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Introduction

PAUL SMITH

There has been something like a new wave of study of Disraeli in the last decade and a half, in which much attention has been paid to aspects of his personality and *œuvre* inadequately recognized or analysed in the standard accounts, especially his social and political ideas, his style of self-presentation, and the significance of his Jewish origins and his assumption of the romantic mode.¹ This volume tries to deepen and expand those explorations for the most formative period of his life, up to about 1850, in the belief that Disraeli sought strenuously to construct the persona with which he confronted the world, and that the analysis of that process of construction – the situation and the stimuli to which it responded, the goals it sought to reach, the materials which it employed, and the manner in which it was pursued – offers the best prospect that we have of advancing our understanding of his character.

For this purpose, we need to escape from the historiography which treats Disraeli, perhaps unconsciously, as an aberrant Victorian, judging him, often in highly moralistic terms, by the standards of an age in which he was already an anachronism and a culture to which he only partially belonged, and therefore seeing him as a deviant from a norm he did not acknowledge. The studies here collected attempt to see him as himself – a product of Jewish origins and European intellectual strains which made him in some sense and degree a stranger and a sojourner in England, and obliged him to pursue in society, literature and politics an intense effort of denization, through which his ‘genius’ could be materialized in terms appropriate to its physical location and to its need to dominate. The task involves giving careful scrutiny to Disraeli’s sensibility and ideas both in their derivation and in their adaptation to the necessities of his progress in

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an often unsympathetic environment. Disraeli was a highly derivative thinker, and as we locate the springs of his inspiration in a wide spectrum of European thought, literature, and social and aesthetic consciousness, so it becomes possible to set him in a firm context of the cultural development of his age. Related to European trends in, for example, Jewish emancipation and assimilation, or romantic self-formation, he appears less isolated and strange than when viewed against a purely English background. In placing him in his proper cultural context, we may better understand not only Disraeli himself, and the nature of the transaction between his 'genius' and the society with which it had to negotiate, but also the forms of expression and action of some of the more important European intellectual and social tendencies of his age.

The process of self-fashioning reached its public apogee in the creation of the political persona with which Disraeli mounted to the leadership of the Conservative party and the prime ministership of England, and engaged in the contest with Gladstone which forms a convenient focus for those who like to take their Victorian politics in the form of dramatic antithesis between personalities apparently at opposite poles of temperament and belief. Here, however, Disraeli's early life is considered not as a prologue to, nor a preparation for, nor an explanation of, the ascent to high office, but rather as a struggle to materialize and exhibit his 'genius', in which politics was one of several forms of expression and fields of action, alongside literature, social climbing, and the effort to seize and guide the mind of the age on such topical and exploitable themes as the determining force of race in history, the advance of the democratic at the expense of the aristocratic spirit, the social and political implications of capitalist industrialism, and the nature and destiny of English nationhood.

Disraeli's preoccupation with 'genius' is the main connecting thread through these chapters. Like much else, it suggests the influence of his father. If he was not quite, as he would put it, 'born in a library',² he was certainly largely formed as a boy by reading in his father's. Isaac D'Israeli's inability to produce a convincing demonstration of high literary talent of his own had early led him to specialize in fluttering round the flame of other people's. In successive editions (1795–1840) of what was originally titled *An Essay on the Manners and Genius of the Literary Character*, he pottered to provide an anatomy of 'genius', considered first as the characteristic disposition of writers, but increasingly also as the phenomenon of supreme intellectual power.³ Benjamin Disraeli grew up in an environment strewn with anecdotes of genius and much exercised about

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the mechanism of being or becoming a genius. It was natural for a boy of talent and ardour to infer that the materialization and demonstration of genius was what life was about.

