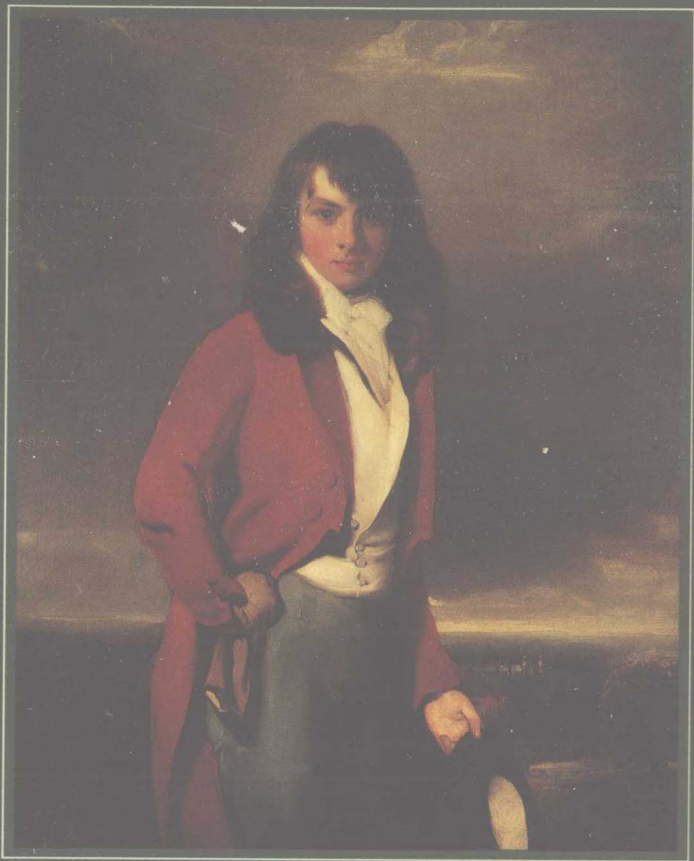


THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

BENJAMIN DISRAELI
CONINGSBY



THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

BENJAMIN DISRAELI

Coningsby
or The New Generation

EDITED BY
SHEILA M. SMITH

Oxford New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1982

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

London Glasgow New York Toronto

Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo

Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town

Melbourne Auckland

and associate companies in

Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City

Introduction, Note on the text, Booklist,

Chronology and Notes © Sheila M. Smith 1982

First published 1844

First issued as a World's Classics paperback 1982

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of Oxford University Press

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Disraeli, Benjamin

Coningsby, or, The new generation.—

(The World's classics)

I. Title II. Smith, Sheila M.

823'.8[F] PR4080.F76

ISBN 0-19-281580-6

Set by Western Printing Services Ltd.

Printed in Great Britain by

Hazell Watson & Viney Limited,

Aylesbury, Bucks

INTRODUCTION

ON 7 July 1842 Lord John Manners, second son of the fifth Duke of Rutland, noted in his journal, 'D'Israeli wishes us to form a party, with certain general principles, not to interfere with acceptance of office: he says even 6 men acting so together would have a great weight.' On 21 October 1842 he wrote, 'at Paris he [George Smythe], Cochrane and DIsraeli agreed that they and myself should form an esoteric party, to decide a course to be taken on all important political questions, to sit together and vote together in the house.' By 28 August 1843 his journal reads: '“Young England” as they have dubbed us has achieved a great celebrity, and could I only satisfy myself that Disraeli really believed all he said, I should be more happy: his historical views are quite mine, but then does he believe them?' That autumn, at Henry Hope's palatial country house, the Deepdene, in Surrey, Disraeli began to write a novel to propagate Young England's ideas: *Coningsby or The New Generation*.

