Edward Bulwer-Lytton's Pre-Industrial Dream

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In his 1871 hollow-earth novel, *The Coming Race*, Edward Bulwer-Lytton created a society in which nobody lives in want, has to toil endlessly to earn a living, or is wealthy enough to incite envy in others. The people are strong, healthy, attractive and long-living. Their widespread prosperity does not require the abolition of private property nor does their good health depend upon Erewhonian eugenics. Neither do they lack outlets for their impressive creative and intellectual energies. For all of this, very few critics in the century-and-a-half since its publication have attempted to take the utopian character of this society literally, opting instead to read it as satirical, dystopian, or anti-utopian. One critic even considers it the father of the anti-utopian novels (Seeber 39). I argue, however, that *The Coming Race* should be read not as an anti-utopian "Condemnation of Advanced Ideas" but as a counter-industrial utopia evoking pre-industrial-era cultural norms and values in a way that casts those of the Victorian era as inferior (Campbell 125). Bulwer's novel performs this move primarily by undoing the industrial era's ascendency of labor over workmanship and contemplation, an ascendency described in detail by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958). Insofar as the novel "reject[s] utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as a dream" and places significant emphasis on the "conflict between the originary world and the utopian society" as well as the imperfections within the utopian society itself, the novel is best understood as a precursor to the "critical utopia" of the twentieth century (Moylan 10).

A far cry from the bustle of Victorian England, these people enjoy a "serenity of mind undisturbed by anxious occupations and eager passions" (67). Bulwer's fictional civilization reverses what Arendt describes as the industrial era's elevation of labor and the triumph of *Animal Laborans* in several important ways. It features, among other things, a true and steadfast belief in immortality, an idea of science not subjugated to utility, a conception of property not synonymous with wealth accumulation, and a proper

esteem for both workmanship and contemplation. By applying Arendt's understanding of modernity I will explain how each of these facets of the novel undoes a crucial transformation occurring during Bulwer's lifetime.

By showing that the novel advances these pre-industrial cultural values and that Bulwer was strongly invested in them, I argue that the ideals of the world presented in the novel are paradoxically both more backward looking than has often been acknowledged and more radical in their challenge to Victorian society and culture in the way that they undermine the glorification of labor at the heart of the industrial era. This reading complicates the critical tendency to view the novel as a reactionary author's attack on feminism, socialism, and utopianism. Such readings are often premised on biographical oversimplifications and overlook important characteristics of the society Bulwer creates.

The plot of the novel is fairly simple. While exploring a friend's mines, the unnamed narrator falls into an underground civilization inhabited by tall, winged creatures, who have attained mastery over their environment through the discovery of an essentially telekinetic fluid called the "vril." All have learned to control it, but the females (the Gy), who are the more powerful gender in this society, have more adept control over it than the males (the Ana). The narrator gradually learns about this society from Taee and Zee, the son and daughter of his host. His time among them goes relatively smoothly until Zee develops a strong affection for him, and because they consider it "no crime to slay those who threaten the good of the community," they decide to sentence him to death to prevent such potentially dangerous interbreeding (125). He is saved from this fate by this very same Zee who, out of love for him, transgresses her civilization's laws by bringing him back to the surface.

The tendency to read *The Coming Race* as a dystopian or anti-utopian novel, while not unanimous, constitutes a relatively pervasive trend in the critical history of the work. This tradition of anti-utopian readings of the novel is part of the basis for Gerardo Rodriguez Salas's assumption that the seemingly

advanced view of women presented in the novel is an illusion and that Bulwer intended it as a parody of the New Woman (88). The text has frequently been read as hostile to various forms of equality and even "heavy handedly" anti-feminist (Wolff 324, 327). Its author, some have argued, "urges us to remain content with our present condition" (Campbell 127). In his 1965 essay on the novel, Geoffrey Wagner takes it as a given that because Bulwer was an "upper class dandy" he was also necessarily an upholder of order and must have hated immodest women (383). Hans Seeber similarly bases his anti-utopian interpretation upon Bulwer's identity as a "champion of the existing order of things" (39). More recent readings of the novel have interpreted it as epitomizing the author's fears about the influence of the increasingly powerful United States and about what the masses could do with new media (Nayder 213, 215; Brantlinger 202). Even those willing to classify the text as a utopia sometimes read it as reflecting the "rather explicit anti-democratic and anti-feminist sentiments" of its author (Komsta 163).