As Charles Richmond demonstrates, however, in his study of Disraeli's education, the examples of preternatural ability and dazzling achievement that first appealed to the young Disraeli were men who had gained power rather than written books. From the first, Disraeli was contemplating the contrast between the life of action and the life of artistic creation, between the corruption which seemed to be involved in success in the one and the purity which seemed to attend dedication to the other. It was clear that in either case the individual genius could not impose itself, indeed could not even form itself, except in interaction with, and adaptation to, the genius of the age in which it lived and the genius of the place which it inhabited, modify the terms of the problem in its favour though it might by asserting the definition of the two last which offered it the best opportunities. The negotiations and transactions involved in this relationship run through all these chapters, as they ran constantly in Disraeli's mind. To recognize, define and sharpen your genius was useless unless you could also recognize the point and method of its successful insertion into its environment. 'Spirit of the Times. To know it & one's self the secret of success', he entered in his commonplace book in 1842.⁴ What he hankered after was what he called, in acknowledging his father's lack of it, 'that rare creative power, which the blended and simultaneous influence of the individual organisation and the spirit of the age, reciprocally acting upon each other, can alone, perhaps, perfectly develop'.⁵

In gauging the character of, and working out the relation between, his 'individual organisation' (that is, his psychological make-up) and the spirit of the time and place, Disraeli had more incentive and more latitude than many of his contemporaries. Without assured station in English society (if with some *entrée* through his father to the world of *belles lettres*), and without inherited standpoint in English politics, he was less directed than they by conventional social patterning or traditionary prejudice. He was not pressed in the mould of public school and university education, but left to the free range of his father's shelves. He was left more than most to invent himself, and even to invent the world he wished to conquer, with the aid of the romantic idealism which he caught at secondhand from Germany via Madame de Staël. The Kantian lesson he wrote down, that it was the power of the understanding 'which gives laws to exterior nature and not exterior nature to it',⁶ was one which he did not forget. The

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conviction which sustained him in the struggles of his early career was that the force of individual genius could shape the terms of its reception into the world by imposing upon contemporaries its own reconceptualization of that world. It was that power which made it possible for the 'destiny' in which Disraeli so strongly believed to be accomplished. If his notion of the superiority of mind over the obdurate density of matter did not extend quite to the transcendentalism which he noted down from Madame de Staël's characterization of Fichte,⁷ he evidently sensed the application to his needs of that philosopher's doctrine that 'every human being ... is alike in this, that underlying the various manifestations of his life, there is one impulse, which amid all change persists unchanged ... Incidentally, the self-comprehension of this impulse and its translation into ideas creates the world, and there is no other world but this world, which is created thus in thought, not freely but of necessity.'⁸

The imperious necessity of realizing the true nature of his genius and translating it into mastery over his environment drove the young Disraeli through the hectic endeavours to create great works of literature and thought, conquer polite, or for that matter impolite, society, make love and money, and mount the ladder of political power (sometimes all in the same week), which supply the subject matter of this volume. There was a good deal of coxcombry in these efforts. To get a footing, a young man without fortune or assured social position had to grab attention. 'I have to make a noise because I'm poor', was the young Evelyn Waugh's reply when Cyril Connolly asked him why he was making a row outside Balliol.⁹ Disraeli's ringlets, and dandified costumes, and affected manners, and purple passages, and ferocious invectives, sought notice. But they did not entirely convey his character. However flippant and flamboyant, however ironic or fantastical, he was entirely serious, and intense in application, in the purpose of being a great man.

Much though Disraeli relished the theatre of the salon or the hustings, his main avenue of self-realization and self-assertion in his early years lay in the ventures in literature that came naturally enough to the son of a minor literary celebrity. Daniel Schwarz's chapter demonstrates the instrumentality of his novels in exploring the possibilities of being that tempted him, testing out the shapes his identity might assume and the roles he might play. The limitations of the young Disraeli's knowledge of life, and a certain lack of real creative imagination in the depiction of character, would perhaps have been enough to ensure that his first novels would be about himself, but in any case it was about himself that he

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wanted to write. It was a self in course of evolution and definition by the very act of writing about it. Disraeli's novels are autobiographical, not in the sense that they furnish a simple record of feelings and events, but in the sense that they exhibit a process of self-fashioning of which they themselves form a vital part. In that, they do no more than follow the normal pattern of autobiography as an activity of self-development, exemplifying P. J. Eakin's argument 'that autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure'.¹⁰ The self, however, could not be a subject of free invention: it could not easily be conceived apart from the models made available by the culture of the age. For Disraeli, as Schwarz explains, the romantic mode supplied the pattern of thought and feeling and the technique of expression appropriate to his nature and needs. Romanticism incorporated into a self-electing European elite the young man hovering on the fringes of social and political acceptance at home, and offered him the reassurance of the preternatural artistic vision that could discern beneath the surfaces of mundane reality the true nature and ultimate meaning of things. In the superiority of that special insight lay the chief moral justification of his claim to play a leading role in a country where he had no unimpeachable native antecedents or automatic membership of the governing class.

