

BENJAMIN DISRAELI'S *CONTARINI* *FLEMING* AND *ALROY*

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“**P**OETRY,” Disraeli confided to his diary in the autumn of 1833, “is the safety-valve of my passions, but I wish to act what I write. My works are the embodiment of my feelings. In *Vivian Grey* I have portrayed my active and real ambition. In *Alroy* (1833) my ideal ambition. The P.R. [*i.e.*, ‘Psychological Romance,’ the original title of *Contarini Fleming*] (1832) is a development of my Poetic character. This Trilogy is the secret history of my feelings—I shall write no more about myself.”¹

It is difficult to know how to assess this much-quoted statement. Disraeli apparently meant that in *Vivian Grey* (1826-27), with its detailed narrative of schemings and counter-schemings, he had foreshadowed his parliamentary ambitions; that in *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* (1833), with its account of an ultimately self-sacrificing hero who seeks to reunite and restore to power a divided and humiliated people, he had projected forth his sense of personal idealism and national destiny; and that in the highly autobiographical *Contarini Fleming* (1832) he had sought to record the development of his own artistic sensibilities. That he should at the same time have vowed to write “no more about myself” is in itself significant, for it suggests that since his visit to the East a change had come over his attitude towards novel writing. Certainly *Contarini* and *Alroy* have little enough in common with *Popanilla* (1828) and *The Young Duke* (1831), nor can they be said in any general way to anticipate *Henrietta Temple* (1836), *Venetia* (1837), *Coningsby* (1844), or *Sybil* (1845). Taken as a pair, they represent an interruption in the course of Disraeli’s development as a novelist—indeed, a regrettable interruption but nonetheless a necessary one.

Disraeli began work on *Alroy* late in the 1820’s. A tightly-packed

¹ Hughenden Papers, Box 11, A / III / C; the entry is dated Sept. 1, 1833, and occurs in the so-called “Mutilated Diary.” Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (London, 1966), p. 38, W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli* (London, 1910-20), I, p. 236, and B. R. Jerman, *The Young Disraeli* (Princeton, 1960), p. 69, all quote it. For permission to quote from the Disraeli papers at Hughenden, I am grateful to the National Trust and to the Trustees of the late Earl of Beaconsfield.

notebook at Hughenden² as well as the section of "Notes" that he appended to the novel show how extensive was the research he had undertaken. Besides the Bible and the Talmud, the "Notes" alone refer to such works as Jacques Basnage de Beauval, *Histoire des Juifs* (La Haye, 1716); Dom Augustin Calmet, *Dictionary of the Holy Bible* (London, 1732); Edward Daniel Clarke's *Travels* (London, 1810-23); William Enfield, *The History of Philosophy* (London, 1791); Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1776-88); *The Works of the Reverend and Learned John Lightfoot, D.D.*, ed. George Bright (London, 1684); Sir John Malcolm's *Sketches of Persia* (London, 1827); Sir Robert Ker Porter's *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia, &c. &c.* (London, 1821-22); and George Sandys' *Relation of a Journey* (London, 1615). He seems not to have made a systematic study of these works but simply to have dipped into them and drawn out what suited his purposes. In several cases his references are incorrect: in notes 10 and 40 he gives the wrong volume numbers for his citations in Lightfoot, and, quoting from Porter's *Travels*, in note 3 he encloses in quotation marks a passage that begins as quotation but ends as précis.

Disraeli's use of works of this sort, to which he would have had access at Bradenham, is not, however, of major importance where *Alroy* is concerned. He was not a scholar and never sought to become one.³ The immediate impetus for the book came from his visit to the Near East:

I had commenced 'Alroy' the year after my first publication, and had thrown the manuscript aside. Being at Jerusalem in the year 1831, and visiting the traditionary tombs of the kings, my thoughts recurred to the marvellous career which had attracted my boyhood, and I shortly after finished a work which I began the year after I wrote *Vivian Grey*.⁴

The greater part of both *Alroy* and *Contarini* was in fact written

² Box 11, A / III / A. The manuscript of *Alroy* has recently been discovered by Professor J. P. Matthews of the Disraeli Project, Owens University, Kingston, Canada.

³ Chapter 3 of Part VI of *Alroy* contains an amusing burlesque on the obscurantism of the learned. The first chapter of a certain treatise, one character remarks, "makes equal sense, read backward or forward" (I, p. 208)—a judgment which Robert Blake says (pp. 107-8) Disraeli himself once applied to the opening chapter of *Alroy*. But this is apparently erroneous, though the remark might with some justification be made of the first chapter of *Contarini*.

⁴ "General Preface," *Lothair*, Longman's collected edition (London, 1870).

during these travels. In the preface to *The Revolutionary Epick* (1834) Disraeli explains why, having conceived that work “on the plains of Troy,”⁵ he did not execute it until some years later. On reaching Constantinople, he writes, his thoughts “more than once” recurred to the poem “but the distraction of far travel, and the composition of two works long meditated—one devoted to the delineation of the Poetic Character, the other to the celebration of a gorgeous incident in the annals of that sacred and romantic people from whom I derive my blood and name,—finally expelled from my thoughts a conception which, in truth, I deemed too bold.”⁶ And of *Contarini* he declares in the 1845 preface that it was “written with great care, after deep meditation, and in a beautiful and distant land favourable to composition, with nothing in it to attract the passions of the hour. . . .” One place where he would have found little “to attract the passions of the hour” was the lazaretto at Malta where, on his return from the East, he was in quarantine for over a month.⁷ As he wrote to his father from Gibraltar on the way back: “You will be surprised, perhaps even astounded at the quantity I have planned & written.”⁸ On the whole it seems likely that he must have done most of this work at Malta, though, for reasons which will be made plain below, he cannot have completed the last quarter of *Contarini* until his return to Brandenham.

A large portion of both works was thus written under the shadow of the death in Cairo on July 19th of Disraeli’s close friend and travelling companion, William Meredith—who happened also to be his sister’s fiancé. This perhaps explains why *Alroy* should have been so floridly dedicated—in a style worthy of the rest of the book—to “Sa,” as he called her;⁹ it perhaps explains, too, why *Contarini*

⁵ (London, 1834), p. [i].

⁶ P. iii.

⁷ The *Government Gazette* of Malta records his arrival with Clay and “Tita” on the Austrian brig “Arpocrate” on 7 September and his departure, without Clay and “Tita,” on the steam-packet “Hermes” on 12 October. I am indebted to Dr. Donald Sultana of the University of Edinburgh for this information.

⁸ Hughenden Papers, Box 12, A / IV / E 32.

⁹ The text, which is not reproduced in later editions, reads: “To / ***** / Sweet Sister! as I wandered on the mountains of Sion, behold! a gazelle came bounding o’er the hills! It perceived me, it started back, it gazed at me with trembling surprise. Ah! fear not! fair creature, I fondly exclaimed, fear not, and flee not away! I too have a gazelle in a distant land; not less beautiful her airy form than thine, and her dark eye not less tremulously bright!

