THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

BENJAMIN DISRAELI

SYBIL

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Sybil
or The Two Nations

EDITED BY
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Oxford New York Toronto Melbourne
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1981

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 Wellington
and associate companies in
Beirut Berlin Ibadan Mexico City

First published 1845
First issued as a World's Classics paperback 1981

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Disraeli, Benjamin, Earl of Beaconsfield
Sybil, or, the two nations. – (The world's classics).
I. Title II. Smith, Sheila M
823'.8 PR4084.S8 80-40627
ISBN 0-19-281551-2

Printed in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Limited
Aylesbury, Bucks

INTRODUCTION

The Times advertised *Sybil* as 'immediately ready' on 8 May 1845, and reviewed it on 13 May. Four days later Disraeli received a letter from a young woman, Mrs. Baylis, who described herself as 'a mechanic's wife' living in Sussex Terrace, a respectable, reasonably prosperous part of Camden Town. She wrote of *Sybil*: 'Your writings *now* are for the great body of the country, the People can feel, can understand, your works . . . You set forth in stirring words in animated, striking, and *truthful* description the real social condition of the country the monstrous distinction betwixt Rich–Poor . . .'

I have already discussed the implications of this letter in *Mr. Disraeli's Readers* (see Booklist p. xviii) but of interest here is Mrs. Baylis's response to the novel's immediacy. Disraeli, a practising politician, wrote it hurriedly to comment on contemporary and recently past events and to argue an acceptable political creed offering hope for the future. The period covered by the novel is 1837–44. Victoria became Queen in 1837, at a time of national distress and disturbance. In the recurring cycles of trade depression following the Napoleonic Wars prices had fallen and wages had been cut. The people of the rapidly increasing industrial towns, such as Manchester and Birmingham, on which the country's wealth depended, had lacked representation in Parliament. The Whig Reform Act 1832 provided for a more equitable distribution of seats, but there was great disappointment that it extended the middle-class rather than the working-class vote. Insufficient representation, falling wages, and the distress caused by the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 – an attempt to regulate the existing unsatisfactory poor laws by cutting down on outdoor relief and forcing paupers to submit to the rigorous and inhuman regime of the new workhouses – largely motivated the Chartists. Chartism was a distinctively working-class movement which began in the Working Men's Association, founded in 1836 by William Lovett, and which aimed to secure, by every legal method, equal political and social rights for all classes. The Chartists believed that if the working class got the vote and if working men were able to become MPs, working-class

wrongs would be righted. Their first National Petition to Parliament in 1839 (rejected) basically demanded universal male suffrage and the means to make it possible for a working man to be an MP.

It was not only factory-workers, then a small percentage of Britain's working-class population, who suffered low wages and bad living conditions. Agricultural labourers were among the last to receive material benefits from the new, expanding industrial system of nineteenth-century Britain, except in the areas where factories competed for available labour (see Harold Perkin: *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780–1880*, London, 1969, p. 147). In the south and east of the country wages were static and desperately low – in Wiltshire, for example, wages were 7s. a week in both 1770 and 1850. During the winter 1830–1 there were agricultural riots and rick burning, purportedly by the mysterious 'Captain Swing' (see E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing*, London, 1969, for a full treatment of the subject). The riots were quelled with great savagery, but poverty was so dire that ricks were burnt and farm-machines smashed each winter following, especially that of 1843–4. Aggravating the situation was the high price of bread due to the corn laws, which prevented cheap foreign wheat from being imported into the country. 1842, when the Home Secretary reported that almost 1,500,000 people in England and Wales were paupers receiving poor relief, has been described as 'probably the most distressed year of the whole nineteenth century' (see Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class*, New York, 1974, p. 26 n and p. 87 n). After Parliament's rejection of the Chartists' second National Petition in 1842 there were riots and strikes in many parts if the country; also, it was the year of the 'plug riots' (described in *Sybil*, Book VI): Lancashire factory-workers demanded the restoration of the 1840 wage-level, and converged on Manchester (Disraeli's 'Mowbray') knocking out the plugs of the boilers in the mills and so depriving them of power and making them idle. Some working-class agitators and some middle-class observers (including Engels) thought it the beginning of the proletarian revolution. Eventually the factory operatives were forced to resume work without their demands being met; but it is important to remember that

Sybil was written at a time when revolution, on the French pattern, seemed possible in Britain.