Lord John's three jottings tell us a good deal about Disraeli, then aged thirty-seven and MP for Shrewsbury, and his association with Young England. He is ambitious; he wants to form a party – which Young England never was, rather a short-lived group of like-minded friends; and he hopes for office in the government. They also show Disraeli's delight in the mystery and intrigue of politics – the 'party' is to be 'esoteric', with all the suggestions of an exclusive coterie – and in political power, for he hopes that the small group will exert 'a great weight'. It is also evident that Disraeli leads the group, and that his flamboyance and obvious ambition give his associates moments of uneasiness.

Disraeli's dominant characteristics were ambition, the energy and intelligence to achieve it, and resilience in failure. His formal education had been sketchy (the Eton episodes in *Coningsby* are based on the experiences of others, not his own) but his family circumstances were comfortable and, as a boy, he

had read voraciously in the library of his father, Isaac D'Israeli, a reasonably well-known scholar and man of letters. As a young man he made the Grand Tour, following in the footsteps of his hero Byron in Switzerland and Italy, visiting Spain, Greece and Albania, travelling to Constantinople, Jerusalem and Cairo, and responding with enthusiasm to the glamour of the East. At home, after several false starts as lawyer, fashionable novelist, poet and journalist, and after some wild youthful adventures including disreputable love-affairs and the incurring of massive debts, he found scope for his ambition, and the desired combination of idea and action, in politics. He showed the utmost tenacity – some said impudence – in his determination to win a seat in the House of Commons (his Jewish origins were technically no bar as Isaac prudently had had his children baptized into the Anglican Church). He succeeded only at his fifth attempt in 1837, the year of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne, when he became Tory MP for Maidstone. He was mocked for his Jewishness and his dandified appearance; and his maiden speech in the House of Commons was a fiasco. But, characteristically, he persisted and, because he was witty and obviously highly intelligent, he began to make his mark as speaker and politician.

Originally Disraeli tried to get into Parliament as an independent Radical. Even after he had adopted the Tory colours he was looked upon as left of the Tory centre. Like Egremont, the aristocratic hero echoing many of Disraeli's political ideas in his novel *Sybil* (1845), the second of the Young England trilogy, he was thought to be 'crotchety' (see *Sybil*, Book V, Chapter 1, Oxford, The World's Classics, 1981, p. 281). Disraeli had taken the occasion of the 1839 Chartist petition, which sought to alleviate working-class distress by demanding working-class representation in Parliament and the possibility of working-class men becoming MPs, to attack the 1834 Poor Law. This substituted centralized relief for the old system based on local administration, and it aimed at reducing pauperism by severely limiting 'out-door' relief and by establishing a harsh workhouse regime to deter all but the destitute from seeking refuge there. In 1840 he opposed the severe punishments given to some of the Chartist leaders and concerned himself with 'that Condition-of-England Question of which our generation hears so much'

(*Coningsby*, Book II, Chapter 1), that is, the working-class distress, unrest and riots of the late 1830s, early and mid 1840s. They were caused by the recurring cycles of trade depression following the Napoleonic Wars, and the subsequent falling prices and reduced wages; and by disillusionment with the Whig Reform Act of 1832, which provided for a more equitable distribution of seats in the House of Commons but extended the middle-class rather than the working-class franchise. These discontents bred Chartism and the middle-class fear of revolution, on the French pattern. As Tadpole, the Tory agent, says, 'We live in revolutionary times' (*Coningsby*, Book I, Chapter 5). This climate of fear and apprehension caused Thomas Carlyle to write *Chartism* (1839), in which he argued that the working classes needed not universal male suffrage and democracy but the guiding hands of wise leaders, and *Past and Present* (1843), extolling the purposeful hierarchical order of a medieval monastery in contrast to contemporary confusions and distress. The same fear gives a sharp edge to the genial and exuberant comedy of Dickens's first Christmas Book, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), and to the more sombre tale for the following year, *The Chimes*, published in the same year as *Coningsby*.

