus and source of energy such that adaptations of the motions to ends resulted” (491). This latter definitional move, according to Laycock, has resulted in a situation where the term “has departed wholly from its primary sense” (491). So dependant upon language is the conscious automaton debate that Laycock attempts to stabilize the terms of the discussion by appealing to a lexical history that predates even Descartes. The physician, momentarily, becomes an etymologist.

Just as Main does, Laycock selects Carpenter’s writing as a particular target for his protest against this inaccurate use of language:

Looking now to the context for the meanings which Dr. Carpenter attaches to the word automaton, and to its derivatives, I find they are two which are widely distinct and different in a scientific sense. By one meaning he denotes a mere mechanical apparatus made to resemble a living thing, but wholly devoid of life and consciousness; by another he indicates the structure of the brain, considered
as a mechanism endowed both with life and consciousness, as sensation and thought, and brought into activity by energies appropriate to it, yet not guided by reason, judgment, or “the will.” (493)

If the will be withdrawn for any reason, according to Laycock’s account of Carpenter’s theory, “the individual becomes an automaton—conscious, it is true, but with no power to regulate his thoughts and conduct” (493). It is at this use of the automaton that Laycock aims his linguistic remonstration. “Here a metaphor is put for a fact of observation,” he complains by way of protesting the collapse between figurative and literal levels of reference. As with Main, Laycock’s efforts to maintain clear lines of semantic demarcation with respect to the automaton figure refract a concerted effort to defend the boundary that separates the mechanical and the human. By way of an alternative, Laycock proposes his own definition of the automaton:

According to my views, every living organism is an automaton in the primary meaning of the word, just because it is living, inasmuch as it is constructed not only so that it shall be able to adapt itself to an external world, but also that the multifarious internal mechanism, whether of the brains or elsewhere, shall be in constant adaptation to each other. What, then, Dr. Carpenter attributes to an energy distinct from the mechanism, I attribute to a mechanism constituted by an energy, and having the express function of inhibiting, or otherwise regulating, acts that are favourable or contrary to the general ends attained by the adaptations of the organism; which are the conservation and well-being of the organism and the continuance of the species of organised beings. (494-95)

Laycock softens the teleological bent of this definition by claiming that if life is to be understood as “a series of adaptations,” then “it follows logically that there is at least an end attained by the working of the mechanism, although there may be no end purposed by it” (495). For Laycock, that people have “knowledge of the ends to be attained” is something fundamentally human, and so his automaton constitutes a reclamation of the efficacy of consciousness in the face of an ambiguous mechanical language. In this way,

131 It is also important to note that the overarching purpose of Laycock’s article is to challenge the commonly held belief that Carpenter is the author of the concept of “unconscious cerebration” and to reassert Laycock’s own role in developing the concept. The rhetoric of possession continues to obtain in this reiteration of Carpenter’s challenge to Huxley’s authority on the subject.
Huxley’s effort to use analogy and metaphor in place of the unknowable operation of mind reveals as much about conceptions of language among scientific writers of the day as it does about theories of consciousness.

**The Meaning of Metaphor**

“Orthodoxy starts at the words,” according to J. H. Bridges’s 1877 account of how ideas and terms travel between disciplines. Leaving “orthodoxy apart,” however, when the word “automaton” is used in the conscious automaton debate, Bridges notes that “the common sense of men suspects either a gigantic error in fact, or else a strange diversion of words from their common meaning” (103). Similarly, the reliance upon analogy in scientific writing came under general fire in the wake of Huxley’s “On the Hypothesis That Animals Are Automata.” An anonymous response to the conscious automaton debate that appeared in *The Spectator* in 1874 calls attention to a kind of intellectual hubris at play in the sorts of figurative leaps made by various participants in the debate:

Nothing seems to us more astonishing than what we may call the unbounded credulity with which physicists who have discovered a law of phenomena in one sphere, at once push it on into new spheres in mere reliance on analogy, even though in those new spheres it comes into the most absolute collision with assumptions which the very persons who reject them habitually and inevitably embody in all their forms of speech, and even in all their thoughts in every hour of their conscious lives. (“Automaton Superstition” 1458)

Among certain scientists and scientific writers, however, there did exist a more positive sense in which figurative language might be understood. For Herbert Spencer, metaphors used in the exploration of fact and knowledge are “more than metaphors in the ordinary sense. They are devices of speech hit upon to suggest a truth at first dimly perceived, but which grows clearer the more carefully the evidence is examined” (qtd. in Cairnes 64n2). In 1887, W. S. Lilly offers the following take on Huxley’s use of materialist terminology: “Some delicacy of discrimination, not commonly found in the average reader of to-day, is required in order to realise that Professor Huxley’s materialistic language is really meant to be not more than metaphorical; that it implies only working hypotheses, which need
not in the least be truths of fact” (279). With this statement, Lilly acknowledges a model of language use that accords with Huxley’s pragmatic approach.

In an important sense, the automaton serves in responses to Huxley as a synecdochal substitute for his argument, and so these somewhat pedantic exercises in definition represent efforts to challenge the coherence and rigor of that argument. In another sense, however, the flexibility of the automaton figure allowed writers to sidestep Huxley’s argument and to use the debate as a platform for their own sundry aims. Clifford, as one example, turns the debate into an opportunity to forward his panpsychic agenda, aligning his definition of the automaton with the suggestion that “along with every motion of matter, whether organic or inorganic, there is some fact which corresponds to the mental fact in ourselves” (731). Laycock avails of the opportunity to air out a seemingly decades-long grievance he’d held against William Carpenter for once performing a “too superficial perusal” of Laycock’s own writing (479). By contrast, William James positioned himself as a “Common Sense” thinker in his own measured and capacious survey of the debate by avoiding the word “automaton” entirely, except when conceptually contained in the phrase “Automaton-Theory” (3).

In this way, Huxley’s effort to “do justice to Descartes” was overtaken by the semantic saturation of the word he used to make his point most forcefully. Descartes received almost no attention in the responses to Huxley’s paper. The term “automaton,” on the other hand, took on another life in the wake of the “conscious automaton” debate, as psychologists honed technical definitions of primary and secondary automatisms, eventually formulating the concept of the subconscious. In the outpouring of argument, debate and response that followed Huxley’s “On the Hypothesis,” the figure of the automaton was pressed into intellectual service as it had never been before in the Victorian age, and it was transformed over the next several decades from a figure associated with the brute technological sublimity of the early industrial landscape to an emblem of uncertainty, of the limits of knowledge, and of the unstable role played by language in articulating new ideas about the constitution of the human body. Though I will now return to fictional representations of the automaton, the non-fictional scientific arguments that coalesced around Huxley’s automaton writing remain potent elements of what the automaton symbolized as the nineteenth century drew to a close.
Chapter Four

“Keep Me at It Like a Steam Engine”: Mechanical Subjectivity in George Gissing’s *New Grub Street*

George Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, published in 1891, relates the fortunes of several writers working in London in the early 1880s. These writers include Jasper Milvain, the novel’s opportunistic protagonist, bent on becoming a well-known man of letters; Edwin Reardon, a struggling depressive who labours to write a second novel in the shadow cast by the oppressively minor success of his first; Ralph Whelpdale, who strikes journalistic gold by launching a magazine on the promise that none of its articles will exceed two inches of column space (with each inch broken into “at least two paragraphs”); and Harold Biffin, whose dedication to the ideals of literary realism drives his ill-fated production of an uncompromising tome called *Mr. Bailey, Grocer* (459, 211).

*New Grub Street* also pays strong narrative attention to a techno-imaginary register, which is to say that in the novel, Gissing sustains an interest in the imbrication of machines, technology, and subjectivity that has not yet been reflected in critical treatments of this work. Generally, Gissing is understood to be the authorial point at which British realism and European naturalism collide and is thus read as being a dour documentarian of urban working-class life. This reputation has been cemented by Fredric Jameson’s extended treatment of *ressentiment* as the driving function of the “alienated intellectual” figures that populate Gissing’s work (195). As a political and social realist interested in critiquing the abstractions that structure the social world of late-Victorian Britain, Gissing’s writing seems to stand at an aesthetic remove from those “lesser” Victorian genres, such as utopian fiction, adventure fiction, and early science fiction, in which technology is understood to play a more obviously thematic role.

I would like to ground my exploration of the under-appreciated techno-imaginary register in *New Grub Street* in a passage of the novel that is focalized through the character of Marian Yule. Marian is one of only two female writers depicted in *New Grub Street*, the other being Jasper’s sister, Dora, who gets her start writing children’s books (88). Since the age of twelve, Marian has worked as an amanuensis for her father, Alfred Yule, an embittered, impoverished representative of an older literary order that once held
him in some esteem. Marian spends long hours in the British Library’s Reading-room, researching and drafting the articles that her father then sells as his own to the journals and magazines of the day. It is in the Reading-room, in a moment of feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of printed work that surrounds her, that Marian lapses into the following mental diatribe:

Oh, to go forth and labour with one’s hands, to do any poorest, commonest work of which the world had truly need! It was ignoble to sit here and support the paltry pretense of intellectual dignity. A few days ago her startled eye had caught an advertisement in the newspaper, headed ‘Literary Machine’: had it then been invented at last, some automaton to supply the place of such poor creatures as herself to turn out books and articles? Alas! the machine was only one for holding volumes conveniently, that the work of literary manufacture might be physically lightened. But surely before long some Edison would make the true automaton; the problem must be comparatively such a simple one. Only to throw in a given number of old books, and have them reduced, blended, modernised into a single one for to-day’s consumption. (107)

This imagined automaton resonates in compelling ways with the conflicting commercial and aesthetic issues that concern Marian. The passage establishes a dichotomy between the human and the machine that aligns the nobility of human affect, aspiration, and creativity in opposition to the mindless, reductive, and derivative automaton, a figure which is premised here upon the logic of commercial manufacture and cultural commodification. The suggestion that writing might have fallen under the purview of the massive scale of industrial production that had come to define progress in the nineteenth century amounts to an assault on the constitutively human faculty of imaginative expression. In this way, Marian’s automaton can be read as indexing a hollowed-out antithesis to the unique, autonomous human author.

However, the conceptual positioning of the automaton here is also more ambiguous than this neat division might suggest. The automaton is something vaguely positive for Marian, in the sense that she’s disappointed when the figure proves to be a fiction. As a fantasy figure, after all, the automaton is an expression of her own creative, speculative imagination. Marian also performs an interesting inversion of cultural value
in this passage, wherein technological invention—linked to the singular brilliance of Thomas Edison—is weighed as being more significant than is the anonymous, manifold wastage of literary production. Along with serving as commentary on the appetite, taste, and consumption habits of the reading public, then, the passage also identifies a general sense in which the technological realm is where useful, innovative creativity resides.

Critics who draw attention to this passage usually do so by making reference to the various writing technologies that were ascendant in the last few decades of the nineteenth century and that were responsible for the enormous growth in material book and literary culture during this time. Robert Selig uses the scene to argue that in Gissing’s modern version of Grub Street, “[t]he human author, who still supplied to publishers their basic raw material, the written word, was changed, in effect, from a craftsman among craftsmen to an isolated anomaly among industrial employees” (191). More recently, Martin Danahay has described Marian’s misinterpretation of the advertisement for a “Literary Machine” as an “odd fantasy,” and claims that “Gissing’s use of ‘manufacture’ and ‘automaton’ here betray the spectral presence of technology turning the handicraft of writing into a type of industrial production” (146). Certainly, technologies ranging from the steam printing press to the typewriter had a profound material and conceptual impact on the commercial market for fictional and journalistic writing towards the end of the century, and this shift away from a more humanistic model of the writing enterprise comprises a key element in Gissing’s acidic critique of just how crudely production-oriented the literary world of the later Victorian period had become. I would like to complicate these readings on two points.

First, the process of turning writing into a type of industrial production had begun long before the last decade of the nineteenth century. Deidre Lynch has described how the alarm generated by “printing presses in overdrive” in the eighteenth century influenced literary approaches to the concept of character (24). In fact, the satirical eighteenth-century texts written about the original Grub Street that Gissing references in his New Grub Street take the technological commodification of literature as a major theme: Alexander Pope’s The Dunciad (1728) and Swift’s A Tale of a Tub (1704), to offer but two examples, self-reflexively represent themselves as degraded and error-
ridden as part of their depiction of a rushed commercialized authorship abetted by the proliferation of printing technology.¹³²

Second, when read in the context of *New Grub Street*’s narration of Marian Yule’s life, this passage demonstrates a specificity that relates less to the wider cultural resonances of industrialized writing production than it does to the constrained nature of her individuated subjectivity. For Marian, the “Literary Machine” advertised in the newspaper is at once a literalization of her circumscribed life and the imaginative solution to it. She is, after all, already in the position of being machine-like: the automaton that seems so tantalizingly plausible to her represents a reprieve from the meaningless and unending labour that defines her experience of the world. Her investment in this conception of mechanical existence is therefore an intensely personal one, and so the figurative work being done by the automaton in this scene cannot be fully exhausted by taking into account only the generic industrial resonances of the human machine. Indeed, my purpose in paying attention to a figure that seems otherwise to be a merely incidental element of Gissing’s text is to claim that the automaton is emblematic of the kind of instrumentalized, mechanical, *individual* subjectivity that so troubles the novel as a whole.

Gissing’s novel, I would like to argue, establishes an initial opposition between the figure of the automaton and the self-reflexive, self-motivating liberal character that stands as the ideal subjective type of the later Victorian era. As the narrative of *New Grub Street* unfolds, however, the distinction between the automaton and the liberal character is gradually eroded, resulting in a critique that reveals the modern liberal subject to be founded on the same instrumentalizing logic as is the automaton. To show how the automaton thus stands as a representative of modern subjecthood in *New Grub Street*, I will first give a brief history of the emergence of liberal character as the idealized subjectivity of the later nineteenth century. This history will demonstrate how the instrumentality of the automaton and the putative humanity of the liberal subject were generally, if sometimes ambiguously, imagined as polarized opposites along a conceptual

¹³² As Alex Wetmore explains, the “printerly puns, typographical manipulations, and reference to the unchecked proliferation of authors and texts in Augustan satire play on fears that the commercial expansion of print technology is contributing to the transformation of literature from a liberal pursuit to a morally debased mechanical trade” (43).
spectrum of subjectivity. Next, I will draw attention to the techno-imaginary register of New Grub Street to trace the manner by which a particularly instrumental mode of interaction is established as the basis upon which human relationships are structured in the novel. Finally, I will focus on the fate of Marian Yule, a character to whom relatively little sustained attention has been paid by critics of the novel, to show the key role that her narrative arc plays in New Grub Street’s eventual erasure of the distinction between the liberal subject and the automaton. This chapter thus takes up the issue of individual motivation that was scrutinized in the depiction of mechanical agency in Lady Audley’s Secret, while turning the species-based interrogations of techno-human imbrication in The Coming Race, Erewhon, and Huxley’s automaton debate to specifically political account.

The Liberal Subject in Victorian Britain

The origins, constitution, and representation of the liberal subject have been of considerable recent interest to scholars of Victorian literature, not only because of the productive ways in which this fissured, multifaceted model of subjectivity refracts cultural investments and agendas of the era but also because the tenets of Victorian liberalism remain responsive elements in the theatre of international politics today. What David Glover has described as “the Whiggish axioms of liberal humanism”—a commitment to the freedom and flourishing of the autonomous human subject—emerged in the nineteenth century out of a complex history of political, philosophical and economic concerns over “the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual” (Glover 983; Mill, On Liberty 1). These concerns coalesced into “the triadic traditions of modest centralization, moralizing secularization, and laissez-faire political economy” that came to define the predominant

133 As Rohan McWilliam notes, “In the present time, liberalism (protean concept that it is) constitutes a vital element of interdisciplinary dialogue about the Victorians, spurred on partly by the fact that liberalism, in revised versions, has influenced both British and global politics ever since” (104). See also Hadley’s “On a Darkling Plain: Victorian Liberalism and the Fantasy of Agency” for an extended treatment of the recent “rediscovery” of Victorian ideals by the American right-wing political machine.
134 Lauren Goodlad describes the kind of localized, provisional, voluntaristic organization of people and institutions that defined British government in the nineteenth century as marking the “manifold legacy” of “an exceptional liberal heritage including the myth of pre-Norman Anglo-Saxon liberty, the civic republican tradition, Puritan dissent, Lockean individualism, laissez-faire political economy, and, in the nineteenth century, aspects of the romantic movement, including German philosophical influences” (3).
ideological approach to governance in Britain during this period (Hadley, *Living* 4). Although John Locke’s considerable influence on the conceptualization of individual freedom throughout the eighteenth century contributed to the privileging of a minimally intrusive governmental structure dedicated to the preservation of “negative” liberties, the advent of industrialism and the concomitant urbanization of Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries necessitated a more interventionist relationship between government and the lives of its individual citizens.\(^\text{135}\)

Chris Otter has catalogued the consequences of this expansion of industrial system in the Victorian era, arguing that the “scope of legitimate governmental intervention . . . slowly dilated with technological growth. Specific physical aspects of collective existence were viewed as beyond the control of the individual: they were ‘social’ and thus justifiable targets of governmental action” (“Making” 580).\(^\text{136}\) What Otter makes particularly salient in this discussion is his supposition that industrialization in Britain marked the beginning of a *technological* liberal state that evolved into its modern form “because of a demonstrable growth in large technical systems that required organization and regulation” (*Victorian* 13). The nature of this governmental expansion was not a particularly cohesive one, however, as it tended to form under conditions more reactive than determinative. Lauren Goodlad describes as a “commonplace” the understanding that “the Victorian state expanded in response to the urgent social pressures of urbanization and industrialization—its piecemeal and unsystematic development unaided by popular consensus or a consistent philosophical agenda” (Goodlad 4).\(^\text{137}\)

Despite this somewhat makeshift mode of social formation, “by the 1880s something recognizable as ‘the liberal subject’ was widespread in stabilizing urban

\(^{135}\) Though this was not an uncontested shift, by any stretch. See Samuel Smiles, for example, writing in 1859: “it is every day becoming more clearly understood, that the function of government is negative and restrictive rather than positive and active, being resolvable principally into protection—protection of life, liberty, and property” (14).

