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Writing the Occult: A Reading of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*

Abstract: This article examines the rhetoric of the occult in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), also known as *Vril: The Power of the Coming Race*, by placing the novel in the context of the late nineteenth-century Occult Revival. A writer, aristocrat, politician and Secretary of State for the Colonies when Benjamin Disraeli was Prime Minister, Bulwer-Lytton was one of the most eminent occultists of the Victorian age and a firm believer in the redemptive power of magic. As such, he supported the idea that occult practices could provide access to the deepest mysteries of the universe, freeing man from the constraints of materialism and the 'sterility' of the positivist episteme. Interestingly, Bulwer-Lytton had privileged contact with the vast panorama of occultism thanks to his personal acquaintance with Eliphas Lévi, the leading esotericist of the day. By observing Lévi's work, Bulwer-Lytton had the opportunity to expand his knowledge of the occult and refine an imaginary permeated by it. From a literary point of view, this would find significant reverberations in *The Coming Race*, one of the author's most enduring works and perhaps his spiritual testament, a novel which is imbued with an occult imagery that will be carefully deciphered in the course of this analysis.

Keywords: *The Coming Race*. Late-Victorian Occult Revival. Eliphas Lévi. Vril. Hollow-earth fiction.

1. *Late-Victorian Occultism*

The closing decades of the Victorian era witnessed a revival of occultism in Britain. During this period, an increasing number of people, mostly from the social, cultural and artistic *élite*, turned to magic and occult practices as powerful cognitive tools, triggering what has been called the 'Occult Revival'. This cultural phenomenon manifested itself in a variety of ways, ranging from the publication of occult treatises and periodicals to the creation of societies and institutions dedicated to the transmission of magical wisdom. At the root of the Occult Revival was a general dissatisfaction with the prevailing positivist episteme of the time, the stiffness of Victorian social norms, and the perceived obsolescence of traditional religious teachings. In contrast to these seemingly sterile paradigms, occultists sought a new kind of knowledge and spirituality, believing that magical practices could enable individuals to gain access to the deepest secrets of the universe and reveal the truth hidden beneath the phenomenal dimension.

In his seminal work *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions*, Mircea Eliade argues that the origins of modern occultism can be traced back to the figure of Eliphas Lévi.[1] Lévi, *alias* Alphonse Louis Constant, was

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[1] See M. Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions*, Chicago and

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born in Paris on 8 February 1810 into a modest family. After spending a few years as a seminarian at Saint-Sulpice, he decided to abandon religious life in order to become actively involved in the occult, writing a series of works that achieved inordinate fame at the time. His *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie* (1856), *L'Histoire de la Magie* (1859), and *La Clèf des Grands Mystères* (1861) laid the foundations for much of the occult speculation that followed. As Alison Butler states, the "[m]ain doctrine behind all of these books was the antiquity, efficacy and ubiquity of magic. Lévi believed that the symbolism of all religions answered to the one universal faith based upon the doctrines of magic and that, through magic, humanity could repossess the divine powers it once held".[2] Throughout his work, Lévi conceived of magic as a synthesis of all forms of knowledge, promoting the idea that occult practices could free the individual from material constraints and provide access to the spiritual world. At the same time, he held an elitist view of magic that was to have a profound influence on the Occult Revival. He openly claimed that only a select few would be able to master the secret doctrine, and repeatedly stressed the need for initiation to gain access to occult knowledge. To borrow Lévi's own words,

> Initiation is a preservative against the false lights of mysticism; it equips human reason with its relative value and proportional infallibility, connecting it with supreme reason by the chain of analogies. Hence the initiate knows no doubtful hopes, no absurd fears, because he has no irrational beliefs; he is acquainted with the extent of his power, and he can be bold without danger.[3]