When the novel was published Disraeli was forty, Tory MP for Shrewsbury in Peel's administration. He came of a family of comfortably prosperous Sephardim Jews, but his father, Isaac D'Israeli, a writer and scholar, had resigned from the Synagogue in 1817 and prudently had had his children baptized into the Anglican Church, so Benjamin's Jewish origins were no hindrance to his political ambitons. But first he started on a short-lived career as a lawyer; then he dabbled in journalism and accumulated debts. He wrote his first novel, *Vivian Grey* (1826–7), published anonymously, to pay them off. It is vigorous, satirical, and inventive, despite its wildly improbable plot and its equally improbable Byronic hero, who tries – and fails – to achieve power by political intrigue. From being acclaimed and eagerly read by London 'society', curious to identify the thinly disguised public figures in the book, it was vilified when the author was discovered to be an obscure young man, ignorant of London high life or politics. Later Disraeli was embarrassed by the novel and tried, unsuccessfully, to suppress it; but he revised it drastically for re-publication, attempting to eliminate its youthful brashness and ignorance of the world.

By 1845 Disraeli knew rather more about politics and the upper levels of London life. *Sybil* opens in Crockford's exclusive gambling club, St. James's Street, 'in a vast and golden saloon' where the young aristocrats are betting on the 1837 Derby and steadying their nerves with 'mystical combinations of French wines and German waters, flavoured with slices of Portugal fruits, and cooled with lumps of American ice'. Here are the details of luxurious living expected in a 'fashionable' or, to use Hazlitt's phrase, 'silver-fork' novel, popular after the publication of Robert Plumer Ward's *Tremaine* (1825). This genre was becoming unfashionable in 1845: Carlyle satirized it in *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4), and Dickens guyed it in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9). But Disraeli, a flamboyant dandy like his friends Edward Bulwer and Count D'Orsay, enjoyed this kind of writing. He had already published several 'silver-fork' novels besides *Vivian Grey*: *The Young Duke* (1831), describing a wealthy young aristocrat's gradual acceptance of

social responsibility; *Henrietta Temple* (1837), a semi-autobiographical love story; and *Venetia* (1837), a fictional account of the lives of Byron and Shelley. Delight in exotic scenes of aristocratic splendour is evident in all Disraeli's novels including the later ones: *Lothair* (1870), which was again concerned with contemporary events – Garibaldi's abortive attempt to liberate Italy in 1867, and the Marquess of Bute's conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1868; and his last complete novel, *Endymion* (1880), a nostalgic fairy tale of the political events of 1830–50. Although such scenes are sometimes almost as exaggerated as Daisy Ashford's high-life fantasies in *The Young Visiters*, from *Vivian Grey* onwards they are often spiced with satire and accompany keen interest in political intrigue and power. But they are given a much greater sense of purpose in *Coningsby* (1844), the novel immediately preceding *Sybil*. In both books Disraeli's knowledge of the London clubs and of the saloons and country houses of the great ladies of politics (such as the Tory Lady Jersey, the fictional Lady St. Julians) is used to express the nature of contemporary political life, not simply to indulge in day-dreams of political power. Descriptions of English aristocratic life are the best and most substantial part of *Tancred* (1847), the extraordinary eulogy of Judaism as the fount of Christianity which completes Disraeli's trilogy of novels in the 1840s.

In the 1830s and 1840s an increasing number of writers and reformers attempted to inform middle-class readers and influence opinion concerning social distress accentuated by the Industrial Revolution. It was the time of the early Royal Commissions and Blue Books (Government Reports, so-called because they are bound in stiff blue paper) investigating labour conditions in factories, sanitation, and destitution both urban and rural. The literary counterparts of these enquiries were the novels 'with a purpose' which debated 'the Condition of England' and exposed social problems. The novel, the increasingly popular literary form, often available in cheap editions made possible by the newly invented steam printing press, was an excellent way of propagating ideas and ideologies. Anthony Trollope's mother, Frances, published *Michael Armstrong* (1840), a melodramatic account of child labour in the factories; in *Jessie Phillips* (1843) she attacked the 1834 Poor Law,

as did Dickens in *Oliver Twist* (1837–8). Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, in *Helen Fleetwood* (1841), exposed the miseries of the rural poor who came to look for work in the industrial town. In the General Preface to the collected edition of his novels (1870–1) Disraeli summarized the ideas embodied in the first two novels of his trilogy:

> 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, in *Sybil*, I considered the condition of the people.