\(^{136}\) Otter explicitly notes the shift from negative to positive conceptions of liberty that attended this expansion: “What Adam Smith called ‘the inferior arts of government’, the maintenance of roads, and the provision of drains, for example, became considerably more important and vastly more expansive in the following century . . . Government’s role shifted from the minimal Smithian one of the protection of property and defense of the realm” (Otter “Making” 570).

\(^{137}\) Goodlad goes on to explain that “centralized measures such as the 1834 New Poor Law and the 1848 Public Health Act were widely disliked” (4).
communities across Britain, and recognized as such by an official ideology of liberalism at its peak” (Mandler 16). As Goodlad explains, although Victorian liberalism is “best characterized by its pervasive tensions and paradoxes,” it is also possible to identify a “remarkably durable liberal mythology” that persisted throughout the later Victorian period, one that was marked by a general responsiveness to “the overall projects of liberating individuals from illegitimate authority while simultaneously ensuring their moral and spiritual growth” (viii). Nikolas Rose describes liberal personhood as maintaining an image of the “individual, autonomous, self-possessed political subject of right, will, and agency” (1). In the opening of his examination of Victorian aesthetic agency, David Wayne Thomas invokes “the idea of self-reflecting individuality that informs liberalism’s conceptions of agency and autonomy” (xiii). Such was the emphasis on the self-sufficiency of the atomized human being, in fact, that the Victorian era came to be understood as a period of “undiluted sink-or-swim individualism” (Mandler 1).

The extent to which individual self-making was both naturalized and moralized in the mid-Victorian period was given narrative form in Samuel Smiles’s best-selling Self-Help (1859), the essential message of which might be encapsulated in a modest claim made by Sir Humphrey Davy quoted therein: “What I am I have made myself” (qtd. in Smiles 27).

The relationship between individual autonomy and property rights has been well-rehearsed in a number of intellectual spheres; the degree to which the ability to own private property either reinforces or guarantees fundamental individual freedoms has been the subject of long and continuing debate. In an article entitled “The Past is a Foreign Country,” Elaine Hadley takes a closer look at the logic of possessive individualism as it took on a particularly Victorian articulation. Hadley’s solution to the problem of abstraction that inheres in both Victorian and contemporary critical treatments of the liberal subject is to ground her analysis of the term in a close reading of the logic upon which the Victorian concept of “character” is based. Hadley anchors her argument in a passage from the third chapter of Mill’s On Liberty which discusses the

139 “Character” is co-terminous with the liberal subject, in Hadley’s estimation. As she writes in Living Liberalism, “the central category of political liberalism—the individual—in some sense folds character into its assumptions, so that political individuality itself is defined by the subject having character. A midcentury liberal individual is a man of character, and a man of character is a liberal individual” (7n11).
extent to which the notion of proprietorship underpins the notion of a full, free subject. Mill’s passage reads as follows: “A person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture—is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character” (264). Hadley’s interest in this claim is driven by the way that Mill structures the difference between having and not having character—a difference grounded in the ownership of one’s own desires and impulses:

Seemingly a philosophically neutral definition, Mill’s contribution implies that anyone who has desires and impulses has a character. Yet, neutrality seems less certain when one notes that desires and impulses are figured here as possessions. Significantly, the trope of ownership becomes most explicit in the negative formulation of the term, in reference to those who do not own desires and impulses. Character is, in this definition, the possession of desires and impulses, but its negative formulation suggests that such possession is by no means a universal or neutral state but a moral virtue of the few. (Hadley 10-11)

What is of particular interest, in the context of this chapter, is the manner in which Hadley draws out the implications of Mill’s passing reference to a steam engine by emphasizing Mill’s association of the mechanical with the non-self-possessed:

Those who do not possess these elemental desires and impulses are, like a steam engine, without possessions, and therefore lack self-possession. They are not in control of themselves and so require a pilot. There is room in this definition, then, for a slippage between merely having desires and possessing them, and it is the implicit and still powerful moral connotations of proprietorship and its associate, propriety, that measure the distance in this slippage. (11)

To be other than a self-possessed liberal subject, then, is to resemble a machine, to be lacking internal integrity and thus subject to the influence of some kind of external motivating or determining force. The liberal relationship to self is a private, contained, and proprietary one, while the mechanical relationship to self is a networked, open, and instrumental one. In this conception of selfhood, the automaton is the shadow that haunts the horizon of the liberal subject. However, Hadley’s clean division between the liberal
self and the so-called mechanical one can be seen as a reiteration of the ultimately ineffectual efforts to maintain a strict boundary between the human and the technological that characterized much of the writing against Huxley’s doctrine of human automatism in the 1870s and that was recognized and narrativized in various registers in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *The Coming Race*, and *Erewhon*.

The complications of existing in a relationship of “ownership” to something as immaterial and abstract as “character” or “self” form part of a larger theoretical focus in Hadley’s work on something that she calls “mental property.” What made up the category of “property,” things over which propriety could be conceivably be extended, evolved and changed dramatically over the course of the nineteenth century. The right to vote or declare citizenship, once based upon landed status, was gradually (and laboriously) reformed to include those whose claims to personhood were established in less material terms, and through this process the concept of “mental property” took hold. Mental property, writes Hadley, “is a form of property ‘created by education and enhanced by strategies of closure’ that emphasize ‘skilled and differentiated labour’ and ‘selection by merit’”; in essence, “mental property” comprises intellectual production or labour that can be considered as cultural capital (*Melodramatic* 190). Hadley explores the full theoretical resonances of mental property in order to demonstrate how its immaterial qualities proved especially useful to the abstracting process of liberal subjectivity:

This mental property was both like other sorts of private property, in that it accrued value and could be exchanged, and unlike it, in that it was presumed to be less burdened by the denotative and connotative baggage of landed and even commercial privilege. More generally, because of its conception as internally generated, mental property was perhaps the most perfect expression of liberal private property. It is this sort of property that individuates Victorian liberal subjects, that makes them the unique persons so favored in this nineteenth-century version of liberal ideology. (“The Past” 11-12)

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140 Hadley aligns this concept of intellectual property with the forthright person of rational character, arguing that mental property “consists of the unique possessions of the individuated intellect and provided a revised version of subjectivity that was insistently differentiated from both the free-trading, amoral, and possessive individual of market culture and the ‘shrieking,’ ‘brawling,’ and ‘hysterical’ voice of populist melodrama” (*Melodramatic* 190).
So, ownership of self and subject is what lies at the bottom of the liberal person in Victorian Britain, making mental property the ultimate measure of liberality. To be a non-owner of self is to be a machine in Mill’s conception of individual freedom, according to Hadley. However, the idea of a character-less subject behaving like a machine is not the full extent of Mill’s commentary on the subject of human flourishing and instrumentality in On Liberty. Before making his specific claim about property, Mill first writes that “[a]mong the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself” (59). Here, the conception of individual responsibility as self-generating is in full force: man as a work of man is the ultimate expression of creativity, perfection, beauty. However, this conception also introduces an instrumentalizing logic to the relationship of man to self, if self is a thing that can be built, just as an automaton is built. Man here is both the labourer and the product, in an abstract sense, certainly, but in a sense that is important to attend to in the context of understanding just what mechanical subjectivity means in this discussion. Mill’s line of reasoning continues as follows:

Supposing it were possible to get houses built, corn grown, battles fought, causes tried, and even churches erected and prayers said, by machinery—by automatons in human form—it would be a considerable loss to exchange for these automatons even the men and women who at present inhabit the more civilized parts of the world, and who assuredly are but starved specimens of what nature can and will produce. Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develope itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing. (On Liberty 59)

Again, Mill’s rationalization seems clear here: human life, even the most rudimentary, “starved” kind of human life currently in existence, is always more intrinsically valuable than a machine, no matter how impressive and sophisticated that machine might be. The distinctiveness of human life lies in its very irregularity, its unpredictability, and its freedom from external (and thus instrumental) sorts of relationships, influences, or models. However, there does exist an interesting ambiguity in Mill’s description. Just as Marian’s “startled eye” delivered to her imagination the vision of a writing machine that
might at once replace and relieve her, Mill’s imagined automaton group—capable of
doing much more than the advertised “Literary Machine” in New Grub Street—can also
be conceptualized as a replacement and relief for those whose dangerous or repetitive
work might be considered burdensome, freeing them to pursue the tendencies of their
own “inward forces.” In the very act of denying the fungibility of humans and machines,
Mill opens up the conditions of possibility for thinking otherwise. For Marian and Mill,
the opposition of person and machine results in a similarly enticing possibility that is
admitted in the very process of being denied: what if such automata existed?

The question underlying such an imaginative slippage is as follows: what space
might Mill’s “inward forces” really have for any kind of “organic” growth in a world of
large-scale industrialization, expansive systematization, and dominant, supra-individual
institutions? How might the claims and dimensions of liberal subjectivity play out in
Victorian lives, and to what extent did the incursion of the techno-social, to use Chris
Otter’s term, influence the conditions of subjective formation? In Living Liberalism, a
study of how the principles of liberalism were deployed in lived experience in Victorian
Britain, Hadley identifies just such a problem:

[P]art of the problem of mechanization lay in the possibility that institutional
forms could produce cognitive forms that were themselves mechanistic, that
neither the balloting booth nor the Fortnightly Review nor land legislation would
reproduce liberal individuals defined by their power of abstracting cognition but
instead mass-produce automatons—a concern already expressed generations
earlier by Locke. In this nightmarish result, the deliberative subject is in fact the
automatic subject, impelled not by reason and reflection but unthinking reflex
fueled externally, ‘one whose desires and impulses are not his own . . . no more
than a steam engine has a character,’ as J. S. Mill averred. This is a threat that
persistently haunts lived liberalism. (56)

It is this very “threat,” in fact, that arises in the implicit social commentary subtending
New Grub Street. In the novel, the business of writing serves as a microcosmic
imaginative laboratory in which Gissing can set in motion models to test the outcome of
various kinds of subjective impingement.
The way in which Gissing’s novel frames the “threat” of automatism that exists in the lived liberal subject is subtle and highly ironized. The abstract question of the relationship between the state and the individual is broached very early in the novel. The first line of dialogue in New Grub Street is spoken by Jasper Milvain: as the Wattleborough church clock strikes eight in the morning, Jasper announces to an unwitting breakfast audience comprised of his mother and two sisters that “[t]here’s a man being hanged in London at this moment” (5). This line does a certain amount of establishing characterological work: Jasper’s addressees are shocked and appalled at his terrible timing, at his dispassionate delivery of this singular fact, and at his immediate urge to turn the situation to egotistical ends. Of the condemned man’s seemingly ignominious position, Jasper remarks that “[t]here’s a certain advantage in reflecting that it is not oneself” (5).

However, this line also opens up a spectrum of subjective positioning that is notable for its placement at the very outset of Gissing’s novel. In response to being accused of harbouring a trait that his sister identifies as a “selfish way of looking at things,” Jasper defends his non-emotional take on the circumstance of the man’s hanging:

“Well,” returned Jasper, “seeing that the fact came into my head, what better use could I make of it? I could curse the brutality of an age that sanctioned such things; or I could grow doleful over the misery of the poor—fellow. But those emotions would be as little profitable to others as to myself. It just happened that I saw the thing in a light of consolation. Things are bad with me, but not so bad as that.” (5)

Here, Jasper demonstrates a utilitarian accounting of the use-value of certain affective responses, as well as an emphatic attention to the practical application of emotional energy in his straitened life. In so doing, Jasper identifies himself as an unsentimental, self-assured and self-directed young man who is in full control of an autonomous affective self. The critical distance with which he regards the hanged man comes to its fullest expression in his final thought on the subject, pronounced as a somewhat larger and more philosophical take on the general nature of the event: “‘A man who comes to be hanged,’ pursued Jasper, impartially, ‘has the satisfaction of knowing that he has brought
society to its last recourse. He is a man of such fatal importance that nothing will serve against him but the supreme effort of law. In a way, you know, that is success”” (6).

Jasper’s subjective constitution as a rational, distanced observer of this punitive moment is at least partially constructed by the highly mediated nature of that observation: Jasper knows about the hanging only because of an item that “happened to catch [his] eye” in the previous day’s newspaper (5). He doesn’t know the condemned man’s name, nor does he know the circumstances that led to the execution, nor does he physically witness the death; Jasper is not even in London, where the hanging is taking place. The entire event is an abstraction to him. It is immediately useful as tool for modulating his own affective state, perhaps, or as a means of enacting estrangement from his own family, but Jasper’s response is not engaged with the specific reality of the man’s execution.

Jasper’s affective autonomy and subjective distance from the anonymous man’s death serve to accentuate the inescapable subjective proximities that define the man’s final moment: the prisoner’s “fatal importance” suggests that his life has been directed by forces external to his own will or desire.141 The activation of society’s “last recourse” here implies an imbrication of the individual and the state so close, so intimate, that only a single course of action obtains. The relationship between law and the bare life of this man has been narrowed entirely to this moment, in a perfect focalization of governmental power over its citizens. In this highly circumscribed, legislatively determined death, Jasper recognizes something that he calls success, “in a way” (5).

In what “way,” exactly, might a man’s execution be counted as that man’s success? Is Jasper impressed by the administrative “importance” of the man? Envious, perhaps, of the attention and spectacle that the man has engendered? Is Jasper captivated by the man’s conspicuous presence in yesterday’s newspaper? Or is what Jasper calls “success” related to the removal of uncertainty from the man’s life, an end to the struggle between internal desire and external limitation that defines many of the lives in New Grub Street? Does the execution expose the foundational logic of interaction between a government and its citizens as being an instrumental one in some significant way?

141 “Fate” is the abstract concept activated in order to explain the terrible circumstances that eventually befall many of the novel’s main characters in New Grub Street. As we have seen in Lady Audley’s Secret, the machinations of fate were increasingly understood in secular, mechanical terms through the century.
What work, in other words, is done by juxtaposing these two men—the literary and the hanged—in this manner at the outset of Gissing’s novel? Jasper Milvain appears to claim a position of superior subjective autonomy with respect to the hanged man. He’s alive, for starters, and seemingly in control of his being in the world. And yet, his introduction of the execution as an unpleasant breakfast topic could be read as an almost programmatic response to the sound of the church bell, which triggered his memory of the day-old newspaper item, the existence of which itself represents an entire system predicated upon the careful deployment of knowledge, power, and publicity for institutional ends. Jasper’s phrasing—“There’s a man being hanged in London at this moment”—implies his automatic acceptance of the veracity and accuracy of the newspaper report, while also identifying the determining power of that report over his experience of time and space in the moment in question. He is also entirely single-minded in his pursuit of literary fame and fortune throughout the novel, determined to “succeed” in the world of *New Grub Street* at almost any cost. Does Jasper really enjoy any more freedom from the operation of technocratic discipline than does the hanged man? More interestingly, does Jasper’s irreverent take on the execution belie a self-conscious suspicion of his own apparent autonomy, or of individual autonomy in the late Victorian period in general?

Further to this opening scene, set as it is at the liberal high-water mark of 1882, *New Grub Street* brings Jasper Milvain, aspiring self-made man, in illustrative contact with John Yule, retired self-made man, in a scene which establishes a seemingly unambiguous framework for measuring the success of a life lived. John Yule is Marian’s uncle, a retired businessman who considers his success in the paper manufacturing industry to be entirely self-generated. Yule is a model citizen of the modern Victorian state—motivated, disciplined, and highly critical of the over-involved role that government increasingly played in the formation of full, functional citizens. In the following exchange, the curmudgeonly Yule responds to Jasper’s light-hearted suggestion that “the business of literature” helps to spread “civilisation”:

“Civilisation!” exclaimed John, scornfully. “What do you mean by civilisation? Do you call it civilising men to make them weak, flabby creatures, with ruined eyes and dyspeptic stomachs? Who is it that reads most of the stuff that’s poured
out daily by the ton from the printing-press? Just the men and women who ought to spend their leisure hours in open-air exercise; the people who earn their bread by sedentary pursuits, and who need to live as soon as they are free from the desk or the counter, not to moon over small print. Your Board schools, your popular press, your spread of education! Machinery for ruining the country, that’s what I call it.” (23-24)

Yule also offers up counter-examples to these nefarious modes of state intervention, alternatives that rely upon the kind of localized initiative that he believes to be far more directly beneficial to both struggling individuals and community strength, and that formed a contentious principle in the evolving nature of social liberalism:

“I have an idea of offering substantial prizes to men and women engaged in sedentary work who take an oath to abstain from all reading, and keep it for a certain number of years. There’s a good deal more need for that than for abstinence from strong liquor. If I could have had my way I would have revived prize-fighting.” (24)

A distinctively secular, muscular liberalism is in play, modeled by the personal example of a “thriving manufacturer” who established himself in the world of business through grit, determination, and a canny investment intelligence. In his retirement, Yule has fully embodied the tenets he espouses so freely. He even began to take an important part in the municipal affairs of Wattleborough. He was then a remarkably robust man, fond of out-of-door exercise; he made it one of his chief efforts to encourage the local Volunteer movement, the cricket and football clubs, public sports of every kind, showing no sympathy whatever with those persons who wished to establish free libraries, lectures, and the like. (19)

Yule is here an upstanding citizen whose moral compass matches his physical fortitude in terms of unswaying truth and rightness. However, what defines Yule’s character, and what plagues many of the characters in New Grub Street, is the same kind of single-minded pursuit as that which marks Jasper’s character, although in this case, Yule’s obsession seems linked to a kind of endless philanthropic productivity.