A closer look at the text reveals some problems with these readings. For example, as B. G. Knepper as observed, for all the discomforting facts about the Vril-ya, the narrator's world is decidedly not at any point depicted as superior. Moreover, given his regrets later in life that he did not insist upon staying with Zee after she rescued him, he clearly does not remember her as a "dystopian monster" (Knepper 23). Marta Komsta likewise acknowledges the apparent superior qualities of the Vril-ya but ultimately views the narrator's manuscript "a token of solidarity with human fallibility against utopia's terrible perfection" (171). As Jennifer Judge explains, the side of humanity Bulwer critiques in the Vril-ya is "not the clearly grotesque Yahoo-side, but rather the seemly and rational Houyhnhnm-side. . . Yet the Vril-yans, like Swift's republic of horses are disagreeable from a human vantage point" (140). As in the case of Swift's Houyhnhnms, an attempt to understand the Vril-yans should engage the question of what seems rational and desirable about them, as well as the question of what about them makes them unsettling in spite of these desirable traits.

Bulwer's own descriptions of the society he created often sound far more utopian than dystopian. In his correspondence with John Forster, prior to the novel's publication, he notes how unlike any known civilization, the Vril-ya manage to successfully combine "the blessings and consolations of a religion without any of the evils and calamities which are engendered by strife between one religion and another" (Lytton 464). They also managed to resolve, "hitherto insoluble above ground," working class problems and related class antagonisms by simply removing such class distinctions. Additionally, "The vices that rot our cities" are completely absent and "All that our female philosophers above ground contend for as to rights of women, is conceded as a matter of course in this happy common-wealth" (463). He would emphasize that "this race, being in many respects better and milder than we are, ought not to be represented terrible, except through the impossibility of our tolerating them or they tolerating us" (264). He would later write to his son that a society like that of the Vril-ya "would be deadly to us, not from its vices but its virtues" (268). Bulwer's point is not so much that the way the Vril-ya do things is wrong, in fact he seems to consider many of their outcomes quite enviable. Rather it is that Victorians are somehow not quite equipped to be happy in such a society. I argue that the habits of mind and elements of Victorian culture that create this incompatibility are what the text subtly critiques.

The critical tendency to view the novel as primarily critiquing the Vril-ya rather than the Victorians is frequently bolstered by a particular understanding of the author's ideological convictions. Notions regarding Bulwer's reactionary politics are not entirely without foundation, but they are only part of the story. Bulwer was self-consciously something of an outsider in Victorian society, so it is not surprising "that he should start life as a Radical, be flirtatious with the Whigs for a decade or two, and end it as a Tory. None of these mainstream options in British politics quite suited" (Mitchell 169). Moreover, from the beginning of his career, there was something anachronistic about his inclinations:

> As recently as the late eighteenth century it had been thought entirely appropriate for leading politicians to weep in the House of Commons. It suggested heightened sensibilities. The same men dressed extravagantly, perfumed and rouged themselves, and operated extravagant manners. . . In trying to eliminate sensibility from the model of manliness the Victorians were fashioning a creature that was too monochrome for Lytton's taste. . . Lytton never fitted comfortably into Victorian society. He was never part of its establishment. (95)

The fact that Bulwer began his political and literary career as a philosophical radical and a cultural outcast suggests that he was just the person to write a utopian novel based around pre-Victorian social, political, and cultural ideals.