Like Lévi, late nineteenth-century occultists had an elitist view of their art. They saw magic as a highly intellectual doctrine that was therefore inaccessible to the illiterate. In this regard, Alex Owen states that "[t]hose who dedicated themselves to the study of occultism and the magical arts referred to themselves as magicians without either apology or irony. […] The magic that they practiced was part of an elite, scholarly tradition and bore only a passing resemblance to the folkloric traditions of a receding rural Britain".[4] As a consequence, late nineteenth-century occultists considered themselves as scholars wholly dedicated to the study of the gnoseological potential of such practices. Since they belonged to an *élite* of a select few, they were not interested in proselytism, that is, in transmitting their knowledge to the masses, but rather in dialoguing with other initiates with whom they shared the same concerns. In this regard, it is clear that late-Victorian occultism was very different from the Spiritualist movement that had spread through Victorian society in earlier years. As Owen goes on to note, late nineteenth-century occultism represented an elitist counterpart to the latter, attaching little importance to the previously celebrated and distinctly bourgeois practice of mediumship and tending to emphasise the relevance of the newly discovered esoteric teachings of the East.[5]

London, The University of Chicago Press, 1976, p. 49.

[2] A. Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic: Invoking Tradition*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 111.

[3] E. Lévi, *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie*, Engl. trans. A.E. Waite, London, Rider & Company, (1856) 1896, p. 44.

[4] A. Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 8.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 5.

Given these premises, one cannot help noticing a clear parallel between late nineteenth-century occultism, with its highly intellectual components, and the scholarly breadth of Renaissance magic. Indeed, many of the characteristics of the Renaissance conception of magic seem to reappear within the Occult Revival. For Renaissance magicians, the study of the occult was inseparable from philosophical speculation. Magic was thus seen as the domain of a small circle who regarded it as an enriching source of knowledge. As Anton Faivre aptly observes, in the Renaissance "[e]sotericism was basically a matter for specialists, but while theologians addressed listeners who could understand, these specialists were more likely to address the cognoscenti, who by necessity, were other scholars".[6] Scholars such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola or Marsilio Ficino embodied the characteristics of the philosopher/sorcerer who sought to master esoteric practices in order to gain a deeper knowledge of the laws that govern the world. Therefore, they addressed their thoughts to other specialists rather than ordinary people.

Owen's earlier reflections provide a context for considering another aspect of the Occult Revival, namely its syncretic nature. Nile Green has even coined the definition "global occult"[7] to convey the mixture of European and non-European elements that underpins this cultural movement. For Green, late nineteenth-century occultism interweaves Western Renaissance magical knowledge with esoteric teachings from other geographical areas, mostly the East.[8] The encounter between seemingly distant cultural paradigms was facilitated, at the time, both by imperialist policies that exposed Western countries, especially Victorian Britain, to a variety of non-Western cultural phenomenologies, and by the progressive refinement of linguistic, ethnographic and archaeological tools that drew attention to the remains of many ancient civilisations. With regard to the latter, the rediscovery of Egyptian antiquity played a key role in the revival of occultism. Occultists were not deaf to the widespread Egyptomania of those years.[9] As such, they increasingly turned to Egypt as the cradle of magical thought or, as C.I. Lehrich puts it, an idealised land of wonders where man could communicate with the gods and where magical enchantments were performed daily.[10] Such a fascination would find an outlet in the occultists' constant use of Egyptian imagery in their rituals, writings and reflections, as well as in the various references to Egypt in the literary works of the time.

Scholars have also pointed to the influence exerted by Freemasonry in reviving occultism. As noted by D.A. Harvey, the "institution of Freemasonry, which emerged in its modern form in seventeenth-century Britain, provided a convenient vehicle for the transmission of a variety of esoteric beliefs".[11] Not only did a number of occultists

[6] A. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 8.

[7] N. Green, "The Global Occult: An Introduction", *History of Religions*, 54 (4), 2015, pp. 384-85.

[8] *Ibidem*.

[9] For more information on nineteenth-century Egyptomania, see D. Gange, *Dialogues with the Dead: Egyptology in British Culture and Religion, 1822-1922*, Oxford, OUP, 2013.

[10] See C.I. Lehrich, *The Occult Mind: Magic in Theory and Practice*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 2009, p. 3.

