

Aristocracy and Justice

SHELBURNE ESSAYS
NINTH SERIES

By Paul Elmer More

“We think that a wise Mean, between these barbarous Extreams, is that which self-Preservation ought to dictate to our Wishes.”
— HALIFAX, *The Character of a Trimmer.*



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DISRAELI AND CONSERVATISM

SOMEWHERE in the course of his infinite gossip Augustus J. C. Hare tells of a dinner at which one of the guests spoke of Disraeli as "that old Jew gentleman who is sitting on the top of chaos." The phrase, worthy of the master of epigram it describes, has been much in my mind as I have been reading the extended memoirs begun by Mr. Monypenny and now in the hands of Mr. G. E. Buckle. The third volume of the biography ends with the year 1855, when Disraeli was neither old, nor yet quite at the summit of the chaos he was climbing; but the significant philosophy of the man is here, and the first flush of victory. The rest can be only the putting on of the crown and the putting of it off — a little tarnished. His statesmanship reaches its climax with the formation of the Conservative party; after that his career is politics.

The very entrance of Disraeli upon the stage is of a kind to stir the imagination. He was born at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when a Hebrew was still precluded from the national life, and, although for social reasons mainly, he was baptized at the age of twelve and through life professed an ardent attachment to the Angli-

can Church, he never denied his race, but rather gloried in it and held it up always as the chosen vessel of God. His education was irregular, at a time when the hard discipline of the public schools was regarded as the only training for victory on the hustings as well as on the fields of Waterloo. He was bizarre in his manners and dress to the point of absurdity, startling London with his curls and waistcoats long before he conquered it by his brains. What should England expect of a candidate for Parliament who, in the days of the Reform Bill, could appear at a dinner wearing "a black velvet coat lined with satin, purple trousers with a gold band running down the outside seam, a scarlet waistcoat, long lace ruffles, falling down to the tips of his fingers, white gloves with several brilliant rings outside them, and long black ringlets rippling down upon his shoulders." Sometimes his trousers were green, and heaven knows what other colours, and this at a time when Bulwer's *Pelham* was introducing the fashion of black as the distinguishing mark of a gentleman. Mayfair gazed and wondered; but Mayfair did not laugh, at least to his face, for it knew his power of sarcasm, as Parliament was afterwards to know it. "He was once dining," says the same lady who has described his raiment, "with my insufferable brother-in-law, Mr. Norton, when the host begged him to drink a particular kind of wine, saying he had

never tasted anything so good before. Disraeli agreed that the wine was very good. 'Well,' said Norton, 'I have got wine twenty times as good in my cellar.' 'No doubt, no doubt,' said Disraeli, looking round the table; 'but, my dear fellow, this is quite good enough for such *canaille* as you have got to-day.'"

There was, in fact, method in Disraeli's vanity, a deliberate purpose to conquer, by dazzling and bullying, a place to which the ordinary paths of access were for him closely barred. I do not know that he was a special reader of Plutarch, but the precision and tenacity of his ambition resemble nothing so much in modern history as they do those stories from the antique world. Early in his life the two prizes of literature and politics rose before his vision, and, though he never gave up the former, he deliberately chose a practical career for his serious concern and made letters subordinate to it. "Poetry," he notes in his Diary, "is the safety-valve of my passions, but I wish to act what I write." Having thus chosen, he determined in his mind the manner of procedure and the warrant of success. "Destiny is our will, and our will is our nature," is the reflection of his Contarini amid the ruins of Athens. The same hero, speaking for Disraeli at the age of twenty-eight, is inspired by these talismanic rules copied from an obelisk in Thebes: "Be patient: cherish hope. Read more: ponder

less. Nature is more powerful than education: time will develop everything." There was never a more patient politician than Disraeli; never one who found destiny more clearly in his own will. And if confidence in himself was one side of his shield, the other side was contempt, or something like it, for mankind in general. Writing to his father from Malta, in 1830, he relates this incident:

Here the younkers do nothing but play rackets, billiards, and cards, race and smoke. To govern men, you must either excel them in their accomplishments, or despise them. Clay does one, I do the other, and we are both equally popular. Affectation tells here even better than wit. Yesterday, at the racket court, sitting in the gallery among strangers, the ball entered, and lightly struck me and fell at my feet. I picked it up, and observing a young rifleman excessively stiff, I humbly requested him to forward its passage into the court, as I really had never thrown a ball in my life. This incident has been the general subject of conversation at all the messes to-day!