“Ah! little did I deem, my sweetest friend, that ere I pressed that beauteous form again, Sorrow should dim the radiance of thy smile, and charge that brilliant eye with many a tear! Yet trust thee, dearest, in a brother’s love, the purest sympathy of our

is made to marry a young woman named Alcesté who dies tragically in childbirth shortly afterwards and who, as “the last of the Contarinis,”¹⁰ is at least the hero’s cousin and possibly, it is darkly hinted, his half-sister as well.¹¹ But it does not explain why, even by the most generous critical standards, these books are so dreadfully bad.

During his tour of the Near East Disraeli, like his hero Contarini, was engaged in an internal debate about his future: was his career to be literary or political? In the absence of any immediate political prospects, one way to seek a resolution of this problem was to set out to write a Great Novel. Both *Contarini* and *Alroy* exhibit flagrant aspirations in this direction. The *Alroy* notebook is of all Disraeli’s extant “working papers” the most voluminous and ambitious. In the first chapter of *Contarini* he tells us through his hero:

I am desirous of writing a book which shall be all truth, a work of which the passion, the thought, the action, and even the style, should spring from my own experience of feeling, from the meditations of my own intellect, from my own observations of incident, from my own study of the genius of expression.¹²

If either of these books, as he worked on them, had struck him as having within them the stuff of which fame is made he might have stuck to letters. “. . . I am not,” he wrote in the preface to *The Revolutionary Epick*, “one who find [sic] consolation for the neglect of my contemporaries in the imaginary plaudits of a more sympathetic Posterity.”¹³ But during the latter part of his travels his interest in

fallen state! If I recall one gleam of rapture to thy pensive cheek, not in vain I strike my lonely lyre, or throw these laurels at thy fairy feet!” (pp. [v]-vi).

¹⁰ III, p. 30 (Part III, Ch. 9).

¹¹ The point is admittedly obscure, but some contemporary readers, possibly with the dedication of *Alroy* in mind, took Alcesté as a portrait of Sarah. In an undated letter to Disraeli, Mrs. Bolton complains that “. . . the rumour was, the book could not be moral Alcesté being your sister—pray shout at this!! They say it matters not about the doctrinal parts. The others render it unfit for a lady.” (Hughenden Papers, Box 13, A / IV / G / 6.) Yet in two other letters (A / IV / G / 4 and 10) she clearly refers to Sarah, who had paid her several visits, as “Alcesté.”

According to one of his *Alroy* notes, Disraeli was an admirer of the Alcesté of Euripides—particularly of the heroine’s “beautiful” conduct as death approaches. (Box 11, A / III / A / p. 19)

¹² I, p. 6.

¹³ (London, 1834), p. iv. It was in this spirit that, writing from Cairo, in May, 1831, he could look back on *The Young Duke* with indifference: “I don’t care a jot about the ‘Young Duke.’ I never staked any fame on it. It may take its chance. I meant the hero to be a model for our youth; but after two years’ confinement in these revolutionary times, I fear he will prove old-fashioned.” (*Home Letters*, ed. Augustine Birrell, London, 1928, p. 94)

current affairs was growing. The July Revolution in France had brought Louis-Philippe to the throne, there had been another revolution in Belgium, and at home William IV was surrounding himself with a more liberal court than would have been tolerated by his predecessor. "Ever since you left," wrote Sarah, "accessions, elections and revolutions have followed one another so rapidly that we have not had breathing time."¹⁴ Disraeli's letters from the East, even before Meredith's death, show an eagerness to get home by the shortest possible route and to take advantage of the opportunities opening up as a result of the imminence of the Great Reform Bill.¹⁵ Well before the publication and commercial failure¹⁶ of *Contarini* it would seem that his primary interests were turning towards politics—a subject, he later told Benjamin Jowett, which he had first begun to understand by reading a file of *Galignani's Messenger* while in quarantine at Malta.¹⁷ Could he, in such circumstances, as he looked over his own manuscripts, have failed to be struck by their subjective and emotionally self-indulgent tone so little calculated to win that universal acclaim which he valued so highly?

Disraeli had first taken to novel writing in a spirit of revenge, and, in a more generous temper, he had carried on in *Popanilla* and *The Young Duke* largely for financial reasons. It was the Eastern tour that brought to a head the question whether his future would be in politics or literature. We can see him working his way towards a resolution in *Contarini*. It must have been with his own epoch in mind that he had Contarini's father, in a letter to his son towards the end of the novel, declare of his own youth:

"It was a political age. A great theatre seemed before me. I had ever been ambitious. I directed my desires in a new channel, and I determined to be a statesman."¹⁸

¹⁴ Hughenden Papers, Box 12, A / IV / E / 8; dated Sept. 30, 1830.

¹⁵ The point is admirably documented by Monypenny (*M & B*, I, p. 202), but still further evidence will be found in *Home Letters*, pp. 90-91.

¹⁶ See Jerman, pp. 150-151, and C. L. Cline, "The Failure of Disraeli's *Contarini Fleming*," *Notes & Queries*, August 1, 1942, p. 69. On pp. 224-226 Jerman tells the fascinating story of the disposal of the unsold sheets: they were issued by Moxon in 1834 and, after sale of only eight copies, were turned over to Thomas Tegg who contrived their re-issue in Glasgow as *The Young Venetian*; or *the Victim of Imagination*—"certainly a better title," Jerman remarks, "than Disraeli's own"—by one "Granville Jones." Although the preface in which Disraeli acknowledges his authorship is deleted, the text otherwise is unchanged.

¹⁷ Evelyn Abbott and Lewis Campbell, *Life of Jowett* (London, 1897), II, p. 109.

¹⁸ *IV*, p. 212 (Part VI, Ch. 14).

The upshot of his growing interest in political affairs, the impending passage of the Reform Bill, and—possibly—a sense that in *Contarini* and *Alroy* he had gone as far in that particular line as it was in him to go, led him to decide henceforth to subordinate literature to politics.

ii.

If *Contarini* was intended, as Disraeli wrote, to be “a development of my Poetic character,” it may be worth asking just what that poetic character was. Certainly Byron had a large place in it: the Byron of *The Corsair*, naturally, and of *Childe Harold*, *Hebrew Melodies*, and *Don Juan*. Nor should the fashionable cult for Byron as a person be forgotten. Yet it was, one suspects, the couplets and the cynicism that most completely took possession of Disraeli’s imagination. For romanticism as we now understand it does not seem to have greatly appealed to him. Already in *Popanilla*, describing a procession at Hubbabub, he had referred to Keats with no particular enthusiasm:

Each carriage was drawn by four horses, and attended by footmen so radiant with gold and scarlet, that, had Popanilla been the late ingenious Mr. Keates, he would have mistaken them for the natural children of Phoebus and Aurora.¹⁹

During his imprisonment, Popanilla’s eye falls upon a faintly Shelleyan volume:

Taking up a brilliantly bound volume, which reposed upon a rose-wood table, Popanilla recited aloud a sonnet to Liberty; but the account given of the goddess by the bard was so confused, and he seemed so little acquainted with his subject, that the reader began to suspect it was an effusion of the gaoler.²⁰

And in Chapter 8 of Book II of *The Young Duke*, in a burst of magnificent high spirits, he is capable of a burlesque that seems in some ways to echo Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats:

‘Tis dinner! hour that I have loved as loves the bard at twilight; but no more those visions rise that once were wont to spring in my quick fancy. The dream is past, the spell is broken,

¹⁹ P. 105 (Ch. 10).