[11] D.A. Harvey, "Elite Magic in the Nineteenth Century", in D. Collins (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West: From Antiquity to the Present*, Cambridge, CUP, 2015, p. 550.

belong to Freemasonry, but its very structural organisation, rooted in initiation rites and secrecy, provided fertile ground for the growth of this elitist form of magic. In this respect, an evident parallel can be drawn between the initiatory structure of Masonic associations and that of the occult societies founded in the late nineteenth century. Presenting themselves as places where adepts could be introduced to magical knowledge, occult societies became the mainstay of the movement. Throughout the decades, more and more people underwent initiation in order to be admitted and gain access to the occult. Among these institutions, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn occupied a privileged position. Founded in 1888 by William Wynn Westcott, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and William Robert Woodman, the Golden Dawn took the form of an "esoteric society for practicing magicians",[12] attracting the attention of a number of notable figures of the time, such as Mina Bergson and William Butler Yeats.

As a concluding remark, it is important to underline that the Occult Revival rose in a historical phase of extraordinary technological and scientific progress, namely the Second Industrial Revolution. The groundbreaking technological discoveries of the time bore on the development of the movement in a contrastive way, as occultists increasingly began to assert the existence of hidden forces behind newly discovered phenomena, such as the electromagnetic field or X-rays. As Alison Butler remarks, this "[c]onflation of science and sorcery is characteristic of Victorian occultists and is a key feature in the nineteenth-century revival of magic".[13] Far from seeing science and magic as two separate and dichotomous realms, Victorian occultists believed in the existence of an inherent connection between the two, and claimed that science and technology could prove powerful tools in supporting their preternatural speculations.

2. *Edward Bulwer-Lytton and the Occult*

A writer, politician, dandy and, of course, occultist, Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-1873) was one of the key figures in the British Occult Revival. As J. Jeffrey Franklin points out, "[w]hile he [Bulwer-Lytton] of course was preceded in the century by many students of the esoteric and occult, and while many of his famous contemporaries also attended séances or consulted mesmeric physicians, few were as informed or as influential as Bulwer-Lytton. He was a dedicated, life-long student of occult spiritualities".[14]

Bulwer-Lytton's interests ranged from social and political issues to the arts and the supernatural. With regard to the latter, this writer would come to be known as one of the most informed occultists of his time, drawing on the knowledge of secret doctrines when writing novels such as *Zanoni* (1842), *A Strange Story* (1850), or the later *The Coming Race* (1871). At the same time, his association with the occult played

[12] A. Butler, "Magical Beginnings: The Intellectual Origins of the Victorian Occult Revival", *Limina*, 9, 2003, p. 79.

[13] A. Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic*, p. viii.

[14] J.J. Franklin, "The Evolution of Occult Spirituality in Victorian England and the Representative Case of Edward Bulwer-Lytton", in Id., *Spirit Matters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 2018, p. 29.

a key role in refining his own concepts of art as "a religious vocation" and of the artist as "a priest".[15] In Bulwer-Lytton's view, the artist, like a shamanic figure, was endowed with the task of capturing realities that transcend the material dimension and crystallising them on the page. In doing so, he was committed to reasserting the value of the spiritual dimension as opposed to the widespread materialism of the time.

Bulwer-Lytton's connection with occult circles has been the subject of much debate among scholars. There has, for example, been much talk about his alleged membership of the Rosicrucian Order. This misconception was given credence by the author's grandson, who said that Bulwer-Lytton was a member of the Rosicrucian Society and Grand Patron of the Order. At the same time, he argued that, as this was a secret society, it should come as no surprise that there is no document in Bulwer-Lytton's papers which might shed light on the connection, nor any mention of it in his correspondence.[16] However intriguing this theory may be, it is hard to get round the notion of there being no official document attesting to the writer's membership within this circle. In this respect, Christopher McIntosh speculates that Bulwer-Lytton was chosen and elected Honorary Grand Patron of the Rosicrucian Society of Anglia in 1871, without his knowledge, and in fact he never attended any of its meetings.[17] On the other hand, Marie Mulvey-Roberts argues that, if we assume "Bulwer was a member of a Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, his achievements in the arcane terrains of occult fiction may be attributable in part to first-hand experience. But his membership has not as yet been verified and claims such as that put forward by his grandson remain unsubstantiated".[18] Butler similarly insists that the writer had no connection with that circle, being "falsely rumoured to have served as the Grand Patron of the *Soc. Ros.* in 1871".[19]