Disraeli savoured to the full the dramatic poses and rhetorical flights of romanticism and its sanctioning of theatrical self-indulgence as an avenue, even a condition, of moral authenticity. But it was the moral authenticity as much as the self-indulgence with which he was concerned. Daniel Schwarz points out the extent to which his earliest novels were an anxious weighing and balancing of the moral merits, and faithfulness to his nature, of the impulses which drove him and the courses of life which they seemed to dictate: they were 'moral parables told by himself for himself about ambitious egoists'.¹¹ Schwarz notes also how the early fiction represents for Disraeli 'the means of ordering and controlling his personality', as he judges his leading characters by the measure of 'traditional values and the community's interest', displaying even in the almost *Sturm und Drang* wildness of his first novel, *Vivian Grey*, his 'sense of propriety and a respect for moderation in passions'.¹² Beneath the strutting sense of supreme powers and boundless ambition lay the reticences of a moralist and the hesitations of a *parvenu*. Perhaps we have given too little credence to what Disraeli wrote in 1833 in the 'Mutilated Diary': 'The world calls

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me “*conceited*”. The world is in error ... When I was considered very conceited *indeed*, I was nervous, and had self confidence only by fits.¹³

Perhaps, too, the truth was that Disraeli as a romantic was not altogether to the manner born. Behind the ‘continental’ and ‘revolutionary’ mind with which he credited himself,¹⁴ and the eastern exoticism he came to affect, the Bloomsbury boy was not hard to discern. There is something in Jonathan Parry’s observation that Disraeli was a case of ‘Venice, Constantinople or Jerusalem on the surface, but Holborn beneath’.¹⁵ Expansiveness of ambition was not matched by expansiveness of circumstances or of opportunities. The high aristocratic tone of the romanticism exemplified by the Byronic model which Disraeli so much admired was not one he was well placed to emulate. He might learn to be scornful of the dullness of the English bourgeoisie (‘For the middle class’, he would note waspishly, ‘marriage often the only adventure of life’¹⁶) but he belonged to it. The urge to heroic deeds was tempered by shortage of funds and by conspicuous attachment to the domestic comforts financed by his father, first in the modest confines of the family home in Bloomsbury Square and then in the more spacious surroundings of Bradenham, the country house which Isaac rented from 1829, ‘most of the rooms 30 and 40 feet long, and plenty of servants, horses, dogs, and a library full of the rarest books’ as Mrs Wyndham Lewis found it.¹⁷ Disraeli needed this kind of support structure. On the eastern tour of 1830–1, the only long period he ever spent away from home, he leaned on one of his travelling companions, James Clay, writing to Sarah: ‘You know that tho’ I like to be at my ease, I want energy in those little affairs of which life greatly consists.’ Clay’s comment was that he was the sort of person who ‘ought never to travel without a nurse’.¹⁸ In England, most of the nursing services were supplied by the succession of older women whom Disraeli induced to mother him, from his sister, the prime confidante of his early days, to the Holborn solicitor’s wife Sara Austen, and Clara Bolton, the wife of a fashionable West End doctor. With Lady Henrietta Sykes, from the spring of 1833, he was able to try his hand at a grand passion with a woman of fashion and beauty, but even with Henrietta he was no more than clinging to the skirts of the *beau monde* – she was the illegitimate offspring of a gentleman brewer and a horse dealer’s daughter, married to a baronet struggling to conserve the remnants of an East India Company fortune.

Yet Holborn habits and Holborn friends could be shaken off, and even the more raffish fringe of society represented by Henrietta or by the Blessington–D’Orsay *ménage* was a start. The main obstacle to a heroic