That in another person might seem like impudent coxcombry; but there is something almost terrible in the thought of a young adventurer of twenty-five calmly adopting such a policy of dealing with men, and by it raising himself to be, as he was for a time, the most powerful leader in the world. Nor was the goal he set before himself any less definite than the means of advance. In 1834, Lord Melbourne, then still Home Secretary in

the Reform Cabinet, and Disraeli, a beaten candidate for Parliament, were talking together after dinner, and the typical British Peer, the friend of Victoria, was attracted by the cleverness of the Hebrew aspirant. "Lord Melbourne," as Disraeli tells the story, which is confirmed by Melbourne's biographer, "asked how he could advance me in life, and half proposed that I should be his private secretary, enquiring what my object in life might be. 'To be Prime Minister.'" The condescending Whig tried gently to argue the young man out of what must have seemed to him pure infatuation; but he did not forget the remark. When, in 1848, as an old man he learned of Disraeli's success in Parliament, he was heard to exclaim: "By God! the fellow will do it yet."

Certainly he needed patience as well as determination at the outset of his career. Three times he stood for Parliament as an independent, without money and without energetic backing. Inevitably he was beaten. Then, in 1835, came the famous Tamworth Manifesto of Peel, with its programme for reconstructing the old Tory party to meet the exigencies of modern politics. Its platform could not long satisfy any one who looked below the surface of things, and ten years later Disraeli described it scornfully as "an attempt to carry on affairs by substituting the fulfilment of the duties of office for the performance of the functions of government; and to maintain

this negative system by the influence of property, reputable private conduct, and what are called good connections." But at the time it gave the baffled candidate an excuse for affiliating himself avowedly with one of the ruling parties. Almost immediately he had himself nominated to the Carlton Club, which was "the recognized social citadel of Toryism." He was yet to fail once again, but to fail in such a way that he could answer a scurrilous attack of O'Connell's with the challenge: "I have a deep conviction that the hour is at hand. . . . We shall meet at Philippi." His readiness to resort to the duel with his Irish antagonist's son did him no harm in the eyes of his British electorate, and his eccentricities had begun to impose themselves on his audiences as a mark of power.

Two years later, in the first Parliament of Queen Victoria, he was returned for Maidstone, and with him went the Mr. Wyndham Lewis whose widow was to become his wife, aiding him with her money and her loyal sympathy. His marriage, if we may look forward a little, was not lacking in those elements that furnish the world with comedy, but was heroic also and beautiful. It is a fact that one night when they were driving together to Parliament House she sat all the way with her finger jammed in the door, bearing the torture in silence rather than disturb his mind before an anxious debate. And it is said by Froude

that the only instance in which he ever spoke with genuine anger was once when some young men ventured a jest at Mrs. Disraeli's age and his motives for marriage. "Gentlemen," he replied, as he rose and left the room, "do none of you know what gratitude means?" The world called her frivolous and him mercenary.

Henceforth Disraeli's business life passed with politicians; his recreation was in the library and in the fields and groves of Hughenden, dreaming his dreams and playing the country gentleman in the neighbourhood of the Beaconsfield which had been immortalized by Burke, and whose name, which should have been Burke's, he was to assume when raised to the peerage. And, knowing the vanities and egotism of the man, we like to remember that he refused the pomp of burial in the Abbey, but chose rather to lie beside his wife and another faithful friend in a quiet parish churchyard.

Such a career would be memorable were it only for the interest excited by the story of a great ambition working itself out through enormous difficulties and in original ways, but it has this added significance that it is bound up with the rise of a new political philosophy, or rather with the resuscitation and adaptation of an old philosophy to meet new circumstances. The result of the Revolution of 1688 had been to introduce into politics a kind of drifting utili-

tarianism and to establish in power an oligarchy which, under various forms and party titles, had ruled in England for a century and a half. Virtually these men were Whigs, and their long close reign was, as Disraeli used to say, somewhat fantastically perhaps, nothing more than the realization of the frustrated efforts of Hampden and the other early leaders of the Rebellion "to establish in England a high aristocratic republic on the model of the Venetian, then the study and admiration of all speculative politicians." It held together, despite factional divisions, through the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, owing to the pressure of events and the principles instilled into public life by Burke. But by 1832 such an oligarchy had become anomalous. In the Reform Bill its leaders, with virtuous faces, abdicated, leaving the country with no clear principle or order of government beyond a short-sighted opportunism. Under the Primacy of Melbourne (1835-1841) there was the shadow of Whiggery over the land, but not the power: Parliament was marking time. Then came with Peel the restoration and betrayal of the Tories. Meanwhile, under the stress of famine in Ireland and labour revolt in England, the new liberal and the new conservative ideas were becoming conscious aims of government. Disraeli, as we have seen, entered Parliament as a supporter of Peel, but he soon felt the deep cleft between his own