Dystopian interpretations of the novel frequently read the females presented in it as a kind of anti-feminist caricature. Like those of many male Victorian writers, Bulwer's views on gender can be confusing and contradictory, but there are reasons to question the popular reading of the Gy as a satire on the New Woman. Mitchell remarks how, "At his best, Lytton would admit that his difficulties with women were not the fault of the whole gender. Rather, the conventions of English society forced them to be 'artificial.' He preferred the company of frank, confident American women" (50). At other times he was known to admire the intellectual inclinations of German and French women and consider them superior to those in England for this reason (24).[1] These preferences and convictions on his part complicate the assumption that the physical and intellectual capabilities and social confidence of the Gy were intended to be read as absurd or nightmarish. They seem to have more in common than not with the women of Bulwer's time whose company he most appreciated and whose personalities he most admired. In this way, like so much else in the novel, the gender roles among the Vril-ya are not so much a parody of the newest philosophical and social trends as they are an implicit critique of mainstream English society.

I The Vril-ya Condition: Obviating the Need to Labor

In order to understand the relationship between *The Coming Race* and the fundamental transitions occurring in Bulwer's lifetime, a brief overview of some of Arendt's key concepts will be necessary. In proposing a new way of thinking about our daily activities, Arendt asks her readers to look beyond such contemporary categories as "skilled," "unskilled," "intellectual," and "manual" labor. These categories are, historically speaking, a recent creation, and a lot can be learned from observing the older and more fundamental distinction between "work" and "labor;" "Work adds new objects to human artifice. Labor produces things only incidentally" (88). Labor's products, unlike work's products, "do not stay in the world long enough to become a part of it" (118). Work's objects may eventually be used up, but this usage is distinct from the destruction of objects made by labor and destined for consumption (137). The significance of the industrial revolution, for Arendt, is that it "replaced all workmanship with labor," leading to the production of "labor products whose natural fate is to be consumed, instead of work products which are there to be used" (124). Consumption and labor are linked in this model due to the fact that consumption is what makes something a product of labor rather than work; to say that we live in a "consumers' society" is "only another way of saying that we live in a society of laborers" (126).

Not only did the industrial revolution replace work with labor, but it also elevated labor's status. Most relevant to Bulwer's novel is Arendt's argument that "The modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a laboring society" (4). Arendt discusses how labor went from something done in order to make time for contemplation to something valued for its own sake. Post-industrial revolution society no longer follows Aristotle's maxim that activity takes place for the sake of contemplation in the same way that "war takes place for the sake of peace" (15). Among other reasons why this glorification of labor is problematic is the fact that, "While dire necessity made labor indispensable to sustain life, excellence would have been

the last thing to expect from it" (48). The spare time of the *Animal Laborans* will be devoted to an increasingly ravenous consumption as the economy becomes a "waste economy" (133-134). Eventually a laboring society reaches its final form, what Arendt calls a "society of jobholders" (322). The values and assumptions of the modern "society of jobholders" are precisely what *The Coming Race* transgresses.

Bulwer had firsthand experience with the detrimental effects of the Nineteenth Century's elevation of labor over workmanship and contemplation. With respect to his literary production, the author's son once recalled how "his father had to work at such a fast pace that the novels were too often 'crudely constructed' and 'the emanations of a mind which is reduced to manufacture from the want of leisure to create'" (Mitchell 35). An 1831 article in *Fraser's Magazine*, lamenting that booksellers, and by extension authors, were forced to focus on quantity rather than quality of novels, noted that "Even our venerated Mr. Edward Lytton Bulwer himself boasts of bringing out some two or three novels in the same year" (9). If the industrial revolution promoted labor over workmanship and contemplation, many literary authors were among those who suffered, seeing their creative work reduced to a mode of manufacture along with other types of production, and those closest to Bulwer could testify to the extent to which it frustrated his creative capacities and workmanship. In early 1870, a period during which he was working on *The Coming Race*, he would write in a letter that "all literary exertion is repugnant to me, so none of my irons in the fire are a bit hotter" (Lytton 460). As someone who "believed that the artist had to be a man of action as well as a contemplative," he could not have been fully content with the way that labor's glorification impacted the work of him and his fellow novelists (Mitchell 169).