²⁰ (London, 1828), p. 226 (Ch. 17).

and even the lore on which I pondered in my first youth is strange as figures in Egyptian tombs.

No more, no more, oh! never more to me, that hour shall bring its rapture and its bliss! No more, no more, oh! never more for me, shall Flavour sit upon her thousand thrones, and, like a syren with a sunny smile, win to renewed excesses, each more sweet! My feasting days are over: me no more the charms of fish, or flesh, still less of fowl, can make the fool of that they made before. The fricandeau is like a dream of early love; the fricassee, with which I have so often flirted, is like the tattle of the last quadrille; and no longer are my dreams haunted with the dark passion of the rich ragoût. Ye soups! o'er whose creations I have watched, like mothers o'er their sleeping child! Ye sauces! to which I have even lent a name, where are ye now? Tickling, perchance, the palate of some easy friend, who quite forgets the boon companion whose presence once lent lustre even to his ruby wine and added perfume to his perfumed hock!

It is difficult to resist the impression that Disraeli was basically out of sympathy with what we now call the romantic movement. His real affinities were with the eighteenth century and particularly with Pope—this, indeed, was the side of Byron that he had already sought to emulate in *The Dunciad of To-day*²¹ as well as in the creation of that “intellectual Don Juan,”²² the hero of *Vivian Grey*. His attempts at exalted versification in *The Revolutionary Epick* and *The Tragedy of Count Alarcos* (1839) are more often turgid and bombastic than otherwise. In 1837 when he sent some declamatory blank verse to *The Times*, Thomas Barnes, its editor, replied in words that might fittingly be applied to all Disraeli's attempts to soar into the poetic empyrean: “Your verses have a stately march and the sentiments are just, but they want variety. The tone is a high one, but the sound is monotonous.”²³

Disraeli did not lack rhetorical power, but he had no sense of the poet's special way of seeing things—a point which is likely to strike the reader of *Venetia*. Like his verse, *Contarini* is full of “fine” senti-

²¹ *Star Chamber*, 10-17 May, 1826, reproduced in *The Dunciad of Today, a Satire, and the Modern Aesop*, ed. Michael Sadleir (London, 1928). In his introduction Sadleir presents a convincing case for attributing this work to Disraeli.

²² *Vivian Grey* (London, 1826), II (Bk. III, Ch. 5), p. 51.

²³ M & B, I, p. 333.

ments and painfully contrived expressions; yet little is presented in a way that seems genuinely and deeply felt, and the images are seldom more than felicitous. The poetic character, as Frank Swinerton has remarked, "is the one character that does not yield itself to ambition."²⁴ Disraeli is more concerned in *Contarini* that his readers should recognize how exquisite and profound are his sensibilities that that they should see what those sensibilities reveal to him. The effect is finally one of appalling emptiness; the tone is indeed high but the sound monotonous. It is hardly surprising that two thirds of the way through the novel he should declare that "It appears to me, that the age of Versification has past,"²⁵ adding a few pages further on:

One would have supposed that the Poet who could not only write, but even print his inventions, would have felt that it was both useless and unfit that they should be communicated by a process invented when his only medium was simple recitation. One would have supposed, that the Poet would have rushed with desire to the new world before him, that he would have seized the new means that permitted him to revel in an universe of boundless invention; to combine the highest ideal creation with the infinite delineation of teeming Nature; to unravel all the dark mysteries of our bosoms, and all the bright purposes of our being; to become the great instructor and champion of his species; and not only delight their fancy, and charm their senses, and command their will, but demonstrate their rights, illustrate their necessities, and expound the object of their existence; and all this too in a style charming and changing with its universal theme, now tender, now sportive; now earnest, now profound; now sublime, now pathetic; and substituting for the dull monotony of metre, the most various, and exquisite, and inexhaustible melody.²⁶

If Disraeli had indeed read his Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley, he does not seem to have profited much from the experience.

What, then, is *Contarini* about? It isn't about the "poetic" in any real sense, nor is it exactly the "psychological autobiography"

²⁴ "Disraeli as a Novelist," *Yale Review* (January, 1928), p. 290; this valuable article is also printed in the *Bookman* (April, 1927) and the *London Mercury* (January, 1928).

²⁵ III, p. 154 (Part IV, Ch. 3).

²⁶ Pp. 159-160.

of the subtitle, although that comes nearer the mark. For if we understand by "psychological" the description of a state of mind and the forces that create it, the book as a whole is not convincing. The early chapters dealing with Contarini's childhood, on the other hand, are both realistic and moving; they are a good anticipation of the brilliant early section of *Venetia* describing the troubled childhood of Cadurcis-Byron. This is possible because in both cases the narrator is necessarily outside his characters speaking in his own voice rather than theirs. But what Disraeli seems to have considered the "psychological" part of the book comes slightly later, in the more rhetorical treatment of Contarini's efforts to recover from the ill-effects of an education such as Lord Chesterfield might have endorsed, and in the difficulties he experiences in choosing between a life of contemplation and a life of action. All this would be well enough if Disraeli had been able to make Contarini's mental processes clear to the reader. But this he cannot do; Contarini's ruminations are really self-conscious theatrical set-pieces that for their proper effect require to be declaimed. Having insisted upon a first person narrative—he stresses the importance of this in his 1845 preface—Disraeli had put himself in a position where he could leave little to the reader's inference. The result is that what Contarini thinks, we read; and what he doesn't think with a sufficient degree of consciousness to set down on paper, doesn't exist.

Beneath all its pretense, *Contarini* is scarcely more than a protracted revery about its author. Occasionally spirited but more often given over to artificial coincidences of plot and prolonged musings on the hero's destiny, its commercial failure is not difficult to understand. Nor, in an age interested in egoisms, is its modest critical *réclame* wholly surprising. As a "psychological autobiography" it did not have any very stiff competition to face. Madame d'Arblay (Fanny Burney) and Milman, Murray's reader, were both enthusiastic admirers, the latter declaring: "Very wild, very extravagant, very German, very powerful, very poetical. . . . It will, I think, be much read . . . much admired, and much abused. . . . The latter part . . . is a rapid volume of travels, a *Childe Harold* in prose."²⁷ Beckford, to whom Disraeli had sent a copy on publication, exclaimed, "How wildly original! How full of intense thought! How awakening! How delightful!"²⁸ and Thomas Campbell, "who, as

²⁷ M & B, I, p. 190-191.

²⁸ P. 191.

he says, never reads any books but his own," Disraeli reported to his sister, "is delighted with it; 'I shall review it myself,' he exclaims, 'and it will be a psychological review.'"²⁹ Apart from Campbell's banter, none of these comments deals with the "psychological" side of the story—hence, perhaps, Disraeli's complaint to his sister that "Amid abundance of praise and blame of *Contarini*, one thing which we all expected is very evident, that not one of the writers has the slightest idea of the nature or purposes of the work."³⁰ For the principal "psychological" feature of the novel is the first person account of the hero's inner doubts about himself and his destiny: how is he to choose between the rival attractions of the hurly-burly world of public affairs and the artist's life of introspection and contemplation?