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career was the lack of scope offered by a settled and self-complacent society with a stable political system. The rapid satisfaction of Disraeli's ambition required change and motion. But the era of the French Revolution and Napoleonic upheaval in Europe was over by the time he began the world, and so was much of what Eric Hobsbawm has described as 'the typical revolutionary struggle of the Restoration period, all dashing young men in guards or hussar uniforms leaving operas, soirées, assignments with duchesses or highly ritualized lodge-meetings to make a military coup or place themselves at the head of a struggling nation; in fact the Byronic pattern'.¹⁹ Disraeli was an apprentice solicitor in a London office when Byron died in the service of the Greek struggle for independence. England did not offer those avenues of heroic endeavour and prospects of cataclysmic upheaval that would allow youthful genius to rush to the fore, though the crisis of parliamentary reform in 1831 caused Disraeli to hope for a moment that it might.²⁰ Its intellectual life did not engender the kind of passionate public confrontation between old values and new that in February 1830 enabled the nineteen-year-old Théophile Gautier to stamp his image unforgettably on the minds of his contemporaries by wearing his red waistcoat like a banner of revolution at the tumultuous first night of Hugo's *Hernani*. Disraeli, at that period, was scraping together the money for his eastern tour and worrying about his greying hair.²¹ His waistcoats were equally striking, but less fortunate in their opportunities.

The frustrations of his situation were much increased by the alarming sensation that he was running out of time. It was characteristic of the great romantic talents to produce masterpieces in their twenties, and to avoid anti-climax by dying in their thirties, if not before. By the time his attempt to secure political influence through the establishment of the *Representative* newspaper had collapsed, and his first novel, *Vivian Grey*, had failed to conquer the critics, Disraeli was falling behind schedule. The effect was to make him doubt, first the possibility of realizing his genius, and then its very existence. Turning experience into saleable goods in his habitual manner, he described both terrors in *The Young Duke*, published in 1831:

View the obscure Napoleon, starving in the streets of Paris! What was St. Helena to the bitterness of such existence? ... to be conscious that his supernatural energies might die away without creating their miracles – can the wheel, or the rack, rival the torture of such a suspicion?

To doubt of the truth of the creed in which you have been nurtured, is not so terrific as to doubt respecting the intellectual vigour on whose strength you have staked your happiness (II, vii).

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To such fears the illness which almost removed him from circulation between the summer of 1827 and the latter part of 1829 owed much of its origin. Charles Richmond and Jerrold Post supply in this volume the first full examination of the psychiatric character of what the patient described as ‘one of those tremendous disorganisations which happen to all men at some period of their lives’.²² Nervous breakdown could at least be interpreted as a reinforcement of Disraeli’s credentials – the almost inevitable response of the artist to a world in which, increasingly deprived of recognized public function, of sustaining patronage and of an assured public, he was, as Eric Hobsbawm has put it, ‘left to cast his soul as a commodity upon a blind market, to be bought or not’.²³ Hobsbawm’s image of the artist standing alone, ‘shouting into the night, uncertain even of an echo’,²⁴ evokes Disraeli’s reminiscence (for it is surely that) in *Contarini Fleming*: ‘I was not always assured of my identity or even existence, for I sometimes found it necessary to shout aloud to be sure that I lived’ (IV, v).²⁵ The notion that wild, exalted, desperate states of mind might unlock the door to truth not revealed to normal consciousness, hence that they might be a sign of the supreme insight of the genius, was hardly invented by the romantics – Dryden observed that ‘Great Wits are sure to Madness near alli’d / And thin Partitions do their Bounds divide’²⁶ – but it was a frequent component of their experiential/experimental technique. Disraeli’s illness was real, but it was surreal also, a fascinated, perhaps half-willed dabbling in that state of mind akin to a waking dream which Isaac in the *Literary Character* had selected as one of the marks of men of genius.²⁷

Whether or not his illness served to reassure Disraeli of his membership of the geniuses’ club, he emerged from it to a sustained period of creative activity, in which *The Young Duke* (completed in 1830) was followed by *Contarini Fleming*, *Alroy* and *The Revolutionary Epick* within the space of four years. In that period, too, he began to add new dimensions to the fashioning of the self. Patrick Brantlinger shows how he followed the current fashion (of which his father had been a precursor)²⁸ for turning the East into a resource of the western imagination, and in so doing embarked on the romanticization of his own Semitic origins in a way which would turn them from a source at best of embarrassment, at worst of self-hatred, into the membership card of a racial and intellectual aristocracy effortlessly superior to anything that had emerged from the primeval forests of northern Europe. Following close upon the awakening of interest in the Jewish past that had set him to work on the history of David Alroy,

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Disraeli's health-restoring tour of the Near East in 1830–1 was the making of him in more senses than one.