Yule’s slightly misanthropic tendencies confirm the vision of “energetic individualism” put forth in Smiles’ Self-Help, which argues along very similar lines:
Daily experience shows that it is energetic individualism which produces the most powerful effects upon the life and action of others, and really constitutes the best practical education. . . . This is that finishing instruction as members of society, which Schiller designated “the education of the human race,” consisting in action, conduct, self-culture, self-control,—all that tends to discipline a man truly, and fit him for the proper performance of the duties and business of life,—a kind of education not to be learnt from books, or acquired by any amount of mere literary training. . . . For all experience serves to illustrate and enforce the lesson, that a man perfects himself by work more than by reading,—that it is life rather than literature, action rather than study, and character rather than biography, which tend perpetually to renovate mankind. (14)

Yule’s position as unassailable leader of the tiny Wattleborough community is based, of course, upon his position as a wealthy and successful local magnate, a position which is predicated upon possession of property both material and mental. However, the near-obsessive productivity and engagement that Yule demonstrates could indeed be read as a suspect energetic output, especially given that he dies while engaged in a public meeting (274).

The extent to which human productivity fell into competition with that of mechanical manufacture and technological efficiency was subsumed into the liberal paradigm of the self-motivated subject, as can be seen in, for example, the publicity brochure that advertised “The Edison Electric Pen” in the late 1870s. Making a clear connection between productive business practices and the operation of civic virtue, the pamphlet includes a number of letters from pleased customers, all of whom are united in their seemingly inhuman ability to generate writing and signatures in great quantities.

142 The full name of the Pen was “The Edison Electric Pen and Duplicating Press, for the Rapid, Accurate, and Economical Production of all kinds of Writings, Drawings &c.” The Pen was patented on August 8, 1876, as an aid in the production of “Autographic Printing.” The system consisted of a stylus connected to a motor that drove a needle in and out of the tip of the stylus “with great rapidity” (“Edison” 1). The needle made a series of perforations in the paper upon which it moved, such that “writing” with the Pen produced a stencil made up of tiny punctures. The second part of the system was a small framed press (sold in two sizes) to which the Pen-made stencil was affixed. By rolling ink over the stencil onto blank paper, copies of an original piece of autographic writing could be produced at the incredible rate of “five to fifteen per minute” (“Edison” 3).
The sense in which technologically abetted productivity ran in parallel with the model of the engaged liberal citizen can be seen in the following testament from the principal of a grammar school in Dartmouth written in 1878:

My duplicate correspondence, in addition to my school work, is a very large one, as I am secretary to our cricket, choral, croquet, horticultural, and other societies, besides being Hnorary [sic] Manager to our Sailors’ Home.

I have only had your pen about a month, and on looking over the old stencils, which I always keep by me, I find I must have printed nearly eight thousand copies of various papers, lists, circulars, programmes, &c., during that time. (“Edison” 17)

The cultural association of writing and mechanism grew throughout the nineteenth century, aided by the production of automata both real and figurative. For example, a machine called the Eureka that could generate grammatically correct Greek and Latin hexameter verse was potent fodder for the raging debate about how best to educate the British children who would grow up to become British subjects (Hall 231-32). No less a cerebral figure than Karl Marx lamented his intellectual existence by claiming, in what would become a cliché of nineteenth-century authorship: “I am a machine, condemned to devour [books], and then throw them, in a changed form, on the dunghill of history” (qtd. in Krader 153). Nor was Gissing exempt from this conventional expression of authorial automatism, describing himself in a letter as being “only a machine for producing volumes” (qtd. in Liggins 93). And of course, New Grub Street was written just as the phenomenon of “automatic writing” was gaining momentum as a psychological and spiritual revelation of selfhood; in the words of Frederick W. H. Myers, the “unconscious mental action” represented in automatic writing “may actually manifest the existence of a capital and cardinal faculty of which the conscious mind of the same persons at the same time is wholly devoid” (235). The automaton in this context contains both a diachronic account of the evolving human relationship to technology and creative production, and a particularly synchronic sense of instability in terms of how the nature of human agency and freedom was understood through this period. To have generated eight thousand copies of “various papers” in a month, then, speaks to a certain dedication to the civic cause, but the question which emerges from such testaments to productivity is to what
degree the organizational dedication demonstrated by the principal with The Pen or by John Yule identifies what amounts to a monomania. The most successful liberal subject in the novel, it would seem, is in danger of seeming in thrall to a communitarian ideal that subsumes his own will. Tellingly, Yule is the possessor, until his death, of the single fortune that will change many lives lived on *New Grub Street*, though not in entirely predictable ways.

**Techno-Imaginary Instrumentalism in *New Grub Street***

Marian’s grim vision of a literary automaton that produces new writing by digesting and condensing old texts can only be considered as an “odd fantasy” if it is taken in isolation from the larger techno-imaginary register of the novel, which extends beyond this passing reference to modern technologies of writing. *New Grub Street* is an intensely modern novel, set as it is amid trams and telegraph messages, investment schemes and new property laws. To begin this unfolding of the complex link between technological instrumentality and human subjectivity in *New Grub Street*, I would like to examine an early conversation between Marian and Jasper, generally considered to be the protagonist of *New Grub Street*. In the third chapter of the novel, Jasper asks Marian if she will accompany him to watch the London express as it passes through the quiet, rural setting of their morning perambulation. Though the two characters are of only recent acquaintance, Marian proves willing, and the scene unfolds as follows:

Leaning on the parapet of the bridge, Jasper kept his eye in the westward direction, where the gleaming rails were visible for more than a mile. Suddenly he raised his finger.

“You hear?”

Marian had just caught the far-off sound of the train. She looked eagerly, and in a few moments saw it approaching. The front of the engine blackened nearer and nearer, coming on with dread force and speed. A blinding rush, and there burst against the bridge a great volley of sunlit steam. Milvain and his companion ran to the opposite parapet, but already the whole train had emerged, and in a few seconds it had disappeared round a sharp curve. The leafy branches
that grew out over the line swayed violently backwards and forwards in the perturbed air. (33)

The dark, kinetic violence of a steam-engine tearing through a scene of bucolic idyll constitutes an image that recurs throughout British and American writing of the nineteenth century. In his landmark work of cultural analysis, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Leo Marx describes the manner in which the pastoral mode, with its carefully circumscribed spaces of civilization, cultivation, and wildness, provided the framework within which the industrialization of America was made imaginatively comprehensible.

The growing tension between organically and technologically inflected ideological positions throughout the nineteenth-century was regularly represented by similar collisions between steam engines and green spaces. Indeed, Marx draws attention to a collection of instances in which the violent invasion of the steam engine into pastoral America is depicted by way of an intrusion upon the thought or inward repose of a thinking human subject: in an 1844 journal entry, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne recorded the sudden interruption of his vernal repose near Concord by the “startling shriek” of a locomotive that brought “the noisy world into our slumbering peace” (qtd. in L. Marx 13). Marx identifies similar passages in Emerson, Thoreau, Melville and several other writers that feature this antagonistic relation between a reflective human being and a machine.

This scene was not unique to American writing. The timetable of railway development (and of the growth of the industrial landscape more generally) in Britain was accelerated relative to what took place in America, but Marx’s account of the “interrupted idyll” is corroborated by critics like Herbert Sussman, for whom the steam engine came to represent an early set of concerns about the emerging technological world of the nineteenth century: “With its simultaneous sense of philosophic determinism, social change, and emotional desolation, the train becomes a complex symbol of Victorian life” (55). In the same year that Hawthorne experienced his interrupted pastoral moment, for example, Wordsworth took to sonnet-writing in order to decry the “rash assault” upon “English ground” that threatened in the plans to build the Kendal and Windermere Railway (146). Perhaps one of the best-known fictional impressions of the relationship between the natural world and the threatening incursion of the technological
sublime is the long, hyperbolic description of the demonic steam engine in Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1848), of which the following passage gives a taste:

> Through the hollow, on the height, by the heath, by the orchard, by the park, by the garden, over the canal, across the river, where the sheep are feeding, where the mill is going, where the barge is floating, where the dead are lying, where the factory is smoking, where the stream is running, where the village clusters, where the great cathedral rises, where the bleak moor lies, and the wild breeze smooths or ruffles it at its inconstant will; away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, and no trace to leave behind but dust and vapour: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death! (298)

The structural oppositions established in this imaginative collision of the natural and the mechanical have generally been understood to encompass a dense, if obvious, set of associations and meanings. “Most important,” writes Leo Marx, “is the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction. It invariably is associated with crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape” (29). Marx contrasts the “sensory attributes of the engine”—“iron, fire, steam, smoke, noise, speed”—with those of “a natural terrain”—“fecundity, beauty, serenity, an ineffable numinosity”—in order to argue that this incursion of the industrial machine into the pristine natural world stands as emblematic of the formative conflict of nineteenth-century cultural life:

> The recurrence of the “interrupted idyll” testifies to the salience of the conflict of meaning and value generated by the onset of industrial capitalism. It prefigured the emergence of what has proved to be a major cultural divide, separating those Americans who accept material progress as the primary goal of our society from those who—whatever their ideals of the fulfilled life—do not. (373-74)

Critical approaches to the train scene in *New Grub Street* have tended to reinscribe this notion of a “cultural divide” that separates an archaic, pastoral world from a modern, technological one: Robert Selig, for example, aligns the train with the “aggressively ambitious Milvain,” arguing that “the London express symbolizes the revolution in the technology of communication which, as Milvain himself notes in chapter 1, has helped to make ‘our Grub Street of to-day . . . a different place’ from ‘Sam Johnson’s Grub Street’”
Standing in contrast to the speed and power of the express train, according to Selig, is Marian’s father, Alfred, whose type is represented in this early pastoral scene by a “grizzled” and “worn-out” horse standing in a nearby field (189).

The divide that separates those who would embrace the coming technological age from those who are less enamoured of its incursion seems, upon first reading, to map neatly on to the contrasting responses of Jasper and Marian in the immediate wake of their encounter with the train:

“If I were ten years younger,” said Jasper, laughing, “I should say that was jolly! It enspirits me. It makes me feel eager to go back and plunge into the fight again.”

“Upon me it has just the opposite effect,” fell from Marian, in very low tones. (32-33)

Here, Marian appears to represent the “feminine” and “submissive” attributes which attach to the natural world in Leo Marx’s schema, and Jasper’s response is close to something that could be described as the “masculine aggressiveness” that aligns with Marx’s idea of the mechanical (29). Indeed, the whole scene involving Jasper, Marian, and the London express train would seem to follow perfectly the outlines of Marx’s emblematic “interrupted idyll” scene. Wattleborough, where both Jasper and Marian are visiting family, is set apart as being a notably non-urban and non-modern location in the novel. The specific path upon which Jasper and Marian accidentally meet is described in sylvan terms:

One recommendation of this retreat was that it lay sheltered from all winds; to Jasper a wind was objectionable. Along the bottom ran a clear, shallow stream, overhung with elder and hawthorn bushes; and close by the wooden bridge which spanned it was a great ash tree, making shadow for cows and sheep when the sun lay hot upon the open field. It was rare for anyone to come along this path, save farm labourers morning and evening. (27)

This is as generically pastoral as things will ever be in Gissing’s novel; the area represents shelter from the wind, a bounty of all that is fertile and natural, and a place defined by sun and sheep. In a moment akin to Marx’s various examples of inward-oriented focus interrupted by steam engines, Jasper and Marian are engaged in a frank
and revealing conversation about the difficult business of professional writing when the mechanical disruption takes place.

Upon closer examination, this scene becomes more complicated than Leo Marx’s model of the machine-wounded pastoral might imply. The chapter in which the encounter with the train takes place is called “Holiday”—Marian and Jasper are, in fact, vacationers to Wattleborough, and they otherwise consider themselves to be urban dwellers who belong to a different, modern world. While the two are certainly enjoying the early spring of a budding romance in this chapter, they are in the scene as outsiders, not as ensconced shepherd-figures. Marian can’t even identify the “great ash tree” that stands near the bridge upon which they meet, though a line from Tennyson belatedly comes to her aid (27-28). In this way, nature is filtered through art (or, perhaps more pointedly, through some of Mill’s “works of man”) for Marian; tellingly, she has no unmediated access to the natural world, as would befit a properly “feminine” and “submissive” representative of nature.

Furthermore, there exists in this scene a sense in which the train is an important relational element of the exchange between Jasper and Marian. Rather than interrupting an occasion of human reflection, the train is the reason for this shared reflective encounter. The two have purposefully sought out the train: Jasper knows the schedule of the express and tells the enthusiastic Marian that he wishes to wait for it for the purposes of his own “amusement.” There is an intimacy exchanged between the two by virtue of Jasper’s confessed excitement at this particular “piece of childishness” (32). Far from being a disruptive, malevolent force, then, the train acts as an affective catalyst of a sort, a punctual and dependable spectacle that precipitates a shared moment between the two witnesses. Marx’s internalized-subject-in-pastoral-repose figure, as it were, is here divided into a relational dyad, to which the train can be added as a third, triangulating element.

The train continues to act as an affective catalyst for Jasper, serving as an impetus for the revelation of more personal information about his upbringing to Marian: “It was by a train like that that I first went up to London. Not really the first time; I mean when I went to live there, seven years ago. What spirits I was in! A boy of eighteen going to live
independently in London; think of it!” (33). There exists something of a shared energy and spirit between Jasper and the train, such that after encountering the express, Jasper is left unsatisfied by the slow pace of life and living in Wattleborough, and he proves eager to return to his chosen milieu, London: “In the meanwhile he was growing restless. A fortnight always exhausted his capacity for enjoying the companionship of his mother and sisters, and this time he seemed anxious to get to the end of his holiday” (41). So anxious is Jasper to reach the end of his break from the city, it would seem, that he cuts that break short, leaving Wattleborough three days ahead of schedule. Rather than being a demonic intruder upon his inward repose, then, the train manifests freedom, autonomy, and a desirably productive mind for Jasper: “Safe in the corner of his third-class carriage, he smiled at the last glimpse of the familiar fields, and began to think of something he had decided to write for The West End” (45).

As we saw in Lady Audley’s Secret, the train underwent a conceptual evolution throughout the nineteenth century: a machine that initially appeared as a threatening intruder came to be understood as an opportunity for travel, escape, and as a means for a mobility that was socio-cultural as well as physical. This conceptual evolution is usefully historicized if one considers the train to be what Chris Otter calls a “liberal object,” one of “a proliferating phalanx of technological artefacts which encouraged, stimulated and made possible forms of practice integral to liberal society” in the Victorian era (“Making” 572). As Otter demonstrates, the link between technology and subjective agency in the period was a constitutive one: the various machines, networks, and devices that defined the era generally “provided people with the resources to become autonomous” (581). The growth of the rail network, for example, facilitated the unprecedented movement of many classes of people, goods, and information across the country, making it possible to envision the train as constituting a “technology of freedom” (574).

The link between technological proliferation and the subjective experience of those in the Victorian era lies in the way that the material effects of these various conditions of existence shaped and informed a distinctive mode of being in the world.

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143 Jasper’s dreamy mental rambling relates to the romance and freedom of the train, not to the untouched natural world; his is not, in fact, a “fantasy of idyllic satisfaction,” as Leo Marx calls it (29).
“Subjectivity,” writes Otter, “is here simply a product of the technical world within which an individual is historically folded, and liberal subjectivity only convenient shorthand for a historically-specific spectrum of possible action” (“Making” 584). The particular “spectrum of possible action” limned by the technical world of the late nineteenth century centers around the ideal of an autonomous, rational, self-moderating individual subject, an ideal which neatly abuts the concept of mechanical regularity, productivity, and efficiency: “Machines, networks and devices encouraged a set of practices—productive labour, mobility, health, cleanliness, attention, independence—essential to liberal subjectivity, and were promoted and imagined as such” (570).

Jasper Milvain certainly appears to be the kind of man to take full advantage of the “network of freedom” presented by the train and other technological contrivances of the later nineteenth century, and who does, therefore, fall into the category of the emergent autonomous subject of the later nineteenth century. As the opening scene of New Grub Street implies, Jasper is quickly established in the novel as an epigrammatically self-conscious character. “I am the literary man of 1882,” he announces to his sisters, by way of explaining his seemingly callous dismissal of a literary acquaintance’s future prospects: “My intellect enjoys the clear perception of a fact” (8).

His self-consciousness is not limited to self-approbation, however. In a conversation with his unfortunate love interest, Marian Yule, Jasper warns her of how highly he prioritizes his literary ambition: “I shall do many a base thing in life, just to get money and reputation; I tell you this that you mayn’t be surprised if anything of that kind comes to your ears” (117). Jasper is also perfectly cognizant of the fact that his attraction to the impoverished Marian has no place in his audacious scheme for literary advancement: “I’m afraid of that girl. No, it won’t do! You understand that I’m a practical man, and I shall keep clear of dangers. These days of holiday idleness put all sorts of nonsense into one’s head. . . . For myself, I shall do my best not to see her again for a long time” (42, 45). Jasper’s sights are set on conquering the business of literature, a task for which his keen eye for market trends and likely prospects is particularly well suited: “I have plenty of scope,” he tells his sister, Maud. “In ten years, I repeat, I shall be making my thousand
a year” (9). Jasper’s relationship to the train, an instrument by which he makes his first step towards his thousand a year, serves as the template for all relationships in his life, be they with humans or other non-human objects: all people and things are means to an end for Jasper, and the consequences of his liberally instrumentalized mode of engagement in the world unfold in dramatic ways.

Marian and the Problem of Self-Possession

If Jasper is established as the self-possessed and self-aware liberal subject in *New Grub Street*, Marian Yule seems to be headed in a very different subjective direction. Marian, as has already been suggested by her wilting response to the awesome power of the London express, stands in opposition to Jasper’s confident, assertive self and cuts a distinctly un-possessing figure. She is hesitant and timid in her pastoral encounter with Jasper. She underplays the extent of the literary work she does for her father (31). She also disavows her own literary potential by responding with self-effacing modesty when Jasper says he’ll look for her “name in the magazines”: “Oh, I don’t think you will ever find it there” (45). She tells Jasper’s sisters that she has “not one” friend of her own age in London (40). Even her opinions fail to take positive form, expressed as they are “by mere reticence” (86). Instead, Marian is herself “possessed” throughout the novel by affective states such as “profound discouragement,” “wretched tumult,” and “shame and anxiety” (106, 173, 177). She seems to have little control over her body: her hands, her head, and her eyes all “fall” or “droop” during various exhausted moments in the British Museum’s Reading-room, a movement reminiscent of the manner in which her response to Jasper in the wake of the London express “fell” from her (106, 81, 32). With no friends, no opinion to call her own, and no control over her affective or physical self, Marian appears very much as the possession-less instantiation of non-character that Hadley extracts from Mill’s account of self-ownership.