Throughout the book Contarini oscillates between these two poles. When his literary ambitions are frustrated he turns to the world of action, and when his political and diplomatic intrigues come to naught he turns back to literature. None of these various shiftings, however, is exactly conclusive—even at the end of the book. The ambivalent close of Part VI, Chapter 2, is typical:

Truly may I say, that on the plains of Syria, I parted for ever with my ambition. The calm enjoyment of existence appeared to me, as it now does, the highest attainable felicity, nor can I conceive, that anything could tempt me from my solitude, and induce me once more to mingle with mankind, with whom, I fear, I have too little in common, but the strong conviction that the fortunes of my race depended on my effort, or that I could materially advance that great amelioration of their condition, in the practicability of which I devoutly believe.³¹

Yet, as he says, this "strong conviction" is wanting. By the time Contarini reaches his final pages he has become only slightly more confident about the future. Having retired to the life of a dilettante in his exquisitely appointed Neapolitan villa, hoping "in time to create a scene which may rival in beauty and variety, although not in extent, the villa of Hadrian,"³² he resolves (no doubt with Beckford in mind) to erect a tower "at least one hundred and fifty

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ IV, pp. 151-152.

³² IV, p. 227 (Part VII, Ch. 2).

feet”³³ high. Here, he declares, “let me pass my life in the study and the creation of the Beautiful.”³⁴ Then suddenly:

Such is my desire; but whether it will be my career is, I feel, doubtful. My interest in the happiness of my race is too keen to permit me for a moment to be blind to the storms that lour on the horizon of society. Perchance also the political regeneration of the country to which I am devoted may not be distant, and in that great work I am resolved to participate.³⁵

Yet the closest he comes to a clear statement of the nature of this participation is the concluding assertion that he hopes to devote himself “to the amelioration of his kind, by the destruction of error and the propagation of truth.”³⁶ The novel has to end somewhere and this is Disraeli’s compromise to end it: a life of secluded aestheticism for Contarini with, however, the distant possibility of some future role in the world of affairs.

There is an inertia about that last chapter, indeed about many of Contarini’s ruminations, that can best be explained by looking back to the beginning of Part IV. After the death of Alceste, Contarini goes to Florence and begins work on a new and more serious novel than the unfortunate “Manstein” (i.e., *Vivian Grey*). This work—which sounds suspiciously like *Contarini* itself—was the product of “many long and unbroken hours”³⁷ of meditation and was intended to achieve “a great and permanent fame.”³⁸ At first the business of composition proceeds easily enough, but soon Contarini is afflicted with “an occasional, but increasing, languor . . . a feeling of inertness, which was painful and mortifying.”³⁹ It is as if at this point in his own work Disraeli’s interest had suddenly collapsed—for the character of the book now changes dramatically. Contarini goes to Pisa for a fortnight’s rest and the chapter concludes:

My visit to Pisa benefited me. I returned, and gave the last finish to my work.⁴⁰

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ IV, p. 228 (Part VII, Ch. 2).

³⁵ IV, pp. 228-229 (Part VII, Ch. 2).

³⁶ IV, p. 230 (Part VII, Ch. 2). Disraeli also avows a deep sympathy with his fellow men and, surprisingly, “a proud and profound conviction of their perfectibility.”

³⁷ III, p. 149 (Part IV, Ch. 2).

³⁸ III, p. 170 (Part IV, Ch. 5).

³⁹ III, p. 162 (Part IV, Ch. 4).

⁴⁰ III, p. 167 (Part IV, Ch. 4).

Then we proceed to chapter five:

All the Italian cities are delightful; but an elegant melancholy pervades Pisa, that is enchanting. What a marble group is formed by the Cathedral, the wonderful Baptistery, the leaning Tower, and the Campo Santo. . . .⁴¹

In short, at this point the book becomes a sort of travelogue based upon Disraeli's travels in Spain, Malta, and the Near East in 1830-31. Much of the text is in fact transcribed from the letters that he had sent home during the 1830-31 tour.

The following table locates by page numbers the various passages in his letters which Disraeli reproduced almost verbatim in the fourth volume of *Contarini*:

<i>Home Letters</i> (London, 1928)	<i>Contarini Fleming</i> (London, 1832) IV
51-52	5-8 (Pt. V, Ch. 1)
50-51	8-11
33	11 (Ch. 2)
22, 40-41	11-17
45-47	19-27 (Ch. 3)
36	33-41 (Ch. 5)
40-43	41-49 (Ch. 6)
37-40	49-53 (Ch. 7)
23	54-55 (Ch. 8)
75	57-58 (Ch. 10)
64-66	60-65
66-69	66-73 (Ch. 11)
69-71	73-79 (Ch. 12)
72-74	79-87 (Ch. 13)
78	118-119 (Ch. 22)
81	119-120
82, 80	120-130 (Chs. 22-24)
87-89	170-175 (Pt. VI, Chs. 4-5)
97	195-196 (Ch. 10)

In the second volume of the novel, Disraeli draws upon recollections of his journey with the Austens in 1826 across the Alps and on to Venice. He had described his experiences in letters to his

⁴¹ III, p. 168.

father (reproduced in part by Monypenny), but when writing *Contarini* he seems to have relied, despite occasional common phrases, solely upon his memory. The following comparisons make an interesting contrast to his more direct use of letters in volume four:

M & B, I	<i>Contarini Fleming</i> , II
96-97	199-200 (Part III, Ch. 1)
98-99	209-211
100-101	212-230 (Chs. 2-4)
104-105	231-247 (Ch. 5)

Yet what may seem surprising is that this last quarter—in which Disraeli has in fact abandoned his original purpose—is far and away the finest part of the novel. For instead of having to plough through Contarini's inconclusive ruminations and his melodramatic rencounters, we are suddenly plunged into a world of real persons and events—all brilliantly drawn. Disraeli was a superb letter writer, and never more so than during his Eastern tour. As his sister remarked, acknowledging a series of letters posted from Gibraltar on the way out: "You describe so enchantingly all that you see, that we share all your enjoyments."⁴² The contrast between the portions of *Contarini* incorporating Disraeli's letters—which he had the good sense to leave largely unaltered—and the more laboured bulk of the novel is instructive. Disraeli was at his best when writing spontaneously (he was, after all, a supremely successful extemporaneous speaker); under pressure of time, the right word and the evocative image immediately sprang to mind. But when time lay heavy on his hands, when there was leisure for "deep meditation" and nothing "to attract the passions of the hour"⁴³—as must have been the case during his quarantine at Malta—he was all too ready, especially when writing in the self-justifying mood so evident in *Contarini*, to let that old devil ambition drive him on to endless elaborations of the com-

⁴² Hughenden Papers, Box 12, A / IV / E / 7; the letter is dated July 28, 1830.

⁴³ See above, p. 74. In the "General Preface," *Lothair*, Longmans' collected edition (London, 1870), he observes that he had "written it with deep thought and feeling" (p. xix) adding, however, that "it would have been better if a subject so essentially psychological had been treated at a more mature period of life" (p. xx). Of his own book, Contarini remarks: "What seemed to me odd enough then, although no puzzle now, was, that they [*i.e.*, the critics] admired what had been written in haste, and without premeditation, and generally disapproved of what had cost me much forethought, and been executed with great care." (III, p. 150, Part IV, Ch. 2) Lockhart, to whom Murray first showed the ms., had confessed himself perplexed by the contrast between "the 'affectations and absurdities' on the one hand and 'the life and brilliancy' of the descriptions on the other." (M & B, I, p. 190)

monplace. In these circumstances his judgment would falter and, one suspects, he wrote more for himself than for others.

iii.