philosophic conservatism and the Tory opportunism of his chief. Various acts of Peel made him appear to Disraeli, and not to Disraeli alone, a defaulter from the interests he was supposed to be protecting, and when, stealing his policy from the discomfited Whigs, he proposed the repeal of the Corn Laws, the antagonism between the two men broke out in war to the death. The Repeal was carried in the House of Commons the 15th May, 1846, but only by splitting the party into the personal followers of Peel, who for a number of years held together as a separate body, and the fragment of Tories who clung loyally to the landed interests and obstinately to a protective tariff. A month later Peel suffered defeat in a division on the Coercion Bill designed for the temporary and forced pacification of Ireland. Four days after that he resigned.

In this struggle the recognized leader of the outraged Tories was Lord George Bentinck, the son of the Duke of Portland, who gave up the sports and pursuits dear to his heart for the unfamiliar strain of political contention. Without him the party could scarcely have held together against the drawing power of Peel, and Disraeli in his life of Bentinck has left a generous tribute to his character and influence. But for us to-day the zest of the drama lies in the personal duel between Disraeli and Peel. Not often does the record of such a war of words retain its vitality

for the reader of a later generation; Parliamentary wit has a sad way of growing stale, and the flashes of lightning that dazzled when they fell have a way of looking like paltry fireworks after the lapse of years. But it is not so with the cold malignant strokes of Disraeli; they pierce and sting to-day as they did when Peel, sitting below on the Treasury bench, was their suffering target. Some of his epigrams pronounced at this time have become proverbial: "The right hon. gentleman caught the Whigs bathing and walked away with their clothes," for instance, and, "A Conservative Government is an organized hypocrisy." And when Peel, after his Cabinet had resigned because they could not agree on the Repeal, and had taken office again because the Whigs were too distracted to carry out the policy stolen from them, came before a breathlessly expectant Parliament with no clear statement of his purpose, but with a long rambling discourse on things in general, Disraeli's reply fell with a power of terrible sarcasm that reminds one at times of Achilles shouting over the trenches in the plain of Troy. It is no wonder that Peel was unable to look indifferent or to conceal his "nervous twitchings," amid "the delirious laughter with which the House accepted and sealed the truth of the attacks." An eyewitness of those scenes has left this account of Disraeli's manner:

In conveying an innuendo, an ironical sneer, or a suggestion of contempt, which courtesy forbids him to translate into words — in conveying such masked enmities by means of a glance, a shrug, an altered tone of voice, or a transient expression of face, he is unrivalled. Not only is the shaft envenomed, but it is aimed with deadly precision by a cool hand and a keen eye, with a courage fearless of retaliation. He will convulse the House by the action that helps his words, yet leave nothing for his victims to take hold of. He is a most dangerous antagonist in this respect, because so intangible. And all the while you are startled by his extreme coolness and impassibility. . . . You might suppose him wholly unconscious of the effect he is producing; for he never seems to laugh or to chuckle, however slightly, at his own hits. While all around him are convulsed with merriment or excitement at some of his finely-wrought sarcasms, he holds himself, seemingly, in total suspension, as though he had no existence for the ordinary feelings and passions of humanity; and the moment the shouts and confusion have subsided, the same calm, low, monotonous, but yet distinct and searching voice, is heard still pouring forth his ideas, while he is preparing to launch another sarcasm, hissing hot, into the soul of his victim.

With the return of the Whigs to power under Lord John Russell and the isolated position of the Peelites, the leaders of the Tories had before them the great task of remaking their party. They pulled themselves together sufficiently to form a brief and troubled ministry in 1852, with Derby as First Lord of the Treasury and Disraeli as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the

Commons, and again in 1858 and 1866. Before the close of this third administration the Earl of Derby retired, leaving Disraeli as Prime Minister; but the full triumph of Disraeli came in the period from 1874 to 1880, when he was at the head of his own Government, for the last four years as the Earl of Beaconsfield. From him the party passed into the hands of Salisbury. It is worthy of notice, by the way, that Salisbury's son, Lord Hugh Cecil, has recently published a little book on *Conservatism* which is a notable addition to the literature of the subject.