The genuinely, if critically, utopian side of Bulwer's novel depicts a civilization in which these fundamental reversals in humanity's relationship to labor, workmanship, and contemplation are undone. By creating vril-powered automata that can fulfill the function slaves once fulfilled in antiquity, Bulwer reestablishes the old hierarchy of values; repose, contemplation and creative pursuits are the ends to which

labor is a means. The ability of the Vril-ya to obviate the need for labor by utilizing automata exposes labor's value as derived solely from its necessity. In this way, Bulwer sanctions the pre-industrial revolution conception of labor as a means to an end and thereby critiques its modern glorification. While this reevaluation of labor, work, and contemplation is the centerpiece, *The Coming Race* advances several other alternative sets of cultural norms that contrast with modern ones, each of which is directly connected to this reevaluation. The ideas of the Vril-ya on property, for example, resemble those of a time before property came to be associated with the accumulation of wealth and capital. Their relationship to science is representative of humankind's relationship to it before it came to be perceived as a pragmatic endeavor requiring utilitarian justification, and their idea of individuality is untainted by the concepts of fame or renown and the strife that accompanies them. Given how radically the Vril-ya transgress some of these aspects of Victorian cultural and society, it is not surprising that dystopian interpretations of their civilization would come easily to many readers.[2]

The novel begins to defy the glorification of labor even before the Vril-ya make their appearance. Bulwer does not give his protagonist an extensive backstory, but one thing that is clear is that, unlike the ambitious and mercenary narrator of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), he values a life of contemplation. An outlier among the *Animal Laborans*, he sees nothing wrong with devoting himself to intellectual and physical exploration of the world when labor is no longer necessary for his survival. Said protagonist is the son of a father who, after a failed stint at politics, "lived much in his library." The son then went to Liverpool to train as a merchant, but when he found himself financially well off, he "resigned for a time all pursuit of the almighty dollar, and became a desultory wanderer over the face of the earth" (3). The opening pages thus reveal that the narrator values labor neither for its own sake nor purely for the riches it can bring, but as a way to create time for contemplation. In this way, Bulwer promotes the values of a contemplative life even before he introduces his alternative civilization. If there is any question whether

the author really endorses this decidedly unproductive search for truth, the fact that it leads to such a fascinating discovery as the Vril-ya is a point in its favor. This exemplary narrator primes Bulwer's reader for the upcoming exemplar of a society running according to similar values.

When the Vril-ya make their first appearance in the novel, "labor of [the] body," to use Arendt's term, seems conspicuously absent (Arendt 79). Transportation, for example, does not require bodily exertion; the creature's wings "seemed to bear him steadily aloft without effort of his own" (*The Coming Race* 13). Language acquisition likewise comes without intensive mental effort. At one point Zee puts the narrator to sleep by touching his forehead, and when he awakens he finds that he "had made still greater advance in the language in the country and could converse with comparative ease and fluency" (24). She had asked him not long before this whether he was aware that languages and other types of knowledge could be acquired in this way (23). One of the next things he learns from them is that what ended the age of hate, envy, passion, social strife, and war was "the gradual discovery of the latent powers stored in the all-permeating fluid which they denominate vril" (27). Essentially, they attained their state of Utopia, with its peace, prosperity, and social tranquility, by discovering a substance that would eliminate the need for labor.

More significantly, this elimination of labor affords them time for quiet contemplation: "The Ana of the community are, on the whole, an indolent set of beings after the active age of childhood. Whether by temperament or philosophy, they rank repose among the chief blessings of life" (51). Significantly, the term "indolent" here does not seem to have any aspersion attached to it. This passage brings labor down in the hierarchy of human activities and, by removing its necessity, reveals that its value is strictly dependent upon that necessity. This change in conditions allows Bulwer to recast indolence as something that would not be inherently bad if "making a living" were not necessary (Arendt 128). He therefore both illuminates and subtly critiques the tendency of moderns to value labor apart from its necessity, suggesting

the need for a method of evaluating activities that does not subject their value to their earning potential. The fact that Bulwer had once written that, "In the high-wrought state of civilization at which we are arrived, few complaints are more common than that of a brain overworked" reveals just how starkly the habits of the Vril-ya differ from those of the Victorians. That he would follow this statement by explaining how it is not always possible to obtain the repose that the doctor recommends and that even when it is possible to get away one is still pursued by "thought" and "care" suggests how difficult it would be for a Victorian to assimilate into Vril-ya society in this respect (*Caxtoniana* 103). Calling attention to labor's overbearing dominance over modern society does not make it an easy problem to solve, but *The Coming Race* provides a vision of what such an escape would look like.[3]

