

The Self-Fashioning of Disraeli, 1818–1851

Benjamin Disraeli remains a commanding figure in the history and ideology of the British Conservative party, and a remarkable example of ascent to high office from outside the traditional elite. This is the first book to bring together specialists in history, literary studies and psychiatry to show how he successfully fashioned his personality in the formative years up to his emergence as Conservative leader in the House of Commons.

The analysis of this process of self-fashioning – the situation to which it responded, the problems of an outsider's integration and advancement in British society, the goals it sought to reach, the techniques which it employed, and the sources on which it drew – offers fresh insight into Disraeli's character and career. Vital aspects of his personality and outlook discussed here include his education, Jewishness, romanticism, orientalism, historical scholarship and political ideas, and the psychiatric disorder of his mid-twenties, which is examined seriously for the first time.

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PAUL SMITH was formerly Professor of Modern History, University of Southampton. His books include *Disraelian Conservatism and Social Reform* (1967), *Disraeli: A Brief Life* (1996) and, as editor, *Lord Salisbury on Politics* (1972).

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SELF-FASHIONING
OF DISRAELI
1818–1851

EDITED BY
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AND
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Preface

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In order to allow consultation of any edition, Disraeli's novels, together with *Lord George Bentinck*, are normally cited by reference to book or part (large roman) and chapter number (small roman) (in the case of *Hartlebury*, the large roman numerals denote the volume number). Letters are cited by reference to their serial number and volume and page number in *Benjamin Disraeli Letters*.

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Disraeli's education

CHARLES RICHMOND

'A sneer! Oh! Ladylove, do I ever sneer?' (Vivian Grey)

I

In 1852, one month after Disraeli became chancellor of the exchequer, Heinrich Heine wrote: 'A singular phenomenon in England – a novelist becoming a minister.'¹ Disraeli was not the first public man with literary inclinations; but the romantic and imaginative quality of his writing makes him unique. This anomalous combination of romantic artist and practical politician, together with the apparent disjunction between what he wrote in his books and what he did in political life, has caused his biographers to comprehend him either as actuated by a mere vulgar ambition to climb, or as a far-sighted statesman, whose career was guided by transcendent ideas. If the former view is accepted, then a charge of insincerity must be sustained; if the latter is accepted then his opportunism is inexplicable. In this chapter, on the basis of an examination of his unconventional education, I explore whether or not it is possible to combine Disraeli's romantic ideas and cynical politics as an organic whole, without excluding either one or the other.

Little is known of Disraeli's education prior to his fourteenth year. At a very early age, he was sent to a school at Islington, which was kept by a Miss Roper. He was then moved to a boarding school at Blackheath, whose headmaster was a nonconformist minister named Potticary. Later in life Disraeli had little recollection of Blackheath but, according to one of his schoolfellows, Disraeli and another Jewish boy were required to

stand at the back of the room during prayers. Once a week they received some sort of instruction in Hebrew.²

In the autumn of 1817, after his baptism in July of that year, Disraeli was transferred to a school kept by the Reverend Eli Cogan at Higham Hill, Walthamstow called Higham Hall. Later in life Disraeli said that he had been 'intended' for Winchester; and it is unclear why he was sent to Higham Hall when his 'younger and duller' brothers both attended the former institution, one of England's greatest public schools.³ Higham Hall was not a backwater; and Cogan – a self-educated classicist and liberal utilitarian with a considerable reputation as a schoolmaster – placed some emphasis on English and modern subjects, which was by no means common then.⁴ Gladstone, for example, who like other public school boys was stuffed full of Latin and Greek, complained that an Eton education had left him 'wretchedly deficient in the knowledge of modern ... literature and history'⁵ – a defect that his future rival would never feel. Cogan's openness to modern subjects may have influenced Isaac D'Israeli's decision to send his son to Higham Hall – for he was himself an original, and a student of modern letters. He was evidently impressed by Cogan. 'My father made his acquaintance in a bookseller's shop', Disraeli wrote later in life in a memorandum on his education, '[and] assumed for a long time that he was a clergyman. When he discovered that he was a schoolmaster, he thought I should be his pupil.'⁶

At any rate, the decision to send Benjamin to this school rather than to Winchester – for whatever reason it may have been made – was momentous. His career was, in a sense, diverted from the stream of public life; and the availability of modern books, both at Higham Hall and in his father's library, was to exercise a curious influence upon his mind. His sense of being an outsider was forged during these years: for he missed the 'blithe and congenial comradeship'⁷ which John Morley asserts was prevalent in public school society. His boyhood was filled with solitude, reading and introspection instead of sport, friendship and debating clubs. However, the outcome at Winchester would probably have been worse. A young Jew of Disraeli's looks and temperament might have been treated to that 'torture', which, in a public school, Thackeray wrote, 'is as much licensed as the knout in Russia'.

Disraeli may have suffered some sort of rebuff at Cogan's school. The eponymous heroes in *Vivian Grey* – the 'seditious stranger' (I, iv) – and *Contarini Fleming* – the 'Venetian countenance' (I, ii) – are involved in schoolboy fights, with the majority of their schoolfellows arrayed on the

side of their opponents. There is no direct evidence that Disraeli endured anti-Semitism at school but he would have been unusual to have avoided it.⁸ It is evident from autobiographical fragments left by Jewish boys who attended public schools that many of them were tormented because they were Jews. For example, after leaving Harrow, Charles de Rothschild (1877–1923) told a friend that, ‘If I ever have a son he will be instructed in boxing and jiu-jitsu before he enters school, as Jew hunts such as I experienced are a very one-sided amusement, and there is apt to be a lack of sympathy between the hunters and the hunted.’⁹ Moreover, boys with Jewish antecedents, who were baptized and had a foreign name, were ‘due for hell’ at English schools, according to the Jewish poet E. H. Meyerstein (1889–1952), who suffered on this account at Harrow. A boy from a solidly Jewish background, who was proud of his religion ‘got through school just fine’ in Meyerstein’s experience.¹⁰

There is also indirect evidence that Disraeli may have suffered at school because he was Jewish. It is evident from the diaries and memoranda that he wrote in or about 1821 (he left Cogan’s school late in 1819 or early in 1820) that he was concerned with the subject of religious persecution. In one hitherto unpublished memorandum he wrote:

bold spirits if not allowed to vent themselves in the court will explode in conspiracy. To debar the follower of ano[the]r faith from partaking of the benefits of the constitution to keep them from the senate because you fear that they may change that senate & that constitution seems to me both impolitic & improv[iden]t. If they can follow their faith and yet enjoy the high[es]t political privileges they have little temptation to attempt any revolution. If you argue on the contr[ary] that the followers of a diff[eren]t faith [?] political privileges they have great opportunities by their influence in the state to cause a revolution in the existing constitution, it must then be asked and examined what is the spirit of the religion which they profess and what power and what wish they may have to restore it.¹¹

In a diary entry dated January 1821, he writes: ‘In talking of the Unity of Religion this mighty spirit [Francis Bacon] strongly blames Religious Persecution and in his essay on that subject has this beautiful Passage “Surely this is to bring down the Holy Ghost, instead of the likeness of a Dove, in the shape of a Vulture or a Raven.”’¹² This was also the basis of his identification with David Alroy, who championed the oppressed Jews of Persia against the Moslems. He probably began reading about Alroy in 1824; and in the novel which he devoted to Alroy he causes him to exclaim:

The world goes well with thee, my Lord Honain. But if, instead of bows and blessings, thou like my brethren, wert greeted only with a cuff and curse, if thou didst rise each morning only to feel existence a dishonour, and to find thyself marked out among men as something foul and fatal; if it were thy lot, like theirs, at best to drag on a mean and dull career, hopeless and aimless, or with no other hope or aim but that which is degrading, and all this too with a keen sense of thy intrinsic worth, and a deep conviction of superior race; why, then perchance you might discover 'twere worth a struggle to be free and honoured (V, iv).