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144 Gissing’s association of money with autonomy is consistent across many of his works. Take Maurice Hilliard’s desires, in *Eve’s Ransom* (1895), to live as “human” for at least a little while: “Going to be a machine no longer. Can I call myself a man? There’s precious little difference between a fellow like me and the damned grinding mechanism that I spend my days in drawing—that roars all day in my ears and deafens me. I’ll put an end to that. Here’s four hundred pounds. It shall mean four hundred pounds’-worth of life. While this money lasts, I’ll feel that I’m a human being” (11-12).
It would appear that the “desires and impulses” driving Marian’s existence are derived exclusively from Alfred Yule’s imposing will. So alarmed was Alfred by the possibility that a young Marian “should be infected with her mother’s faults of speech and behaviour” that he would “scarcely permit his wife to talk to the child” (94). Marian was sent at “the earliest possible moment” to a day-school and was then boarded out “in her tenth year.” From the age of twelve, Marian has worked as Alfred’s amanuensis, leaving Marian only limited and circumscribed exposure to her mother’s virtues of “humility and kindliness” (94). Alfred’s monomaniacal professional needs have shaped Marian into an instrumentalized extension of himself, a prosthetic component of his literary ambition who accepts his desires as her own and who spends a great deal of her waking hours devoted to his program of work (80).

This restriction of Marian’s internal and affective development results in a selfhood that is interpreted as limited by others; patrons of the Reading-room repeatedly fail to recognize Marian as an autonomous, independent person. “[U]nder the great dome” of the Reading-room, Marian works exclusively to provide materials and text for the anonymous publications that form the “greater part of the work by which Yule earned his moderate income” (20, 80). In the first scene that illustrates her daily literary toil, Marian is repeatedly interpellated as a somewhat disappointing substitute for Alfred. She is approached by various voices that make “demand upon her attention,” only to discover that the owners of those voices are looking for her father, or want her to carry messages or volumes to her father (81-83). Even more alarming is Marian’s inability to recognize or claim those qualities that might be considered uniquely her own. She is not nearly as confident as Jasper claims to be, and she fails to understand how to claim her skills and talents or how she might turn them to her advantage. Dora and Maud Milvain, by contrast, are entirely taken by Marian, who is “unlike any girl with whom they had hitherto associated” (40). Jasper Milvain, too, is genuinely captivated by Marian, who unfortunately suffers from an illusory, non-individuated subjectivity that prevents her from appreciating various intrinsic qualities upon which she might base a fuller sense of self.

The embryonic self-consciousness that Marian reveals as she confesses her London loneliness to Dora and Maud finds an anchoring focus in Jasper. In what amounts
to an erotic movement of self-awakening, Marian’s interest in Jasper, or at least her interest in his attraction to her, brings to the psychic fore for the first time wants and desires that she can identify as her own. Alfred’s early and intractable dislike of Jasper represents a foundational division between Marian and himself, a kernel of dissent around which Marian’s stunted process of individuation can develop. She begins to realize the ways in which her father’s domineering personality and deep-rooted sense of egocentric invalidism impose limits upon her social world. And, in fact, it is a moment of her father’s ungracious temper that first sets in motion her full coming to consciousness.

After the elder Yule suffers yet another demoralizing defeat in the literary arena, Marian offers him a gesture of physical comfort: “she laid her cheek against her father’s, in an unwonted caress which had a strange effect upon him” (105). This “strange effect” triggers a self-indulgent, narcissistic tirade on Yule’s part which shocks Marian into seeing herself from her father’s perspective for the first time: “She went up to her room, and wept over the wretchedness of all their lives. . . . She was not a woman, but a mere machine for reading and writing. Did her father never think of this? He was not the only one to suffer from the circumstances in which poverty had involved him” (106).

This initial moment of self-awareness, brought about by physical proximity turned affective repulsion, does not coalesce into a kernel of individual autonomy, however. It results, instead, in a negatively-defined reduction of Marian to her work, to her basic function in the commercialized system of New Grub Street. Marian’s impulse in this instant is to think of the things that she is not: she is not a woman; she is the unnamed-but-implied referent of the phrase “not the only one,” a subject of whom her father fails to conceive in his seemingly exclusive claim to the misery of impoverishment. What Marian recognizes for the first time is the extent to which her father has been thinking of her as a device of convenience, a machine that exists to do work for him.

Marian’s acknowledgment of her instrumental status in this moment amounts to a negative subjective claim: locating herself as a “mere machine” identifies her as something less than a full human subject, something that has been created by another agent as a means to an end. In a gesture that reduces Marian, reading, and writing to operations of industrial logic, the worth of her existence is measured in units of production. All of these elements are standard tensions in the conceptual polarization of
the autonomous human and the machine by the end of the nineteenth century, but Marian adds an extra twist to the portrayal of her mechanical subjectivity: she expresses a wish that her limited individuality be recognized as such. What Marian experiences, in this moment of despair, is a self-conscious and critically distanced perspective on her own being. What she does not find in that experience is grounds for motivation, energy, or hope.

Marian’s negative articulation of this critical subjective distance becomes even more expansive as she embarks upon an extended reflection on the meaning of the literary work she performs for her father:

She kept asking herself what was the use and purpose of such a life as she was condemned to lead. When already there was more good literature in the world than any mortal could cope with in his lifetime, here was she exhausting herself in the manufacture of printed stuff which no one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day’s market. What unspeakable folly! (106-07)

Here, Marian’s abnegation of self continues in the admission of the abject futility of her work, which is not writing but uncreative manufacture, and in the physical exhaustion that results from the time she spends in the Reading-room. She comes closest to a positive expression of desire when she declares a wish to perform some other, more useful kind of work in the quotation that opened this chapter: “Oh, to go forth and labour with one’s hands, to do any poorest, commonest work of which the world had truly need!” (107). Just as Jasper’s eye was caught by the newspaper’s account of the man to be hanged in London, Marian’s eye is caught by another newspaper account of a severely limited subjectivity in the form of the “Literary Machine” she misrecognizes as a mechanical version of the reading, writing automaton that she believes herself to be. The parallel between these two scenes is suggestive: Jasper and Marian are both positioned as reader-observers, which places the hanged man and the automaton in a relationship of some equivalence. Jasper and Marian both demonstrate something like envy towards subjects that have been stripped of civilized human trappings.

Marian’s despair speaks to the experience of a subject who is self-conscious and self-critical but who cannot turn this critical faculty to the subject’s own desires and ends. Marian cannot imagine an alternative to the system of reproduction and consumption in
the world of *New Grub Street*, only an alternative to herself. In visualizing yet another machine, a merely mechanical substitute for herself, Marian imagines her *self* into nothingness. Her critical faculties are intact and substantial; her description of literary manufacture is arguably the most potent expression of New Grub Street’s bloated, pathologized excess of literary product that appears in the novel. However, this critical or reflective capacity holds no functional force; her hard-won self-awareness offers no solution to her problem, no promise of agency, and no route to a better existence, because Marian’s self-consciousness forecloses the possibility of a “self” she can call her own. Without a ground upon which to lay some sort of subjective claim—without a positively defined self to regulate or to cultivate—Marian remains on the outside of the system of possessive personhood to which Jasper, for example, has procured access.

The automaton functions as an interesting representative of this subjective condition. It simultaneously marks the limit of Marian’s human capacities and the point past which she wishes she could pass. The human automaton, that is, a device built to imitate human form and function such as Marian imagines here, is a machine that dissembles—it gives the appearance of independent movement, of self-governance, of mechanized life, and yet it derives its motive force from some external source: a spring must be tightened, a key turned, in order for the machine to operate. The problems that require solving in *New Grub Street* relate to exactly what aspect of individual existence—what position on the spectrum of subjectivity—is the illusory one and what sources of motivation are obscured by either the automaton or the liberal subject.

There is an important sense, however, in which Marian’s charged moment of mechanical identification results, as mentioned, from a reaction to Alfred’s egocentrism and thus represents the beginning of a change in Marian’s constitution of self. The first steps she takes towards becoming a positively self-directed subject develop out of the growing tension she notices between her father’s “deep-rooted and rankling antipathies” and Marian’s own wish to further her relationships with Dora, Maud, and especially Jasper (118). Upon receiving a visit from Jasper at her home while Alfred is out, for example, Marian worries about the confrontation that may result from her father’s resistance to having the Milvains as future visitors: “But she was of independent years; she must be allowed the choice of her own friends. The pleasure she had in seeing Jasper
under this roof, in hearing him talk with such intimate friendliness, strengthened her to resist timid thoughts” (118). Marian finds something upon which to stake a claim of positive selfhood in Jasper’s pleasurable interest in her, and she is thus emboldened to defend the social space that she might “rightfully” call her own. This passage offers a glimpse of the elements that combine to produce Marian’s growing sense of self: her awareness of certain ethical claims to which she is entitled as an adult, along with her strength and resolve to enforce those ethical claims. This construction of Marian’s expanding self is not an unambiguous one, though; she is, after all, deriving her strength from someone else’s interest in her, in an ironic re-deployment of the instrumentalizing approach to personal relationships that Marian so detests in her father.

This sense of strength or willfulness that Marian manages to distill out of Jasper’s interest in her does not go unnoticed by the man who has generally assumed Marian’s will to be his own: her father. Alfred confronts Marian with his stubborn opinion that Jasper is the writer of a devastating and anonymous review of Alfred’s latest book, *English Prose of the Nineteenth Century*. Marian’s response is a cool denial that such should be the case and a request for evidence of Jasper’s involvement in the review. Alfred is taken aback by what he sees as an atypical assertiveness in Marian’s response: “This was not at all Marian’s natural tone in argument with him. She was wont to be submissive” (170). The significance of this passage lies in the fact that Marian is externalizing the internal shift she is experiencing for the first time, which results in Alfred’s startled recognition of her newly dissenting individuation.

Marian’s burgeoning sense of confidence, as it turns out, is a kind of foundational reaction based upon the affective limits that have defined her life to this point. That is to say, Jasper’s attention is important to Marian because it fills a void or a lack in her emotional experience:

Alone in her room she sat down only to think of Jasper Milvain, and extract from the memory of his words, his looks, new sustenance for her hungry heart. Jasper was the first man who had ever evinced a man’s interest in her. Until she met him she had not known a look of compliment or a word addressed to her emotions. He was as far as possible from representing the lover of her imagination, but from the day of that long talk in the fields near Wattleborough the thought of him had
supplanted dreams. On that day she said to herself: I could love him if he cared to seek my love. Premature, perhaps; why, yes, but one who is starving is not wont to feel reluctance at the suggestion of food. The first man who had approached her with display of feeling and energy and youthful self-confidence; handsome too, it seemed to her. Her womanhood went eagerly to meet him. (187)

The troubling revelation in this passage is that Jasper’s presence has “supplanted” her own romantic ideal, suggesting that Marian is not so much becoming self-possessed as she is, again, deriving from other people something that feels like the motive force of self-possession. In thinking over Jasper’s friendly advances towards her, and after rationalizing away all of her doubts and complaints about him, Marian “recognized her power over him and exulted in it. . . . [H]er heart laughed within her as the desire drew him” (188). This is a telling moment in the novel’s depiction of the relationship between the two because it is not clear, exactly, whose desire is doing the drawing; “the desire,” with its frustrating omission of a possessive pronoun, implies that this entanglement could be predicated upon Jasper’s desire rather than Marian’s. The narrative contains several more subtle hints about the extent to which Marian’s “attraction” to Jasper is constructed by forces and circumstances extrinsic to Marian, as in the following line, which identifies unhappiness as a determining element of her process of self-actualization: “To-night she was full of a rich confidence, partly, no doubt, the result of reaction from her miseries” (188-89). My point here is to suggest that New Grub Street is deeply invested in making salient the entirely constructed, provisional, or mediated nature of what is supposed to be a constitutively human trait: that of romantic or sexual attraction. Marian can imagine a romantic ideal, certainly, but she cannot claim full possession of that ideal, which is quickly and completely overwritten by the “reality” or circumstantial nature of her social and economic position.

Marian’s economic position takes on an entirely new valence with the news of John Yule’s death. According to his will, Alfred, his younger brother, is to receive no money at all, while Marian is to inherit five thousand pounds “out of her uncle’s share in a wholesale stationery business” (309). The transformation of Marian by this news is almost instantaneous, as is her father’s attempt to cajole Marian into spending her
inheritance on the foundation of a new journal that he would edit. Marian’s response to his request is definitive:

Money is a great fortifier of self-respect. Since she had become really conscious of her position as the owner of five thousand pounds, Marian spoke with a steadier voice, walked with firmer step; mentally she felt herself altogether a less dependent being. She might have confessed this lukewarmness towards literary enterprise in the anger which her father excited eight or nine days ago, but at that time she could not have uttered her opinion calmly, deliberately, as now. The smile which accompanied the words was also new; it signified deliverance from pupillage. (314)

The confidence and sense of power that she has been drawing from Jasper’s interest in her has now taken on amplified, materialized form in the shape of her inheritance.

Alfred Yule tracks Marian’s newfound assurance in the world with suspicion, intuiting that she has become more self-confident either because of her recent windfall, or—worse—because she has fallen in love:

He observed her with the closest study day after day. . . . She was more womanly in her bearing and speech, and exercised an independence, appropriate indeed to her years, but such as had not formerly declared itself. The question with her father was whether these things resulted simply from her consciousness of possessing what to her seemed wealth, or something else had happened of the nature that he dreaded. (399)

What poor, unfortunate Alfred fails to consider, of course, is that both circumstances are having an effect upon Marian. Alfred’s unintentional equation of money and love here draws out the things that these two concepts have in common: they both open up onto the question of self-possession. Marian seems to be transforming from a negatively defined mechanical subject to someone with a claim to personhood. However, the precarious, contingent state of this positive claim is ominously foreshadowed in Marian’s presumptive confidence in the robustness of her legatee status. Concerned about Marian’s plan to distance herself from her father by moving out on her own, Mrs. Yule observes that Marian has “no money” with which to take lodgings at the moment. Marian’s response is swift: “No money! As if I couldn’t borrow a few pounds until my own comes
to me! Dora Milvain shall lend me all I want; it won’t make the least difference to her. I must have my money very soon now” (404). But Marian’s fall from potential prosperity is delivered quickly and cruelly: the inheritance goes awry, and with it vanishes her new sense of autonomous personhood. Marian turns insensible upon learning from a letter that her financial, and therefore subjective, hopes have been reduced to worthlessness. When she comes to, she has awakened as the same despairing, suffering Marian that existed at the beginning of the novel, save perhaps for a little added resentment (412).

Marian now considers herself to be a “prisoner of fate,” and in losing her claim to the small fortune that had produced such a shift in her conception of self, she has lost all the power that she’d once felt in her relationship with Jasper (412). Gone is the delightful sense of command she enjoyed over him (326). Instead, she again becomes self-restricting—she restrains her thoughts and anxieties about their future together in Jasper’s presence when she delivers the news of the failure of her inheritance (416, 418). The opportunistic and feckless Jasper wastes no time in identifying this shift in dynamic between the two and in reinforcing her sense of determined helplessness by demanding that she do for him what she cannot do for herself: enact a positive, agential desire in the world. “[K]eep me at it like a steam engine,” he exhorts her, speaking of his literary work; “decide my fate for me, Marian” (418, 473). What is most telling about Jasper’s response is the way in which it suggests the possibility that embracing instrumentality, and thinking of oneself as well as others as a means to some end, is the key to individual achievement in this modern, mechanized world.

It comes as no particular surprise that Marian’s sense of dejection leads her right back into the space that had so dramatically focalized her sense of being a machine in the first place; upon returning to work in the Reading-room, she “did her best, during the hours spent there, to convert herself into the literary machine which it was her hope would some day be invented for construction in a less sensitive material than human tissue” (468). Rather than despairing of her return to a mechanical subjectivity, then, Marian is now trying to become a machine; the concept that once stood as a negative reference point for her is now an imaginary position to which she aspires. The machine’s advantages—a lack of emotional and physical feeling, an ability to work without fatigue, and an absence of consciousness—define Marian’s human excesses. Her body once again
returns to its dissolute, non-agential or non-motivated state, complete with a “dropped hand” and words that fall from her lips (472). In this way, Marian’s imagined “literary machine” represents both the very limits of her efforts at subjective autonomy and her greatest ambition.

**Authorial Signature as Mental Property**

Authorship and agency are closely linked throughout *New Grub Street*, insofar as the tension between different modes of understanding autonomous subjectivity in the novel can be mapped on to different characterizations of authorship. A key element in defining these various models of authorship is the question of the signature; the ability of a particular author to lay public claim to a work by way of a personal signature involves a complex negotiation of power, authority, and cultural economy that undergirds much of the dramatic conflict in the novel. A signature is a public mark of ownership over a written document, a material instantiation of a claim to mental property, and, in the case of *New Grub Street*, an important measure of individual productivity.

The signature emerges in the novel as an emblem of personal autonomy through a series of associations with success, wealth, and social mobility. A young Reardon, for example, discovers the limits of his social capital when he decides to acquire a “reader’s ticket” required for entry to the British Museum, an acquisition for which “it was necessary to obtain the signature of some respectable householder, and Reardon was acquainted with no such person” (58). Instead, Reardon must “force himself upon the attention of a stranger”—in this case, a well-known and sympathetic novelist who attempts to offer Reardon some advice about the literary career upon which the younger man seems bent. Reardon rejects the advice, which leaves the novelist with little more to do than to “grant his genial signature for the specified purpose, and add good wishes in abundance” (59).