If Bulwer-Lytton's affiliation with the Rosicrucian Society of Anglia seems dubious, it is undeniable that the author corresponded with one of the most important esotericists of the time, the aforementioned Eliphas Lévi, thanks to whom he refined his knowledge of magic and carried out a series of occult experiments. The ritual they performed on the roof of the Pantheon in London in 1861[20] and the occult experiments they conducted at Knebworth Castle in the same year are, in this respect, noteworthy.[21] Bulwer-Lytton's relationship with Lévi played a fundamental role in the writer's existential parabola. His acquaintance with this notable figure gave him the opportunity to broaden his knowledge in the field and refine an imaginary that would be permeated by telling echoes. From a literary point of view, this would find

[15] For a deeper understanding of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's view of art, see L. MITCHELL, *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters*, London and New York, Hambledon & London, 2003, p. 131.

[16] See R. BULWER-LYTTON, *The Life of Edward Bulwer, First Lord Lytton by his Grandson*, 1913, quoted in M. MULVEY-ROBERTS, *Gothic Immortals: The Fiction of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, London and New York, Routledge, 1990, p. 157.

[17] See C. MCINTOSH, *The Rosy Cross Unveiled: The History, Mythology and Rituals of an Occult Order*, Wellingborough, The Aquarian Press Limited, 1980, p. 110.

[18] M. MULVEY ROBERTS, *Gothic Immortals: The Fiction of the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross*, p. 157.

[19] A. BUTLER, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic*, pp. 78-79.

[20] See R.L. WOLF, *Strange Stories and Other Explorations in Victorian Fiction*, Boston, Gambit, 1971, p. 262.

[21] See G. GALLI, *Hitler e il nazismo magico. Le componenti esoteriche del Reich millenario*, Milano, Rizzoli, (1989) 2005, p. 39.

significant reverberations in *The Coming Race*, one of the author's most celebrated novels, in which references to Lévi's occult ideas are anything but veiled.

3. The Coming Race*: A Journey into the Occult*

Published few years before Bulwer-Lytton's death, *The Coming Race* (1871) can be regarded as the author's spiritual testament and one of his most enduring works. The novel focuses on an anonymous American protagonist's journey into the bowels of the earth and his encounter with the Vril-Ya, an extremely advanced race of beings whose customs, laws and history are described in detail throughout the narration.

The subject matter of the novel, namely the description of an underground journey and the encounter with apparently far more advanced beings than humans, should not be regarded as Bulwer-Lytton's invention. The novel draws upon a well-established genre in the literary panorama of the time, what Elizabeth Hope Chang calls "hollow earth fiction".[22] Such a genre grew out of the attempt to fictionalise the pseudo-scientific theory of the hollow earth, which, although very old, experienced a resurgence of popularity in the nineteenth century.[23] According to Alessandra Calanchi, the modern conceptualisation of the hollow-earth theory can be traced back to the English scientist Edmund Halley (1656-1742), who argued before the Royal Society that the earth was hollow and contained concentric spheres similar in size to planets such as Mars, Venus, or Mercury.[24] Halley's theories were later taken up by John Cleves Symmes, a writer and captain in the United States Army, who gave the hollow-earth theory renewed popularity. In 1818, Symmes wrote a handbill addressed to scientists, academics and politicians around the world to promote his idea that the earth was hollow and possibly habitable.[25] Soon afterwards, he became the initiator of the hollow-earth fiction genre with the publication of his novel *Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery* (1820), a literary translation of his own theoretical reflections. This text, which concerns Mr Seaborn's descent into the bowels of the earth and the encounter with the extremely advanced Symzonians, would have a great influence on a number of later works, including Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) and Mary Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1890), among others (including of course *The Coming Race*).[26]

In *The Coming Race*, a fictionalisation of the hollow-earth theory is interwoven with a pervasive rhetoric of the occult. In the words of R.L. Wolf, this novel is "[a]t once

[22] E. HOPE CHANG, "Hollow Earth Fiction and Environmental Form in the Late Nineteenth Century", *Contexts*, 38 (5), 2016, p. 387.