The administration in which Disraeli somewhat unreasonably hoped for office was that of Sir Robert Peel, who became Prime Minister in 1841. Disappointed when these expectations were not fulfilled, and seeking political activity, he gathered about him in the House of Commons the group of younger Tory MPs, Young England, whose aim was to revitalize the Tory party and to represent its interests as those of the people. The chief members of the group, apart from Disraeli, were Lord John Manners, MP for Newark, an idealistic young man interested in literature and church architecture, who appears in *Coningsby* as Lord Henry Sydney; Manners's friend from Eton and Cambridge days, George Sidney Smythe, MP for Canterbury, the brilliant and dissipated eldest son of Disraeli's former friend Lord Strangford, and the model for Coningsby himself; and Alexander Baillie Cochrane, MP for Bridport, who is Sir Charles Buckhurst in the novel. Young England sought to revive the principles of an ancient and imaginary Toryism, and was anti-Utilitarian, emphasized the importance of faith rather than reason and materialism, and had a glamour similar to that of

Sir Walter Scott's romantic feudalism. *Tancred* (1847), Disraeli's third novel in the Young England trilogy, is subtitled 'The New Crusade', and the phrase echoes the contemporary quest for spiritual values in medieval forms, such as Gothic architecture in which writers as dissimilar as Augustus Welby Pugin, the architect, and John Ruskin, the critic and art historian, discerned moral qualities. Young England had something in common with other contemporary crusades against the age, such as the Oxford Movement, which sought to re-establish the pure faith and ideals of the pre-Reformation Church (Frederick Faber, one of Newman's disciples, was a friend of Smythe and of Lord John Manners), and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood which wanted to restore the simple, direct vision of primitive painters in place of the academic sophistication of Sir Joshua Reynolds (Sir Sloshua, as they irreverently dubbed him).

No doubt Young England, with its determination to revive medieval feudal customs (one of the most absurd scenes in *Coningsby* is Eustace Lyle's almsgiving ceremony at St. Geneviève, Book III, Chapter 4 – even Mr. Lyle looks 'a little embarrassed' and blushes), and its adulation of Charles I, deserved the mockery of *Punch* and the gibes of Robert Brough's satirical poem 'Lord Charles Cleverly':

To him, legislation's a pleasure;
 (Though by it so many are bored!)
 Last session, he brought in a measure
 To have the old Maypoles restored;
 And, then, with the people so kindly
 He mixes – their meetings attends –
 Advises them not to rush blindly
 In face of their masters and friends! – . . .
 His charity, too, so disarming
 To malice – he's founded some schools,
 (The costume and badge are most charming!)
 Himself, he has framed all the rules.
 With scriptural texts (*his* selecting)
 The walls round are tastily hung:
 Content and submission directing,
 As virtues most fit for the young . . .
 'Tis cheering and really delightful
 To see such a promising gem –
 A Lord – of Democracy frightful,

The tide, who has talent to stem!
The Peers, they say, care but for plenty,
And won't even work for their pelf!
Here's one who has scarcely turned twenty,
Will manage the nation himself!

Lord John Manners's own poetry came in for a good deal of satirical comment, particularly the volume *England's Trust, and Other Poems* (1841), which contains the undying couplet

Let wealth and commerce, laws and learning die,
But leave us still our old Nobility!

But Young England was not all medieval mummery. They made some telling criticisms of the 1834 Poor Law, concerned themselves with working-class housing and urban sanitation, and advocated the provision of public holidays at a time when there were very few.

Disraeli, from being one of Peel's supporters, moved increasingly into opposition to him. Although *Coningsby* lacks the sharp criticism of Peel to be found in *Sybil*, it advocates Tory principles set up against those expressed by Peel in his so-called Tamworth Manifesto, 1834. In this year Peel took the unprecedented step of addressing to the electorate a manifesto, drawn up in consultation with his colleagues and delivered to his constituents at Tamworth, Staffordshire. He sent it to the leading London newspapers for publication. In it Peel took pains to assert that the Tory party was not a reactionary party, disclaiming any desire to tamper with the Whig Reform Act and presenting himself as being far from averse to reform. As John Wilson Croker, Peel's supporter and the Rigby of *Coningsby*, wrote, commenting on the manifesto:

As to the *past*, Sir Robert Peel justly says that the whole of his public life evinces a sincere, though not blind, deference to *public opinion*; and as to the *future*, he professes that the measures he may propose will be influenced, not merely by what any particular set of men may endeavour to set up as public opinion, but also by the paramount consideration of what may be really and permanently beneficial to the *public interests*. (*Quarterly Review* 53 (1835), 263)

In *Coningsby* Disraeli replies to Peel's manifesto with Young England's; their version of Tory principles is offered in place of the Tory leader's. At first Disraeli intended to express his ideas

in the one novel but, as he explained in the General Preface to the Collected Edition of his novels (1870-1), they split over into three:

The derivation and character of political parties; the condition of the people which had been the consequence of them; the duties of the Church as a main remedial agency in our present state; were the three principal topics which I intended to treat, but I found they were too vast for the space I had allotted to myself.

These were all launched in 'Coningsby', but the origin and condition of political parties, the first portion of the theme, was the only one completely handled in that work.

Next year (1845), in SYBIL OR THE TWO NATIONS, I considered the condition of the people, and the whole work, generally speaking, was devoted to that portion of my scheme...

In recognising the Church as a powerful agent in the previous development of England, and possibly the most efficient means of that renovation of the national spirit which was desired, it seemed to me that the time had arrived when it became my duty to ascend to the origin of that great ecclesiastical corporation, and consider the position of the descendants of that race who had been the founders of Christianity... Familiar as we all are now with such themes, the house of Israel being now freed from the barbarism of mediaeval misconception, and judged, like all other races, by their contributions to the existing sum of human welfare, and the general influence of race on human action being universally recognised as the key of history, the difficulty and hazard of touching for the first time on such topics cannot now be easily appreciated. But public opinion recognised both the truth and sincerity of these views, and, with its sanction, in TANCRED OR THE NEW CRUSADE, the third portion of the Trilogy, I completed their development.

The idea of the union between Aristocracy and People, a central theme in *Coningsby*, was not new to Disraeli. As long ago as 1835, defending the House of Lords against the Radicals and the Irish nationalist, Daniel O'Connell, he had written, in *A Vindication of the English Constitution*, 'This estate from the character of the property of its members, is also essentially [although non-elective] the representative chamber of the land; and as the hereditary leaders of the nation, especially of the cultivators of the land, the genuine and permanent population of England, its peasantry.' In this publication, as in *Coningsby* and *Sybil*, he poured scorn on the Whigs' *coup d'état* to secure

the Hanoverian succession in 1714 – he argued that the House of Brunswick was supported by the great Whig families, thirsty for power, the Nonconformists, and the men who had a money interest in establishing the Hanoverians. He went on: ‘The rest of the nation, that is to say, nine-tenths of the people of England, formed the Tory party, the landed proprietors and peasantry of the kingdom, headed by a spirited and popular Church, and looking to the kingly power in the abstract, though not to the reigning king, as their only protection from an impending oligarchy.’ Already he uses the word ‘oligarchy’ by which he was to characterize the Whigs in *Coningsby* and *Sybil*; it means a form of government in which the power is confined to a few persons or families, as distinct from Toryism which, he argues, represents the people. Sometimes in *Coningsby* and *Sybil* he uses the expression ‘Venetian constitution’ when referring to Whig rule, with ironic reference to the oligarchy which ruled Venice in the days of the republic. Like his own Tadpole and Taper, he was always aware of the efficacy of a good political rallying-cry.

In *A Vindication* he argues:

The Tory party in this country is the national party; it is the really democratic party of England. It supports the institutions of the country, because they have been established for the common good, and because they secure the equality of civil rights, without which, whatever may be its name, no government can be free, and based upon which principle, every government, however it may be styled, is, in fact, a Democracy.