It is difficult to say why Disraeli was not more explicit about his Judaism in his autobiographical novels, diaries and memoranda in the 1820s; but it is probable that he himself was confused. Born a Jew and baptized at the age of twelve with a father who was, if anything, an eighteenth-century deist, and a grandmother who would not consort with other Jews, it is only natural that he suffered from a crisis of identity in the 1820s.¹³ Was he a Jew or a Christian; and what was his relation to English society? Contarini Fleming reflects that, '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). Disraeli did not invent the role of the 'aristocratic Jew' for himself until after his illness and trip to the East. Until that time, he may have suffered from a lingering doubt as to who and what he was. In any case, as a consequence of what may have been rebuff at school, Disraeli's ambition,¹⁴ which was given its initial impetus by a feeling that he had been neglected by his mother, was both darkened and intensified.¹⁵

Disraeli's ambition was probably conditioned by schoolboy slights. They created dichotomous humours in him: vengefulness and the desire for love and acceptance. When his longing to be loved met with jealousy and hatred, he became ambitious 'with a vengeance'. Emma Lazarus thought Disraeli shared with Shylock, as a representative Jew of the Diaspora, 'the rebellion of a proud heart embittered and perverted by brutal humiliations, and the consequent thirst for revenge'.¹⁶

It is true that Disraeli was not known for vengefulness in his later career. He was regarded by many as a man of magnanimity, strong loyalties and party spirit. But this was later in life – after 1852, at any rate – when he had attained power and partial acceptance. Between 1820 and 1846 his career was repeatedly stained with this passion. He was always more ready to repay an injury than a benefit: for, as Tacitus asserts, 'gratitude is a burden and revenge a pleasure'. The reader is invited to test

this judgement of Disraeli by comparing his treatment of Benjamin Austen and Daniel O'Connell in the 1830s. He befriended the former and received his loans but dropped him as he began to make his way in the *beau monde*; and he responded ferociously to the anti-Semitic attack of the latter, swearing to 'pursue his existence' with an 'unextinguishable hatred'.¹⁷

Vivian Grey, the book which Disraeli regarded as a portrayal of his 'active and real ambition',¹⁸ breathes a ferocious spirit of revenge. When Vivian becomes the manager of some clandestine theatricals at the Reverend Everard Dallas' school, an usher called Mallet becomes envious. He glares at Vivian (who treats him as a sort of 'upper servant') 'with eyes gloating with vengeance' (I, iv). Mallet draws the proscribed theatricals to Dallas' attention, and the latter indirectly denounces Vivian as a 'seditious stranger' (I, iv). Vivian's schoolfellows, including his erstwhile friends, join in the chorus of denunciation. The chorus is led by an older boy named St Leger Smith, whom Vivian proceeds to thrash in a fight. After this, Vivian is universally shunned and is warned not to return. 'Not return, eh! but that will I though', he growls, 'and we shall see who, in future, can complain of the sweetness of my voice! Ungrateful fools!' (I, iv). When he returns he cronies (for he is charming) with Mallet, whom he causes to rule over the school tyrannically. Thus the first revenge is exacted. St Leger Smith and the schoolboys, incensed at the injustice, attack Mallet and Vivian. The latter pulls out a pistol:

'Not an inch nearer, Smith, or – I fire. Let me not, however, balk your vengeance on yonder hound [Mallet]: if I could suggest any refinements in torture, they would be at your service.' Vivian Grey smiled, while the horrid cries of Mallet indicated that the boys were 'roasting' him (I, v).

This theme continues later in the novel in connection with Vivian's attempt to organize a political party for the marquess of Carabas and his friends. Mrs Felix Lorraine (a distant relation of the marquess), whose love for Vivian has become jealousy, poisons the minds of the Carabas men, whose allegiance Vivian has endeavoured to win. She also attempts physically to poison Vivian. In response, Vivian informs her that her scheme has failed (prior to her learning of its success), and this intelligence causes her blood vessel to burst. The result is more than satisfactory: 'Had Vivian left the boudoir a pledged bridegroom, his countenance could not have been more triumphant' (IV, vi). Then he writes to his confederate:

'We have been betrayed – and by a woman; but, there has been revenge! oh! what revenge!' (IV, vi).

However, it is true that a generalized humour of revenge was not the only motive for Disraeli's prodigious feat of climbing in the 1830s and 1840s. After his illness and travels in the East, he was impelled by the conviction that he was a superior man as both a genius and an 'aristocratic Jew'. The desire to vindicate these qualities in himself was probably something akin to pride. 'Alas I struggle from Pride', he wrote in his 'Mutilated Diary' in 1833.¹⁹ There was also a longing for fame for its own sake. 'To create a sensation', Robert Blake writes, 'to occupy the limelight, to act a part on the greatest stage in the world, these were the springs of action that thrust Disraeli onward.'²⁰

The corrupt character of Disraeli's ambition at the age of fourteen is demonstrated by the historical types to which he gravitated. There is a diary in his papers,²¹ hitherto unpublished, and entitled 'The Reign of Henry the Eighth', which sheds some light on this subject. It is well to note that Disraeli began to imbibe 'the new, ruthless political ideas of Renaissance Europe'²² at this early age. The 'immense series of historical reading' which comprised Vivian Grey's early education may have been commenced by the author of that work while he was still under the tuition of Eli Cogan. Disraeli's career was distinguished by a knowledge of modern history, despite the fact that his view of the past was sometimes more imaginative than rational. It is probable that he laid the foundation for this knowledge in or about 1818 and in the early 1820s. However, it is clear that the young Disraeli was repeatedly fascinated by the same kind of historical figure. Most of his heroes rise by cunning from mean origins to immense power; some are not born in the countries in which they rise, and all express their wills in foreign affairs.

Cardinal Wolsey (whom Vivian Grey wishes to 'act') was the chief among these (I, ix). The son of an Ipswich butcher, Wolsey rose by cunning, deceit, wit and personal charm, effectively to rule England for fourteen years. His vast wealth and immense power, which were expressed both in foreign politics and spiritual affairs, evidently fascinated Disraeli. In his diary, he focuses upon Wolsey's ambition and perfidy: 'The object of Wolsey's early ambition was the papacy. He would not have hesitated to commit any action inimical to the influence of Rome and favourable to his own views.'²³ Paraphrasing Lord Herbert, he concludes: 'He got a kind of absolute power in spiritual matters at home, and during his favour with the King, all things succeeded better than afterwards, tho' yet it may be

doubted whether the impression he gave, did occasion diverse irregularities which were observed to follow.²⁴

In another diary Disraeli draws biographical sketches of a similar kind:

Craut – who from a boy behind y counter raised himself by his industry to y post of Paymaster General of y army, and at length to that of Minister of State. He was to have been called to account in his last stage of life but he cunningly diverted that storm by feigning himself lunatic.²⁵