Perhaps the most important single contribution of recent writing on Disraeli has been to re-establish the centrality to any interpretation of his character and career of his Jewishness and the way in which he chose to understand and to utilize it. That Jewishness was a principal determinant both of his situation and of his mode of response to it has been clear enough to students like Israel Zangwill, Philip Rieff and Isaiah Berlin; but full recognition and exploration of its significance was set back by Robert Blake's virtual dismissal of the issue, first in his observation that 'England at the beginning of the nineteenth century was a tolerant place, and its Jewish inhabitants were numerically far below the figure at which, sociologists tell us, an alien minority risks becoming the object of hatred to their fellow citizens', and second by his contention that 'it is not so much the Jewish as the Italian streak in Disraeli that predominated'.²⁹ Lord Blake, all the same, acknowledged Disraeli's own interest in his Jewishness, 'to the point of being something of a bore on the subject', and his need, as evinced in *Tancred* and *Lord George Bentinck*, to find a form of composition between pride in Jewish ancestry and adherence to the Christian religion.³⁰ Disraeli was, in fact, as Stanley Weintraub and Anthony Wohl have recently been at pains to illustrate,³¹ operating in a context often more tolerationist than tolerant, in which anti-Semitic prejudice of a racial as well as a religious kind was commonplace, even if discrimination did not boil into persecution. That he had been a baptized Christian since the age of twelve made little difference to the way in which he was identified by many of his contemporaries, not only by critics and enemies eager to characterize him in terms which they assumed would heap him with contempt, but by friends and supporters too. The Salford Conservative who, at the end of his career, praising his ascent from humble origins, described him as 'the son of an outcast' betrayed not only ignorance but a common popular recognition both of his Jewishness and of the handicap which it imposed.³²

The handicap was not very great in the making of a literary reputation or the achievement of a certain level of acceptance in society – indeed, a touch of strangeness might add spice to a novel or a fashionable party – but, as Todd Endelman points out in this volume,³³ the case was different when Disraeli started to climb the political ladder and to assert a claim to prominence in what was still a specifically Christian legislature, part of an avowedly Christian polity. Anything that could be used by his opponents

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to impugn his credentials for such a role would be. Weintraub believes that already with *Alroy* in 1833, at the very beginning of his struggles to enter parliament, he was adopting the tactic of aggressively anticipating slurs about his origins by defiantly celebrating ‘that sacred and romantic people from whom I derive my blood and name’.³⁴ Certainly by the 1840s, as Endelman shows, he was devoting much energy and ingenuity to demonstrating the aristocracy and the spiritual genius of his race, in order to establish his membership of it as a source of pride and a title to that objective external vision – that ‘absolute freedom from prejudice which was the compensatory possession of a man without a country’, credited to Sidonia in *Coningsby* (IV, x) – which, in giving him the insight into English history, character and destiny that only an outsider of superior formation and understanding could possess, authorized his claim to lead. The readiness of opponents to exploit anti-Semitic feeling against him left him little option but to counter-attack in the most vigorous way possible. Todd Endelman believes that he could have chosen, as did other Jewish aspirants to political leadership, to play down his Jewish identity,³⁵ but no amount of reticence would have spared him from anti-Semitic shafts, and reticence in any case was not his nature. Moreover, set up as a country gentleman at Hughenden and a Buckinghamshire county member by Bentinck money, so that he could give the protectionists the debating power in the House of Commons which they conspicuously lacked, he felt an imperious need to show that, if he was being hired, he was taking service on his own terms, without denial of any aspect of his identity or concealment of any article of his beliefs. With *Tancred* in 1847 and the biography of *Lord George Bentinck* in 1851, he defied the prejudices of the bigoted Protestant party for which he spoke with an assertion of Jewish racial pride rendered only slightly less risky by the unlikelihood that it would catch the attention of many of his not very bookish backbenchers.

In so utilizing his Jewishness to situate himself more rather than less comfortably in English society, indeed to place himself in the saddle, Disraeli exhibited the technique of thought with which he characteristically transcended, at least in idea, all the difficulties in his path. It was a form of romantic transfiguration of the real in the light of the ideal, achieved through the supposed ability of the man of exalted intellect to discern a deeper reality beneath the banalities of conventional wisdom. It operated largely by the mechanism of radical inversion, at its simplest asserting the precise opposite of what was generally believed to be the case. No wonder that in 1833 Disraeli could retail to Sarah as a joke a