In *A Vindication* he is contemptuous of the ‘Gallic equality’ of the French Revolution which meant ‘that no-one should be privileged’ but supported ‘the principle of English equality’ which is ‘that everyone should be privileged’. He attacks the Utilitarians, as he does in *Coningsby* and *Sybil*: ‘the Utilitarian only admits one or two of the motives that influence man; a desire of power and a desire of property; and therefore infers that it is the interest of man to tyrannize, and to rob.’ The conclusion to *A Vindication* foreshadows that to *Sybil*:

The English nation, to obtain the convenience of monarchy, have established a popular throne, and to enjoy the security of aristocracy, have invested certain orders of their fellow subjects with legislative

functions: but these estates, however highly privileged, are invested with no quality of exclusion; and the Peers and the Commons of England are the trustees of the nation, not its masters.

Robert Blake in his admirable biography of Disraeli shows that he was eclectic in his use of material from earlier writers to create his Tory ideology – among others, they include Cobbett, Burke, and Isaac D'Israeli in his *Commentaries on the Life and Reign of Charles I* (1828–30). George Smythe encouraged him to extend what Lord Blake aptly terms 'the Tory apostolic succession' (*Disraeli*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1966, p. 172) to the Stuarts, and to Laud and Strafford. Disraeli's Tory interpretation of history, the central theme of *Coningsby* and *Sybil*, is succinctly summarized in the biography, pp. 194–6: the Whigs were what Disraeli termed a 'factitious aristocracy' whose fortunes originated in the 'unhallowed booty' obtained at the Reformation by 'the plunder of the Church'; using somewhat tortuous arguments, Disraeli contends that the Tory party which dominated England between the Battle of Waterloo (1815) and the Reform Act (1832), the spiritual ancestor of Peel's Conservatism, did not represent 'true' Toryism or the 'English system' (see *Coningsby*, Book II, Chapter 1). As Lord Blake shows, Disraeli unjustly guys Lord Liverpool, 'the Arch-Mediocrity'; Disraeli argues that after Liverpool's death (1828) the blunders of the Duke of Wellington allowed power to fall into the hands of the Whigs who, in 1832, hoped to consolidate their position for at least a generation. The Reform Act 'emancipated neither the Crown nor the People' but overthrew the aristocracy. The Whigs' overwhelming success in the general election following the passing of the Reform Bill destroyed the Opposition and, in Disraeli's words, 'no government can be long secure without a formidable Opposition'. Two years after the Reform Act the Whigs are so broken and divided that Peel and the new Conservative party find themselves prematurely and briefly in office. In *Coningsby* Peel is depicted as being trapped by 'ceaseless intriguers' into forming a premature Conservative administration in 1834. Otherwise he might have 'acceded to power as the representative of a Creed, instead of being the leader of a Confederacy' (Book II, Chapter 4). Book II, Chapter 5 of *Coningsby* is a very short chapter wholly

devoted to attacking the 'Conservatism' of the Tamworth Manifesto: 'There was indeed a considerable shouting about what they called Conservative principles; but the awkward question naturally arose, what will you conserve?' Disraeli in *Coningsby* and *Sybil* argues that neither the Whigs nor the Tories, as they are currently constituted and led, can offer a satisfactory remedy for the nation's ills. But the nature of the new Toryism, revitalized by Young England, although expressed in stirring rhetoric in the novels, remains, as Lord Blake points out, vague and impractical. Like Carlyle, Disraeli has no faith in democracy. He advocates a mystic combination of Church, Monarchy and People, but remains prudently silent about how this is to be translated into social terms. *Tancred*, indeed, abandons any consideration of the Church as an agent of social regeneration in England in favour of an extraordinary eulogy of Judaism as the fount of Christianity. But despite the flights of fancy in *Coningsby* and *Sybil*, Disraeli, with characteristic shrewdness, clearly perceives the importance of the alliance of power between aristocracy and industrialists – between the Coningsbys and the Millbanks, the Egremonts and the Traffords – although, like so many at the time, he fails to see the importance of the struggling Trade Unions in the country's politics.