What Reardon does take away from this encounter, apart from a sense of the highly determined relationship between fame and power, is his “first glimpse of what was meant by literary success” (59). Here, the signature of the novelist means both access to

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145 For a comparative sense of the tensions that inhered in the cultural meanings of anonymous and pseudonymous publication at the end of the century, see Rachel Buurma’s “Anonymity, Corporate Authority, and the Archive: The Production of Authorship in Late-Victorian England.”
the world of literature and knowledge via entry to the British Museum; it also reifies an image of literary success and domestic comfort to which Reardon will remain in perpetual thrall. His early and hopeful solicitation of the novelist’s signature can be contrasted with a later, more desperate scene in New Grub Street, when penury and demoralization have driven Reardon to ask his former co-worker, Mr. Carter, for a yuletide loan:

“Ha, Reardon! How do? how do? Delighted to see you!”

“Are you very busy?”

“Well, no, not particularly. A few cheques to sign, and we’re just getting out our Christmas appeals. You remember?”

He laughed gaily. There was a remarkable freedom from snobbishness in this young man; the fact of Reardon’s intellectual superiority had long ago counteracted Carter’s social prejudices. (151)

Carter’s signature is an un-fraught affair, a merely administrative gesture that numbers as one of a series of tasks and duties constituting his state of gainful employment, and a gesture that authorizes the sending and solicitation of money to and from the world at large. The contrast between the efficacy of Carter’s institutionally underwritten signature, the famous novelist’s culturally potent signature, and Reardon’s own fraught, inert authorial signature triangulates a structure of divergent subjective positions in New Grub Street. It is at this moment, in fact, when Reardon is resigned to asking Carter for a loan, but just before he has screwed up the courage to articulate the humiliating request, that the third explicit reference to automata occurs in the novel: “Reardon was talking like an automaton. It seemed to him that he turned screws and pressed levers for the utterance of his next words” (151).

If Edwin Reardon’s relationship with his own and other people’s signatures in the novel tends towards a kind of legible abjection, Marian Yule offers the interesting case of a character for whom the very possibility of signing is a troubled, complicated affair and upon whom the problem of signing agency devolves in troubling ways. The question of when and what Marian is able to “sign” is threaded through the novel as a whole and makes evident the various ways in which her own status as an autonomous subject is only partial and tenuous. For instance, in their first conversation together in Finden, Jasper and
Marian discuss the one matter of common interest between them: their respective affiliations with London’s literary world. Jasper is pointed and polemical in his anatomizing take on the operation of modern literary success, while Marian adopts a position of deferential supplication with respect to Jasper’s knowledge and position in the world of *New Grub Street*. Of particular interest for Jasper, in terms of how “marketable literary work” is produced, is the matter of the public circulation of an author’s name. Success in the market of New Grub Street is predicated upon drawing “the special attention of the public” to an author’s name, whether that attention be attracted through advertising, through reference to that author in print, or through signed/known authorship (29). Jasper takes Ralph Warbury, a man already possessed of “money and friends” and an Oxford pedigree, as an example of just how this process of building a literary reputation happens: “his name was mentioned in print six times a week before he had written a dozen articles” (29). What is important to note in this passage is the fact that literary liveliness is not merely a function of how many works an author has signed or of how successful those works might be; instead, it is a matter of visibility, of print-prominence, and of cultural exchange-value. For Jasper, authorship is no more or less important in developing a literary reputation than is advertising or a mention in the gossip column.

Before long, the conversation turns to the matter of Marian’s own literary efforts, with which Jasper has a passing familiarity on account of having seen her working in the British Museum Reading-room (15):

“Have you published anything with your signature, Miss Yule?” Jasper at length inquired.

“Nothing. I only help father a little.”

This silence that again followed was broken this time by Marian. (31) This is a crucial moment in terms of the fledgling relationship between the two young writers and, especially, with regard to the way in which the moment fixes Marian’s lack of personal autonomy. Marian, in her own mind, is “nothing” in the literary world on account of having no work published under her name. Even more important is that she has now performed this “nothingness” for Jasper, who takes her at her word as she disavows the extent or nature of her work with her father. A little after this encounter,
Jasper’s sister, Dora, asks Jasper about Marian: ‘You say you don’t know what Miss Yule writes?’ Jasper’s response is authoritative: ‘I find she doesn’t write independently; just helps her father. What the help amounts to I can’t say’ (35-36). Here, Marian’s lack of independence has defined her relationship with Jasper, with consequences that unfold in a manner both horrific and inexorable.

But what of Marian’s literary work? In the face of Jasper’s overweening professional confidence, she admits only to helping her father “a little” in his writing. As we have already seen, however, it becomes apparent that the “help” she provides to her father is of an extensive and long-standing nature. Marian has been shaped into a seamless extension of her father’s professional self, to the exclusion of a social life of her own or even of a relationship with her mother that is unmediated by Alfred Yule’s anxious concern for his literary reputation. Marian’s relationship with her father is a filial link based entirely upon literary production, a subsumption of affective connection in the name of material advancement.

The adult Marian of the novel’s main narrative has become, importantly, almost entirely self-sufficient when it comes to producing of a work of literary criticism:

Marian was by this time almost able to complete such a piece of manufacture herself and her father’s share in it was limited to a few hints and corrections. The greater part of the work by which Yule earned his moderate income was anonymous: volumes and articles which bore his signature dealt with much the same subjects as his unsigned matter, but the writing was laboured with a conscientiousness unusual in men of his position. . . . He had of late begun to perceive the fact that those passages of Marian’s writing which were printed just as they came from her pen had merit of a kind quite distinct from anything of which he himself was capable, and it began to be a question with him whether it would not be advantageous to let the girl sign these compositions. A matter of business, to be sure—at all events in the first instance. (80)

Here, we see Marian as, again, instrumentalized by her father’s ambition. The question of whether or not she might take credit for her own writing is neither an issue of fatherly pride nor one of ethical transparency but instead only “a matter of business.” Marian’s support for Alfred Yule thus functions in more ways than one; she literally writes for
him, but she also represents some vague, imagined potential for future success that Yule co-opts as his own.

The question of signature and authorship in Alfred Yule’s own professional life, as this passage suggests, has its own difficult history. The falling-out between Yule and his literary nemesis, Fadge, for example, turned publicly on the fulcrum of anonymous authorship: In 1873, Fadge delivered an anonymous review of Yule’s “On Imagination as a National Characteristic,” a review that offered such a devastating penetration of Yule’s pretentiousness and pedantry that it became the talk of London on account of its “exquisite virulence.” Despite being an anonymous article, “concerning the authorship there was no mystery,” and Fadge’s reputation was delivered an important boost as a result. Yule, in a move understood to be an “indiscretion” in the novel, launched “a violent reply, a savage assault upon Fadge, in the columns of The Balance,” the journal for which Yule served as editor at the time. The delivery of such a ham-fisted, publicly legible response to Fadge’s “anonymous cleverness” only resulted in “throwing ridicule upon the heavy, conscientious” Yule (96). In this instance, anonymity offered the apprentice Fadge an opportunity for a breakout written performance—the chance to attach enough critical ballast to his own name and reputation that his signature became a viable one. By the time of the New Grub Street’s main action, however, the ignominy of anonymous publication weighs heavily upon the elder Yule, while remaining the only mode of literary production available to Marian.

What is made clear in this early exchange between Yule and Fadge is the extent to which a complex negotiation between public and private, or legible and occluded, types of authorial agency is encoded in the concept of “the signature” in this new world of literary and journalistic production. Marian’s work as an uncredited amanuensis places her outside this system of negotiation entirely, and she seems to relate to that system only with a sense of passivity and, eventually, despair.

Several times during the course of New Grub Street, Alfred considers the question of Marian’s literary independence, although these instances emerge out of the possibility of Alfred’s ascension to a more stable professional position. The first instance occurs in the wake of hearing that Marian might be romantically interested in Jasper Milvain, marking another moment during which Alfred conflates Marian’s affective life with his
own literary one. Here, Alfred contemplates the implications of Marian’s involvement with Jasper:

It would not have been pleasant to him to foresee a life of spinsterhood for his daughter; but she was young, and—she was a valuable assistant.

How far did that latter consideration weigh with him? He put the question pretty distinctly to himself now that his wife had broached the matter thus unexpectedly. Was he prepared to behave with deliberate selfishness? Never yet had any conflict been manifested between his interests and Marian’s; practically he was in the habit of counting upon her aid for an indefinite period.

If indeed he became editor of *The Study*, why, in that case her assistance would be less needful. And indeed it seemed probable that young Milvain had a future before him. (99)

In what reads as Alfred’s first consideration of Marian as something other than a useful tool of which he is “needful,” Marian is momentarily differentiated as someone who might, indeed, be possessed of her own interests, her own life. It is telling, though, that this momentary differentiation is an entirely abstract and hypothetical one; “never yet” has any reality of Marian’s claim to an independent subjectivity been manifest in Alfred’s eyes. It is also telling that the terms of Marian’s imagined independence are literary ones.

Ultimately, Alfred balances the loss of Marian as a “valuable assistant” against the gain of his editorship of *The Study*, a substitution that reiterates a continuing instrumental or prosthetic relationship between father and daughter.

Eventually, Alfred Yule sees fit to “offer” Marian the chance to publish under her own name:

“Those paragraphs on the Rota Club strike me as singularly happy,” he said, tapping the manuscript with the mouthpiece of his pipe. “Perhaps you might say a word or two more about Cyriac Skinner; one mustn’t be too allusive with general readers, their ignorance is incredible. But there is so little to add to this paper—so little to alter—that I couldn’t feel justified in sending it as my own work. I think it is altogether too good to appear anonymously. You must sign it, Marian, and have the credit that is due to you.” (397)
This offer is made in incredibly bad faith by the elder Yule. His entire interest in approaching Marian in this spirit of “flattering benignity” is to guarantee himself access to the inheritance she has been promised in the wake of John Yule’s death (397). Alfred has been left entirely unrewarded by his brother’s will, but Marian is to receive five thousand pounds, and it is this legacy that Alfred wishes to funnel into a periodical project of his own devising (300).

Marian, as an astute observer of the machinations of the world around her, is aware of exactly where her father’s interests lie:

She saw that her father would not allow himself to seem discouraged by the silence she maintained on the great subject which awaited her decision. He was endeavouring gradually to involve her in his ambitions, to carry her forward by insensible steps. It pained her to observe the suppressed eagerness with which he looked for her reply. (397)

In attempting to trade Marian’s signature for access to her legacy, Alfred is opening up the possibility of putting his daughter’s signature into an important kind of economic circulation in New Grub Street. Recalling his earlier “business” consideration of “whether it would not be advantageous” to let Marian sign her compositions, Alfred has arrived at a definitive answer: under the current circumstances, it is entirely advantageous to his professional interest to give his permission for, or his seal of approval to, her signature. By underwriting the possibility of Marian’s signature in this way, his is the foundational subjectivity that brings it into being. The concept of a signature being authorized by someone other than the signing subject complicates the establishment of any simple link between autonomy and authorship in this novel.

Two aspects of the relationship between Marian and her father are made abundantly clear in the above exchange. First, Alfred’s literary or professional interest clearly trumps any paternal feeling that he might hold for Marian, suggesting that desperation and the instrumentalization of personal relationships go hand-in-hand in this novel. Second, in strategizing a trade with Marian in this way, Alfred reveals that he is capable of conceptualizing Marian as a subject with her own wants and needs. Of course, Alfred imagines an autonomous Marian in terms of his overdetermining mode of being a
professional Man of Letters, not as a subjectivity based on affective or familial relationships.

Marian’s resistance to Alfred’s offer is an important moment in the novel, as it represents one of the few instances during which she articulates the outlines of a clear personal boundary that she identifies as her own. This resistance comprises a negative subjective claim—namely, that she doesn’t want to become embroiled in her father’s ill-conceived scheme—rather than a clearly positive one, but it remains a significant point of development in her emerging, self-conscious being. Her resistance also represents an importantly critical take on the situation: Marian understands that Alfred’s signature-based pitch is both affectively hollow and tragically weighted. His claim that the suggestion of a signed piece is based on the merit of her work is undercut by his dismissive addendum that there exists “no other girl of [Marian’s] age” who could write such a piece, and she can see the foolhardy ambition that lies behind his apparent good will (397).

Despite the critical clarity with which she observes the machinations behind Alfred’s suggestion, Marian makes a fatal error in judgment in this scene, as she consents to and internalizes the terms of Alfred’s proposed exchange. That is, she accepts Alfred’s entirely imaginary valuation of her signature and thinks of her signature as having a kind of intrinsic worth. Furthermore, she has also absorbed Alfred’s conflation of the professional and the personal, and she carries the idea of the “worth” of her signature forward into her romantic negotiations with Jasper. Once the potential of her inherited legacy vanishes, Marian attempts to capitalize upon the imaginary worth she has invested in her as-yet-unreal signature to trade with Jasper for a marriage arrangement.

But there is an important sense in which Jasper thinks of affective relationships in professional terms just as Alfred Yule does, if perhaps in a slightly more transparent, or self-aware, register. Jasper believes that he has made his financial and professional aspirations clear to Marian. Earlier in the novel, he sets out the terms of his future romantic entanglement for his sister, Dora:

“Now, suppose—a quite impossible thing—that Marian inherited some twenty or thirty thousand pounds; I should forthwith ask her to be my wife. . . . It would be a most rational proceeding. I like her very much; but to marry her (supposing she
would have me) without money would be a gross absurdity, simply spoiling my career, and leading to all sorts of discontents.” (297-8)

Jasper insists to Dora that Marian “understands” this arrangement, on account of Marian being a girl who “claims the new privileges of woman” (297). However, it becomes increasingly clear that Jasper has misread, purposefully or otherwise, the nature of Marian’s feelings for him. When the unfortunate news about the lack of any actual money attached to Marian’s inheritance comes to light, this gap in mutual comprehension is forced into full view.

Marian breaks the news of her bankrupted inheritance to Jasper by showing him the same letter that has delivered the blow to her. The two have different reactions to the news. Jasper’s only hope is that Marian “may get something substantial out of the scoundrels yet” (414). Marian’s heartbreaking counter-offer is to suggest the possibility of her signing her writing as a possible solution to the depressing financial scenario they face:

“There’s something I must tell you. Father said I had better sign that Harrington article myself. If I do that, I shall have a right to the money, I think. It will at least be eight guineas. And why shouldn’t I go on writing for myself—for us? You can help me to think of subjects.” (414-5)

In a gesture of desperate hopefulness, Marian offers her signature as compensation for the loss of the inheritance, as though one hypothetical or imaginary windfall might easily replace another. Marian then re-enacts the signature-exchange scene with her father in front of Jasper, except that the roles have now been reversed—Marian, here, takes up her father’s position of anxious, misplaced eagerness. By acknowledging her father as the ground of possibility for her own literary work—“Father said I had better sign that Harrington article”—Marian reveals the abject distance between her own self and anything resembling a full-bodied expression of self-determining liberal agency, as well as the frantic need she feels to assert some sort of wretched control over Jasper. All that is achieved in this scene, though, is a complete miscarriage of Marian’s signature.

The failure of Marian’s signatory gambit lies, it would seem, in her failure to claim her signature, and the mental property of which it is a symbol, as her own. The final repercussions of this mistake unfold over the last pages of the novel. Marian has, by
this point in *New Grub Street*, found work in a provincial library and has thus been unceremoniously expelled from the central focus of the novel’s action and from the narrative itself. As though this expulsion were not insult enough, Jasper succeeds in removing any trace of a claim that she might have laid to authorship, as anonymous or ghostly as that authorship might have been. This retroactive erasure of Marian’s writing is a final measure of Jasper’s ability to thrive and exert his own agency in the world of *New Grub Street*. At a dinner party, a noted novelist announces the news of Alfred Yule’s death and follows the news with a little more on Yule’s life:

> All the guests were ignorant of any tie of kindred between their host and the man spoken of.

> “I believe,” said the novelist, “that he had a clever daughter who used to do all the work he signed. That used to be a current bit of scandal in Fadge’s circle.”

> “Oh, there was much exaggeration in that,” remarked Jasper, blandly. “His daughter assisted him, doubtless, but in quite a legitimate way. One used to see her at the Museum.”

> The subject was dropped. (512)

This disavowal of Marian’s writing does not seem malicious on Jasper’s part, exactly; he recounts the anecdote to Amy later that same evening: “Someone spoke of her this evening, and repeated Fadge’s lie that she used to do all her father’s writing” (514). It is, after all, exactly how Marian characterized her work to Jasper during their very first meeting in Finden. What is in evidence here, then, is Jasper’s patent inability to consider the possibility that Marian might have been capable of that kind of intellectual work. Jasper represents a model of what is required of those who would thrive in *New Grub Street*: a person driven by bare self-interest, void of anything resembling empathy or sympathetic imagination. He is the new, modern man, the one who manages to work out and profit from the material conditions that define modern life, and who remains unaware that those are a set of conditions to which Marian has no point of unmediated access. The whole problem surrounding the matter of Marian’s signature thus functions as an emblem or symbol of her general inability to achieve autonomy in the novel.
However, unlike Marian’s personal mistakes with respect to the question of her signature, the failure of her inheritance points to a much larger problem in *New Grub Street*. This larger failure suggests that John Yule’s fortune—at once understood to be the result of his deeply integral selfhood and the ground upon which that selfhood rests—is as provisional, precarious, and subject to the whims of “fate” as are any of the other elements of everyday life. How viable is the logic of possession as a foundation for something like human subjectivity, the novel asks, if property ownership is itself ephemeral or aleatory?