If their mastery over the vril makes it easy for them to restore contemplation to its rightful place above labor, it also allows them to elevate the status of workmanship. Part of the way in which Arendt defines *Animal Laborans* is against *Homo Faber*, "the creator of human artifice" (139). While there is little evidence of labor among the Vril-ya, there is much evidence of great workmanship. When the main character observes their civilization for the first time, he notes how, "Deep below to the left lay a vast valley which presented to my astonished eye the unmistakable evidences of art and culture" (7). That the first thing he sees upon entering this society is artifice, not industry, is an early indication of the kind of civilization he has entered. One of the first things he notices about the first building he sees is that "it had been made by hands" (8). While first noting the similarity to Egyptian architecture, on closer observation he decides that it is "more ornamental and more fantastically graceful than Egyptian architecture allows" (8). It would appear that the lack of need for labor has allowed them to hone their ability to create. Workmanship, like contemplation, is more highly prioritized in this world than it is in Bulwer's England.

Their role as artificers and makers is further reflected in their relationship to their natural environment. Another observation the narrator makes about the first building he sees is that it had been

"hollowed partly out of a great rock" (8). This description suggests the presence of *Homo Faber*, "a destroyer of nature," in contrast to *Animal Laborans* whose role is nature's "servant" (Arendt 139).[4] The vril, as Bulwer's narrator soon learns, "is capable of being raised and disciplined into the mightiest agency over all forms of matter, animate or inanimate. It can destroy like the flash of lightning, yet differently applied, it can replenish or invigorate life, heal, and preserve" (27). Their domination over the natural world is most apparent in their connection to the underground wildlife. They radically alter their environment by killing massive numbers of animals for the sake of their own survival but do not eat the meat. Their hunting, therefore, is what Arendt would call the "work of [their] hands," which destroys nature, rather than labor of the body, which serves nature and creates products for consumption (Arendt 79, *The Coming Race* 32). They are molders of and masters over their natural environment.

II The Vril-ya and the Vril: Undoing Modernity

The Vril-ya protect the creative aspects of their pursuits partly by avoiding the dangers of what happens, according to Arendt, when large numbers crowd together, namely the "almost irresistible inclination toward despotism, be this the despotism of a person or of majority rule" and the resulting tendency toward conformity. If the Ancient Greeks understood that the polis "could only survive if the number of citizens remained restricted," the Vril-ya seem to view their communities in a similar light (Arendt 43). Part of the way in which the people of Bulwer's subterranean society maintain harmony is by keeping towns very small in population, and keeping the relations more or less familial: "Each community sets its own limit according to circumstances, taking care that there shall never arise any class of poor by the pressure of population upon productive powers of the domain; and that no state shall be too large for a government resembling that of a single well-ordered family" (76). It is not difficult to see how this arrangement would have appealed to Bulwer. Between his twenty-eighth and forty-eighth birthday,

the percentage of England's population living in urban areas went from about a quarter to about one half. This period also witnessed "the rapid urbanization of national culture" and the social problems exacerbated or illuminated by this transformation would attract significant attention from Victorian writers (Hewitt 408). The enforced smallness of Vril-ya communities is presented as a way in which they are able to avoid such problems. It is, in their view, not only the best way to prevent the growth of the kind of impoverished underclass that became such a feature of urban life in Victorian England but the arrangement most conducive to combining "the greatest degree of happiness with the highest degree of intellectual achievement" (76).