The two novels express the Tory ideology formulated in Disraeli's *Vindication of the English Constitution* (1835), which attacked the Whigs and the Utilitarians and designated the Tory party 'the national party . . . 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.' Obviously such thinking owes a debt to Burke, who argued that the state and its institutions are an organic growth, and is in opposition to Bentham, the father of Utilitarianism, who defined society as an aggregate of individuals.

Disraeli's philosophy of history – if his ideology merits that name – also has affinities with Cobbett's Radical Toryism and with Walter Scott's romantic Toryism. These ideas earned Disraeli the leadership of a small group of friends, all Tory MPs, known as 'Young England'. They appear in *Coningsby*. Coningsby himself is an idealized portrait of George Smythe, the brilliant and dissipated eldest son of Lord Strangford; Lord Henry Sydney is Lord John Manners, later the seventh Duke of Rutland; and Buckhurst is Alexander Baillie-Cochrane. Egremont, in *Sybil*, also owes a lot to Lord John Manners, although there is much of Disraeli himself in the character, especially in his attitude to Chartism. Young Eng-

land was not a political party but a group of friends sharing political views. They were active for a very short period, from 1842 until 1846, when the alliance began to split up. They attacked the Utilitarians and yearned for an idealized feudal society in which Church and aristocracy combined to protect the people's rights. They criticized the 1834 Poor Law, attempted to improve working-class housing, supported Lord Ashley's factory reforms, and urged the importance of holidays (which they spelt 'holydays') for the people. Also, they argued that the Church had a responsibility for men's bodies as well as for their souls. (For a full account of Young England and Disraeli's association with it, see Robert Blake, *Disraeli*, London, 1966, pp. 167–89.) Like Pugin's Gothic architecture, the Oxford Movement, and the later Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Young England was a romantic protest against the scientific, Utilitarian economics and politics of the time. They were guilty of many follies, including an uncritical adulation of the Stuarts, particularly Charles I ('Rightly was King Charles surnamed the Martyr; for he was the holocaust of direct taxation. Never yet did man lay down his heroic life for so great a cause: the cause of the Church and the cause of the Poor.' *Sybil*, Book IV, Chapter 6), and their dream of uniting aristocrat and working man was sometimes expressed in acutely embarrassing social functions and cricket matches. *Punch* mocked them; Dickens originally included satire on Young England in *The Chimes* (1844), and slyly ridiculed the cult of Charles I in poor Mr. Dick's obsession with that monarch's head in *David Copperfield* (1850). However, Young England genuinely desired reform, and Lord John Manners's journals show his determination to fulfil the responsibilities which he felt accompanied wealth and aristocratic position.

But Young England in 1844 were all, apart from Disraeli, youths in their twenties. Older than the rest and by far the most intelligent, Disraeli was ambitious, longing for power and the limelight. He was remarkable for his determination and resilience. He tried five times before he at last succeeded in getting into Parliament. Once there, his maiden speech was laughed to scorn. Undaunted, he shouted 'The time will come when you will hear me' – and it did. Such a man was not going to rest content with the leadership of a small Tory splinter

group. Disraeli bore a grudge against Peel who, not unreasonably, had refused to give him office in 1841. Although his attitude towards Peel is amicable enough in *Coningsby*, he criticizes Peel's Tamworth Manifesto of 1834 as 'an attempt to construct a party without principles . . . There was indeed considerable shouting about what they called Conservative principles; but the awkward question naturally arose, what will you conserve?' (*Coningsby*, Book II, Chapter 5.) The criticism becomes sharper in *Sybil*. Cynicism, deviousness, and political expediency characterize 'the Man in Downing Street', the satiric portrait of Peel. In the earlier novel Coningsby rejected the old-style, self-seeking Toryism of his grandfather Lord Monmouth (based on the Marquess of Hertford, also the model for Thackeray's Lord Steyne in *Vanity Fair*, 1848), as Egremont rejects that of his brother, Lord Marney, in favour of a new-style Toryism which yet has its roots in the past and is based on an ideal union of Church, Monarch, and People. This is Disraeli's political manifesto, as against Peel's. Like Carlyle (see particularly *Chartism*, 1839, and *Past and Present*, 1843), Disraeli advocates a feudal hierarchy directed by energetic, intelligent leaders who look to the future in that they recognize the wonder and the potential of the Industrial Revolution. Disraeli will have nothing of 'Gallic equality', no English equivalent of the French Revolution. The people cannot lead, as Egremont explains to Sybil (Book IV, Chapter 15), but they need a leader from the ranks of the true aristocracy. It becomes plain in the novel that Disraeli feels himself to be one of these aristocrats. After its publication, when Young England disintegrated, it became obvious that Disraeli aimed to supplant Peel as leader of the Tory party.

