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IN APRIL 1907, twenty-six years after his death, in Bloomsbury Square where he had lived as a boy, Disraeli was the subject of a paper delivered to the progressive discussion group, the Rainbow Circle, by the Liberal MP J. M. Robertson.

Disraeli [the Circle heard], the most notable egoist of his generation, entered public life to push his own fortunes. His talk, like his dress, was an act of self-obtrusion, a flaunting of his cleverness. He had no political ideals or convictions, and never cared for any cause as such ... The secret of his ultimate popular success was his appeal to the passions of racial enmity & belligerence – as witnessed for example in his antagonism to Russia. All that he did was to create jingoism. Tried by the standards of moral character and moral aim, Disraeli has no aspect of greatness. He was a man of abnormal pertinacity & determination, a strong-willed & self-assertive eccentric, but as a statesman & as a politician, he was outclassed by his opponents in his own country & in his own day.

Not surprisingly, among these heirs to the philosophic radicalism Disraeli had lampooned, the minutes record ‘general agreement’ with Robertson’s views, but, less predictably, they also record some elements of a warmer appreciation and a subtler analysis. It was suggested in the discussion

that Disraeli was great in that he captured the great tory party, that his Irish policy was sincere, that the democratic idea that permeates the tory party at the present day was due in some measure to him, & that there was a certain amount of elevating ideas beneath all his eccentricity & egoism. Some stress was laid upon his essentially Asiatic temperament, character & outlook.

(‘Asiatic’ was a nice progressive synonym for ‘Jewish’.)¹

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It was not a bad miniature of the debate that began in Disraeli's lifetime and has continued to this day, as to whether he was a mere cynical careerist and charlatan or a statesman of constructive achievement and genuine vision, and as to how far his British life had to be understood in terms of adaptation to local prejudices and manipulation of native materials by one who, in his inmost nature and feeling, was not what Britons meant by British. The images of actor, artist and alien have vied with those of statesman, sage and patriot, to the immense confusion of those who have innocently supposed that they could not all be true – an error Disraeli would never have made.

As the Rainbow Circle's minutes suggest, evaluation of Disraeli's career has had much to do with political partisanship, moral fastidiousness and prejudice against the outsider. His role in giving the Conservatives a plausible title to be a 'popular' and 'national' party, by the passing of the Second Reform bill in 1867 and a clutch of social measures between 1874 and 1880, and by his seizure in the 1870s of the national and imperial platform which was to sustain them so effectively for some eighty years, made him an inevitable totem of the party and even a guru of its progressive wing. It simultaneously caused opponents whose political patents it infringed or whose political opportunities it undermined to regard him as a political necromancer, who by black arts had corrupted the soul of the Tory party and the British nation, exploiting the greed for office of the one, the pride of power of the other, in order to take the first place in a country to which by blood and sentiment he did not truly belong. The two views have intermingled as much as clashed. Conservatives have sometimes disliked Disraeli's methods and suspected his motives, at the same time as admiring his achievement and profiting by his legacy. Those to the left have enjoyed the wit and bravado of an outsider's capture of the Tory party and the prime ministership, even while deploring the uses to which his victories were put and the cynical egoism which they subserved; or, by emphasising Disraeli's youthful radicalism and later appropriation of much that passed for liberalism, have managed to regard him almost as one of their own, marooned in the wrong party but beguiling it into broader views and better courses.

The ambiguities of these interweaving attitudes reflect the ambiguity of their subject. Through them runs the difficulty even close and sym-

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pathetic contemporaries experienced in gauging whether Disraeli was ‘genuine’ or ‘serious’, whether any backbone of principle or belief underlay his brilliant instinct of performance and his ceaseless manoeuvring for position. ‘How’, wrote his friend and political pupil, Lord Stanley, in 1861, ‘can I reconcile his open ridicule, in private, of all religions, with his preaching up of a new church-and-state agitation? or how can I help seeing that glory and power, rather than the public good, have been his objects? He has at least the merit, in this last respect, of being no hypocrite.’ Allies and opponents, admirers and critics, alike, often combined a lively appreciation of Disraeli’s talents with the sensation, resentful or amused, that they were being had. Disraeli, wrote Wilfrid Scawen Blunt in 1903, was

a very complete *farceur* ... you cannot persuade me that he ever for an instant took himself seriously, or expected any but the stolid among his contemporaries to accept him so. His *Semitic* politics of course were genuine enough ... Our dull English nation deserved what it got, and there is nothing funnier in history than the way in which he cajoled our square-toed aristocratic Party to put off its respectable broad-cloth, and robe itself in his suit of Imperial spangles, and our fine ladies after his death to worship their old world-weary Hebrew beguiler under the innocent form of a primrose.