M. d'Ilgen – revengeful, crafty, a master of his temper, tongue, countenance eyes. As by his parts he raised himself, so by them he supports himself. He is the repository of his own secrets, hav[ing] no confidant nor favourite to share them ... He has so little scruple in point of oaths, that he takes & breaks them with equal indifference ... That which ... proves his genius, is that he has supported himself a long time without kindred, friends or creatures.²⁶

Disraeli was also fascinated by Marshal Dorfling, Cardinal Alberoni and Baron Ripperda. The first of these heroes was a seventeenth-century field marshal in the Brandenburg army. He was the son of Bohemian peasants, and began life as a tailor's apprentice – which facts Disraeli notes in his diary. However, for Alberoni and Ripperda he reserved a special affection. 'Often', Contarini Fleming says of his boyhood, 'had I been an Alboroni [*sic*], a Ripperda' (II, xi). Cardinal Alberoni (1664–1752) was the son of an Italian gardener. From an itinerant priest he became cardinal and minister of state in the Spain of Philip V. He rose and fell in virtue of a love of intrigue. Baron Ripperda (?–1737), enjoyed a similar fate in the same country. One historian has written of him: 'Few more unconscionable liars and intriguers are recorded in history than this audacious courtier.'²⁷ It is as if Disraeli is reassuring himself in these diaries that it is always possible to rise. He seems also to embrace the lesson that much cunning, fraud and deceit are necessary in order to do so. In light of the above examples, it can be said that his ambition was conditioned by his perception of the obstacles in its path.

In one sense these obstacles were real, and in another sense they were imaginary. As F. M. L. Thompson demonstrates, the caste attitude in England became more pronounced between Pitt's expansion of the peerage and the first Reform bill. The old aristocracy endeavoured to strengthen class lines in order to differentiate itself from the newly ennobled and from the wealthy middle class.²⁸ Their grasp upon the reins of the two great political parties was firm, if not absolute, prior to 1832; and this monopoly was based upon control of the electoral system. Even after the 1832 Reform, over forty peers remained who could 'virtually

nominate²⁹ a representative to the Lower House; and usually these seats were placed at the disposal of a member of the family. There were few patrons; and the price of politics was, very often, prohibitive.³⁰

However, as Robert Blake has shown, Disraeli's 'point of departure, though low by the standards of nineteenth century Prime Ministers, was neither as humble nor as alien as some people have believed'.³¹ His father was neither a gardener nor a peasant, but a literary man of some eminence and private means. In view of the fact that Disraeli could have studied at Oxford, it must be said that the obstacles in his path were, to some extent, self-imposed. Had he distinguished himself in the debating club, as for example George Canning had done, there is no reason to believe that his talent would have gone unnoticed. But this was not Disraeli's understanding. It is clear that when he left Cogan's school, he believed himself to be socially inferior and an outsider. However, he would not, as Contarini Fleming declares, 'sink into my innermost self' (I, vii). He would show them all. The recurrent lesson in his diaries is that, in order to escape from low origins, low arts must be employed.

II

Disraeli's formal education ended when he left Higham Hall. Having missed both Winchester and Oxford, he had failed to follow the educational course that was becoming customary for the country's political elite; which contributed both to the somewhat oblique character of his relation to British society, and to his own acute sense of that obliqueness. While there are rather wistful references in *Hartlebury* (I, ii) and *Coningsby* (I, viii–xi) to Eton and the benefits of a 'crack college', on the other hand he seemed to glory in his own superiority in 'general knowledge',³² acquired from his modern and cosmopolitan education. He regarded men like Gladstone as 'overgrown schoolboys'³³ who, as he wrote in *Endymion*, had read 'very little more than some Latin writers, some Greek plays, and some treatises of Aristotle. These with a due course of Bampton Lectures and some dipping into the "Quarterly Review"... qualified a man ... not only for being a member of Parliament, but becoming a candidate for the responsibility of statesmanship' (iii). In the end, he derived from his education a form of self-knowledge based more upon a comprehension of his own subjectivity and vocation than upon a knowledge of Man's limitations in the cosmos;³⁴ and a view of heroic morality rooted more in the idea of self-realization than self-sacrifice.³⁵

Disraeli spent 1820 and the greater part of 1821 at home reading in his father's library. In the memorandum on his education already alluded to, Disraeli said that he never reached the first class, 'and was not even eminent in the second'³⁶ in the study of classics at Cogan's school. At home, and so far as we know on his own, he now contrived to make himself a scholar of Greek and Latin. Disraeli is excessively generous to himself when he causes Vivian Grey to boast that 'twelve hours a day, and self-banishment from society, overcame, in twelve months, the ill-effects of his imperfect education' (I, vi). It is apparent from the diaries which Disraeli kept in 1820 that, although he made himself a passable scholar of Latin, he never gained a firm grounding in Greek. However, 'the frequent blunders in Greek accident' which 'disfigure' his diaries³⁷ do not concern us here – except insofar as they tended to set him even further apart from the classically educated politicians who were graduates of Eton and Christ Church. It is of more interest to contrast the reverent tone of Disraeli's 'classical diaries' with the corruption and cunning of his diary in or about 1818. For example, he finds the conduct of Admetus worthy of blame. 'Eurip. Alcest.', he notes, 'the character of Admetus is most detestable, he first suffers his wife to die for him and then abuses his father for not dying for her. He is a faithless husband, and an undutiful son.'³⁸ But he admires Pericles: 'In my opinion & most humbly do I advance it (at the same time exulting to find the sagacious Mitford on my side) Pericles is the greatest and most accomplished of the characters of Antiquity.'³⁹ He seems also especially to have revered Homer and Plato. There are two memoranda devoted to them in his papers.⁴⁰ Of Vivian Grey's admiration for Plato, Disraeli wrote:

Wonderful is it that while the whole soul of Vivian Grey seemed concentrated and wrapped in the glorious pages of the Athenian; while, with keen and almost inspired curiosity, he searched, and followed up, and meditated upon, the definite mystery, the indefinite development; while his spirit alternately bowed in trembling and in admiration, as he seemed to be listening to the secrets of the Universe revealed in the glorious melodies of an immortal voice (I, vi).

This does not seem to be a very classical formulation. Indeed, Disraeli's 'classic reverie' probably has more to do with romanticism. Scholars of European romanticism attribute to Plato and the latter Platonists (especially Plotinus) a crucial formative influence upon the early romantic theorists: directly on Novalis and Schelling, and through them on the Schlegels. The German theorists wished to bypass Plato's derogation of

the arts; and they found in his disciples a justification for the deviation of art from reality. Plotinus taught that art must imitate the permanent Platonic Forms which transcend the impermanent visible world.⁴¹ Vivian Grey's father attempts to dissuade him from reading the latter Platonists. 'Pray, tell me my dear boy, what possible good your perusal of the latter Platonists can produce?' (I, vi).

Vivian Grey's reverence is also apparent, in muted form, in Disraeli's classical diaries, as we have seen. This surely constitutes a remarkable contrast to Cardinal Wolsey and M d'Illgen. In fact, it is the first real sign of that elaborate romantic faculty which exerted so much influence upon his life. In a sense, this faculty is common to humanity. Illusions are necessary for life. The necessary corruption that attends most human life produces a concomitant longing for purity. But in Disraeli's case the degree of his corruption and the height of his longing far surpass those of the generality of men. This psychological paradigm of romance and corruption, it will be evident, deepened and intensified between 1821 and 1824. In the latter half of the 1820s Disraeli endeavoured to purge himself of the excesses of his imagination; but throughout his life he remained subject to its effect.