**Gissing’s Frustrated Humanism**

*New Grub Street* is invested in the viability of a version of social liberalism that remained ascendant through the closing decades of the nineteenth century. This imagined citizenship emerged out of a modern and importantly material technological world, which, according to Gissing’s novel, imparted a certain instrumentalism to all manner of relationships between agents, human or otherwise. Elaine Hadley contemplates the idea that the late-Victorian novel might “become a kind of refuge for the cultivated liberal individual who can no longer be imagined out and about in society,” and she specifically references Gissing’s “disappointed protagonists,” observing that they “could be viewed as the representatives of real-life liberal individuals consumed by mass journalism who sustain their individuality in the pages of his narrative, which functions as one of the few remaining ‘spaces’ where social heterogeneity and liberal cognition itself can be formalized” (*Living* 34). However, in terms of the novel’s interrogation of liberal subjectivity’s contradictory grounds of existence, it would appear that *New Grub Street* can, conversely, be read as an expression of Gissing as “frustrated liberal humanist” (Goodlad 213). The world as mechanical system leaves little opportunity for a truly autonomous self to exist, such that only those characters willing to be self-consciously mechanical emerge triumphant. The next chapter will take up the intersection of aesthetic agency and the figure of the automaton that remains a shadow narrative in *New Grub Street*’s interrogation of the liberal subject by exploring how mechanical subjectivity operates in George du Maurier’s *Trilby*. 
Chapter Five

“Just a Singing-Machine”:

The Making of an Automaton in George du Maurier’s *Trilby*

This final chapter represents something of a departure from the emphasis I have placed on revealing the shaky ground upon which human exceptionalism is understood to be based in my discussions of automata both fictional and non-fictional in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *The Coming Race*, *Erewhon*, the Conscious Automaton debate, and *New Grub Street*. In the case of the eponymous heroine of George du Maurier’s 1894 bestseller, *Trilby*, I aim to elucidate the etiology of her automaton being so as to allow her life an ironic autonomy with respect to the figure usually assigned sole responsibility for her mechanical state: the mesmerist, Svengali. That is to say, my purpose here is to reorient an already existing sense of Trilby as an automaton by broadening the horizon of influence that constructs her machine-like self.

*Trilby* tells the story of a winsome Parisian grisette who, through a process both mysterious and spectacular, becomes Europe’s greatest singing star. In the novel’s closing pages, set twenty years after the events of the narrative proper, several minor characters meet and discuss the tragic events of Trilby’s life, to which they have each borne partial witness. In the midst of this encounter, the terminally ill Gecko reveals what he claims to be the “secret” behind Trilby’s meteoric rise to operatic fame: “*There were two Trilbys*” (298). The first Trilby, or “*our* Trilby,” as Gecko explains, lived a life “full of celestial sweetness and sympathy.” The second Trilby, in contrast, was burdened by a far less illustrious sobriquet—Gecko refers to her simply as “Svengali’s Trilby”:

“Well, that was the Trilby he taught how to sing—and—and I helped him. God of heaven forgive me! That Trilby was just a singing-machine—an organ to play upon—an instrument of music—a Stradivarius—a flexible flageolet of flesh and blood—a voice, and nothing more—just the unconscious voice that Svengali sang with—for it takes two to sing like La Svengali, monsieur.” (298-99)

Gecko’s description of this “other” Trilby is unnerving in its reduction of the singer to a disembodied voice, its invocation of an inhuman instrumentality, and its articulation of a subjectivity that is simultaneously non-singular and singularly non-existent. The verity of
this chillingly deconstructed version of Trilby is predicated upon the mesmeric abilities of that archetypically evil impresario, Svengali.\footnote{At the novel’s outset, Svengali (whose real name is Adler, according to one character) is a talented Jewish pianist in search of fame and fortune in Paris. Svengali’s musical genius is overshadowed by his poor manners, his bullying ways, his unkempt appearance, and his egotism. He dreams of becoming a singer, although he is “absolutely without voice, beyond the harsh, hoarse, weak raven’s croak he used to speak with, and no method availed to make one for him” (42).} So overpowering is Svengali’s influence, it would seem, that he comes to dominate not only Trilby’s mind but also the critical and scholarly life of \textit{Trilby} in the century since the novel was published. This chapter explores the assertion that there exist “two Trilbys” in the text, identifying the complicated nature of Svengali’s dominance in the novel in order to suggest that neither Svengali nor the discourse of mesmerism can fully account for all that befalls Trilby in her short life. The trajectory of this exploratory route through du Maurier’s novel can be traced through a series of questions: What is it about Trilby, in particular, that renders her so susceptible to mesmeric control, thereby facilitating Svengali’s dream to “play as nobody else can play” (74)? Might there exist some more complex relationship of connection, causality, or sequence between the “two Trilbys” than what Gecko identifies? How, in other words, does the life that Trilby lives for the majority of the novel relate to the relatively short period she spends as the sensational public persona known as “La Svengali”? The purpose of posing these questions is to refocus the terms of critical debate onto Trilby herself and to propose that Trilby’s fate in the novel is linked to a lifelong process of dehumanization that shatters her sense of autonomous self and reduces her to a most rudimentary version of the human. In her narrative progression from aspiring subject to tractable object, Trilby can, in fact, be positioned as belonging to the long cultural genealogy of the automaton, a genealogy which both predates and extends beyond the specific historical outlines of the Victorian formulation of mesmerism. In this light, Svengali and his mesmeric ability can be read as symptomatic, rather than causative, elements of Trilby’s transformation. Du Maurier’s novel, invested as it is in anxieties about will and agency at the Victorian fin de siècle, is thus linked to the lengthy, continually evolving imaginative history of the automaton and to a larger nineteenth-century concern about the fate of human subjectivity in an increasingly rationalized, systematized world.
To establish this interpretive reorientation, I begin with an examination of current critical approaches to du Maurier’s “nineteenth-century fairy tale,” in the words of the Atlantic Monthly, in order to reveal the kinds of investments that have rendered Trilby somewhat incidental in discussions of the novel that bears her name (qtd. in Purcell 68). I then explore the literary and critical significance of female musical automata in general and Trilby-as-automaton in particular. By examining the development of Trilby’s character in light of the concepts that emerge from this context, I hope to reconstruct a more comprehensive understanding of the narrative arc that comprises both Trilby’s life and du Maurier’s novel.

Critical approaches to Trilby tend to elide Trilby’s experience as a thinking, feeling subject in favour of an emphasis upon Svengali’s powers of mesmeric influence. Take, for example, Daniel Pick’s treatment of the novel in his Svengali’s Web: The Alien Encounter in Modern Culture. For Pick, Svengali constitutes the “indispensable ingredient” of Trilby (2). It is Svengali, in this view, who supplies the narrative momentum and locus of meaning for the novel and who has emerged triumphantly out of a coterie of memorable characters to become a cultural icon. That Svengali is now the best-known character of the novel is a claim substantiated by Jonathan Freedman, who describes the emergence of what he calls “Svengali-phobia” in the wake of the original, Trilby-centered enthusiasm for the novel: “Trilby-mania soon merges into an odd fascination with Svengali, one which outlasts the early responses that centered with such cultural idealism on the figure of Trilby” (164). What is of particular interest in this recalibration of cultural interest in the novel, however, is the manner in which the focus on Svengali has come to influence critical consensus about how the novel’s plot unfolds. Pick describes the novel’s narrative in terms based entirely upon the sway that Svengali appears to hold over the unfortunate Trilby:

Svengali attempts to win over the heroine of the book, a young artists’ model named Trilby. He hypnotises her without her consent. She becomes “haunted” by his eyes and by his name which rings in her head and ears until “it became an obsession.” Trilby is eventually compelled to marry Svengali and is then

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147 For a glimpse of the kind of intense response generated by the novel for nineteenth-century readers, see Purcell and Freedman: “Trilby-mania” inspired tributes in the form of plays, parodies, boots, hats, sausages, foot-shaped ice cream, and, perhaps most enduringly, the name of a town in Florida.
transformed into an international concert star, who sings, zombie-like, to ecstatic audiences while under Svengali’s spell. When Trilby finally escapes the mesmerist’s clutches in very public and dramatic circumstances it is only to collapse, broken and exhausted. (1-2)

The language of consent, compulsion and capture in this summary works to establish Svengali’s control of Trilby as absolute and polarizes the two characters into dynamic opposition: Svengali is the active agent, the masterful manipulator, and the driving force of the narrative. Trilby, on the other hand, is the innocent victim, the collateral damage, the inert handmaid of Svengali’s unquenchable ambition.

In a similar critical condensation, Trilby is inevitably reduced to one or other of two flattened “versions” that are used to stand as indices of her entire character, just as Gecko insists on a distinction between “our Trilby” and “Svengali’s Trilby” (du Maurier 298-99). Throughout much secondary literature on the novel, Trilby is alternately described as being either “a loose-living girl with a heart of gold” or “a mere puppet of Svengali’s, a singing machine devoid of individual volition and unable to remember her former friends” (Purcell 63; Ferguson 135). No serious critical attention has been accorded the transformation of one Trilby into the other, nor to the existence of any connection between the two Trilbys beyond a vague, shared “Trilbiness,” except to further emphasize the sublime efficacy of Svengali’s mesmeric ability by endorsing the notion that the novel tells the tale of “an ordinary, tone-deaf woman transformed magically into a singer of genius” (Freedman 158).

Yet there are elements of the novel which call into question the seemingly endless reach of Svengali’s power. Previous to his encounter with Trilby, Svengali has made at least one disastrous attempt at creating a singing diva, an attempt which leaves the unfortunate Honorine Cahen broken-hearted and voiceless (du Maurier 46). Far from delimiting a truly all-encompassing sphere of influence, Svengali’s powers turn out to be

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148 Pick’s emphasis upon Svengali’s absolute agency in the text is rehearsed almost endlessly in other critical explorations of Trilby’s themes. Grace Kehler describes the disturbing way in which Trilby suffers “Svengali’s unethical seizure of her mind and voice in order to fulfill his musical aspirations” (247). For Jonathan Taylor, “Svengali’s destruction of Trilby’s individual identity—and substitution of his own” is the pivot upon which the novel’s plot hinges (Taylor 227). The incredible phenomenon that is “La Svengali” is “swept into the narrative by Svengali’s creative force,” according to Martha Banta (22).

149 An important exception to this generalization is Phylis Weliver’s in-depth analysis of Trilby in her Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, upon which I will comment later in this chapter.
effective only upon “anything smaller and weaker than himself—from a woman or a child to a mouse or a fly” (77). Indeed, Trilby’s own memories of the time she spends in Svengali’s company are not entirely consistent with the scheme of entrapment and forced confinement he is supposed to have imposed upon her. In the following passage, wherein Trilby describes what she knows of Svengali’s wife and children, the relationship between Trilby and Svengali appears to function under far more complex terms than are generally acknowledged:

He’d deserted them long before; but he used to send them plenty of money when he’d got any; I made him, for I was very sorry for her. He was always talking about her, and what she said and what she did, and imitating her saying her prayers and eating pickled cucumber with one hand and drinking schnapps with the other, so as not to lose any time; till he made me die of laughing. He could be very funny, Svengali, though he was German, poor dear. (257)

These examples of Svengali’s limitations are not definitive, and certainly Trilby’s account of her life with Svengali can only be considered dubiously reliable, at best. However, the accumulated weight of these textual details is surely enough to suggest that the emergence of the eerie “La Svengali” might be ascribable to something other than Svengali’s mesmeric powers alone.

From Mesmerism to Automatism

The critical assertion that Victorian mesmeric discourse holds the key to unlocking the mystery of *Trilby* is a justifiable one in many respects. *Trilby*’s depiction of mesmerism is emblematic: Mary Elizabeth Leighton, for instance, draws upon reviews of the novel both contemporary and current to argue that *Trilby* stands as the “exemplary ‘hypnotic fiction’” of the nineteenth century (215). Certainly, the unstable modality

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150 Mesmerism is the name given to a process derived from Franz Anton Mesmer’s (1734-1815) theory of “animal magnetism,” which posited the existence of a ethereal “fluid” that permeated all earthly elements in a system of flow and circulation. This fluid could supposedly be manipulated by trained individuals in order to produce a change in the health or mental state of a mesmerised subject. For a history of the rise of the mesmeric phenomenon in Victorian Britain, see Winter. Hypnotism is a term associated with James Braid (1795-1860), who suggested that the changes observed in an entranced subject derive not from the influence of an outside operator but from processes in the subject’s own mind. As Phyllis Weliver writes, “Like Mesmer, Braid used trances to cure nervous disease, but he also claimed that hypnotism had an advantage over mesmerism because a patient could not be influenced by it without her free will and
implied in Gecko’s doubled, deadened description of the “two Trilbys” and in the multiplicity of the entity called “La Svengali” can be mapped out upon Victorian concerns about mesmerism’s threat to the integrity of individual identity. As Sarah Gracombe explains,

For many Victorians mesmerism’s most disturbing quality was the way that it troubled the notion of a stable, unified identity by suggesting that there were hidden—unconscious—mental regions that might contradict one’s own sense of self, a Mr. Hyde inside every sober, respectable Dr. Jekyll. The unconscious, by its very definition, was thus unresponsive to the traditional Victorian solutions for mental regulation: morality, religion, and above all one’s own will. What made this situation worse was, paradoxically, that the unconscious might respond to someone else’s will (100).

Mesmerism, then, seems to account for those facets of La Svengali that contradict the most characteristic features of Trilby’s personality, including the former’s stunning musical skill and her cruel snubbing of Little Billee in the Place de la Concorde; these can be read as the exertions of Svengali’s will upon Trilby’s unconscious mind (234-35). Similarly, Trilby’s memory loss and her inability to sing in Svengali’s absence stand as markers of a supposedly originary self that remains preserved, pure and uncorrupted, in some privileged subjective space. Not only can the strange confusion of bodies and minds in the figure of Trilby/La Svengali be explained, seemingly, through mesmerism’s encounter with those mysterious nether regions of the mind, but the very fact of using mesmerism as an explanatory heuristic for the novel allows the blame for Trilby’s sad fate to fall neatly and squarely upon Svengali. However, critical explorations of the way that mesmerism functions in the novel tend towards a curious limit, a limit that is formed around the conception of the mesmerized subject as an automaton. That is to say, approaches to Trilby that attend to contemporary mesmeric discourse often betray a resistance to engaging with the more conjectural aspect of thinking about the mesmerized subject as a kind of machine.

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“consent” (82). Mesmerism and hypnotism were, and still are, often treated as interchangeable terms, despite the different roles that will and agency are understood to play in each approach.
Daniel Pick and Phyllis Weliver both emphasize the mesmeric aspects of the novel in their analyses of *Trilby*, although those analyses arrive at markedly different conclusions. Pick, as we have seen, accords a great deal of importance to the role that mesmerism plays in the construction of Svengali’s character. By contrast, Weliver’s treatment of *Trilby* is unusual for its extended analysis of Trilby’s character across the entirety of the novel and for its intention to “debunk the idea that mesmerism alone is responsible for Trilby’s singing” (260). What is shared between the two approaches, however, is something that resembles a reluctance to take seriously the automaton-like behaviour demonstrated by Trilby-as-La-Svengali. In his analysis of *Trilby*, Pick acknowledges the way in which automata and automatism featured in discussions of mesmerism during the nineteenth century:

Mesmerism and hypnotism were sometimes said to produce a state of human ‘automatism’, but this only begged further questions about the meaning of the mechanical condition to which the subject had been reduced. Was the ‘sleeper’ imprisoned or liberated, dehumanised or brutalised by the entrancer’s commanding eye? (106)

Similarly, Weliver recognizes the extent to which that mesmerized subject was considered a “conscious automaton” throughout the nineteenth century (81). Despite acknowledging the figurative presence of the automaton in mesmeric discourse, however, both critics continue on to differentiate Trilby from this association.

For Weliver, Trilby’s mesmeric submission to Svengali’s will is far too incomplete to explain the distinctive dimensions of her musical success. Trilby’s voice, after all, is memorable before she ever meets Svengali, and her happy willingness to sing badly at any prompted moment in her bohemian life means that “Svengali does not coerce her to do something that she does not already desire” (266). Furthermore, part of La Svengali’s appeal lies in the charm and charisma that attaches to Trilby’s personality, a detail that Weliver argues is a definitive point in favour of the argument that Svengali’s mesmeric influence is only partial: “Because her past identity and

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151 The unique qualities of Trilby’s sonorous voice are narratively established as being distinctively hers. In fact, Svengali’s interest in Trilby begins when he overhears a famous composer say “that the most beautiful female voice in Europe belonged to an English grisette who sat as a model to sculptors in the Quartier Latin, but that unfortunately she was quite tone-deaf, and couldn’t sing one single note in tune” (296).
mannerisms are not abdicated while mesmerized, Trilby’s personality creates at least part of her image as La Svengali” (264). However, Weliver’s point, in attending to these limitations of mesmeric control, is to argue that Trilby ultimately enacts a subversive resistance to repressive social coding in her role as La Svengali: “Trilby rises above attempted methods of containment to author her own performance” (261). To call Trilby an author of her own performance, as we will see, is surely to overstate the subjective agency at her disposal for much of the novel, but what is notable about Weliver’s argument is the manner in which any notion of thinking about Trilby-as-La-Svengali as being in an automaton-like state is rejected. Weliver states definitively that Trilby “is not an imitative automaton, but an equal who likes to sing” (264).