In *Sybil* Disraeli explores and popularizes an idea which had been current for some time – Cobbett and Carlyle, among others, had expressed it – that Britain's increasing wealth had divided it into the rich and the poor, the 'Two Nations' of the novel's subtitle. Like Dickens's 'Boz' venturing into the unknown territory of the London poor, Egremont, the younger son of an aristocratic family, ennobled through the spoliation of the monasteries, learns something of working-class life through his friendship with the Chartist leader Walter Gerard, Gerard's daughter Sybil, and the Chartist journalist Stephen

Morley. Using his own experiences in brief visits to the northern industrial cities, drawing on Blue Book information and on the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor's file of correspondence for his newspaper the *Northern Star*, Disraeli crams a bewildering number of topics into the novel: Chartism and Chartist riots, the iniquity of the truck system (payment of workers in goods instead of in cash), female and child labour in coal-mines, the growth of trades unions, the plight of the handloom weavers, the agricultural depression, the insanitary squalor of the agricultural labourers' existence. Although parts of the novel are deliberately structured – for example the comparison between horse-racing and the jockeying for place in political life made in the opening chapters, and the repeated contrast between life lived by the rich and that experienced by the poor as in the Deloraine House ball, with its political intrigues, followed by the Hyde Park scene of destitution in which the crossing-sweepers aspire to be link-boys – it lacks organization and some of the Blue Book facts are undigested. It is held together only by Disraeli's voice, mostly using the tones of Parliamentary debate: quiet sarcasm, fierce attack, challenge, exhortation. In a sense, Disraeli himself is the most important character in the novel, and its vigour proceeds from his constant stream of ideas and wit. Its strength is the evocation of the business of English politics – its passions, its intrigues, its aspirations, its tedium. His creation of the agents Tadpole and Taper, the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of Tory political life, would alone justify Disraeli's reputation as a novelist. He is unable to create a community, as Elizabeth Gaskell does in the Manchester scenes in *Mary Barton*, but he competently assembles Wodgate from the Blue Books, as he does the squalid rural town Marney, adding memories of his own northern visits, and using the place as a foil for its selfish landlord, Lord Marney, whose whining tone of self-justification and complaint is perfectly caught. Generally, his characters are pallid mouthpieces for ideas, such as Egremont, Gerard, and Morley; or Blue Book facts galvanized into activity and improbable speech, such as Devilsdust and the inhabitants of Mowbray; or theatrical tuppence-coloureds like Baptist Hatton, with his aura of mystery, his gourmet breakfasts, and his attendant cats. Sybil herself is an emblematic figure, the

emissary of a socially conscious Church. Presented in a series of static poses as the Ministering Angel or Lady Bountiful or Our Lady of Sorrows, like a stylized figure by a Nazarene painter, she first appears in the ruins of Marney Abbey (based on Fountains, beloved of contemporary engravers of the picturesque), which evoke Cobbett's pre-Reformation England and Pugin's humane Gothic church, which in *Contrasts* (1833) he set against the bleak Utilitarian workhouses. The ruins also suggest those in which Childe Harold found spiritual solace: both Egremont and Sybil are given to melancholy soul-searchings of the kind Byron made fashionable.

Disraeli's conviction that there is barbarism and savagery in the other 'Nation' of which his readers should take warning betrays him into the over-emphasis and exaggeration of which Dickens is sometimes guilty. He chooses to present the worst details of the worst trade in Wodgate, the town of locksmiths. But although he has no ability to tease out the complexity of a character or a situation, as does George Eliot for example, his freedom from moral earnestness and his ability to see more than one side of a question prevent his producing ludicrous ogres like Frances Trollope's factory-owner, Sir Matthew Dowling, in *Michael Armstrong*. 'Bishop' Hatton is grotesque, but he has vigour because, despite his brutality, his skill gives him an authority which England's effete aristocracy and indifferent clergy have forfeited.