To the student of Disraeli's fiction as a whole, however, *Contarini* is of some interest for what it reveals about the development of certain themes which can be seen germinating in his previous work and which will go on to a further stage in subsequent novels. To a considerable extent it is true to say that throughout his career Disraeli was really writing the same novel over and over again. Partly this is because most of his novels centre on a young and ambitious hero who is largely Disraeli—or Disraeli's persona—in fairly thin disguise; partly, too, it is because many of the ideas that preoccupied him at the very start remained, in one form or another, a source of recurrent interest to him.

In the first part of *Vivian Grey* Mrs. Lorraine tells a mysterious story about one Max Rodenstein which really has nothing to do with the rest of the novel. The story is a reworking, in a German setting, of an anecdote Disraeli had heard at Murray's dinner-table in 1822. In its essentials it is about the relationship of art and nature: Max's portrait, by a sudden change in its appearance, announces the simultaneous death of Max himself. This theme pops up again in the description of Beckendorff's collection of 'pictures' in part two where, in a collaboration between art and nature, the light of the natural world, filtered through coloured windows, evokes the qualities of paintings by Breughel, Claude, and Honthorst. In *Popanilla* and *The Young Duke*—both of which are permeated with the idea of artifice—the theme goes underground, as it were, and such figurative expressions of it are replaced by verbal play. Then at the end of *Contarini* (a novel in which the hero learns to recognize the superior force of nature over education), Disraeli returns to the figurative exposition of his theme, this time with recollections of Pygmalion. In the villa to which Contarini retires one of the principal objects of veneration is "a sleeping Cupid, by Canova, over which I have contrived, by a secret light, to throw a rosy flush, that invests the ideal beauty of the sculptor with still more ideal life."⁴⁴ There is, too, this odd memorial of Alcesté:

At the end of the gallery I have placed the portraits of my

⁴⁴ IV, p. 226 (Part VII, Ch. 2).

father and of my mother, the latter copied by an excellent artist from the miniature. Between them is a frame of richly carved ivory, enclosing a black velvet veil, studded with white roses, worked in pearls.⁴⁵

Even Contarini's prose style, we are told, has been formed by a study of the Venetian, Tuscan, Florentine, Roman, and Spanish schools of painting.⁴⁶

In *Henrietta Temple* Disraeli returns again to the idea of the artificially life-like statue. Lord Montford takes Henrietta and her father to the studio of a "celebrated sculptor" at Pisa:

The artist was full of enthusiasm for his pursuit, and showed them, with pride, his great work, a Diana that might have made one envy Endymion. The sculptor declared it was the perfect resemblance of Miss Temple, and appealed to her father. Mr. Temple could not deny the very striking likeness. Miss Temple smiled; she looked almost herself again; even the reserved Lord Montford was in raptures.

"Oh! it is very like," said his Lordship. "Yes! now it is exactly like. Miss Temple does not often smile; but now one would believe she really was the model."⁴⁷

Two chapters later the Temples visit Lord Montford's establishment at Rome:

At the end of the principal gallery, Henrietta perceived an open door, which admitted them into a small octagon chamber, of Ionic architecture. The walls were not hung with pictures, and one work of art alone solicited their attention. Elevated on a pedestal of porphyry, surrounded by a rail of bronze arrows of the lightest workmanship, was that statue of Diana, which they had so much admired at Pisa. The cheek, by an ancient process, the secret of which has been recently regained at Rome, was tinted with a delicate glow.

"Do you approve of it?" said Lord Montford to the admiring Henrietta. "Ah! dearest Miss Temple," he continued, "it

⁴⁵ IV, pp. 226-227 (Part VII, Ch. 2). *Cf.*, the mysterious (and never fully explained) black-framed portrait over Beckendorff's fireplace in Book VI, Chapter 6, of *Vivian Grey*.

⁴⁶ III, pp. 139-142 (Part IV, Ch. 1).

⁴⁷ II, p. 270 (Bk. V, Ch. 2).

is my happiness that the rose has also returned to a fairer cheek than this."⁴⁸

Earlier in the same novel Disraeli makes much of the resemblance between Ferdinand, who has just met the Temples and is taking them over the picture gallery at Armine, and a portrait of his grandfather:

It was indeed a picture to gaze upon and to return to; one of those visages, which, after having once beheld, haunt us at all hours, and flit across our mind's eye unexpected and unbidden. So great indeed was the effect that it produced upon the present visitors [sic] to the gallery, that they stood before it for some minutes in silence; the scrutinizing glance of the gentleman indeed was more than once diverted from the portrait to the countenance of his conductor, and the silence was eventually broken by our hero.

"And what think you," he inquired, "of the famous Sir Ferdinand?"

The lady started, looked at him, withdrew her glance, and appeared somewhat confused. Her companion replied, "I think, sir, I cannot err in believing that I am indebted for much courtesy to his descendant?"⁴⁹

And in *Venetia* the heroine's discovery of a portrait of her father in a locked room at Cherbury is an incident from which the greater part of the novel's action springs. There can be no doubt that the notion of a dichotomy between art and nature fascinated Disraeli; indeed, as some of the passages above indicate, at times it could have an almost superstitious hold upon him, analogous in a small way perhaps to his penchant for theological and racial mystifications in *Contarini*, *Alroy*, and *Tancred*. In general, however, he kept it to a subordinate role in his novels, though in *Popanilla* and, in a very different way, in *Venetia* he was able to turn it to good artistic effect.

Another important theme which runs through several of these

⁴⁸ II (Bk. V, Ch. 4), pp. 291-292. A technique for colouring statuary was developed at Rome early in the century by the English sculptor John Gibson (1790-1866) of whose work Disraeli might possibly have heard—though Gibson's own tinted sculptures were not exhibited publicly until after the date of *Henrietta Temple*.

⁴⁹ I (Bk. II, Ch. 4), pp. 171-172.

early works is the romanticized feudalism with which Disraeli is inclined to invest his ancient country seats. This is not simply a question of magnificent old country houses; Château Desir in the first part of *Vivian Grey* is clearly an example of one of these, but apart from its Gothic antiquity there is nothing particularly feudal about the place. In *The Young Duke*, on the other hand, part of the Duke's self-discovery centres on his recognition of his duties to the tenants on his estates—a recognition helped by the example of Mr. Dacre. And here, indeed, a new element enters the picture, for the Dacres are an old Roman Catholic family. From this point onwards in Disraeli's fiction, many of the great country houses which are described as being run with a sound understanding of the reciprocal duties of tenant and lord will be Roman Catholic. *Alroy*, of course, is necessarily an exception. So is *Venetia*, for Disraeli could not very well saddle Shelley and Byron with Catholic ancestors—although it must be admitted that he does his best in this direction by setting the scene of Herbert-Shelley's reunion with his wife in a convent near Venice. Similarly, in *Contarini* although the hero remains a Protestant, he is strongly attracted to Catholicism—through the mystical influence of incense and ritual rather than from doctrinal considerations—and weds Alcesté according to the Roman rite. With the return in *Henrietta Temple* to a predominantly English setting, Disraeli draws the two strains of great country houses and Romanism together and for the first time gives us a Catholic hero (though not a very devout one) in Ferdinand Armine. Not only are the Armines good landlords passionately attached to their land, but they owe much of their felicity (indeed, too much so far as Ferdinand's viability as a character is concerned) to a Catholic priest named Glastonbury who befriends the family and acts as tutor to Ferdinand. And like *The Young Duke* and *Contarini*, *Henrietta Temple* contains important scenes set in ruined abbeys—apparent foreshadowings of the “two nations” scene in *Sybil*.⁵⁰