Shorn of the distancing references to Disraeli’s Jewishness, this has much in common with the verdict of a historian who has practised as a politician, Lord Jenkins, that Disraeli is, among British political figures, ‘captain of the impudents’.²

Recent interpretation of Disraeli has rested less on new research than on shifts in the angle of vision. Much of the evidence on which we depend for our knowledge of him he broadcast himself, in his novels and other writings and in his speeches. They and his letters and papers are so extensively quoted in the six-volume biography published between 1910 and 1920 by W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, Conservative imperialists both, but not altogether uncritical admirers, that their work constitutes a compendium of source materials broad and honest enough to permit evaluations differing widely from their own. Writing in the 1960s the standard modern account of Disraeli, Lord Blake was able to be franker about such things as his sexual and

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financial entanglements, and to take advantage of B. R. Jerman's important exploration of his early years,³ but for the main lines of Disraeli's career the corpus of knowledge he had to work with was not very much larger than that available to Monypenny and Buckle. So it has remained, despite a steady flow of monographs touching on aspects of Disraeli's political and literary career, and the publication in the diaries of the fifteenth earl of Derby of an important set of glimpses by a close friend and colleague. Even the majestic Kingston edition of Disraeli's letters (often mangled in previous publication), which began to appear in 1982, has reached the 1850s without so far bringing to light anything which compels major revision of existing views, though its uncovering of a hitherto unrecognised novel of 1834 by Disraeli and his sister, *A Year at Hartlebury or The Election*, has enlarged our insight into the former's first venture in politics. It seems improbable that new caches of evidence of first-rate significance will appear, and likely that, while research will continue to extend our grasp of the detail and context of Disraeli's career, advance in understanding will come primarily by more sensitive reflection on what has, for the most part, been long familiar.

The ease and lucidity of its style, the urbanity and shrewdness of its judgements, and the apparent comprehensiveness of its treatment readily explain why, since its publication in 1966, Robert Blake's *Disraeli* has sometimes seemed to render further reflection unnecessary. As a narrative of Disraeli's career, it is hard to think that it will be surpassed. As an analysis of what drove and shaped that career, however, some recent writing has found it less commanding and complete. The crux lies in Disraeli's intellectual and emotional, rather than political, biography, or in the problem of how to integrate the one with the other, and the questions at issue were already largely familiar to the Rainbow Circle. They centre around the problem of Disraeli's intellectual integrity. Are the social, political, religious and racial ideas which he propounded so vividly in the 1830s and 1840s, and repeated or re-endorsed at intervals later on, to be taken seriously, even regarded as 'principles' supplying unity and coherence to his public career, or must they be seen as a glittering farrago of youthful exuberances, largely or wholly set aside in the shifts and exigencies of climbing to political emi-

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nence? Or again, should they be understood, as I suggested in a 1987 article,⁴ not as a blueprint for political action or as a mere scattering of intellectual wild oats, but as an attempt to create and impose a definition of the identity, needs and destiny of the Tory party and the English nation which would offer a home and a leading role in both to an outsider who might seem to belong naturally to neither?

The tendency of Lord Blake's essentially political biography is to push Disraeli's ideas to the periphery. Blake defends his subject against the charge of insincerity and lack of principle, but only by treating the 'Tory idea' he elaborated in his youth as a flourish unconnected with his subsequent career as a front-bench politician, which was directed, not by the notions of Young England, but by a sincere, if commonplace, Tory belief in the supreme value of the landed interest as the guarantee of the stability and greatness of England and the liberties of her people. A somewhat similar disjunction is operated by Peter Ghosh's view that, even if Disraeli had 'principles sufficient to justify his personal integrity', they did not direct his actions: he was guided as a Tory leader from the late 1840s by a set of working principles resting on such prosaic foundations as 'Francophilism and his estimate of the political value of low taxation', the tactical advantage of which was to enable him to spend most of his mature career competing with Gladstone for that supreme electoral talisman, the Peelite mantle of economical finance and moderate progress.⁵ This chopping of Disraeli into two intellectually unconnected or inconsistent halves, the young swash-buckler and the mature, pragmatic leader, presents some problems. It tends to deny that the child is father of the man, and to deprive Disraeli of a consistency of outlook and wholeness of political conception which it was, throughout his life, one of his central aims to assert. It turns into the epiphenomena of the career much that was central in the living of the life.