In *Coningsby*, then, Disraeli gives fictional form to his ideas on 'the origin and condition of political parties'. Several of his earlier novels had been concerned with the delights and disasters of political intrigue, and the satisfying expression of ideas and ideals in politics, notably his first, *Vivian Grey* (1826–7), and *The Young Duke* (1831), both of which had made him enemies. But since entering the real world of politics in 1837 he had written no fiction. When Peel failed to give him office he found the time to write, and *Coningsby* is the first of his novels which has politics as its central theme. Disraeli can be given the credit for inventing the English political novel. Although William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) and Robert Bage's *Hermesprong* (1796) deal with the large abstract ideas of Reason, Justice and Government, *Coningsby* is the first novel in English to centre on the activity of contemporary politics. Now that Disraeli was an MP and had found the political form appropriate to his ambition, aspiration and Romantic ideas, he sought to give them fictional form. He had always been aware of the

heady delights of gossip in the novel – *Vivian Grey* is full of it – and several ‘keys’ to *Coningsby* quickly appeared, purporting to reveal the real identities of the fictional characters. Disraeli’s method, however, is to use contemporary figures as vehicles for his attitudes and ideas rather than sketch people to the life. Rigby, for example, is an embodiment of Disraeli’s savage feelings towards Croker rather than a recognizable portrait of the Tory politician. Similarly, the impressive Lord Monmouth – arguably the most powerful character in Disraeli’s fiction – is not a portrait of the Marquess of Hertford so much as an inflated figure, in his magnificent folly and determined hedonism approaching the proportions of Ben Jonson’s Sir Epicure Mammon in *The Alchemist*. Much of Disraeli’s success as a novelist was *succès de scandale*; as Wordsworth wrote tartly to the publisher Edward Moxon, ‘How can any one when such trashy books as Disraeli’s are run after expect any portion of public attention, unless he confines himself to personalities or topics of the day’ (21 July 1844). Undoubtedly, there is in Monmouth the spice of reference to the notorious aristocrat, yet his primary function is to symbolize the self-gratification and self-interest of the Toryism which must be discarded for Coningsby’s new idealistic brand. As the novel opens, the conflict between the two is embodied in the masterly scene of the confrontation between Monmouth, who has relinquished his luxurious life in Italy and returned to England solely in the hope of defeating the Reform Bill, and the boy Coningsby, his wondering and awe-struck grandson. Disraeli makes careful preparation for the scene. This is the young Coningsby’s first meeting with his grandfather, and the reader shares his perspective of the London headquarters of the Tory party bustling with political activity, and of Rigby’s gossip with Tadpole and Taper about the rumour of Lord Grey’s resignation. Rigby, Monmouth’s agent and companion, and MP by favour of the aristocrat’s interest, accompanies the boy to Monmouth’s great town house where Coningsby is ushered into the august presence only to be overcome by the occasion and to burst into tears. His grandfather, who has a horror of emotional display, impatiently dismisses him as a milksop but has second thoughts about the boy’s calibre at dinner when, having controlled his nerves, Coningsby confidently offers the Marquess’s friend Mr.

Ormsby a good bottle of champagne if he will come and dine with him at Eton. Monmouth then takes kindly to the boy and shows him favour, thinking to make him heir to his wealth and to his politics. How Coningsby, although feeling gratitude to, and liking for, his grandfather, formulates his own Tory creed and rejects Monmouth's, being in turn rejected by him, constitutes the true plot of the novel. Disraeli, however, provides the reader with the obligatory love-interest in Coningsby's chivalrous passion for, and eventual marriage to, Edith, daughter of the industrialist Millbank. Also, there is a spice of mystery and romance in Millbank's unfulfilled love for Coningsby's unhappy mother, and the melancholy love which Flora, Monmouth's natural daughter, feels for Coningsby. The Marquess disappoints Coningsby's expectations when he leaves Flora the greatest part of his fortune; but she obligingly dies, presumably of a broken heart, and, in the last pages of the novel, leaves her wealth to Coningsby.