It may also have been during 1820 that Disraeli became the object of his father's desultory guidance. Much of what is Toryish and old-fashioned in Disraeli's outlook is attributable to this guidance. Vivian Grey undergoes 'a prodigious change' as a result of 'constant communion with a mind highly refined, severely cultivated, and much experienced' (I, ii).⁴² Isaac D'Israeli may well have inspired in his son a romantic reverence for the traditions of the Tory party. In the general preface to the 1870 edition of his novels, Disraeli asserts that he derived his 'Tory theory of history', which is set out in *Coningsby* and *Sybil*, from the reading which he did in his father's library.

Born in a library, and trained from early childhood by learned men who did not share the passions and prejudices of our political and social life, I had imbibed on some subjects conclusions different from those which generally prevail, and especially with reference to the history of our country. How an oligarchy had been substituted for a kingdom, and a narrow-minded and bigoted fanaticism flourished in the name of religious liberty, were problems long to me insoluble, but which early interested me. But what most attracted my musing, even as a boy, was the elements of our political parties, and the strange mystification by which that which was national in its constitution

had become odious, and that which was exclusive was presented as popular.⁴³

This account was written half a century after the period it claims to describe. Doubtless it is coloured by much of what subsequently occurred. For example, there is no sign in his diaries and memoranda of a theory of a national party. However, much of this reminiscence is accurate. In light of the assertion that he pondered how an 'oligarchy had been substituted for a kingdom', and in light of the argument for a revived monarchy in *Comingsby* and *Sybil*, the following memorandum is of much interest. Written in or about 1820, it is entitled 'The Constitution'. It is in fact an argument in favour of a mixed constitution, in which the power of the Crown is given full scope. 'The influence of the Crown is acknowledged and intended by the constitution as much as the influence of the aristocracy and the influence of the people.' The future Radical candidate proceeds, on the basis of tradition, to refute the views of parliamentary reformers:

At no period of English history can the house of commons be found correspond[ing] to the idea entertained of it by the reformers. There have always been 'boros' and always what they term corruption and from this I conceive that those 'boros' and that influence was an acknowledged and intended influence. What is ye influence of the King supposing that the house of commons sho[ul]d be that which ye reformers wish it? – it would not exist. Yet the kingly power is of equal authority and of equal importance in the ancient constitution as the Lords or the Commons. Our ancestors would not have endowed the kingly power with an equal authority if they had intended him not to exercise it. Where then is the kingly power to be found, in its influence in the councils of the nation.⁴⁴

It need hardly be said that, prior to 1832, it was a major tenet of the Tory party that franchise reform would vitiate the influence of the Crown and destroy the balance of the constitution. The Whigs, from the first, were opposed to the king's prerogative.

This inchoate royalism was probably derived from his father. His influence provided Disraeli with a bridge into the Tory party fourteen years later. Isaac D'Israeli's political opinions inclined to be Toryish for most of his life; and he devoted two of his works to the vindication of James I and Charles I. He wrote in the final chapter of his work on the latter: 'his devotion to the institutions of his country ... his magnanimity, and the unsubdued spirit, were more peculiarly his own ... his virtues and his genius alone triumphed over his fate'.⁴⁵

In questions of foreign policy (which were always his primary interest), Disraeli's opinions seem also to have coincided with those of the Tories. He neither understood nor sympathized with liberalism. The struggle of weak nations against the strong left him cold. This view was in reality the natural extension of his view of domestic politics. The guiding principle of individuals (at least individuals like Wolsey) was power and self-interest, and the same principle governed nations. Like most men of the 'right', he believed in a natural hierarchy based upon power, and in *Realpolitik*. He believed in conservatism and expansion not in liberal magnanimity. To this view Disraeli adhered throughout his life: he was as much of an 'imperialist' at sixteen as at seventy.

There is a memorandum in his papers, written in or about 1820, which is devoted to the question of Greek liberty. The issue at the time was whether the English should interfere on behalf of the Greeks in their struggle against the Turks. The Whigs, and much of the country, answered in the affirmative; but the Tories preferred to defend the English alliance with the Turks. In this spirit, Disraeli closes his memorandum:

Thus the argument is brought to this point whe[the]r we are entitled by the law of nations to assist the subjects of the Turkish Empire in the revolt and struggle for independence. The inhabitants of Greece would be contented with our portion of Liberty. Some spirits at home ask for more. This leads me to ask what you mean by LIBERTY.⁴⁶

Ten years later, it is interesting to note, he agreed with Wellington and the Tories in condemning Sir Edward Codrington's destruction of the Turkish fleet at Navarino.⁴⁷ To the Whigs the Turks were wholly distasteful. In Lord John Russell's scale of civilized nations they represent darkness and tyranny.⁴⁸ Disraeli, however, was always an ardent Turkophile.

Disraeli's 'classic reverie' did not last for long. In 1821 there is decided change in the tone of his diaries. It is interesting to note that Vivian Grey undergoes a similar change when he discovers 'the futility of that mass of insanity and imposture – the Greek philosophy', and begins to read the moderns. Under their influence 'the mind of Vivian Grey recovered ... a great portion of its original freshness and primal vigour' (I, vii). Then he begins to study politics:

having now got through an immense series of historical reading, he had stumbled upon a branch of study certainly the most delightful in the world

– but, for a boy, as certainly the most pernicious – THE STUDY OF POLITICS. And now everything was solved! ... He paced his chamber in an agitated spirit, and panted for the Senate (I, viii).

There is reason to believe that such a transformation actually occurred sometime in 1821. In November of that year he was articled to Swain, Stevens, Maples, Pearse and Hunt, a firm of solicitors; and in the memorandum on his education he wrote that he ‘had some scruples’ about this employment: ‘for even then I dreamed of Parliament’.⁴⁹

However, there is more convincing evidence of this change in the diaries which he kept in 1821. One of these is entitled ‘A Study of Lord Bacon’s Essays’,⁵⁰ and in it Disraeli collected the ‘pernicious’ political doctrines of the sixteenth century. He took a number of notes verbatim from the *Essays*; and it is well to observe the tone and character of the maxims which attracted him. ‘The Rising unto place’, he notes from Essay XI, ‘is Laborious, and by pains men come to greater pains; and it is sometimes base, and by indignities men come to dignities.’⁵¹ And he embraces the following notion of self-interest:

Wisdom for a man’s self, is in many branches thereof, a depraved thing; it is wisdom of rats, that will be sure to leave a house before it fall; it is the wisdom of the fox, that thrusts out the Badger, who digged and made room for him; it is the Wisdom of Crocodiles, that shed tears, when they would devour.⁵²

Friendship is also considered in this light: ‘The Parable of Pythagoras is dark, but true, “cor ne edito”. Certainly, if a man would give it a hard phrase, those that want friends to open themselves unto, are cannibals of their own hearts.’⁵³

It may have been at this time that Disraeli read Bolingbroke. We cannot be sure about the extent of his reading but it does not seem to have been very deep. Vivian Grey quotes ‘a whole passage of Bolingbroke’ (II, i) in order to vindicate the opinions of the marquess of Carabas; but there is only a fragmentary reference to Bolingbroke in one of Disraeli’s diaries. ‘The true point of political wisdom’, he notes, ‘consists in distinguishing justly, between what is absolutely best in Speculation, and what is the best of things practicable in particular conjunctures.’⁵⁴ Although Bolingbroke exerted a far greater influence upon his future career, Disraeli was probably more familiar with the precepts of Bacon in 1821.