This distancing of Trilby from the figurative automaton is less explicitly articulated in Pick’s analysis of the novel than it is in Weliver’s proclamation, but is no less notable for being so. The following passage from Pick’s Svengali’s Web introduces a discussion of possible sources of inspiration for the characters in Trilby:

Quite how much of the earlier mesmeric literature was known to the creator of Svengali we cannot be sure, but some literary connections proposed in later versions of the tale surely had no place in Du Maurier’s original conception. Thus in the 1955 film version, Svengali was linked to ‘Coppola’, a frightening figure from E.T.A. Hoffmann’s extraordinary tale, ‘The Sandman,” published in 1816. Fastidious literary critics might object to the conflating of Hoffmann with Du Maurier in this way; in fact, Hoffmann’s story does contain, albeit in a more complex form, elements of the sexualised and demonic mesmeric saga of the manipulative ‘conductor’ and the automaton singer, which the later writer went on to explore. (104)

Here, Pick is at once admitting and disavowing the significance of Hoffmann’s earlier fictional depiction of a “singing-machine” and her creator, although his reasons for doing so are not entirely clear. What might occasion the critical hesitation evident in Pick’s insistence that these pre-existing literary and cultural tropes, to which the characters of Trilby and Svengali clearly correspond, “surely had no place in du Maurier’s original conception”? In fact, the influence of Hoffmann’s story extended throughout the nineteenth century, inspiring works such as Arthur Saint-Léon’s 1870 ballet, Coppélia, Jacques Offenbach’s 1881 opera, Les contes d’Hoffmann, and Villiers de L’isle Adam’s
1886 novel, *L’eve future*. Lest there remain any doubt as to du Maurier’s familiarity with some of the later Hoffmann-inspired work, Weliver describes du Maurier as a “talented tenor of some significance” who performed at least one of Offenbach’s pieces himself (260). The extent to which du Maurier may have been influenced by these works is certainly up for debate, but to suggest that there exists no possible connection between Hoffmann’s Olimpia, a singing automaton built and operated by the ambitious and manipulative Professor Spalanzani, and du Maurier’s Trilby, a “singing-machine” controlled by the ambitious and manipulative Svengali, seems like an excessively cautious claim, even for the most “fastidious” of literary critics that Pick summons into authoritative existence (104).

To what might these objections to thinking about Trilby as an automaton be attributed? Certainly, the “mechanical condition” of the mesmerised subject was a source of ontological trouble for the Victorians. To classify something as an automaton is a remarkably non-committal affair: as Gaby Wood points out, the word “automaton” can equally describe a “figure which simulates the action of a living being or a human being acting mechanically in a monotonous routine” (xviii). The contradiction inherent in this definition is emblematic of what Ernst Jentsch identifies as the psychological experience of the uncanny: “Among all the psychical uncertainties that can become an original cause of the uncanny feeling, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate” (Jentsch 11). The uncanniness of the “mechanical condition” induced by mesmerism corroborates and amplifies the anxiety already inherent in mesmerism’s challenge to notions of stable identity: to what extent does the unconscious mind operate like a subterranean machine, impervious to conscious control? Might a kind

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152 See Grace Kehler’s “The Victorian Prima Donna in Literature and the Ghosts of Opera Past,” especially Chapter V, and Martin Willis’s *Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines* for more on Hoffmann’s influence throughout the nineteenth century.

153 Of course, it is Sigmund Freud who has since popularized the concept of the uncanny, using the same literary text that Jentsch did—Hoffmann’s “The Sand-Man”—to elaborate upon his point. However, Freud disagrees with Jentsch on several points, not least the idea that intellectual uncertainty is at the heart of the uncanny experience. Several critics, including Adam Bresnick, have demonstrated the extent to which Freud had to equivocate upon a detail of the ending of Hoffmann’s story in order to argue against Jentsch, which only serves to further emphasize the difficulties inherent in engaging with a concept as slippery as the automaton (Bresnick 115-23).
of instrumental interface mediate the link between unconscious mental processes and bodily reflexes? And to what degree can external influence or control be imposed upon the structure and functioning of those unconscious, possibly machine-like processes? The imbrications of automatism and mesmerism in the nineteenth century are deep and tangled, as a result of which representations of the human automaton shift between literal and figurative meaning in unpredictable ways. None of these difficulties, however, would appear to explain why both Pick and Weliver make extensive use of contemporary mesmeric discourse to shape their arguments about Svengali and Trilby while underplaying the mechanical implications about body and mind that emerge from that discourse.

I would like to suggest that the problem is one of conceptual provenance: the model of the mechanized human subject does not, in fact, derive from nineteenth-century mesmeric discourse but is instead one of the ingredients that contributes to the emergence of mesmerism as a cultural formation. Insofar as it places the power to automatize a person into the hands of a small number of corrupt and easily-identified individuals, mesmerism is a technique that serves to contain and explain the spectre of the mechanized human that emerges alongside the industrialization of the nineteenth century. To acknowledge that a more generalized and abstract process of mechanization might form the basis of Trilby’s transformation in the novel is to open out the discussion onto a much larger and less easily defined process of dehumanization that resulted from the increasingly industrialized, standardized, and rationalized world of the nineteenth century. Yet it is in the context of this larger discourse, of which mesmerism forms only a part, that Trilby’s life can be made comprehensible. An exploration of Trilby’s gradual erosion into what can be described as an automaton-like state emphasizes not the moment of mesmeric encounter but, instead, the over-arching narrative of her difficult life. The approach to this larger narrative of subjective mechanization is steep and requires as contextual support an examination of the cultural significance of female musical and performing automata by way of establishing Trilby’s imaginative ancestry.
Female Performing Machines

In an important sense, the history of automata begins with constructed female figures; the first automata recorded in literature are, as I have mentioned, the intelligent “handmaidens of gold” made by Hephaestus, god of fire and craft-making, in Homer’s *Iliad*. James A. Francis argues for the significance of the descriptive similarities between Hephaestus’s golden automata and another female figure of that craftsman’s making: Pandora, a creature made of clay whose “appeal is purely visual” and who renders both gods and men “awestruck as soon as they lay eyes on her” (15). For Francis, both of these “manufactured” women elucidate the nature of viewing and of reading by emphasizing the reactions of their respective audiences to the textual account of their visual being (16-17). Of like symbolic formation is Ovid’s account of Pygmalion, the sculptor who falls in love with a statue of his own making. That statue, named Galatea in later tellings of the tale, is brought to life by Venus, thus representing a intersection of human desire and the super-human power of giving life. In Wendy Beth Hyman’s estimation of the Pygmalion myth, “the animation of material is the ur-narrative of the western imagination, a literalization of the metaphoric desire to create ‘living’ art. It is fraught with both the glories and aspirations of this essential desire” (3). Artificial women, from this perspective, form the fantastical core of aesthetic production.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the craft of automaton-making had entered its most ambitious and creative period, and few limitations remained on what could be considered the purview of mechanical life. In October 1737, Jacques Vaucanson debuted a trio of masterwork automata that included a drumming shepherd, a duck that appeared to actually “digest and excrete,” and a flute player who proved to be so compelling to watch that “all Paris flocked to see the mechanical masterpiece with the human spirit” (Bedini 37). The main source of public fascination with this flute player was the figure’s ability to generate a flow of air that resembled breath, an uncanny effect that appeared eerily close to a sign of life (Wood 22). Even more captivating than Vaucanson’s life-like machines were two spectacular female musicians of the day, one called “La musicienne,” or “Musical Lady,” and another named “La joueuse de tympanon,” or “The Dulcimer Player” (Voskuhl 295). “The Musical Lady,” built by the father-son clockmaking team of Pierre and Henri-Louis Jacquet-Droz, not only played the clavichord with her own
fingers but also moved her eyes and heaved her breast in a most convincing manner: “‘She is apparently agitated,’ a contemporary remarked, ‘with an anxiety and diffidence not always felt in real life’” (qtd. in Schaffer, “Enlightened” 138). “The Dulcimer Player,” made by David Roentgen and Pierre Kinzing, was given to Marie Antoinette in 1785 (Voskuhl 296). Accounts of these figures in action “emphasize in general the enchanting and deceptive grace with which the mechanical women move their bodies” (Voskuhl 304). According to Adelheid Voskuhl, “the discussion concerning the expression of passions through bodily motions in musical recital took on, as did many other cultural debates, a distinctly gendered edge when it came to the limits, and potential dangers, of arousing affect in social interaction” (305). Musical performance offered a unique combination of affective engagement and technical skill through which to explore the contradictory restrictions placed upon bodies that were expected simultaneously to project and to repress individual agency and identity.

The visible expression of apparent emotion on the female bodies of these musical figures points to the source of a number of anxieties produced by these particularly sophisticated automata. The anxieties centre around a profound questioning of all that once seemed distinctively and exclusively human: a machine that seems to be able to communicate emotion suggests a dangerous disconnection between the experience of an inner, conscious self and the outward expression of that inner self. That the heaving breast under consideration here was housed in the body of a female automaton is of special significance, given the particularly gendered dimensions of the social standards for affective propriety at the time. Julie Park details the extent to which the figure of the automaton, as an index of moral comportment and bodily discipline, appears regularly in eighteenth-century conduct literature for women, and she also draws particular attention to reproductions of this figuration by the very women to whom the metaphor was meant to apply: “the machine works as the standard against which female character is not only compared and measured, but self-created” (25). Identification with such a standard is inherently damaging for the women involved, as it “derives from and creates a thwarted, rather than expanded image of self” (25). Park focuses her argument on the liminal

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154 As we have seen, Charles Babbage’s childhood fascination with the “Silver Lady” automaton became an emblematic aspect of his identity as a creator of machines that replicated and perfected modes of human cognition, an aspect that belongs to this lineage of feminized mechanical life.
moment of a young woman’s “coming out” from a private to a public persona in the work of Frances Burney, observing the various textual strategies that Burney uses to articulate just how catastrophic the “psychological duress of female socialization” could be for the development of adult female subjectivity (45). Burney deploys the figure of the automaton to capture the instability of “a psyche striving to become a subject while cultural forces (itself included) insist on its object-hood,” even as the automaton simultaneously serves as the model for that object-hood (31).¹⁵⁵

By the end of the eighteenth century, then, the automaton had come to signify the very pinnacle of human creativity and technological ingenuity, but it was also, paradoxically, representative of a human subject under the kind of duress that was derived from the limitations imposed by systemic social codes and institutional constraints upon individual will and desire. The female automaton, in particular, represented an especially intense concatenation of social pressure along with notions of individual agency and desire. Amidst an ascendant “Age of Machinery” at the turn of the nineteenth century, to use Carlyle’s term, the scope of these limitations grew ever more pervasive, as large-scale systems of discipline and organization emerged in the wake of expansive technological development. The factory, the steam-engine, the wholesale transformation of England into the landscape of what Herbert Sussman has called the “technological sublime,” all contributed to a systemic rationalization of subjective experience and, therefore, to an intensification of the symbolic and metaphorical value of the automaton (45).¹⁵⁶

The emerging phenomenon of mesmerism coincided with a growing concern over the new scale of systematized order that would come to distinguish the Victorian Age. Mesmerism gave shape to those concerns by demonstrating how easily a supposedly coherent individual subject could be stripped of his or her own rational abilities and

¹⁵⁵ For more on the cultural investments that attach to the female automaton of the eighteenth century, see Voskuhl’s exploration of automata in the work of Jean Paul. Voskuhl concludes that “music-making women automata functioned as a motif in Jean Paul’s commentary on the ramifications of contemporary efforts to understand the affective ‘inner self’ of individuals and to codify its manifestations” (310-11).
¹⁵⁶ Ironically, the technological development that rendered automata obsolescent was facilitated by the automaton-makers themselves, as the ability to replicate human movement brought the skills of the automaton-makers to bear on the development of mechanised labour and factories around this time. Many well-known producers of automata, including Vaucanson and Jacquet-Droz, eventually turned their hand towards replicating human movement on a factory scale, and devoted their attention to the creation of factory machines (G. Wood xviii).
rendered completely susceptible to external influences. Much of the contemporary non-
fictional literature on mesmerism inevitably describes the mesmerised subject as an
“instrument,” a “puppet,” or as an automaton (Taylor and Shuttleworth 50, 98). The
fear that machines, in the form of factories and techniques of mass-production, were
usurping the rightful places of working human beings was therefore met by the fear that
on the level of their most basic, fundamental processes, humans were nothing more than
machines in the first place.

The inevitably gendered overlap between industrial machines and mesmeric
demonstrations has been articulated by a number of critics. In the words of Andreas
Huyssen, “Woman, nature, machine had become a mesh of significations which all had
one thing in common: otherness; by their very existence they raised fears and threatened
male authority and control” (226). A collision between this industrial anxiety,
mesmerism, and the aestheticized mechanical being represented by female automata can
be seen in a remarkable anecdote recorded by W. B. Carpenter in 1877. Carpenter
describes a moment during a British tour by the Swedish soprano, Jenny Lind, whose
performances inspired a “Lind-mania” that preceded “Trilby-mania” by several decades:

When Jenny Lind was singing at Manchester, she was invited by Mr. Braid to
hear the performances of one of his hypnotized subjects, an illiterate factory girl,
who had an excellent voice and ear, but whose musical powers had received
scarcely any cultivation. This girl in the hypnotic state followed the Swedish
nightingale’s songs in different languages both instantaneously and correctly; and
when, in order to test her powers, Mdlle. Lind extemporised a long and elaborate
chromatic exercise, she imitated this with no less precision, though unable in her
waking state even to attempt anything of the sort. (“Mesmerism” 143)

This real-life Olimpia, who remains nameless in the aura of Jenny Lind’s spectacular
celebrity, can mimic musical greatness only when her subconscious is directly accessed
under the benevolent direction of Braid’s masculine authority.

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157 In 1840, Chauncy Hare Townsend described the relationship between mesmeriser and mesmerised as follows: “The one impels, the other obeys impulsion: the one designs, the other executes: the one sets in motion a machine (and what a machine! the mind of man with all its complicated marvels!), the other is the machine itself” (qtd. in Taylor and Shuttleworth 52).
158 See also Alison Winter’s explication of gender in mesmeric discourse in Mesmerized and M. Norton Wise’s “The Gender of Automata in Victorian Britain.”
The gendered overtones in the narrative of automatism involving the “factory girl” can be made salient by way of comparison with another description of musical automatism: Sergeant F., the wounded French soldier who exemplifies Huxley’s conscious automaton theory in “On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata,” worked as “a singer in a café in the Champs Elysees [sic]” before enlisting in the army (Mesnet, “Automatism” 50). One of the acts of automatism of which the soldier later proved capable was a musical performance triggered by an accidental encounter with a ray of sunshine that reminded the man of a stage light:

This ray must have given him the impression of a footlight, for he at once placed himself before it, readjusted his toilette, opened the roll of paper which he carried in his hand, and softly hummed an air, running his eyes over the pages as he slowly turned them, and marking with his hand a measure that was perfectly rhythmical. Then he sang aloud, in a highly agreeable manner, giving his song the correct expression, a patriotic ballad to which we all listened with pleasure. This first selection terminated, he sang a second, and afterwards a third. (Mesnet, “Automatism” 63)

Despite being in a state of conscious automatism under the care of a medical authority, the soldier’s automatic capacities exceed containment by that medical figure. Huxley’s elaboration upon this episode describes a gender-neutral (in Victorian terms) account of the mechanism that underlies vocal performance: “A song which has been learned has its molecular representative, which potentially represents it in the brain, just as a musical box wound up potentially represents overtures. Touch the stop and the overture begins; send a molecular impulse along the proper afferent nerve and the singer begins his song” (FR 571). The soldier’s automatic singing abilities do not require the same sort of narrative policing as do the young factory worker’s; the soldier’s “gestures, bearing, his inflections of voice, the shades of warmth and sentiment which he expressed in his singing” are allowed to be “a simple reminiscence” of the man’s long learning and repetition of the songs, while the “illiterate factory girl” is rendered mute in the absence of Lind’s and Braid’s influences (Mesnet, “Automatism” 64; Carpenter, “Mesmerism” 143).
Trilby as Machine

Trilby can thus take her place in a historical field delimited by the larger history of the automaton as a symbol of discipline and ordered bodily comportment, a more specific history of the automaton as a gendered expression of creative power, and by the complex Victorian attraction to, and repulsion from, the regularity and systematicity of the machine. Initially, it is difficult to imagine anything or anyone less regular than Trilby; the ways in which she may be considered undisciplined or improperly bounded at the beginning of du Maurier’s novel are myriad. Trilby first appears in the artists’ loft as an uninvited interloper, wearing “a strange medley of garments” that includes a French infantry soldier’s overcoat and an ill-fitting pair of men’s slippers. Lest the masculine bent of her wardrobe make for too coherent an image, Trilby’s body is described as being unmistakably feminine, boasting a “fully developed” figure that includes a pair of “slim, straight, rosy heels” and a “delicate, privet-like whiteness” of neck (12-3). Trilby’s voice is similarly androgynous, suggesting as it does “an incipient tenore robusto” (13). Her accent displays the same impiety towards the boundaries of nation as her character does towards those of gender and domestic space: the audacity of Trilby’s cross-dressing is matched by the outrageousness of her unique facility with cross-speaking, as evident when she announces her name “in English, with an accent half-Scotch and certain French intonations” (13). Any moral alarm that might be raised by these irregularities is tempered by the openness of her heart and the purity of her charm; her idiosyncrasies are celebrated as details that make her unique, and they form the basis of her attractiveness to the many men who are counted among her admirers in the novel.

Some explanation for Trilby’s unruly ways is provided through a description of her parentage. Trilby’s father, an educated English gentleman, met her mother, an uneducated Scottish barmaid, in Paris’ Rue de Paradis Poissonnière (37). Trilby emerges from this union as neither English nor Scottish (nor properly French, for that matter), neither ladylike nor coarse, neither educated nor unwise. She is, instead, some motile combination of all of the above, able to shift and adapt to various circumstances and situations. Trilby’s malleable nature can be seen in the alternate family arrangement that she devises after the death of her own parents: “le père Martin, the rag-picker, and his wife, the bric-a-brac dealer” become pseudo-grandparents to the young Jeannot, while
Trilby seems happy to be considered as either sister, godmother, or natural mother to the boy (38). This improvised family unit can be read as a resourceful and mutually beneficial solution to the problems faced by the orphaned Trilby, but it can also be understood as a resistance to the traditional family structure that defined the social organization of the day and, thus, as something of an assault upon the very foundations of Victorian morality. Trilby resists the formation of heteronormative social bonds in other ways, as evidenced by her lack of serious interest in male suitors. Trilby takes up her love interests “capriciously, desultorily, more in a frolicsome spirit of camaraderie than anything else,” and she proves to be “far more serious and faithful in friendship than in love” (36-7). For this capriciousness, she is likened to “a distinguished amateur who is too proud to sell his pictures, but willingly gives one away now and again to some highly-valued and much-admiring friend” (37).