[23] For a detailed account of the history and development of the hollow-earth theory, see A. CALANCHI, "Una frontiera sotterranea? La *Hollow Earth Hypothesis* negli USA", in J. MARTEN e I. KLAVER (a cura di), *Il (sotto) suolo e l'immaginario*, Fano, Aras Edizioni, 2015, pp. 121-58.

[24] *Ibidem*, pp. 121-22.

[25] See D. GRIFFIN, "Hollow and Habitable Within: Symmes' Theory of Earth's Internal Structure and Polar Geography", *Physical Geography*, 25 (5), 2004, pp. 382-83.

[26] See E. HOPE CHANG, "Hollow Earth Fiction and Environmental Form in the Late Nineteenth Century", p. 387.

the climax and the summing up of Bulwer's long love affair with the supernatural".[27] If it is true that the book is partly inspired by the model of *Symzonia* and draws upon the paradigms of the hollow-earth fiction, it is also true that it deliberately transfigures key concepts of the Occult Revival, thus testifying to the author's longstanding preoccupation with magic and the supernatural.

Key to the narrative is Bulwer-Lytton's portrait of the Vril-ya, a fully developed underground race provisioned with vril, a miraculous fluid that has been instrumental in the blooming of their civilisation. The term 'Vril-ya' itself, which literally translates as 'the civilised nations', stands out as a reverential tribute to this substance and its paramount role in the life of this race. Indeed, the mastery of vril allows the Vril-ya to fly, heal the most severe wounds and alter the very structure of matter. At the same time, this fluid has a highly destructive power, enabling the Vril-ya to easily annihilate any enemy. Most interesting is the fluid's ability to bestow wisdom and harmony upon its users. Since its discovery, the Vril-ya have undergone an extraordinary process of evolution, freeing themselves from the constraints of earthly passions. As a result of this process, war, hatred, conflict and envy have gradually disappeared from their society, and this race now lives in a seemingly perpetual state of interior peace.

As I will show, Bulwer-Lytton's description of vril seems to draw on a palimpsest of extratextual occult sources that, if duly deciphered, provide crucial information about the hidden meanings standing behind the definition of this fluid. Therefore, it is useful to take a closer look at this passage:

> I should call it [vril] 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, etc. These people consider that in vril they have arrived at the unity in natural energetic agencies, which has been conjectured by many philosophers above ground, and which Faraday thus intimates under the more cautious term of correlation.[28]

In this excerpt, the novel's protagonist compares vril to electricity, or more precisely to a synthesis of various phenomena belonging to the electromagnetic field. In doing so, he equates two seemingly dichotomous realms: the mystical and the scientific.[29] Viewed through the lens of late nineteenth-century occultism, this correlation takes on a profound significance, functioning as evidence of the interweaving of magical beliefs and scientific discoveries that characterised the period. Eleanor Dobson highlights how the conflation of the electromagnetic field with the occult was central to the Victorian paradigm of the supernatural, as for many late-Victorian occultists "[t]he matter through which light and electrical signals passed was envisaged as the same substance which allowed the spirits to fluctuate between visible and invisible forms".[30] Like many of his contemporaries, Bulwer-Lytton believed in the existence of a common

[27] R.L. Wolf, *Strange Stories and Other Explorations in Victorian Fiction*, p. 323.

[28] E. Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race*, Peterborough, Broadview Press, (1871) 2002, pp. 45-46. In other editions, the book's title appears as *Vril: The Power of the Coming Race*.

[29] See L. Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters*, p. 142.

[30] E. Dobson, "Gods and Ghost-Light: Ancient Egypt, Electricity, and X-Rays", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 45 (1), 2018, pp. 119-20.

thread between electricity and the supernatural, and claimed that electromagnetism, if properly harnessed, could unleash hitherto unimagined powers. Writing to John Foster in 1870, the author summed it up perfectly when he said: "I do not mean Vril for Mesmerism. But for electricity developed into uses as yet only dimly guessed and including whatever there may be genuine in mesmerism, which I hold to be a mere branch current of the one great fluid pervading all Nature".[31] According to Bulwer-Lytton, electricity might prove an extremely useful tool for accessing the supernatural, eventually developing properties similar to those of the imaginary fluid he described in *The Coming Race.*