The mention of Glastonbury leads us to a third and final theme running through these early novels. One of Disraeli's stock characters is a worldly and experienced older man, usually of an artistic

⁵⁰ In the *Vivian Grey* notebook at Hughenden (Box 11, A / III / E / 5, p. 3) Disraeli cites C. E. Dodd's description (*An Autumn near the Rhine*, London, 1821, p. 46) of a girl waltzing in the orange and black “costume of the *Couvent des Dames Nobles* at Frankfort,” an order open to both Catholics and Protestants; this was the basis for the initial description of the Baroness, arriving at the ball, in *Vivian Grey* (V, pp. 95-96; Bk. VII, Ch. 5) and it may have been the point at which heroines and religious orders coalesced in Disraeli's imagination.

and philosophical temper, who acts as mentor and—by getting him out of occasional scrapes—benefactor to the hero; to a large extent he embodies Disraeli's notion of his own wiser alter ego. Sidonia in *Coningsby* is perhaps the most conspicuous example of this type, but he is foreshadowed in nearly all the earlier novels. Horace Grey, as Vivian's father, must be excluded, and so much Beckendorff in the second part of the novel, for although Vivian quizzically admires him and in an indefinite way benefits from his advice, in the last instance they are foes. But in *The Young Duke* this role of wise and kindly mentor is taken by Mr. Dacre, himself based upon Evelyn in Plumer Ward's *Tremaine* (1825); in *Contarini* it falls to Winter; in *Alroy* to Honain; in *Henrietta Temple* to Glastonbury; and in *Venetia* to Dr. Masham.

Disraeli probably created these characters out of his own emotional needs and experiences. As a youth he was much given to the society of older men—men, that is, who could teach him something—and during his Mediterranean travels he encountered two such, one of whom he always felt had had an enormous influence over him. It is not important to identify either of these as his "model"—and the type is too general for that in any case. But it is instructive to notice how he reacted to these men; there was a strong, if well restrained, element of hero-worship in him, which comes through very clearly in the novels. From Florence, while touring with the Austens, he wrote to his father of "a very extraordinary man of the name of Saunders . . . the intimate friend of the late Emperor Alexander . . . is still attached to the Court of Russia. . . ."

He is a deep student, full of philosophy, first principles, and the study of the beautiful, but eloquent and profound. Though of a very close temper, he was so delighted to get hold of someone who had a literary turn that we have become tolerably intimate, and I occasionally visit him at his country villa, which, by the bye, is the *Villa Vespucci*, rented by him of a noble family of that name, the lineal descendants of the famous Americus. He is now engraving the most valuable picture in Italy, the masterpiece of Fra Bartolommeo.⁵¹

⁵¹ M & B, I, p. 108; the letter is dated September 29, 1826. In a letter of 11 July 1828, Meredith wrote from Stockholm of his "newly acquired friend, the Baron Fleming" who, he added, "is an intimate friend of young Saunders, the son of your Saunders of Florence." (Hughenden Papers, Box 12, A / IV / A / 14.) Meredith may subsequently have discussed the Baron with Disraeli and so, indirectly, have contributed to the character of Contarini's father.

And during his stay in Egypt in 1831 he fell in with the archaeologist and diplomat Paul Emile Botta, of whom he later wrote:

But the man from whom I have gained most in conversation is Botta, the son of the Italian historian, whom I knew in Egypt, travelling as a physician in the Syrian dress—the most philosophic mind that I ever came in contact with. Hour after hour has glided away, while, *chibouque* in mouth, we have disserted together upon our divan, in a country where there are no journals and no books. My mind made a jump in these high discourses. Botta was wont to say that they formed also an era in his intellectual life. . . .⁵²

Whatever the nature of their “high discourses,” Disraeli evidently felt a strong bond of sympathy—a favourite word of his, especially in *Venetia*—with Botta; they were in correspondence as late as 1846.⁵³

These recurrent elements in the early novels are interesting enough to anyone who wishes to trace Disraeli’s development, but they in no way attenuate the failure of *Contarini* as a novel. The tone may be high, but (excepting the passages drawn from his letters) the sound is indeed monotonous. For all the book’s autobiographical interest, it is difficult to imagine any critical standards which would justify its rehabilitation today.

iv.

As a novel, *Alroy* is even worse—though as a failure it is rather more interesting. There is nothing wrong with its conception. Although slightly episodic, the plot is essentially well laid and even has affinities with ancient tragedy: the pronouncements of oracles receive serious attention, a sense of destiny is never far from Alroy’s mind, the conflict of love and honour figures prominently in the latter part of the book, and Alroy’s final sufferings bring him to a new understanding of himself and a readiness to submit to the Divine will. None of this, moreover, interferes with the well-paced action one expects from a novel of exotic adventures. Even Alroy himself, a character torn between personal ambition and the wish to serve

⁵² Hughenden Papers, Box 11, A / III / C; the passage occurs in the “Mutilated Diary” and is dated September 1, 1833.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Box 12, A / IV / F / 2. There are only two letters—1831 and 1846—and neither is especially “philosophic” (see Blake, pp. 68-69), though it is perhaps significant that they should have kept in touch for so long. Disraeli mentions Botta again in a letter to his sister in 1840; see *Home Letters*, p. 233.

a higher cause (in this case the national aspirations of the Jews) is, at least in conception, believable and sympathetic.

The difficulty comes in the execution. So intensely has Disraeli identified his own feelings with the situation and character of Alroy that it seems not to have occurred to him that his readers, possibly not sharing in that identification, might find Alroy's vainglorious personality absurd if not, indeed, downright offensive. For he is a character who, in his more vaunting moments, irresistibly reminds one of C. S. Lewis's description of Marlowe's Tamburlaine as "Giant the Jack Killer."⁵⁴ The book is full of the most appalling rant, and it is indicative of the extent of Disraeli's identification with his hero that quite as much of this rant comes from the narrator as from Alroy himself. Here is Alroy after having slain Alschiroch, the governor of Hamadan who has attempted to abduct Alroy's sister Miriam:

"Away! I'll look upon him, and I'll triumph. Dead! Alschiroch dead! Why! but a moment since, this clotted carcass was a Prince, my tyrant! So we can rid ourselves of them, eh? If the Prince fall, why not the people? Dead, absolutely dead, and I his slayer. Hah! at length I am a man. This, this indeed is life. Let me live slaying!"⁵⁵

And here is how Disraeli describes the deed:

The water column wildly rising, from the breast of summer ocean, in some warm tropic clime, when the sudden clouds too well discover, that the holiday of heaven is over, and the shrieking sea-birds tell a time of fierce commotion, the column rising from the sea, it was not so wild as he—the young Alroy.

