

DISRAELI'S FICTION

DANIEL R. SCHWARZ



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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
Introduction	i
1 Metaphors of the Self: Disraeli's Early Fiction	7
2 From Immersion to Reflection: Romance and Realism in <i>Henrietta Temple</i> and <i>Venetia</i>	55
3 Progressive Dubiety: The Discontinuity of Disraeli's Political Trilogy	78
4 Art and Argument in <i>Sybil</i>	105
5 The Argument and Significance of Disraeli's Last Novels	125
Conclusion	150
<i>Notes</i>	154
<i>Index</i>	161

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Cornell University
Ithaca, New York
January 1979

DANIEL R. SCHWARZ

For my wife Marcia

Introduction

In the National Portrait Gallery in London, there are two quite different pictures of Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81). The first, an engraving by H. Robinson after an 1840 painting by A. E. Chalon, shows Disraeli with long, somewhat unkempt hair, an arrogant look approaching a sneer on his lips, inflamed eyes as if he had been up all night, a sloppy, creased coat, and an open shirt, his neck hardly concealed by a cravat. He cuts a most unconventional figure for a public man, and his mysterious, yet audacious air is emphasised by the fact that we cannot see his hands. In the second portrait, flatteringly painted by Sir John Everett Millais in 1881, the last year of Disraeli's life, the former Prime Minister, in formal dress and bow tie with arms folded, is the picture of propriety. Looking very much younger than his years, confident and poised, with arms folded, neat, stern without being unduly severe, and clearly in complete control of his emotions, he is the embodiment of the successful statesman. His taut self-control and his polished manner (every hair of beard and head is in place) contrast so strikingly with the earlier portrait that it reminds us that Disraeli, more than most men, consciously created the public self that stares so imposingly at us. Yet Disraeli never quite succeeded in erasing from the public mind the portrait of the younger Disraeli, the man whose novels and behaviour scandalised England. Not without a touch of anti-Semitism, critics twitted Disraeli about his transformation. For example, the caption accompanying the first cartoon (by C. Pellegrini) ever to appear in *Vanity Fair* (1869) read: 'He educated the Tories and dished the Whigs to pass Reform, but to have become what he is from what he was is the greatest Reform of all'. Similarly, a cartoon in *Punch* on 29 January 1867 comments on Disraeli's delicate footwork during the passage of the Second Reform Bill.

In the following chapters, I shall be concerned with Disraeli's career as a novelist. Were his novels not important as works of art, they would be worth studying for what they tell us about one of the major figures of the nineteenth century. Taken as a whole these novels are a considerable artistic achievement and, if both quality and output

are taken into account, need yield only to the works of Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, Trollope, Hardy and maybe Scott among nineteenth-century novelists. At the university where I teach, my enthusiasm for Disraeli's novels is regarded as a tolerable critical eccentricity, because I teach and write about 'major' novelists. Yet when I prevail upon students or colleagues to read *Sybil*, they are invariably enthusiastic. Nor does their excitement diminish after reading *Coningsby* or *Vivian Grey*; indeed their appetite is whetted for more, and they continue to enjoy subsequent novels, including some like *Lothair* and *Henrietta Temple* that have been read infrequently since the nineteenth century.

In this era of literary criticism, when attention is paid to minor writers whose work provides projects for dissertations but gives scant pleasure to anyone, it seems odd that Disraeli has been ignored. Richard A. Levine's *Benjamin Disraeli* (New York: Twayne, 1968), the only book-length critical study of Disraeli's novels, was published almost a decade ago. Levine does not give serious attention to the entire canon. Rather he focuses on the Young England trilogy (*Coningsby*, *Sybil* and *Tancred*) and discusses the other novels in relation to the trilogy and Disraeli's later ideas. I shall be much more concerned than he with the aesthetics of Disraeli's novels and with the relation between Disraeli's novels and his life.¹ A. B. Walkley's remark in 1922 is still appropriate: 'Disraeli's novels are documents as well as delights. It is a perpetual marvel to me that so few people . . . seem to read them.'² Disraeli's novels merit renewed attention not only because of their wit, insight, breadth, and vision and because they reveal the consciousness of one of the Victorian giants at crucial stages in his career, but also because they present strikingly original imagined worlds. In common with the other great Victorian novels, Disraeli's fictional works have the capacity to tell us something about another age and about ourselves. Like the major Victorian novelists, Disraeli is a deft psychologist and a student of the manners and mores of his time, but his political career gives him a unique perspective.

Disraeli's literary career spans over half a century, from 1826 to 1880. He published the first volumes of *Vivian Grey* when Scott, Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge were still alive and before any of the major Victorians, excepting Carlyle, were published. He concluded his career in 1880, a year when Dickens and Thackeray were dead and George Eliot was to die, and Thomas Hardy had already published *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native*.