The scenes at Eton introduce Coningsby's circle of friends, enthusiastic young aristocrats, heirs to privilege and position, ardently debating the problems of the day as well as enjoying the life of gilded youth. But among them is Oswald Millbank, the great manufacturer's son, outside the aristocratic circle but drawn towards the personality of Coningsby. Their friendship is sealed when Coningsby saves Millbank from drowning. Lord Monmouth, in disgust at the Reform Act and 'this Radical-ridden country' (Book I, Chapter 11), goes abroad again, telling Coningsby to make Monmouth House his home, and sighing 'I fear these are evil days for the NEW GENERATION!' Ironically, Coningsby finds hope for his generation in the new Toryism which he conceives as he becomes aware of the manufacturing districts through his friendship with Millbank, and as he is influenced by the mysterious Sidonia's wisdom and insistence on the need for faith in a materialistic age. Coningsby, the eponymous hero of the novel, is a rather pallid, passive figure. The imaginative – some would say fanciful – centre of the book is Sidonia, whom Coningsby first meets by chance in a country inn during a rainstorm. This omniscient Jew is remote, impassive, wise, fabulously wealthy, party to the secret manoeuvres of European politics, the confidant and master of kings, princes and politicians. He has some affinities with Baron Lionel de

Rothschild, but he is also the embodiment of Disraeli's own dreams and wish-fulfilment. In *Sidonia* Disraeli gave fictional form to the mystique of politics, and to his own yearning to be at the centre of political power. The mysterious Jew is the real hero of *Coningsby*, representing not only Disraeli's faith and pride in his own race, but also his belief in the power of the great man, the outstanding individual. 'A great man', writes Disraeli after *Coningsby*'s first meeting with *Sidonia*, and obviously thinking not only of the fictional character but also of himself, 'is one who affects the mind of his generation' (Book III, Chapter 2). With characteristic echoes of Shakespeare, he has *Coningsby* ponder upon the soaring architecture of King's College, Cambridge, refusing to believe that the spirit which raised those walls is extinct: '“Come what come may, I will cling to the heroic principle. It can alone satisfy my soul”' (Book V, Chapter 2). *Sidonia*, the mysterious, omnipotent, self-sufficient hero also owes something to Disraeli's and Smythe's adulation of Byron, and is reminiscent of the protagonists of the verse tales *Lara*, *The Giaour* and *Mazeppa*.

Disraeli's dandyism and attitudinizing in *Coningsby* also have Byronic resonances. As in his earlier fiction, he delights to describe the aristocratic world, its glitter, its follies, and its impingement on the world of politics. In generalized description (Disraeli was short-sighted but too vain to wear spectacles, so his descriptive passages do not contain many precise details) he establishes the comfortable opulence of Beaumanoir based on the Duke of Rutland's Belvoir Castle: 'How delightful was the morning-room at Beaumanoir. . . Such a profusion of flowers! Such a multitude of books! Such a various prodigality of writing materials! So many easy chairs too, of so many shapes; each in itself a comfortable home; yet nothing crowded' (Book III, Chapter 2). His narrative tone takes on the note of gallantry which eventually charmed Queen Victoria: 'Then the morning costume of English women is itself a beautiful work of art. . . One should see them in their well-fashioned muslin dresses. What matrons, and what maidens! Full of graceful dignity, fresher than the morn!'