Bacon and Bolingbroke are similar in a fundamental respect: they are two of Machiavelli’s greatest English disciples. Bacon shared with Machia-

velli an essentially secular approach to politics.⁵⁵ One scholar has written that 'Bacon is more Machiavellian than Machiavelli.'⁵⁶ Bolingbroke, whom Herbert Butterfield calls 'the most remarkable of Machiavelli's disciples',⁵⁷ modelled his Patriot King after the Prince with *virtù*. The influence of Machiavelli on all modern thought has been enormous. Felix Raab did not exaggerate when he wrote that 'as far as the modern world is concerned, Machiavelli invented politics'.⁵⁸ It is not my purpose to discuss the importance of Machiavelli in the history of political thought. However, suffice to say that he was the first political philosopher to suggest that statesmen *ought* to do bad things.⁵⁹ He lowered the ends of politics by rejecting the 'imaginary principalities' of the ancients and Christianity and replaced them with a politics of this world. In Machiavellian thought, politics and conventional morality do not mix; and it is upon this fundamental point that Disraeli is in agreement with him. Perhaps this is why Disraeli has often been called 'the most modern of all Victorian statesmen'.⁶⁰

It is improbable that Disraeli read Machiavelli in the 1820s. He was evidently familiar with him, insofar as Vivian Grey, before his first meeting with the statesman Beckendorff, exclaims, 'what I would give now to know by rote only one quotation from Machiavel!' (VI, vi). Among Disraeli's miscellaneous memoranda, there is a biographical note which identifies 'Machiavel' as a 'Politician, Historian, General, dramatist, Poet & novelist'.⁶¹ It is possible that Disraeli found reference to that 'doctor of Italy' in the writings of Bacon and Bolingbroke and wished to satisfy his curiosity. But there is no real evidence that he knew Machiavelli's writings intimately. However, there are many similarities between Disraeli's conception of politics in the 1820s (as expressed in *Contarini Fleming* and *Vivian Grey*) and the political philosophy of Machiavelli. It is true that much of what Disraeli wrote about politics can be ascribed to natural prudence; but some of his similarities with Machiavelli may be attributable to the influence of Bolingbroke and Bacon.

There is a striking prefiguration of one of these similarities in the diary devoted to Bacon's *Essays*. From the essay on 'Great Place', Disraeli notes: 'Reduce things to the first institution, & observe wherein and how they have degenerated; but yet ask counsel of both times; of the ancient what is best; of the latter time what is fittest.'⁶² This notion conditioned much of Disraeli's future political practice. From 1834 to 1846 he viewed himself as a prophet of 'reinvigorated toryism'. He believed that, like Bolingbroke, he lived in an age corrupted by a 'factious aristocracy' which led the

country away from the salutary principles of 'Primitive Toryism'.⁶³ Even in his first attempts to be elected at High Wycombe, he spoke of 'regenerating'⁶⁴ that borough. The role of the great man in this dilemma is to purge the nation of the present corruption, and restore it to its original principles.

This conception of the great man as one who purges the state of its corruption and causes its return to first principles (in order to ensure survival) is fundamental in the thought of Bolingbroke and Bacon.⁶⁵ It is derived from book III, chapter 1 of Machiavelli's *Discourses*:

For, as all religious republics and monarchies have within themselves some goodness, by means of which they obtain their first growth and reputation, and as in the process of time this goodness becomes corrupted, it will of necessity destroy the body unless something intervenes to bring it back to its normal condition. This [may be caused by] some man of superior character.⁶⁶

Disraeli's politics were characterized by Machiavellian flexibility in conjunction with an overriding belief in the power of the individual will. He was always 'ready to trim his sails';⁶⁷ he did not, for example, cling to Protection when he perceived that it was 'dead and damned' in the late 1840s. Disraeli revered historical examples and traditions; but he did not scruple to commit any act which broke with precept and ensured survival in the future. It is this concentration upon survival that is peculiarly modern. In the ancient theoretical tradition, civil society existed in order to make men good; the theoretical purpose of civil society in modernity is continued survival. Disraeli's treatment of the Tory party was informed by this attitude. Perhaps more than any other statesman he ensured the survival of an essentially aristocratic party in a democratic age. In a sense, of course, this was only prudence. Statesmen must be sufficiently flexible to meet the exigencies and shifting circumstances of political life, or they become, as Robert Blake puts it, 'antediluvian survivals'.⁶⁸ But Disraeli possessed this subtlety in an uncommon degree. Both Gladstone and Peel were more willing than Disraeli to sacrifice survival on the altar of morality. The latter never swerved from the Machiavellian teaching that 'he errs least and will be most favoured by fortune who suits his proceedings to the times'.⁶⁹

Like Machiavelli, Disraeli thought of politics as the conquest of *fortuna*. In *Lord George Bentinck*, he acknowledges the shocking extent to which fortune decides the outcome of political battles: 'there is nothing in which the power of circumstances is more evident than in politics. They baffle

the forethought of statesmen, and control even the apparently inflexible laws of national development and decay.⁷⁰ But Disraeli had a preponderant belief in the power of the will. Beckendorff in *Vivian Grey* – Disraeli's ideal creation of a statesman – possesses the *virtù* that Machiavelli attributes to Moses, Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus. In chapter 6 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes: 'And in examining their life and deeds [Moses *et al.*] it will be seen that they owed nothing to fortune but the opportunity which gave them matter to be shaped into what form they thought fit.'⁷¹ This conquest of fortune has been the object of Beckendorff's life. When Vivian Grey tells him that he recognizes 'in every contingency the preordination of my fate', Beckendorff responds:

A delusion of the brain! Fate, Destiny, Chance, peculiar and special Providence – idle words! Dismiss them all, Sir! A man's Fate is his own temper; and according to that will be his opinion as to the particular manner in which the course of events is regulated. A consistent man believes in Destiny – a capricious man in Chance ... Man is not the creature of circumstances. Circumstances are the creatures of men. We are free agents, and man is more powerful than matter. I recognize no intervening influence between that of the established course of Nature, and my own mind (VI, vii).

And Beckendorff, who depends 'only upon himself', concludes: 'No conjuncture can possibly occur, however fearful, however tremendous it may appear, from which a man, by his own energy, may not extricate himself' (VI, vii).

The essence of *virtù* is boldness. Boldness is the principal instrument with which fortune is conquered. 'Fortune is a woman', Machiavelli wrote, 'and it is necessary, if you wish to master her, to conquer her by force; and it can be seen that she lets herself be overcome by the bold rather than by those who proceed coldly.'⁷² Disraeli illustrates this precept – probably more for his own edification than for the reader's – in his depiction of the secret conference of European ambassadors in *Contarini Fleming*. Contarini and his father attend the conference on behalf of their king, whose succession is opposed by three of the ambassadors who favour the interest of the abdicated dynasty. Contarini's father, the prime minister, hopes that the issue will be resolved by negotiation, since no appeal to force is possible. However, when the negotiations founder, Baron Fleming makes a timorous appeal to his two allies for support, but they are reticent. Then the young Contarini takes the initiative without prior authorization. He disarms the absolutist ambassadors, who are hostile to his king, with the

threat that he will institute a popular election of the monarch. The possible spread of democratic tendencies causes the ambassadors to relent. 'I was astounded by my audacity', Contarini exclaims, 'It is difficult to convey any idea of the success of my boldness' (II, xiii).