The lack of severe social and economic stratification in these communities is among their most conspicuous features. While the novel has traditionally been interpreted as a satire of extreme democratic leveling, their notions of property are not ultimately that extreme. Their sense of property is more ancient than modern and, from Arendt's perspective, would constitute a more sustainable conception. While all pre-modern civilizations viewed property as sacred, to have property did not mean to have wealth so much as to have "one's location in a particular part of the world and therefore to belong to the body politic" (Arendt 61). Under such systems, the head of the family, regardless of wealth or poverty, had his "location" and citizenship in the world (62). The distinction is important because by this older standard most moderns who defend property do not defend "property as such" but "the unhampered pursuit of more property or of appropriation" (110). While the wealth of the Vril-ya is neither common nor equal, "each pursues his own inclinations without creating envy or vying" (*The Coming Race* 29). Even more importantly, there are among them no "hazardous speculations" or "emulators striving for superior wealth or rank" (30). This is not to say they do not possess private property in the modern sense as well as the pre-modern sense, but the older idea of property is not fully displaced by the "unhampered pursuit of more property or of appropriation" as it is among the above-ground moderns (Arendt 110). The fact that nobody

complains about their high taxation reinforces the sense that their conception of property revolves more around dignity than accumulation (*The Coming Race* 82).

The lack of envy and contempt among the Vril-ya is partly a result of their relative lack of economic stratification, but the comparative absence of fame and renown in their culture is also a contributing factor. The narrator recalls how he described to Zee "our great men—poets, philosophers, orators, generals—and defied the Vril-ya to produce their equals" only for her to remain unimpressed. She responds by contending that "this predominance of the few over the many is the surest and most fatal sign of a race incorrigibly savage" (54). They are aware, even if the narrator might not be, that true action cannot take place in isolation, and that even supposedly great men cannot do what they do without help (Arendt 188, 197). Zee's sentiment on this subject is one which Bulwer seems to have strongly supported, having argued once that "the true object of a State is less to produce a few elevated men than to diffuse a respect for all principles that serve to elevate" (*England and the English* 326).

Like their relative lack of economic and social inequality, the relationship of the Vril-ya to science and technology has often been interpreted as either dystopian or satirical. The college of sages, where "those studies which are deemed the least use in practical life are the more diligently cultivated," reminds some critics of the scientific pursuits of Swift's Laputians (*The Coming Race* 30, Knepper 28). However, the strict independence of their pursuit of knowledge from questions of practical application or utility suggests a scientific ethos that many of Bulwer's contemporaries, and Bulwer himself, took rather seriously. In 1831 William Whewell would lament that those "engaged in remote and abstruse researches" sometimes felt the need to defend their work on the grounds "that no one can foresee the possible results of discovery, and that the most recondite and abstract speculations have often come, by some strange and circuitous route, to have a bearing on the uses of daily life." While not denying that such serendipity occurs, Whewell maintains that the true value of such knowledge "is that which every lover of it feels in

his own heart;—that it is valuable for its own sake" (404). Thomas Malthus once suggested that, paradoxically, much knowledge and many great inventions would never have come about "if a rational curiosity and a mere love of information had not generally been allowed to be a sufficient motive for the search after truth!" (13). According to Arendt, it is a matter of "historical record" that modern technology was not a product of "a pragmatic desire to improve conditions and better human life on earth." Rather, the motivation of early scientists lay "exclusively in an altogether non-practical search for useless knowledge" (289). Not only is the philosophy of the college of sages one which, during Bulwer's lifetime, still had serious and eloquent advocates, it is consistent with the approach that guided such pursuits for most of human history.

Bulwer expounded upon this view of science as a lofty, non-pragmatic endeavor in his own writings. He would argue in *England and the English* (1833) that the "part of science which addresses itself to immediate utility is not the highest" (328). The discovery and comprehension of primary and general principles requires "habits of mind and modes of inquiry only obtained by long years of profound thought and abstract meditation" (329). He believed that continental European countries compared favorably to England when it came to their esteem for such higher scientific pursuit (335). Understood in this way, the college of sages looks less like a satire and more like a restoration of the pursuit of scientific truth to the status that it held before it was compromised by utilitarian considerations. Moreover, the words of the Vril-ya themselves on this subject do not seem intended to paint them in a ridiculous light. As the narrator's host tells him, "The motive of science is the love of truth." Their inventor "enjoys an occupation congenial to his tastes." Science is for man to exercise his mind (72). Alongside the lack of flagrantly ridiculous depictions of their studies as one finds in Swift's and Butler's depictions of the Laputians and Erewonians, these testimonies regarding the non-utilitarian benefits of science are a manifesto for returning such pursuits to their original status and function.