At the same time, vril is defined as "the all-permeating fluid",[32] a definition similar to that of "the one great fluid pervading all Nature"[33] in the letter to Foster. This notion, which casts vril as the *logos* in the universe and as the intrinsic principle animating nature, recalls a pantheistic view that was already present in the Renaissance magical tradition. As Antoine Faivre notes, the "word magia, so important in the Renaissance imaginary, truly calls forth that idea of a Nature, seen, known, and experienced as essentially alive in all its part, often inhabited and traversed by a light or a hidden fire circulating through it".[34]

The Renaissance concept of living nature was revived by nineteenth-century occultists, who postulated the existence of immaterial forces permeating the cosmos. These theories certainly had a major influence on Bulwer-Lytton's conception of vril. According to Aurélie Choné, for example, the delineation of vril is similar to that of the Odic force defined by Baron Karl Ludwig von Reichenbach, namely a vitalistic substance that circulates in the universe and is associated with electricity, magnetism, and heat.[35] There is also a strong resemblance between Bulwer-Lytton's imaginary fluid and the Indian mystic Swami Vivekananda's reformulation of the ancient concept of *prana*[36] as the synthesis of all energetic phenomena: "What moves the steam engine? *Prana*, acting through the steam. What are all these phenomena of electricity and so forth but *Prana*? What is physical science? The science of *Pranayama* (breath control),

[31] E. BULWER-LYTTON, "Letter to John Foster" (1870), quoted in L. MITCHELL, *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters*, p. 230.

[32] E. BULWER-LYTTON, *The Coming Race*, p. 53.

[33] E. BULWER-LYTTON, "Letter to John Foster", p. 230.

[34] A. FAIVRE, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 11.

[35] See A. CHONÉ, "La force Vril entre science, fiction et occultisme: les enjeux de la réception ésotérique du roman d'Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race* (1871)", in F. WILLMANN (ed.), *La Science-Fiction entre Cassandre et Prométhée*, Nancy, Presses universitaires de Nancy, 2011, p. 111.

[36] Despite the acclaim it received during the Occult Revival, Swami Vivekananda's view of *prana* actually derived from a misunderstanding of the original Sanskrit concept presented in the *Upanishads*. To truly grasp the essence of this concept, one must delve into its etymology, where 'pra-' means 'forward' and 'an' corresponds to 'movement' or 'breathing'. Far from being concerned solely with energetic phenomena, the original Sanskrit term refers to a universal, omnipresent vital force, a breath of life in a constant state of creative expansion within the material realm. For a deeper investigation, see K.G. ZYSK, "The Bodily Winds in Ancient India Revisited", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13, 2007, pp. 105-15 and D.S. ZOHERER, "From *Fluidum* to *Prāṇa*: Reading Mesmerism through Orientalist Lenses", in L. POKORNY and F. WINTER (eds), *The Occult Nineteenth Century: Roots, Developments, and Impact on the Modern World*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 85-110.

by external means".[37] Choné also stresses the influence exerted by Mesmerism[38] and Galvanism[39] on the author's depiction of vril.

While it is true that the above theories may have influenced Bulwer-Lytton, it is my contention that the author's concept of an 'all-permeating fluid' endowed with extraordinary properties was primarily inspired by the occult meditations of Eliphas Lévi, and in particular by his concept of 'astral light'.[40] Lévi defined the astral light as a universal magnetic force and an "all-penetrating fluid",[41] claiming that its control was the key to all occult knowledge.[42] By controlling this substance, one could potentially alter the natural cycle of the seasons, simulate daytime during the night, establish instantaneous communication over vast distances, gain insight into events happening on the other side of the globe, and produce healing or damaging effects from afar.[43] Bulwer-Lytton's description of the powers of vril sounds similar to that of astral light. In this regard, we read that

> These subterranean philosophers assert that by one operation of vril […] they can influence the variations of temperature – in plain words, the weather; that by other operations, akin to those ascribed to mesmerism, electro-biology, odic force, etc., but applied scientifically, through vril conductors, they can exercise influence over minds, and bodies animal and vegetable, to an extent not surpassed in the romances of our mystics.[44]

Both substances are thus presented as capable of healing and destroying, of building and dismantling. Interestingly, Lévi claimed that the magnetic vibrations of astral light could be controlled by a magic wand and that, when channelled into a human body, would give the magician mastery over them: "By the aid of these vibrations he influences the nervous system of persons made subject to his action, accelerates or suspends the currents of life, soothes or tortures, heals or hurts – in fine, slays or brings to life".[45] An obvious echo of this description can be found in Bulwer-Lytton's depiction of the Vril-ya and their ability to control an individual's psyche. As such, equipped with a

[37] S. Vivekananda quoted in N. Green, "The Global Occult: An Introduction", p. 386.