But *virtù* is not virtue: flexibility presupposes an indifference to morality. The lesson to which Disraeli seems to return again and again in the 1820s is that good and evil arts must be employed in order to conquer fortune. Both Beckendorff and Baron Fleming (the practical statesmen who appear in Disraeli's novels in the 1820s) are alike in this respect. They have risen from lower-class and middle-class origins respectively to become the prime ministers of their countries; and they have, in turn, both made their countries powerful. Like Baron Fleming, 'Beckendorff has not scrupled to resort to any measures, or adopt any opinions in order to further the interests of his monarch and his country' (VI, iv).⁷³ There is a striking similarity between this ostensible patriotism and 'the end justifies the means'⁷⁴ teaching of Machiavelli.

The truth is that, in the 1820s, Disraeli had a deeply cynical view of politics. He shared with Machiavelli the fundamental view that moral considerations are inimical to the practice of politics. Machiavelli believed that Christian morality and the concern with heaven had led to the neglect of this world. If men are permanently self-interested and niggardly, then statesmen must not act as if they are altruistic and liberal. Adherence to principle limits the statesman's vision and flexibility; and it is impossible to make men moral.

There is an illustration of this conviction in *Vivian Grey*. Young Vivian, while travelling through the German countryside, happens to kill a wild boar which is about to gore the prince of Little Lilliput. This prince, formerly the king of 50,000 subjects, has been 'mediatised', and has come under the suzerainty of the duke of Reisenberg and his prime minister, Beckendorff. After about an hour of conversation, Vivian is enlisted to restore the prince's power (at least this is Vivian's understanding). For this purpose, a meeting between the prince, Vivian and Beckendorff is arranged at the latter's house. Upon their arrival, the prince harangues Beckendorff with an anti-slavery speech, in which he asserts that 'the Divine Author of our religion was its decided enemy', and that he is speaking 'as I have felt it my duty to do, as the advocate of popular rights and national privileges' (VI, vii). He represents himself as the defender of the liberties of his people. The prince is confused by Beckendorff's eccentric response. Beckendorff, who neither eats nor sleeps and tucks

perfumed handkerchiefs in his sleeve, leaves his guest and rides off in the middle of the night. The prince confuses this simulation of folly with madness. In fact, while the prince has been espousing popular rights, he has missed the play of power politics which is carried on beneath the surface by Beckendorff. The latter's plan has been to wean the prince away from his recalcitrant independence with an offer of a Grand Marshallship in the duke of Reisenberg's government. Beckendorff's midnight ride is occasioned, not by madness, but by a sudden desire of the duke to revoke the offer. Of these designs the prince is entirely ignorant; although they do not escape the shrewd and discerning Vivian. The upshot of these machinations is that the champion of the liberties of his kingdom relinquishes his independence for a post in the duke's imperial government. Thus the moralist's vision is obscured; and, in the crisis, he acts solely on the basis of self-interest. Mr Sievers, Vivian's confidant, assesses the actions of the prince, and political practice in general:

And yet [he observes to Vivian] without the slightest compunction, has this same man [the prince] deserted the party of which, ten days ago, he was the zealous leader. How can you account for this, except if it be, as I have long suspected, that in politics there positively is no feeling of honour? Every one is conscious that not only himself, but his colleagues and his rivals, are working for their own private purpose; and that however a party may apparently be assisting in bringing about a result of common benefit, that nevertheless, and in fact, each is conscious that he is the tool of another. With such an understanding, treason is an expected affair; and the only point to consider is, who shall be so unfortunate as to be deserted; instead of the deserter (VII, ii).

The statesman must always be ready to act basely; although he must be capable of dissembling his baseness. Beckendorff dissembles his designs by feigning himself 'a frivolous creature' (VI, vi). The narrator in *Vivian Grey* asserts that 'our wisdom must be concealed under folly' (I, ix). This notion of appearances is fundamental in Machiavellian thought. To a man who wishes to rise from low origins, Machiavelli recommends that 'it may at times be the highest wisdom to simulate folly'.⁷⁵ Disraeli's dandyism in the 1830s was surely, to some extent, a calculated folly. In a fascinating passage in *Vivian Grey*, the narrator likens the hero of that book to the god Jupiter, who came to earth in the form of a herdsman. 'For, to govern man, even the god appeared to feel as man; and sometimes as a beast, was apparently influenced by their vilest passions' (I, ix). Contarini Fleming is described as a 'wild beast' (II, xii) when he enters politics. At the

conference which takes place in the same book, and which has been alluded to, Contarini observes that ‘the great diplomats appeared to me so many wild beasts ready to devour our innocent lamb of a sovereign’ (II, xiii). Their practical mode is ‘compressed in two words – subtlety and force’ (I, xxi). These passages are redolent of chapter 18 of *The Prince*, in which the statesman is enjoined to imitate Severus: ‘a Prince being thus obliged to know well how to act as a beast must imitate the fox and the lion’.⁷⁶

III

Disraeli worked as a solicitor’s clerk from November of 1821 until July of 1824. In May of 1824 he submitted his *Aylmer Papillon* to the publisher John Murray, with whom he was becoming more intimate. The work is a light satire on English society; but it is more interesting as a manifestation of his restlessness than as a serious literary effort. It is impossible to say precisely when, but it was probably sometime in 1824 that Disraeli read Madame De Staël’s *Germany*. There are two hitherto unpublished diaries in Disraeli’s papers containing copious notes from that work, which attest to this fact.⁷⁷ *Germany* had been published in an English translation from the French by Murray in November of 1813,⁷⁸ when the latter became friendly with its author. It is not unreasonable to surmise that Disraeli learned of the existence of this book through Murray. Moreover, in July of 1824, Disraeli made a trip to Belgium and the Rhine; and it is clear from the diaries which he kept during his travels, and from his letters, that he became fascinated by Germany in 1824.⁷⁹ This interest was apparently sustained throughout the 1820s. The second part of *Vivian Grey*, it will be remembered, is set in that country; and one of Disraeli’s other autobiographical novels, *Contarini Fleming*, was written under the influence of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*.⁸⁰

Germany made a great impression in England both at the time of its publication and in the 1820s, when it was read, for example, by William Hazlitt. Carlyle called *Germany* ‘the parent of whatever acquaintance with the German literature which exists among us’.⁸¹ It was also much admired by Byron, who wrote: ‘What the devil shall I say about D’Allemagne? I like it prodigiously.’⁸² The book is informed by a cloudy and sentimentalized version of the early romantic theorists – especially August Schlegel. Madame De Staël may be said to have been an advocate of German romanticism. The final chapter of the book is an exhortation to the

enthusiasm which was deplored so much by the thinkers of the eighteenth century: 'The meaning of this word [enthusiasm] among the Greeks is the noblest definition of it: enthusiasm means *God in us*. Indeed, when man's life is emotionally overflowing it has something of the divine.'⁸³

Disraeli may have read this work as a kind of reaction against his political and historical studies – although it is uncertain whether he did so consciously at the time. It is difficult to avoid the impression that he felt himself to have been corrupted. Like the German romantics he became a hard student of mysticism; and he was evidently transfixed by the idea of purity. In 'an essay on the soofees' he writes:

The Oabitan mentions these opinionists by y name of Suffi, Soofee, Sefi, Sephi. The Arabic term which bears all these spellings means wise, holy, & is supposed to be derived from a word signifying *pure, clean*. The distinct & finite nature of y human soul being denied & man declared an [*sic*] pure emanation or ray from the divine essence ... the best life imitates the celestial purity.⁸⁴

Disraeli may have felt that he had been corrupted by his early education. Contarini Fleming declares: 'Blessed by nature with a heart that is the shrine of sensibility, my infamous education had succeeded in rendering me the most selfish of my species' (II, xii). Thus he sought in romanticism a mode of purification and a means of transforming his view of himself and the world. Friedrich Nietzsche observed this phenomenon in artists like Byron, Poe, Musset and Kleist. He believed them to be men with 'souls in which they usually try to conceal some fracture; often taking revenge with their works for some inner contamination, often seeking with their high flights to escape into forgetfulness from an all-too-faithful memory'.⁸⁵ Disraeli was also afflicted with this 'inner contamination'; and, like many of the continental romantics, he sought with his 'high flights' to escape to a transcendent purity.