This designation of “amateur” is, of course, a thinly-veiled attempt at moral recuperation in its assertion that Trilby has never worked as a prostitute, but it is also important for the way in which it highlights Trilby’s simultaneous participation in and absence from the sphere of mainstream economics depicted in the novel. On the one hand, Trilby earns a living as a model and is acutely aware of the economic exigencies of the day-to-day life she lives. She understands that English artists are valued in bohemian Paris because “they pay,” and she can recite the starting rates of negotiation at la mère Martin’s magasin de bric-à-brac operation (32). On the other hand, Trilby does not seem particularly invested in any system of economic exchange beyond this merely pragmatic interest. Her material needs are modest, and she works only as much as she must to satisfy those basic needs: “She might have lived in guilty splendour had she chosen, but her wants were few. She had no vanity, and her tastes were of the simplest, and she earned enough to gratify them all, and to spare” (36). Her link to the bohemian artists’ sphere in which she moves is economic as well as social, but for Trilby, the economic connection becomes more of a hindrance to her social desires than anything else. Just as the revered Monsieur Carrel offers his Friday rounds “for love, not money,” Trilby would rather run her small errands for her gentlemen friends for something other than a wage: “She was, of course, most liberally paid for all these little services, rendered with such pleasure and goodwill—far too liberally, she thought. She would have been really happier
doing them for love” (62). In this sense, Trilby is an “amateur” participant in the sphere of economic exchange in the same way as she is an amateur with respect to her romantic and sexual attachments.

All of these broken rules and pervious boundaries signal the undisciplined nature of Trilby as she appears at the beginning of du Maurier’s novel, but they are also linked to the completely original charm that supposedly defines her “Trilbyness.” It is important to note here that Trilby is not unaware of social convention and that she does not flaunt standards of moral rectitude out of sheer ignorance. As demonstrated by the careful and deliberate way in which she cultivates her relationship with the Laird, Taffy, and Little Billee, Trilby is quite conscious of the social dynamics and mores that shape the world around her. She seems, in this light, to epitomize an undisciplined, unproductive character that stands in direct contradiction to the set of attributes defining the ideal, automatised body of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: she breaks all the codes of decorum and good behaviour that delimit genteel society, she is spontaneous and unpredictable, and she produces nothing that could be considered to have material worth. At the very same time, she operates with an unmistakably positive valence in the text by virtue of being earnest, loyal, and devoted, and because her cheerful insouciance seems hard-won: she has survived the deaths of both of her less-than-model parents and endured the puritanical fallout of youthful sexual indiscretion, the traumatic remnants of which are discernible in her intermittent attacks of neuralgia. Trilby’s unconventionality can, in fact, be understood as a concerted attempt to carve out something by way of an individual, independent identity: “Young as she was (seventeen or eighteen, or thereabouts), and also tender (like Little Billee), Trilby had singularly clear and quick perceptions in all matters that concerned her tastes, fancies, or affections, and thoroughly knew her own mind, and never lost much time in making it up” (60).

As La Svengali, by contrast, Trilby has become a regular, efficient and disciplined body. She is now properly feminine, even archetypally so, resembling a Greek statue as she poses on stage, “clad in what seemed like a classical dress of cloth of gold, embroidered with garnets and beetle’s wings; her snowy arms and shoulders bare, a gold coronet of stars on her head, her thick light brown hair tied behind and flowing all down her back to nearly her knees” (209). She is understood by other characters (and, indeed,
by many critics of the novel) to be married to Svengali, which would place her firmly within the normative bounds of accepted adult relationships. Her body is now an unmistakably productive one, capable of generating a sound that can be quantified and measured against that produced by recognised masters of the genre: “Everything that Paganini could do with his violin, she does with her voice—only better—and what a voice!” (170). Not only does her labour prove to be lucrative, but much of the La Svengali myth revolves around that same lucre; “She sang at Siloszech’s,” an aristocratic admirer explains, “and all the fellows went mad and gave her their watches and diamond studs and gold scarf-pins. By gad! I never heard or saw anything like it.” (171). Far from being the bane of Trilby’s existence, an economic paradigm that maximizes efficiency and profit is now the basis and symbol of her relationship with the world.

The important point of contention to be settled here, of course, is how this transformation of Trilby into the mechanised La Svengali takes place. Critical attention is often paid to the first and most explicit depiction of mesmerism in the novel, wherein Svengali hypnotises Trilby to cure her of a painful episode of neuralgia (49). The incident ends with Svengali reciting what is usually interpreted as his ominous and apparently prophetic incantation to Trilby: “You shall see nothing, hear nothing, think of nothing but Svengali, Svengali, Svengali!” (52). Svengali leaves this encounter feeling confident that his success in gaining some measure of dominion over Trilby is assured: “He felt his peroration to be so happy and effective that he thought it well to go at once and make a good exit” (52). However, while it is true that Trilby seems slightly unsettled by the predatory aspect of the mesmeric encounter she has just experienced, she initially appears thrilled by the disappearance of her neuralgia: “‘He’s a rum ‘un, ain’t he?’ said Trilby. ‘He reminds me of a big hungry spider, and makes me feel like a fly! But he’s cured my pain! he’s cured my pain! Ah! you don’t know what my pain is when it comes!’” (52). It is not until the Laird speaks with such self-aggrandising intensity about the dangers of mesmerism that Trilby grows apprehensive and feels “cold shivers” run down her back. The Laird terrifies Trilby with a catalogue of common fears about mesmerism’s influence:

“He’s a bad fellow, Svengali—I’m sure of it! He mesmerized you; that’s what it is—mesmerism! I’ve often heard of it, but never seen it done before. They get you...
into their power, and just make you do any blessed thing they please—lie, murder, steal, anything! and kill yourself into the bargain when they’ve done with you! It’s just too terrible to think of!” (52).

It is only after this hyperbolic announcement that Trilby begins to feel obsessively “haunted” by Svengali’s presence. Despite the theatrics surrounding Svengali’s mesmeric display, then, it is actually the Laird who does the most “impressing” upon Trilby’s mind in this scene.

The impact of the Laird’s opinion upon the outcome of this encounter serves to draw attention to just how important the three British artists are to Trilby. More than anything else in the novel, it is Trilby’s attempt to curry favour with these three that motivates her transformation. Her feelings for the most genteel of the three men, Little Billee, lead to Trilby’s devastating humiliation when he is shocked at seeing her posed “in the altogether” at Carrel’s studio, a humiliation that marks the first serious blow to Trilby’s sense of cohesive self in the novel (82). The “new-born feeling of shame” that results from this incident spurs “a gradual and subtle change” in Trilby (82, 88). She becomes thinner, more docile, more delicate in speech—more properly feminine, more “ladylike,” according to the standards of the day. Little Billee then launches an unrelenting campaign for Trilby’s hand. After the twentieth proposal, she consents, but not without a great deal of reserve about what she now believes to be an unbridgeable gap in their social standings (87-88). Her feelings of inadequacy are reinforced by the reaction Little Billee’s mother evinces upon learning of the engagement: “You have just said yourself that you are not a fit wife for him. If you are so fond of him, will you ruin him by marrying him; drag him down; prevent him from getting on in life; separate him from his sister, his family, his friends?” (126). The gap between Trilby’s unique personal deportment and the particularly English standards of behaviour that are given voice through Little Billee’s mother is made painfully clear for all here, including Trilby.

This second instance of humiliation results in Trilby’s leaving Paris with her young brother and almost-son, Jeannot. She takes up residence in the village of Vibraye, and makes a living “washing and working with her needle” (136). In what amounts to a third blow to the coherence of Trilby’s sense of self, Jeannot dies of scarlet fever. Jeannot’s death proves to be trauma from which Trilby cannot recover. Later, she
recollects: “Oh! I was mad with grief, and pain in my eyes, and wanted to kill myself, when I lost my dear little Jeannot, at Vibraye. I fancied I hadn’t been careful enough with him. I was crazed!” (256). After cutting off her hair and disguising herself in workmen’s clothing, she walks back to Paris, where she goes unrecognized by her former friends. Significantly, it is only after reaching the limits of her physical, mental and financial resources, and finding herself unable to end her life by jumping into the Seine, that Trilby seeks out Svengali so that he might at least cure her neuralgia once more (257). Trilby feels that this hopeless trajectory in her life as inexorable, but her sense of the cosmically inevitable is articulated in terms of a forcible distancing from the loves of her life, not as an irresistible pull towards Svengali.

From here, the saga of La Svengali’s career unfolds along its well-known path, but it is clear that Trilby’s transformation into a disciplined, affectless, machine-like body begins before she gives herself up to Svengali. Svengali comes to represent a terminal personification of all those social constraints, psychological injuries, and thwarted desires that leave Trilby wandering the streets of Paris, alone, demoralized, but unable to take the steps she wants to take to end her life. Her involvement with Svengali, then, rather than being at his behest, is a form of suicide, a gesture of self-abnegation marking the last of the internal energies that Trilby manages to marshal. It is also clear that the cause of this transformation is not mesmerism in the strictest sense but the continuous and debilitating pressure placed by an inflexible social structure upon a single individual. Svengali’s hypnosis of Trilby can be seen as a literalisation or condensation of the effects that accumulate simply by living in a world in which she is expected to be more British, more ladylike, more regular, more “in her right mind” than she would otherwise choose to be.

To place Trilby back into the centre of critical discussion in this way—to suggest that the motive force of the novel derives from the story of her life—has necessary heuristic implications. Svengali’s narrative influence in the novel is reduced, but the cultural significance of his representation as both a mesmerist and a musician remains undiminished. That Svengali emerges from this reading as a kind of scapegoat, shouldering the blame for the tragedy of Trilby’s undoing, lends further support to those studies of the novel that explore the contemporary anti-Semitic anxieties underpinning
Du Maurier’s portrayal of the music master. This reassessment of Svengali’s power allows for a redistribution of narrative responsibility in *Trilby*, implicating a far wider group of people and institutions in the outcome of Trilby’s life.

Among the institutions that emerge as culpable in this manner is the world of artistic production in the novel, a world in which “Trilby’s identity is continually being anatomized,” to use Martha Banta’s phrasing (21). The nature of artistic creation in *Trilby* traces the celebrated myth of Pygmalion, whereby the touch of an artist (gifted enough to commune with the divine) brings life to a representation that is inevitably figured as passive and feminine. However, the “bringing to life” of Trilby by those who paint her, sculpt her, use her as muse, or, indeed, as musical instrument must first involve the erasure of her own integral self; the romantically abstracted concept of “Trilbyness” that inheres in the various artists’ representations of her in the novel is produced at the expense of the actual Trilby. Trilby, here, is the anti-Galatea, a person transformed into a moving statue through the destruction of her own life for the sake of another’s artistic impulse.

It is a fuller conception of Trilby’s characterization that is at stake in this reading of the novel. By drawing out the tensions that emerge between the constitution of her inner self and those social disciplinary techniques to which she feels compelled to conform, Trilby can be understood as an index of besieged subjectivity at the end of the nineteenth century. Tenets of social conventionality take on an even more threatening aspect when placed alongside the growing emphasis upon systematization, commodification, and mechanization that followed in the wake of large-scale industrialization in Europe. To claim that there are “two Trilbys” in this text, as Gecko does in the novel’s last pages, is true to the extent that Trilby, when she performs as La Svengali, is doing so in an unconscious, entranced state. However, to insist upon the separation of these two Trilbys into disconnected entities, one a naïve and carefree nymph, one the product of an evil sorcerer, is a mistake. Mesmerism might help to account for how La Svengali sings as she does, but the larger narrative of a woman being stripped of her own individual subjectivity in the name of achieving a disciplined, proper

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and productive being in the world explains how Trilby becomes the automatous La
Svengali in the first place.
Conclusion

The works explored in this dissertation all take advantage of the automaton’s potent signifying register to hypothesize architectures of subjective experience. In these texts’ varied struggles to comprehend self-motivation, to anticipate the evolution of the technologically imbricated human, to articulate spaces of epistemological opacity, to interrogate the tenets of liberal subjectivity, and to represent the mysteries of creative expression, the automaton repeatedly marks the limits of individual agency. Significantly, the account of the Victorian automaton presented here moves beyond what Herbert Sussman calls “the commonplace Victorian picture of man as automaton in the mechanized factory” (142). While the anxieties that attended industrialization are important elements to be addressed in any attempt to understand nineteenth-century conceptions of human autonomy, those anxieties do not exhaust the symbolic operation of the automaton in that period. This dissertation has made a claim for recognizing the automaton as an emblem of post-Victorian-industrial subjectivity, as a figure that admits to the increasingly unknowable quality of the modern world, and as a fundamentally unassimilable element in the networks of text, information, and energy defining that world.

I have argued that the automaton was used to recalibrate definitions of the human at a time when those definitions had been radically destabilized by the incursion of industry and the bureaucratization of everyday life, by revelations about the physiological basis of mind, and by Darwinism’s challenge to the notion of the human as a privileged category of being. As a metaphor, the Victorian automaton was an ambivalent one, its precise, predictable operation standing in apparent opposition to the human, even while it aligned with new, scientific conceptions of the human as involving overdetermined programming, hidden springs of movement, and illusory autonomy. Consequently, the automaton acted as a bridge between the organic and the technological in the Victorian age, suggesting the many ways in which these two categories might catechize and illuminate one another. The lability of the automaton formed part of its attraction as a metaphor, as Thomas Huxley recognized, a lability just as likely to foment debate as to settle it. The automaton metaphor demonstrated the extent to which the debate over the
working of consciousness and free will depended upon language and rhetorical mastery; this can be seen in the arguments that followed Huxley’s incendiary article but also in Lady Audley’s Secret’s metafictional rendering of narrative agency and in Erewhon’s hyperbolization of narrative agency’s influence on readers.

The appeal of the automaton metaphor can also be found in the figure’s evocation of human self-mastery. By rehearsing the godlike ability of humans to generate likenesses of themselves, the automaton confirmed the enduring transcendence of self-creative agency. However, writers such as Bulwer and Butler use speculative timelines to depict the human as displaced from such mastery by technological progress; The Coming Race goes so far as to imagine the human transforming to merge with machines. Similarly, du Maurier invokes mesmerism in Trilby to dramatize the process of becoming an automaton, while Braddon, Bulwer, Butler, and Gissing emphasize the human as always already an automaton. The automaton thus appears as a revenant in the era of a liberal ideology premised upon the principles of self-mastery and self-possession. Despite its ostensible rejection of mechanical determinism, liberal subjectivity is revealed to be dependent on the clock-like operations of capitalism (thematized in Erewhon) and material cultural production (as shown in New Grub Street). Indeed, the figure of the automaton recurrently emphasizes the extent to which subjectivity is irretrievably entangled with exterior structures of power and circumstance: Lady Audley’s Secret, The Coming Race, Erewhon, New Grub Street, and Trilby all anatomize the myriad influences that combine to produce the individual subject. The waning fantasy of human self-mastery is evident only in the synecdochal remnant of the hand across these texts, in the influence of Clara’s hand upon Robert in Lady Audley’s Secret, the signing hand in New Grub Street, and Svengali’s mesmeric manipulations in Trilby. The tensions and valences that once inhered in the hand as a figure of human agency are updated by the automaton metaphor for a modern age.

Furthermore, the novels I have examined in this dissertation share a fascination with the automaton as a figure for aesthetic mechanisms. Because the automaton is a machine that imitates animate life, automata in fiction are second-order imitations; as Wendy Beth Hyman explains, literary automata are “representations of representations of animate beings” (9). The conceptual space enabled by this mimetic distance allows the
automaton figure to be used to investigate the mechanics of plot and character (as seen in *Lady Audley’s Secret*’s self-reflexive meditation on the reiterable quality of its narrative), artists’ manipulation of others (evident in sensation fiction’s play on the nerves of its readers, *Erewhon*’s narrator’s commercial appeal to his readers, and various vectors of artistic influence in *Trilby*), and artists’ own enslavement to the demands of creative production (made explicit in the drive to write in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *The Coming Race*, *Erewhon*, and *New Grub Street* and in the compulsion to create in *Trilby*). If, as Samuel Weber claims, “the conceptual matrix of modern representational thought” remains stubbornly loyal to a basic distinction between subject and object, the automaton directly challenges this “conceptual matrix” by demonstrating subjects and objects to be provisional, defined by context, and belonging to the same order of being (979).

The automaton’s failure to adhere to the rules of the subject-object binary constitutes part of its equivocal status as a textual “thing.” At once a material object designed to activate the imagination and a symbolic figure that benefits from attention to the history of its material form, the automaton addresses the material turn in Victorian studies with all the productive convolutions of its hybrid nature. As a textual representation of an archaic machine, the automaton metaphor I have described here partakes in the fluid exchanges propagated by technological developments like the train, the telegraph, and other systemic connectivities while also registering moments of fictional subjective resistance to this fluidity. As a mediator in efforts to explain how human consciousness emerges as a phenomenon somewhere between body and mind, each iteration of the automaton metaphor records adjustments to modern conceptions of the human. These three frames—the automaton as object, as technology, and as a conceptual marker—have formed the theoretical lens of this dissertation.

The Victorian automaton emerges from this study as an figure that elegizes a belief in the human as a privileged ontological category. In place of the existential security offered by the doctrine of human exceptionalism, the automaton registers a perpetual uncertainty about the nature of knowing in the modern world. I have argued for a fuller conception of the Victorian automaton as an emblem of the volatile imaginative boundary between the categories of human and machine; as a textual tool for addressing the mechanisms that facilitate or limit subjective, scientific, political, and creative
agency; and as a symbolic figure that short-circuits conceptual closure, narrative neatness, and efforts to establish certainties about the constitution of human being.
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