If the way that science is understood and practiced among the Vril-ya would appear to evoke pre-modern ideals, their religious practices also seem designed to recapture part of what was lost in the process of industrialism. Arendt argues that the "victory of the *Animal Laborans* would never have been complete had not the process of secularization. . . deprived individual life of its immortality" (Arendt 320). In a letter regarding an early draft of *The Coming Race* that Bulwer had sent to John Forster, he suggested that "Perhaps, too, it would be safe to omit all reference to the power of communicating with the dead" (467). Given what did make it into the published version of the novel, it is not surprising that he had at one point considered giving the Vril-ya such a power. Their religion consists of "the worship of one divine Creator and Sustainer of the universe" and their belief in the afterlife is so wholehearted that they do not regard death with fear or sorrow (44). Their funerals are conducted in a cheerful spirit (101). Instead of "birth" and "death" dates, their coffin lids contain the dates on which the individual in question was "lent to us" and "recalled from us" (102). The sincerity of their belief in life after death is most clearly demonstrated when Taee considers deliberately dying in order to accompany the narrator to another world upon the latter's impending execution, as if it were merely one more form of emigration (126). Many of their thoughts on God and the afterlife are thoughts which the Victorians would claim to share, yet Taee interrogates such claims when he inquires, "None of the Vril-ya fear death: do you?" (124). This inquiry calls the sincerity of upper-world religion into question. The narrator, as a representative of a world in which this deprivation of immortality has taken place, is confronted here with a society that has maintained its religious integrity where the Victorians lost it in their movement toward secularization.

Conclusion

In the years following the publication of Bulwer's novel, hucksters and visionaries alike would become enormously invested in trying to market or discover the real life equivalent of the vril (Sweet vii-

viii). But the wish for such a power, in our present state, is a "self-defeating" one; a society that glorifies labor will never truly be freed from it (Arendt 5). Only when labor is valued strictly on account of its necessity will freedom from that necessity be liberating. *The Coming Race* brings into focus this barrier to liberation. This sense of the unfitness for utopia of even the best and wisest Victorians is part of what prevents the novel from being naively nostalgic, even though in many ways it does look backward in history for its ideals. Like the critical utopia, Bulwer's novel seems like more of a "dream" of a better society than a "blueprint" for one, but by illuminating the limitations that make us unfit for utopia, Bulwer makes it possible to question them. He also anticipates the critical utopia genre by revealing the imperfections of the utopian society as well as those of the visitor's society (Moylan 10). As Komsta has argued, the solidarity among the Vril-ya is in many ways "systemic" rather than "reflective," but Zee's decision to rescue the narrator at the end can be read as a "transgressive gesture of reflective solidarity toward the Other" (165, 169). The ways of the Vril-ya are not above reproach, and the Vril-ya at their best are capable of questioning them. By making the incompatibility of the Victorians and the Vril-ya attributable to the imperfections of both, Bulwer gives us all the more reason to view both critically.

While critics have acknowledged the importance and influence of *The Coming Race*, viewing it as "a pioneer" in occult fiction and in alternative history, the kind of radical questioning to which it opens the door has often been overlooked (Campbell 127, Suvin 158). In fact, some have even gone as far as to suggest that "Bulwer urges us to remain content with our present condition and not strive for what we are unfit by nature to achieve, sustain, or enjoy" (Campbell 127). Yet, as this essay has shown, the way that Bulwer discusses many of the ideals of the Vril-ya elsewhere in his writings does not suggest that he saw these ideals as altogether impossible or unnatural. Nor did he view his present historical moment as the pinnacle of social or political advancement. In an essay titled, "On the Spirit in which New Theories Should Be Received," he argues that a thriving society requires both an "inert and resisting" impulse as

well as an "active and encroaching" one (*Caxtoniana* 138). While he considers a balance between these forces important, he spends a considerable portion of the essay emphasizing the need for open-mindedness toward new ideas, noting that every important truth "was once a novelty" and that "if a philosopher is to pronounce for himself what is possible and what is not, there would soon be no philosophy" (139, 140). Such arguments make it difficult to read *The Coming Race* as advocating for unqualified contentment with the status quo.