There is an illustration of this psychological inversion in *Vivian Grey*. After Mrs Felix Lorraine attempts to poison him, Vivian sees his own corruption in her; which corruption is intolerable to him.

I fancy [he exclaims] that in this mysterious foreigner, that in this woman, I have met a kind of *double* of myself ... Yet do I find her the most abandoned of all beings: a creature guilty of that which, even in this guilty age, I thought was obsolete. And is it possible that I am like her? that I can resemble her? ... Oh, God! the system of my existence seems to stop: I cannot breathe ... It is not so – it cannot be so – it shall not be so! (III, v).

This passage is immediately followed by a lyrical outburst, the object of

which is the 'Sultana of the soul' – the moon. In one of the Byronic digressions in *The Young Duke*, the narrator succumbs to an access of remorse when he realizes that he is 'infinitely corrupt'. 'My thousand errors, my ten thousand follies, my infinite corruption', he says, 'have well deserved a bitterer fate than this' (III, xviii). By reaction, he flies to the greatest ideal of all romantics: his own soul. 'Must we, then, part, indeed, my delicate Ariel! and must thou quit this earth without a record! Oh! Mistress, that I have ever loved! oh! idol, that I have ever worshipped!' (III, xviii). But, as so often is the case with Disraeli, this sudden access of genuine emotion is succeeded by humour and wit. 'Where are we?' he continues, 'I think I was saying, that 'tis difficult to form an opinion of ourselves. They say it is impossible ... And yet, I sometimes think I write a pretty style, though spoiled by that confounded puppyism; but then mine is the puppy age, and that will wear off' (III, xviii).⁸⁶

Wit is a fixture in Disraeli's career: he was 'one of the wittiest men that ever lived'.⁸⁷ In view of the peculiar collocation of corruption, romance and irony in Disraeli, he can be comprehended in relation to the German romantics.⁸⁸ It is true that Disraeli read Burke, probably in 1825, and that he resembled Coleridge and Carlyle in some respects. He shared their Burkean contempt for theory, and for the utilitarians. But there are elements in Disraeli's romanticism that are clearly foreign to the essence of English romanticism – rather, they are distinctly German. The characteristic experience of the German romantics is of a tension between the real and the ideal (or of polarities in general – the inward 'fracture') which is reconciled by irony. Novalis, for example, strove to idealize vulgar physical reality, but could not finally believe in his imaginative creations. The romantic generation in Germany, Raymond Immerwahr asserts, 'could never take its romanticism in deadly earnest, never quite pretend to eliminate the chasm separating life and literary imagination. This gap, which it knew it could not close, it chose to bridge with conscious irony.'⁸⁹ Friedrich Schlegel actually posited a doctrine of *romantische Ironie*. He saw 'two antagonistic powers within the creative process: creative enthusiasm counteracted by skeptical irony'. Irony enables the mind 'to mediate between two opposing aesthetical systems'.⁹⁰ The essence of German romanticism, and its uniqueness, consists in its concentration upon the synthesis of paired opposites; and the failure of this synthetic process is manifest in irony.

The English romantics differ from the Germans in this respect. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats abandoned the satiric tradition of the

eighteenth century; and consequently they are devoid of wit.⁹¹ It would be difficult, for example, to imagine Keats declaring at the end of his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': 'But what the deuce is death, when dinner is waiting all this time!' (*The Young Duke*, II, viii). There is a heaviness and earnestness in the English that is foreign to the German romantics, who are distinguished by either daemonic humours or lightness and the play of intellect. The exception to this rule is Byron; but Byron was an uncharacteristic English romantic. He was essentially a man of the eighteenth century who wrote for fame in the nineteenth century; and, having spent most of his adult life on the continent, his affinities, such as they were, were with the continental romantics.

It is true that Byron exerted an immense influence on Disraeli; and it is probable that Disraeli's irony is in part attributable to this influence, as it was also to his status as a Jewish *étranger*. But it is a mistake to regard Disraeli's romanticism solely as the sort of fashionable affectation of youth which was prevalent in the generation which followed Byron. Disraeli was not, as David Cecil wrote of Byron's lover, Lady Oxford, 'a professional romantic', who adopted a 'fashionable pose'.⁹² Most of the positive emotion that historians identify in Disraeli's career – his admiration for the English aristocracy; his pride in himself as an 'aristocratic Jew'; and his belief in the greatness of England – is connected with his romanticism. It served his deepest needs, by providing him with a redeeming vision of the world, which permitted him to transcend the limitations and frustrations of his own situation through the power to transform the external world.⁹³ In or about 1824, German romanticism, with its concentration upon mysticism and the supernatural, served as a vehicle for an inner purification. But it is his ironical relation to reality that seems to place him in the German camp. Much of his foreignness and ostensible insincerity become comprehensible when Disraeli is understood in these terms.

What ideas of the German romantics were imparted to Disraeli by Madame De Staël? It must be said that Disraeli shared, to some extent, the understanding of reality which was peculiar to the post-Kantian idealists. Later in the 1820s, when he discovered that their excessively imaginative world view had in part been the cause of his nervous collapse, and interfered with his prospects for a political career, he endeavoured to restrain the flights of his imagination. He appears to have passed through a sort of anti-romantic phase, and approached the more extreme claims of his romanticism in a spirit of satire and inquisition. In the second part of *Vivian Grey*, for example, a pupil of Fichte's is depicted at a literary *soirée*

stuffing *kalte Schale* into his mouth (VII, iii); and Contarini Fleming's father advises him, 'I think if you could control your imagination you might be a great man' (II, ix). But Disraeli was never able wholly to purge himself of the effect of his imagination – indeed, he never wished to, for he always considered it the noblest virtue of a statesman.⁹⁴

Disraeli was familiar with the ideas of Kant and his 'disciples'. Kant made an overwhelming impression on German romantic philosophy. He argued that the mind is not simply a passive recipient of the world around us, but that it is also to some extent the creator of knowledge. He denied the possibility of absolute knowledge, for the mind is a mechanism which acts upon the impressions it receives. Thus we do not know reality as it is in itself, but only as it appears to us. This notion had a liberating effect upon the romantic theorists who followed him. If reality is finally unknowable, they asserted, then man is free to 'think-create'⁹⁵ the world. 'The organs of thinking', Novalis wrote, 'are the creative organs of the world.'⁹⁶ In an extensive essay on part III, chapter 6 of *Germany* (which is devoted to Kant), Disraeli notes the Kantian idea that the mind is, in part, the creator of reality.