Pallid and mad, he swift upsprang, and he tore up a tree by its lusty roots, and down the declivity, dashing with rapid leaps, panting and wild, he struck the ravisher on the temple with the mighty pine. Alschiroch fell lifeless on the sod, and Miriam fainting into her brother's arms.⁵⁶

Disraeli also allows himself a great deal of prose-poetry—much of it alliterative and none of it moving; there are similar attempts in the second part of *Vivian Grey* where the verse gains nothing

⁵⁴ *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), p. 52.

⁵⁵ I, pp. 44-45 (Part I, Ch. 2).

⁵⁶ I, pp. 40-41 (Part I, Ch. 2).

(save, perhaps, an element of concealment) from being set out as prose. Here are two specimens:

Still the courser onward rushes, still his mighty heart supports him. Season and space, the glowing soil, the burning ray, yield to the tempest of his frame; the thunder of his nerves, and lightning of his veins.

Food and water they have none. No genial fount, no grateful tree, rise with their pleasant company. Never a beast or bird is there, in that hoary desert bare. Nothing breaks the almighty stillness. Even the jackal's felon cry might seem a soothing melody. A grey wild rat, with snowy whiskers, out of a withered bramble stealing, with a youthful snake in its ivory teeth, in the moonlight grins with glee. This is their sole society.⁵⁷

And:

Suddenly a creature steals through the black and broken rocks. Ha, ha! the jackal smells from afar the rich corruption of the courser's clay. Suddenly and silently it steals, and stops, and smells. Brave banqueting I ween to-night for all that goodly company. Jackal, and fox, and marten cat, haste ye now, ere morning's break shall call the vulture to his feast, and rob ye of your prey.⁵⁸

The novel has, too, some engaging implausibilities. Alroy, alone and starving in the desert, is approached by a lion:

He returned the lion a glance as imperious, and fierce, and scrutinising, as his own. For a moment, their flashing orbs vied in regal rivalry; but at length the spirit of the mere animal yielded to the genius of the man. The lion, cowed, slunk away, stalked with haughty timidity through the rocks, and then sprang into the forest.⁵⁹

Next morning things get even better:

The carol of a lonely bird singing in the wilderness! Suddenly it downward dashes, and thrice with circling grace it flies around the head of the Hebrew Prince. Then by his side it gently drops a bunch of fresh and fragrant dates.

⁵⁷ I, pp. 54-55 (Part II, Ch. 1).

⁵⁸ I, p. 61 (Part II, Ch. 2).

⁵⁹ I, p. 64 (Part II, Ch. 3).

'Tis gone, 'tis gone! that cheerful stranger, gone to the palmy land it loves; gone like a bright and pleasant dream. A moment since and it was there, glancing in the sunny air, and now the sky is without a guest. Alas, alas! no more is heard, the carol of that lonely bird singing in the wilderness.⁶⁰

These passages have all been taken from the earlier part of the book and it is only fair to add that as the story advances there is less of this kind of desperate striving after effect. Yet Disraeli never wholly abandons a strain of resolute and humourless extravagance. Towards the end, in a passage much admired by Beckford,⁶¹ Miriam's death is described in the following terms:

Suddenly a trumpet sounded.

"What is that?" exclaimed Miriam, in a shrill voice, and looking up with a distracted glance.

Neither of them [*i.e.*, her handmaidens] answered, since they were aware it betokened the going forth of Alroy to his trial.

Miriam remained in the same posture, and with the same expression of wild inquiry. Another trumpet sounded, and after that a shout of the people. Then she raised up her arms to Heaven, and bowed her head—and died.⁶²

It is reasonable enough to explain the worst excesses of *Alroy* as a result of Disraeli's intense emotional identification with his hero, but there is another point that should be mentioned. Disraeli was well aware that he was writing in the rather special genre of the oriental romance—a genre in which his father's "Mejnoun and Leila" had already won a modest place.⁶³ The terse and anecdotal style of the notes in *Alroy* bears a general resemblance to Henley's in *Vathek*—and Disraeli's presentation of one of the first copies of

⁶⁰ I, pp. 65-66 (Part II, Ch. 4).

⁶¹ "Les scènes dans le donjon sont émouvantes, la mort de Miriam fort belle: l'héroïsme d'Alroy, sublime." See G. Jean-Aubry, "Disraeli et le solitaire de Bath," *Figaro*, 5 December, 1931, pp. 5-6. As with *Contarini*, Disraeli had sent an early copy of *Alroy* to Beckford, who greatly admired the book and made copious pencil notes—of which the sentence quoted (in Jean-Aubry's translation) is a typical specimen—on the margins and endpages. The volume in 1931 belonged to M. le comte Philipon. For an account of Disraeli and Beckford, see M & B, I, pp. 191-92, 199, 248, 253.

⁶² III, p. 81 (Part X, Ch. 20).

⁶³ *Romances* (London, 1799). The tale inspired an opera (*Kais: or, Love in the Desertis*) performed at Drury Lane in 1808, and as late as 1832 Colburn and Bentley advertised—but apparently did not publish—a separate edition; see James Ogden, *Isaac D'Israeli* (Oxford, 1969), p. 56. Beckford pronounced it "capital" when he met Disraeli for the first time in 1834. (*Home Letters*, p. 127.)

his book to Beckford speaks for itself.⁶⁴ As the *Monthly Review* had observed with reference to *Vathek*, the “peculiar character” of the genre was “not only to overstep nature and probability, but even to pass beyond the verge of possibility, and suppose things, which cannot be for a moment conceived.”⁶⁵ Something of this sort was what Beckford had meant by sublime imagination, and Disraeli evidently was thinking along the same lines when he wrote *Alroy*.

Yet a more fundamental source of Disraeli’s taste for the heroic and extravagant may be found in his childhood fascination with such chapbooks as *The Seven Champions of Christendom*, *Valentine and Orson*, and—possibly—*The Most Excellent and Delightful History of Fortunatus*.⁶⁶ He had read at least the first two early in life and had found in them an enchanting mixture of the heroic, the chivalrous, and the bizarre. To a large extent they must have helped to form his literary tastes; certainly when he later proceeded to Sidney, Spenser, and Ariosto he seems to have been more attracted by the grand deeds and rich descriptions than by their allegorical and moral underpinnings.⁶⁷ Frederick Maples, a son of one of the partners in the law firm to which Disraeli was articled in his youth, reported in a letter to Lord Rowton in 1889:

On one occasion when Mr. Benjamin D’Israeli was calling on my Mother, he saw lying on the table some story books belonging to me as a young child. He then made the observation to my Mother: “Oh! Mrs. Maples, why do you give such tame storybooks to Frederick? Let me send him some.” He shortly afterwards sent two books, one ‘The History of the Seven Champions of Christendom’ and the other ‘Valentine and Or-

⁶⁴ “William Beckford, esq., from the author.” That Disraeli must have sent the book almost immediately it was published is indicated by G. Jean-Aubry, p. 6.

⁶⁵ May, 1787; quoted by Roger Lonsdale in the introduction to his edition of *Vathek* (Oxford, 1970), p. xix.