[38] Originating from Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), a German physician and graduate of the University of Vienna, Mesmerism soon spread throughout Europe, arguing for the existence of a great magnetic agent that, in the form of a subtle fluid, would pervade all nature and the living world to various degrees. See A. Choné, "La force Vril entre science, fiction et occultisme: les enjeux de la réception ésotérique du roman d'Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race* (1871)", p. 110.

[39] At the end of the eighteenth century, the Italian scientist Luigi Galvani noticed that a frog's leg contracted when its muscle and nerve were connected by a metal arc. To explain this phenomenon, Galvani postulated the existence of an electric fluid flowing from the nerve to the muscle, which he called 'galvanic fluid'. This discovery would attract the attention of a number of scientists in the following decades, leading to discussions and debates about the exact nature of the phenomenon. See N. Kipnis, "Luigi Galvani and the Debate on Animal Electricity, 1791-1800", *Annals of Science*, 44 (2), 1987, pp. 107-108.

[40] Chone's reading of *The Coming Race* also includes a reference to astral light as a source of inspiration for the depiction of vril. See A. Choné, "La force Vril entre science, fiction et occultisme: les enjeux de la réception ésotérique du roman d'Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race* (1871)", p. 111.

[41] E. Lévi, *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie*, p. 11.

[42] See C. McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1972, p. 9.

[43] See E. Lévi, *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie*, p. 8.

[44] E. Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race*, p. 46.

[45] E. Lévi, *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie*, p. 30.

vril-impregnated wand, the Vril-ya are able to influence people's minds, hypnotise and control them, or alleviate their fears and anxieties.

Similarly, references to Lévi's occult writings seem to recur in Bulwer-Lytton's description of the physical appearance of the Vril-ya. Throughout the story, the Vril-ya are described as an anthropomorphic race of extraordinary, if disturbing, beauty. Much like simulacra, they both embody and muddle up human traits. Speaking of one of the Vril-ya, the main character claims that it "was the face of man, but yet of a type of man distinct from our known extant races".[46] Thus, the protagonist's encounters seem to be filled with awe and terror, two interrelated as well as contrasting emotions reminiscent of the Romantic notion of the sublime and, at the same time, of the ancient Greek concept of *thauma.* Indeed, the Vril-ya's ideal beauty conceals an uncanny menace, as if a brutal force were hidden beneath the harmony of their forms. As the character claims,

> [m]y eyes opened upon a group of silent forms, seated around me in the gravity and quietude of Orientals – all more or less like the first stranger; the same mantling wings, the same fashion of garment, the same sphinx-like faces, with the deep dark eyes and red man's colour; above all, the same type of race – race akin to man's, but infinitely stronger of form and grandeur of aspect – and inspiring the same unutterable feeling of dread.[47]

The Vril-ya's face resembles that of the Sphinx, with its harmonious and mysterious features. Interestingly, in *Dogme et rituel de la Haute Magie*, Lévi states that

> He who aspires to be a sage and to know the Great Enigma of Nature must be the heir and despoiler of the sphinx: his the human head, in order to possess speech; his the eagle's wings, in order to scale the heights; his the bull's flanks, in order to furrow the depths; his the lion's talons, to make a way on the right and the left, before and behind.[48]

Bulwer-Lytton's characterisation of the Vril-ya as winged sphinx-like beings seems similar to Lévi's description quoted above. In making such a connection, Bulwer-Lytton effectively equates this subterranean race with the paradigmatic traits of the Sage, portraying them as the custodians of magic and its groundbreaking power.