Kant and the Idealists are for re-establishing primitive truths and a spontaneous action in y soul – Thus far for the understanding – in morality they preach conscience in the arts – the ideal ... Kant endeavoured to trace the limits of the two empires, *of the senses & of y soul* – of *nature exterior*, and *nature intellectual*. They call, in German philosophy ideas *subjective* those which spring from ye nature of our intelligence and its faculties, & ideas *objective* all those which are excited by y [senses?]: that is by external objects. Kant takes nothing *a priori*. He believes in no innate knowledge ... But he believes that the power of understanding is innate – that this power cannot be brought into action unless it is exercised – that its exercise is the acquisition of knowledge, but that it is this understanding which gives laws to exterior nature and not exterior nature to it.⁹⁷

The post-Kantian idealists accepted the liberating elements of this philosophy. They were also influenced by the Platonic view (through his latter disciples) that the sensible physical world half-reveals or disguises the Forms or Ideas, and that, consequently, the physical world is not ultimately real. The post-Kantians posit a dim conception of ultimate reality;⁹⁸ but their primary concern is with avoiding reality and not finding it. The post-Kantians deprecate the physical world, but their conception of ultimate reality is open ended. The German romantics engaged in a quest for wonders, and in a constant endeavour 'to seek

strange truth in undiscovered lands'. This quest derived from the post-Kantian belief that the physical world is pervaded and surrounded by mysteries which man might sense and art adumbrate. Their thought concentrates upon the mystical, the supernatural, the unconscious and the invisible. They shared the deprecatory view of reason that is common to all romanticism. Thus they stood in an ambiguous relation to reality. 'The most characteristic art of German romanticism', Siegbert Praver writes, 'transports reader, viewer and listener to a frontier between the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible.'⁹⁹

The desire to be free of vulgar physical reality led the German romantics to concentrate upon mysticism in thought and music in art. Mysticism was believed to be the most transcendent form of thought, and music the most transcendent art. Disraeli shared this German inclination. It will be remembered that Disraeli familiarized himself with mysticism while reading about the East and David Alroy, in conjunction with Madame De Staël. In his diary he writes: 'Life is a miracle & death a mystery. Nothing is extrord[inar]y for everything is extraordinary.'¹⁰⁰ To this mystical view he adhered throughout his life; and his politics were full of the symbols of mysticism when he attained power. He wrote in *Lothair* at the age of seventy: 'Can there be anything more miraculous than the existence of man and this world? anything more literally supernatural than the origin of things?' (xxxviii).

The concentration upon music is also peculiar to German romanticism. 'In England', M. H. Abrams asserts, 'the lyrical poem seems to have been the root consideration out of which developed the concept that all art is emotional expression. In Germany, on the other hand, music came to be regarded as the art that is most purely expressive.'¹⁰¹ Music was regarded as the most transcendent art and the purest expression of spirit because of its remoteness from the demonstrable logic of rational experience. It is the art which is most free of physical reality. 'The musician', August Schlegel averred, 'has a language of feeling independent of all external objects; in verbal language, on the contrary, the expression of feeling always depends on its connection with the idea.'¹⁰² The German romantics also had a preference for instrumental music, because of its freedom from the earthly association of words.

Disraeli's education in music was probably advanced by his reading of Madame De Staël. Disraeli's 'champagne-like sparkle' can be understood in light of this education: Lothair admires 'no one so much as Mozart' (xx). In his diary on *Germany*, he writes:

effect of music – See Mad De Stael theory written in the 2nd vol. of her *Germany ... Music: It can speak to the secrets of a man's heart as if by divination ... We cannot express the inexpressible. The Musician can make us feel what the Poet cannot. He creates secret sympathies by melodious mysteries.*¹⁰³

It is clear from *Contarini Fleming* that Disraeli was familiar with German music and that he had 'a passion for instrumental music' (III, viii).¹⁰⁴

The basis of Disraeli's fascination with music and mysticism was probably the same as that of the post-Kantian idealists – disdain for reality. In his diary he notes Madame De Staël's characterization of perhaps the most extreme idealist, Johann Gottlieb Fichte:

A German Philo. Mad. d. S. vol.3. 107. Idealists. The character of Fichte p.110–11. He despised particularly all expressions w[hi]ch inclined in y slightest degree to substantiality: *existence* was a word in his opinion too absolute. *Being, principle, essence* were words scarcely sufficiently ethereal to indicate the subtle shadowings of his opinions. On dit that he dreaded the contact of real things, & that he endeavoured to avoid them. When you talk with him, you lose all conscience of this world.¹⁰⁵

It is not suggested that Disraeli was transformed into an idealist after reading Madame De Staël. He was, as he probably would have said himself, 'predisposed' to that philosophy. It is apparent that Disraeli was aware, or became aware, of his tendency to dissociate from reality, which was one of the symptoms of the neurotic illness to which he succumbed between 1827 and 1832.¹⁰⁶

While the German romantics despised reality they glorified imagination. They arrogated to the great man the power to make or remake reality. This transformational faculty – the compulsion to transform vulgar physical reality – is fundamental to the romantic vision. M. H. Abrams likens the romantic mind to 'a radiant projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives'.¹⁰⁷ Transformation of the world is effected by the imagination. 'Imagination is the highest and most original part of man', Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote, 'and everything outside it only a reflection upon it'.¹⁰⁸ The German romantics admired, above all, the naive poetical imagination of Homer, which created the horizon of a whole civilization, and a complete world view. But the Germans were not naive: they were self-conscious creators; and consequently they were ironic. They sought to defy the dictation of reality; and this defiance they believed to be heroic. Novalis maintained that romance is a kind of discipline: 'By giving a high meaning to what is ordinary, a mysterious

aspect to what is commonplace, the dignity of the unknown to the familiar, a semblance of infinity to the finite, I romanticize it ... Life itself should be a *Roman*, not one given us but one made by us.¹⁰⁹ When Contarini Fleming is asked by his cousin Alceste why he wishes to undertake the impossible task of restoring his family's fortune in Rome, he responds: 'I have no sympathy with reality. What vanity in all the empty bustle of common life! ... It develops all the lowering attributes of my nature' (III, ix).

In a sense, Disraeli's life was a sustained effort to live a fiction. 'Poetry', he wrote in his diary in 1833, 'is the safety valve of my passions, but I wish to *act* what I *write*.'¹¹⁰ It was indeed necessary for him to invent a role for himself, for circumstances had denied him one. His early autobiographical novels were a sort of workshop of the self,¹¹¹ in which he invented, tested and often abandoned tentative models for possible selves,¹¹² using fiction as a means to attain self-knowledge. Having defined his essential character, the 'self-discoverer'¹¹³ progressed to his political apprenticeship, during which he sought to integrate his personality with English political life. In his first efforts on the hustings, he reached into the theatrical properties box and found the costume of Bolingbroke, and with it the pose of a prophet of reinvigorated toryism. This impersonation eased his way into the Tory party. But in order to meet the aristocratic rulers of England on equal terms he was obliged further to transform his vision of himself. 'Unable to function in his proper person as a man of dubious pedigree in a highly class-conscious society', Isaiah Berlin writes, 'Disraeli invented a splendid fairy tale.'¹¹⁴ In his own eyes he was not the middle-class Jew who had been tormented at school, and whose first attempts to make his fortune had ended in ruin – he was a member of the most aristocratic branch of the most aristocratic race. By the end of the 1840s, when this elaborate fiction had been fully articulated, both Disraeli's political persona and his education were essentially complete.