⁶⁶ There was at least one chapbook of this tale (sometimes called “The Wishing Cap”) issued ca. 1810, and in a letter from Alexandria to his sister Disraeli wrote: “After some days we landed at Cyprus, where we passed a day on land famous in all ages, but more delightful to me as the residence of Fortunatus than as the rosy realm of Venus or the romantic kingdom of the Crusaders” (*Home Letters*, p. 86)—but of course he might have been alluding to Dekker’s *Old Fortunatus*. He knew the legend, at any rate, so it does not greatly matter.

⁶⁷ See, for example, *Henrietta Temple*, III (Bk. VI, Ch. 22), p. 299: “It is Kensington Gardens that is almost the only place that has realised his idea of the forests of Spenser and Ariosto. What a pity, that instead of a princess in distress we meet only a nursery-maid!” And in *Venetia* the young heroine loses herself in the “wondering pages” of the *Arcadia*, “which she pored over with a rapt and ecstatic spirit, that would not comprehend the warning scepticism of her parent.” I (Bk. I, Ch. 3), p. 22.

son.' In the latter he wrote some lines addressed to me. Mr. Isaac D'Israeli told my Mother that these were the first lines of Benjamin's he had ever seen. I enclose you these two books.⁶⁸

The impression formed, particularly by the *Seven Champions*, cannot have been a passing one, for early in *Venetia* Disraeli refers to it again:

Venetia loved her book; indeed, she was never happier than when reading; but she soon recoiled from the gilt and lilliputian volumes of the good Mr. Newbury [sic], and her mind required some more substantial excitement than 'Tom Thumb,' or even 'Goody Two-Shoes.' 'The Seven Champions' was a great resource and a great favourite; but it required all the vigilance of a mother to eradicate the false impressions which such studies were continually making on so tender a student; and to disenchant, by rational discussion, the fascinated imagination of her child.⁶⁹

And when he has Mrs. Cadurcis in a fit of rage fling a volume at her young son, he is careful to substitute this favourite book of Venetia's for the "poker and tongs" which, Moore records, were "the missiles which Mrs. Byron preferred" on such occasions.⁷⁰ The romance, the chivalry, the bizarre adventures, and the heroism in these works were important—and, it would seem, enduring—influences on Disraeli's literary imagination. Not only *Alroy*,⁷¹ but the

⁶⁸ Hughenden Papers, Box 303, folder marked "20-24," sheet headed "1823." The books, alas, are not at Hughenden. Although Monypenny quotes from this letter (I, p. 39), the passage given above is omitted.

⁶⁹ I (Bk. I, Ch. 3), pp. 21-22. See also pp. 46-47 (Bk. I, Ch. 5).

⁷⁰ I (Bk. I, Ch. 6), pp. 58-59, and *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* (London, 1830), I, p. 69.

⁷¹ The scattered references to "the champions of the Cross" in *The Rise of Iskander*, which Disraeli appended as a companion piece to *Alroy*, suggest that the chapbook was even on his mind when he composed this tale while staying at Bath with Bulwer early in 1833. (*Home Letters*, p. 117) But *Iskander*, although far superior to *Alroy* as a piece of workmanlike fiction, is still a flat production. Jerman (p. 178) is no doubt right in seeing it as marking, with *Alroy*, "an end of a stage in Disraeli's own development. . . . From here on, Disraeli would become less and less introspective, much to his advantage and relief." There are, incidentally, two parodies of *Alroy*: one, of an anti-semitic cast, is by R. H. Barham (attributable on the basis of the ms. in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library) entitled "The Wondrous Tale of Ikey Solomons! !" in the *New Anti-Jacobin*, April, 1833, pp. 86-91. I am grateful to Professor John W. Osborne for bringing this to my attention. Thackeray adapted the pseudonym to "Ikey Solomons, Esq., Junior" and published his *Catherine* under it in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1839. The other parody, by Maginn in *The Maclise Portrait Gallery* (London, [1873], p. 98), is more amiable and dwells on the prose-poetry and the egoism.

“Young England” novels generally, in their more heroic and medievalising aspects may be said to go back to Disraeli’s absorption in such chapbooks early in the century.

v.

When Leslie Stephen in a judicious survey of Disraeli’s novels comes to the prose-poetry in *Alroy*, he not surprisingly admits that the effect is “simply grotesque.”⁷² Of the two novels he prefers *Contarini* and notes the “amazing vitality” of the hero as a sign of “the effervescence of youthful genius”⁷³ in his creator. Certainly there are vigorous moments in the novel which look back to *Vivian Grey*. But as far as prose style is concerned, the parts of *Contarini* which he cites for “what may be called poetical prose”⁷⁴ are, oddly enough, not the ruminative, soul-searching passages that Disraeli seems to have thought the more profound and “psychological” portions of the book, but the “pictures of life and scenery” which, he quite properly adds, are “vivacious, rapid, and decisive.”⁷⁵ These, as we have seen, are the portions which Disraeli transcribed with little alteration from the letters he had sent home from the East—written, indeed (and necessarily), in a “vivacious, rapid, and decisive” manner in startling contrast to much else in the book.

This fact compels us to consider in a new light Stephen’s lament that by entering parliament in 1837 Disraeli had taken the first steps in the “degeneration of a promising novelist into a Prime Minister.”⁷⁶ Writing several years after the publication of *Lothair* and before that of *Endymion* it was entirely reasonable for Stephen to suggest that “In later years, the habit of parliamentary oratory seems to have injured Mr. Disraeli’s style.”⁷⁷ In the early works, he writes, “the style is generally excellent till it becomes too ambitious. It has a kind of metallic glitter, brilliant, sparkling with numerous flashes of wit and fancy, and never wanting in sharpness of effect, though it may be deficient in delicacy.”⁷⁸ All this is true enough, but it is necessary to consider the alternative. Suppose, as Stephen wishes, that Disraeli’s “brilliant ability had been allowed

⁷² *Hours in a Library*, second series (London, 1876), p. 391.

⁷³ P. 389.

⁷⁴ P. 390.

⁷⁵ P. 390.

⁷⁶ P. 393.

⁷⁷ P. 390.

⁷⁸ P. 391.

to ripen undisturbed by all the worries and distractions of parliamentary existence.”⁷⁹ He was, we know, a supremely ambitious man and it is idle to imagine that, had he opted for an exclusively literary career, he would have lost any of that ambition. The effect upon his style—“generally excellent till it becomes too ambitious”—may readily be supposed. Disraeli wrote best under a sense of urgency, whether brought about by the need for ready cash or the need to get a letter into the next post, and when the hours lay heavily upon him—as in the lazaretto at Malta—the candour and vivacity that were otherwise natural to him fled from his mind. He would then set out to prove to the world, and not least perhaps to himself, that poets were made as well as born and that the literary renown for which he had put aside more worldly ambitions could be amply realized through his own unstinting exertions. Disraeli’s talents as a writer were not for the sublime or profound, but for the sparkling, the bizarre, and the ironic. Such a writer may take himself seriously only at his peril. Deftness and lightness of touch were the marks of his particular gift, and a hastily written work like *The Young Duke*, for all its faults, shows more of his real powers than could a whole shelf of *Contarinis* and *Alroys*.

⁷⁹ P. 345.