A somewhat naïve delight in being privy to such scenes breaks through the carefully cultivated knowing, worldly tone, which is one of the main targets of Thackeray's satire. *Codlingsby*,

contributed to *Punch* in April and May 1847. This delight is reminiscent of the pleasure at having gained entry to the aristocratic world expressed in Disraeli's letters to his beloved sister Sarah. For example, describing the visit he and his wife paid to Paris in 1842-3:

Our latter days at Paris were very brilliant. The principal features, the ball at the English Embassy, a thousand guests, and orange trees springing from the supper table; [*Coningsby* and *Sybil* were as hastily written as the letters, and sometimes display equally unfortunate stylistic lapses] my farewell audience with his majesty; a grand dinner... I... was surrounded with celebrities... But above all spectacles was the ball at Baron Solomon de Rothschild's; an hotel in decoration surpassing the palaces at Munich; a great retinue of servants, in liveries more gorgeous than the Tuileries, and pineapples plentiful as blackberries. (4 February 1843)

Disraeli draws on these experiences in the later chapters of *Coningsby* in which he describes Coningsby's pursuit of Edith Millbank amid the splendours of Parisian high-life. However, his descriptions of great houses are not included in the novel simply to flaunt his great connections or dazzle the reader with their opulence. He differentiates one from another, and so indicates the differences between their owners and occupants. Madame Solomon de Rothschild's Parisian house 'is not more distinguished by its profuse decoration than by the fine taste which has guided the vast expenditure' (Book VI, Chapter 2). Coningsby Castle, where Lord Monmouth entertains his grand friends, his doubtful ladies and his toadies 'was quite unlike Beaumanoir. That also was a palace, but it was a home' (Book IV, Chapter 6).

In his treatment of aristocratic life Disraeli has something of Byron's ability to mock what he extols and yet not negate the adulation. This lends zest to the descriptions. For example, he perfectly suggests the elegance and charm of Lady Everingham's garden party: 'The weather was as bright as the romances of Boccaccio; there were pyramids of strawberries, in bowls colossal enough to hold orange-trees; and the choicest band filled the air with enchanting strains, while a brilliant multitude sauntered on turf like velvet, or roamed in desultory existence amid the quivering shades of winding walks' (Book VIII, Chapter 7). But he as perfectly suggests the elderly nervousness

of those aristocrats who are finding this last day of an English July a little chilly: ‘“I am for indoor nature myself,” said Lord Eskdale.’

Moreover, although Disraeli does full justice to the incidental arabesques of the aristocratic scenes, these scenes are integral to an important theme of the novel, that is, the nature of the true aristocrat, the true leader, ready to assume his social responsibilities. (See particularly the discussion between the elder Millbank and Coningsby in Book IV, Chapter 4.)

Coningsby combines the glamour of the ‘silver-fork’ or ‘fashionable’ novel, then going out of fashion, with the purpose of the social-problem novel, then coming in. Disraeli’s witty, ironic narrative voice combines the two, even as Disraeli the man combined the affected dandy, delighted with his acceptance into aristocratic and royal circles, with the astute, intelligent politician, well aware of the shams, including his own, but determined to achieve political power. Disraeli was no literary stylist; he lapses into clichés and melodrama. Particularly when describing passages of love he is apt to rely on Shakespearian echoes, classical references and rhetorical questions: ‘Is it not the noon of a summer night...soft with the breath of Ausonian breezes? Within that sweet and stately residence, dwells there not a maiden fair enough to revive chivalry; who is even now thinking of him as she leans on her pensive hand, or, if perchance she dream, recalls him in her visions?’ (Book VII, Chapter 7). He found literary composition a labour. While working on *Coningsby* in his father’s house Bradenham, Buckinghamshire, during the winter of 1843, he wrote to Lord John Manners ‘I am daily more convinced, that there is no *toil* like literature’, and sometimes his style consequently is laboured: ‘Coningsby put his arm around the astonished neck of Oswald, as if they were once more in the playing fields of Eton’ (Book VII, Chapter 6).

Yet he does succeed in creating a fictional world in *Coningsby*: the corruption and attraction of Lord Monmouth and his entourage; the somewhat naïve enthusiasm and ardour of Coningsby and his friends; the uncertainty and excitement of political life in the period 1832–41, as Whig and Tory looked to the future in the aftermath of the Reform Act. In *Coningsby* Disraeli’s subject is not the adventures of politicians,