In a dashing survey of Disraeli's ideas in 1990, John Vincent restored them to prominence partly by inverting the normal order of importance between Disraeli's intellectual achievement and his political. Losing most of the general elections he fought, inept at handling public opinion and his own party, largely ineffectual in government, Disraeli is downgraded as a politician, at the same time as he is seen as an acute exponent

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of political sociology, ahead of his age in analysing the problems of emergent urban and industrial society, even if his recipe for tackling them hardly went beyond ‘the achievement of an era of good feeling’ through charismatic leadership, well chosen ‘social platitudes’, and the restoration of the sense of social responsibility among the upper classes.⁶ Others, myself included, have focused on the origin and function of Disraeli’s ideas in terms of their instrumentality in the task of integrating what he described as his ‘continental’ and ‘revolutionary’ mind into his English environment in a way which would enable him to achieve not a mere passive assimilation but the pinnacle of power. How far these ideas corresponded to ‘reality’, embodied ‘truth’, or constituted ‘principles’ intended to materialise in policies, has been seen as a less illuminating question than that of what they were meant to do, and did, in relation to the intellectual and emotional needs, as well as the tactical necessities, of their author. The English compulsion to give Disraeli marks on some notional scale of seriousness of purpose and consistency of belief and practice has been modified by a concern to elucidate the way in which he struggled for success, not simply in advancing his fortunes but in reconciling the diverse aspects of his personality and inheritance with each other and with the society in which he had to operate, in an emotionally harmonious, intellectually satisfying, and aesthetically pleasing synthesis. Disraeli was, or aspired to be, an artist: the problem is to discern the sources and mechanism of his art and the kind of wholeness it aimed to achieve.

In this, Disraeli’s Jewishness and his romanticism have been highlighted, the one as presenting an acute problem of identity for a convert to Christianity seeking to rise in a formally Christian polity and to claim the leadership of the English nation, the other as a mode of thought and feeling, largely continental in inspiration, which combined with Jewishness both to accentuate Disraeli’s quality of strangeness in English life and in so doing to supply the peculiar, detached and transformational vision which enabled him to conjure up a ‘pure’ Tory tradition and a ‘true’ English nation within which he could live and lead. Lord Blake’s study has little truck with either. Romanticism, as a *modus operandi* helping Disraeli to establish the terms of composition between his ‘genius’ and the external world, does not figure. Jewishness is largely

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dismissed as a matter of practical import with the argument that it was rather the Italian than the Jewish temperament that predominated in Disraeli (though his need to come to terms with his Jewish identity does receive recognition in the discussion of *Tancred* and in Blake's subsequent sketch of his journey to the Near East).⁷

Following the lead of such perceptive commentators as Israel Zangwill and Philip Rieff (who do not appear in Blake's bibliography) and Isaiah Berlin (whose important lecture on Disraeli and Marx came later), more recent writers such as Todd Endelman and Stanley Weintraub have sought to bring out the character of Disraeli's Jewishness and the problems which it posed for him.⁸ Preceded by the impressive but little known work of Raymond Maitre, literary scholars such as Daniel Schwarz and students of Disraeli's intellectual formation like Charles Richmond have looked at the role of the romantic vision in the frantic process of self-fashioning which occupied the early years.⁹ Both streams have contributed to a growing sense of the intricacy of Disraeli's performance and of the need to relate it to European currents of thought and feeling, against which the 'continental' and 'revolutionary' mind appears, not strange and anomalous, as when set in a narrowly conceived English frame and prodded by the blunt instruments of Anglo-Saxon empiricism, but familiar and even fashionable.

Sometimes, too, it appears derivative and commonplace. Disraeli was not an original or a profound thinker. As Richard Faber has said, he was 'not so much deep as complex', and it is the complexities that fascinate. His thought presents not a compelling system but an intriguing reticulation. Some of it, like some of his self-presentation in speech, manner and dress, was extravagant to excess, fantastical to the point of absurdity, ambiguous and ironical in the highest degree. Alarmed, as Lord Blake notes, by the irony and the fancy, sober Britons have tended to approach Disraeli with their guard up, determined not to be cozened.¹⁰ But the guard is better dropped, for only by taking Disraeli on his own terms can we discover what those terms were. If that risks taking him at face value, it avoids the grosser error of ignoring the value which attaches in human transactions – and which he certainly attached – to face. In standing none of his nonsense, you catch very little of his drift.

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The task of Disraeli's biographers has always been daunting, to the degree that some of his contemporaries wondered whether it was even possible. Carnarvon, who had sat in two cabinets with him, noted at his death: 'I doubt much if there is anyone living who combines all the conditions for a faithful description & analysis of so singular a life & character.' 'There was', Gladstone declared in 1895, 'no life which required so much to be written as that of Disraeli and which it was so difficult, if not impossible, to write with any approach to faithfulness.' The need to integrate recent study of Disraeli's mentality into the familiar story of the political career makes matters no easier. None the less, it is time to march to the sound of the guns. 'Every book', Disraeli once told Metternich, 'is a battle lost or won.'¹¹