Like most of the 'Condition of England' novels in the 1840s, *Sybil* is optimistic despite its note of warning. Although admitting injustices and imperfections, the energetic early Victorians could not countenance the idea of ultimate disaster and failure. The fear of revolution, evident in the description of the mob's attack on the tommy-shop or on Mowbray Castle, as it is in the riot-scenes in Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) and Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850),is countered by the final vision of hope for the future. England is to be saved by the nation's responsible youth, Disraeli obviously counting himself of the company despite his forty years. This is what his correspondent Mrs. Baylis, herself young and obviously idealistic, had responded to, although the 'truth' of Disraeli's descriptions is sometimes in doubt. The necessary secrecy with which trade union affairs were conducted (membership

could cost a man his job) is reduced to melodrama and, despite the respect accorded to Gerard's and Morley's ideas, Chartism finally becomes a charade, at the mercy of the drunken egotist Hatton. Those hectic scenes at the end of the novel, which Disraeli tossed off in such haste for the publisher, illustrate the difficulty of reconciling an account of contemporary conditions with the demands of the novel, particularly a love-story with a happy ending. As contemporary reviewers pointed out, the plot does *not* unite the 'Two Nations'. Sybil is not a daughter of the people, who, we are told, are not worthy to provide a husband for her, but an aristocrat in disguise. This aristocracy is justified in its recognition of its social duties as well as its privileges, and therefore provides satisfactory leadership for the struggling people. That some of them were content that this should be so is clear from Mrs. Baylis's letter. But, as Robert Blake remarks in his biography of Disraeli, it is difficult to see how the union of Church, Throne, and People was to counteract the destitution described in the novel. Its vision does not spring from its factual observations, but is rather imposed upon them.

Disraeli was never a popular novelist like Dickens or Thackeray or Trollope. His novels had satisfactory rather than large sales, apart from *Lothair*, which attracted the curious because it was written by an ex-Prime Minister. He is an exotic among English novelists. Although he appreciated the increasing power of the middle class he did not share their attitudes. Even while admiring Trafford, the model factory-owner, he suggests that some of his work people were bored by the schooling he provided, and he describes the gaiety of the factory-workers as well as their hardships. To be properly understood Disraeli's novels should be approached by way of the eighteenth-century discursive novel, Byron's satiric narratives, and Thomas Love Peacock's witty conversation pieces. In such writing the domestic interior which Elizabeth Gaskell describes in *Mary Barton* is out of place. Disraeli's métier is wit which exposes the aristocrat or the politician:

> Lord Marney, who was fond of chess, turned out Captain Grouse, and very gallantly proposed to finish his game with Miss Poinsett, which Miss Poinsett, who understood Lord Marney as

well as he understood chess, took care speedily to lose, so that his lordship might encounter a champion worthy of him. (Book II, Chapter 6)

'People get into Parliament to get on; their aims are indefinite.' (Lady St. Julians, Book IV, Chapter 3)

'After all, it is only a turn-out. I cannot recast her Majesty's speech and bring in rebellion and closed mills, instead of loyalty and a good harvest.' (The 'gentleman in Downing Street', Book VI, Chapter 1)

Disraeli's scenes may sometimes be stagey, even ludicrous, as in the love-passages between Morley and Sybil (Book V, Chapter 4); his ideas may sometimes be outrageous or his interpretation of history preposterous; yet we are always aware of his sharp intelligence and lively mind. He has that inestimable virtue in a writer of fiction: he is never dull.

SHEILA M. SMITH

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text of *Sybil* reproduced in this edition is that of Longmans' Collected and Revised Edition of Disraeli's Novels 1870–1, the most important collected edition of Disraeli's novels in the nineteenth century, overseen by the author. Unless mentioned in the Notes, the few alterations made to this text, such as corrections of misprints and occasional modernizations of spelling, have been effected silently.

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SYBIL

OR

THE TWO NATIONS

*

The Commonalty murmured, and said, 'There never were so many Gentlemen, and so little Gentleness.'

BISHOP LATIMER