As long as the world of the Vril-ya still strikes readers as unpleasant or dystopian, the question of why it leaves this impression will continue to be worth asking. Those members of *Animal Laborans* who read the novel are prompted to reassess the place of labor in their own world. Those who would view the right to property as implying unchecked accumulation of capital and wealth and disdain for high taxation are confronted with a view of property that sharply contradicts their own. When presented with the prospect of a society freed from the need to labor, the "society of jobholders" can hardly be expected to see the prospect as utopian. As Arendt, explaining the cause of the modern distinction between intellectual and manual labor, writes:

> Since under modern conditions every occupation had to prove its "usefulness" for society at large, and since the usefulness of intellectual occupations had become more than doubtful because of the modern glorification of labor, it was only natural that intellectuals, too should desire to be counted among the working population. (92)

In other words, intellectuals have grown into the habit of justifying their work by classifying it as labor. Readings of *The Coming Race* that insist on designating it a dystopia may owe something to the tendency of even those among *Animal Laborans* who do what we would call "intellectual" and "skilled" professions to conceptualize their occupations as labor rather than workmanship. This tendency makes it difficult to

envision a society with an alternate means of evaluating activities than their conduciveness to "earning a living." Bulwer, if nothing else, gives us a glimpse of how such a society might look.

Notes

1. A section from a poem Bulwer wrote in *The New Monthly* reads:

> "In short, if any nobler lore,
> Your hearers could suspect you knew,
> Then, if a man, you're dubbed a bore
> But if a woman damn'd a blue" (qtd. In Mitchell 167).

2. On the surface it may appear that what the Vril-ya achieve by means of the vril is exactly the thing that moderns seek as they continually employ science and technology to reduce the need for labor. But there is one very important difference; what moderns strive to reduce and eliminate is what they call "manual" and "unskilled" labor. But as Arendt argues, there is a more meaningful distinction to be made that has more to do with the purpose and mentality of the tasks than the concrete properties of them (92). All serious activity, including skilled occupations in modernity are done "as labor" not as workmanship (127-28, 141). Even intellectual work can be done *as* labor. The objective of the "society of jobholders" is to "earn a living," or in other words, to earn money to purchase food to sustain oneself to come back and work another day (127-28). The Vril-ya eliminate "labor" in the true sense of the word. Their time goes into contemplation, pursuit of truth, and workmanship that creates objects of permanence.

3. When discussing the belief of the Vril-ya that animals and even plants partake in the afterlife as well as humans, the narrator approvingly quotes the nineteenth century zoologist Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz's

argument that it would be a "lamentable loss" if the afterlife did not allow for "the contemplation of the harmonies of an organic world" (qtd. in *The Coming Race* 48). That time and space for contemplation can be found following one's death would perhaps be some consolation to those who saw the ways of the Vril-ya as impossible to realize in this life.

4. When discussing Artifice and workmanship, it would be mistaken to interpret Arendt as championing *Homo Faber*. In fact, Patchen Markell in trying to provide a synopsis of what *The Human Condition* is about suggests her aim is in part "to summon us to defend the possibility of action against the threats imposed by the dominance, and invasiveness, of *Animal Laborans* and *Homo Faber*" (20). Her critical stance toward what she calls *Homo Faber* is apparent in the text, yet for the purpose of discussing the relationship of Bulwer's novel to its time period, it is most relevant to discuss how the term relates to the contrast she draws between labor and work(manship) and the elevation of one over the other, the replacement of work products to be used with labor products to be consumed.

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