To explore further the occult elements contained in the novel, it may be useful to draw attention to the belief system of the Vril-ya. In addition to their attribution of divine power to vril, this underground civilisation is said to be firmly committed to a particular religious doctrine. They acknowledge the existence of a deity whom they reverently refer to as the 'Divine Creator', the 'Sustainer of the Universe', or the 'Supreme Being'. The Vril-ya do not ascribe human attributes to such a being and discourage any speculation as to its nature. Such a characterisation of an indefinable deity who, like a demiurge, orchestrates the laws of the universe, does not proceed along the lines of the Abrahamic religions, with their belief in a paternal and anthropomorphic God. On the contrary, it is reminiscent of the concept of the Supreme Being or 'Great Architect', typical of Freemasonry and of many esoteric doctrines. In presenting such an image,

[46] *Ibidem*, p. 24.
[47] *Ibidem*, pp. 28-29.
[48] *Ibidem*, p. 4.

Bulwer-Lytton deliberately departs from Western traditional religious paradigms and, in keeping with a common thread running through late nineteenth-century occultism, offers a perspective in which the occult and religious spirituality are inextricably intertwined.

Bulwer-Lytton's description of the Vril-ya's belief system also allows us to make a final observation about the occult rhetoric of the novel, namely its dialogue with the widespread Egyptomania of the time. *The Coming Race* is in fact replete with references to Egyptian culture. Regarding the religious sphere, for example, we are told that in "writing, they [the Vril-ya] deem it irreverent to express the Supreme Being by any special name. He is symbolised by what may be termed the hieroglyphic of a pyramid, A".[49] Egyptian imagery is also used to describe the physical appearance of the Vril-ya, as previously emphasised by references to their sphinx-like face. Furthermore, Egyptian features seem to underpin the urban structure of this underground society, as these passages illustrate:

> Straining my eye farther down, I clearly beheld at a distance the outline of some large building. It could not be mere natural rock, it was too symmetrical, with huge heavy Egyptian-like columns, and the whole lighted as from within.[50]
> Midway in this thoroughfare we stopped at a building that differed from those we had hitherto passed, inasmuch as it formed three sides of a vast court, at the angles of which were lofty pyramidal towers.[51]

It is easy to surmise how such descriptions reflected the prevailing fascination with Egyptian antiquity that characterised the late nineteenth century. This enchantment with Egypt and its ancient past was then of a piece with the emergence of a romantic, if somewhat deceptive, view of Egypt as a bewitched realm, an idyllic topography that never really existed. Hence Bulwer-Lytton's further transfiguration of it into the fictional construction of a society where magic, knowledge and moral values were inextricably linked.

4. *Conclusion*

The result of a unique, creative blend of occultism and hollow-earth fiction, *The Coming Race* (1871) weaves its narrative tapestry around the American protagonist's subterranean journey and his encounter with the winged, sphinx-like Vril-ya, superhuman creatures of piercing, sinister beauty and extraordinary strength. As I have attempted to show, in depicting this underground race, and in describing the miraculous fluid ('vril') with which they are endowed, the novel engaged with the cultural climate of the coeval Occult Revival, an epistemic trend characterised by a strong shared concern with magic and occult practices, and the belief that hidden forces lurk beneath the phenomenal dimension. In this respect, *The Coming Race* seems to draw heavily on the occult writings of Eliphas Lévi, the most important esotericist of the period. In particular, I have tried to show that Bulwer-Lytton's definition of vril

[49] E. Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race*, p. 73.
[50] *Ibidem*, p. 20.
[51] *Ibidem*, p. 31.

derives directly from Lévi's concept of 'astral light', a supernatural force supposedly pervading the universe and exerting healing as well as destructive powers.

The occult rhetoric of the novel informs both the religious beliefs of the Vril-ya and their social system. The Vril-ya's worship of a nameless, indefinable deity departs from traditional religious paradigms and is more reminiscent of the esoteric and Masonic belief in a Supreme Being and 'Great Architect' of the Universe. Finally, the novel can be said to bear witness to the Egyptomania that prevailed at the time. Indeed, it contains a number of references to Egypt and its ancient culture which serve as a backdrop for the portrayal of a society in which magic, knowledge and moral values intertwine.

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