If Disraeli's personal contest with Peel is the dramatic moment of his career, its larger significance lies in the patient effort to infuse a living philosophy into the dumb unthinking Toryism of tradition, and to put meaning into the name Conservative which the party had assumed in 1835. The Reform Act, while relaxing the grip of the Whig oligarchy, had left the principle of utilitarianism in full operation, and from it was growing the doctrine of *laissez-faire* along with the so-called economic interpretation of history. Under the driving force of Cobden and Bright and the Anti-Corn-Law League power had passed from the landed proprietors to the manufacturers and the middle classes. Protection was withdrawn from the land, while the taxes for the poor and other burdens laid on it by virtue of its privileges remained in force. But the new Liberal

party could not rest here. Already the pressure on it from the more radical organizations was growing severe, and socialism was before it. The conservative elements in its creed had no other tenure than the routine of habit. What was to withstand the onflow? Nothing, unless a true conservatism, based on some permanent principles of human nature, could be reasoned out and brought into play; and this task Disraeli set before himself as a conscious aim. He prevailed, or partly prevailed, chiefly, I fear, because his theories coincided with the personal advantages of a group of men who, without his brains, would have been helpless. His failure, so far as he failed, was due in part to the instinctive dislike of the practical British mind for anything tainted with ideas; in part also to weaknesses in his own character.

His conservative philosophy, as yet fairly free of the later mixture of imperialism, may be found full-fledged in the articles he contributed to the press before his election to Parliament and in the novels written during the Peel administration. Of the latter it is not my purpose to offer here any criticism. They were recognized at the time by a French critic as creating a special branch of historical fiction, and to create a new *genre* in literature is no slight honour. It is fair to say also that, with all their manifest blemishes of taste, they are likely to interest the reader just

in proportion to his experience of life and his acquaintance with English politics. John Morley, no lover of Disraeli surely, sums up the traits of the novels in a few phrases — “the spirit of whim in them, the ironic solemnity, the historical paradoxes, the fantastic glitter of dubious gems, the grace of high comedy, all in union with a social vision that often pierced deep below the surface.” Mr. Morley is not surprised that Gladstone did not relish these qualities.

The most important of Disraeli's early fugitive writings are the *Vindication of the English Constitution* (a “letter” to Lord Lyndhurst, published in 1835) and the *Letters of Runnymede* (contributed to the *Times* during the first half of 1836). They are an attempt to appear in the double rôle of Burke and Junius, and Disraeli, who was neither quite one nor quite the other of those heroic figures, comes, it must be allowed, amazingly near being a blend of both. Runnymede has not the terrible voice of the gods, and his attack on Lord John Russell, though as venomous in intention as Burke's on the Duke of Bedford and Junius's on the preceding duke (the Russells enjoy an inherited privilege of abuse), has neither the justification nor the deadly efficacy of its models. Yet Runnymede could sting:

You were born with a strong ambition and a feeble intellect. It is an union not uncommon, and in the majority of cases only tends to convert an aspiring youth

into a querulous and discontented manhood. But under some circumstances — when combined, for instance, with great station, and consequent opportunities of action — it is an union which often leads to the development of a peculiar talent — the talent of political mischief. . . .

Disraeli knew that the men on whom he was pouring his scurrilous, and anonymous, invective were not the empty knaves he made them; but political mischief is not always the work of rogues or fools, and Disraeli believed with all his heart — and rightly, whether the result meant good or evil — that a revolution was under way and that the spirit of the new Whiggism was “hostile to the English Constitution.” That must be the palliation of his rancour; that is the explanation also of his endeavour to fortify his own party with a tenable theory of government based on the Constitutional balance of powers.

The conservatism which Disraeli preached in season and out of season, to mocking Whigs and stolid Tories, rests on a few simple facts of human nature. It believes first of all in the virtue of memory as equally important with the spontaneous faculty of invention. It lays stress on the sheer value of the past — what Disraeli, quoting a fine phrase of Lord Coke's, called “reverend antiquity” — as a constituent part of the present; it emphasizes the need of experience as a brake on the forward-driving unrest of hope.

Both liberal and conservative admit that change is an inevitable attendant of life; the difference in their attitude is this, that the liberal tends to regard all change as progress towards something better, whereas the conservative tends to regard change in itself as a discomfort, to be tolerated only when it removes a specific evil.

Nor does the virtue of this slackening process depend alone on the need of delay to ensure a wise choice among the thronging desires of change; it depends also on the necessity of making sure that the admitted change, when it comes, shall be salutary in its operation rather than subversive of order. For an illustration, take the growing power of the labour unions. Their constitution was at the beginning bitterly contested by men who now, in theory at least, acknowledge the validity of their principles. And, however it may seem wise that this hostility should have given way in time, it does not follow that the initial check was unsalutary, nor is the surrender an argument of inconsistency. For it should be pretty clear to any one who reads history that a new power of this sort, if it were exercised without opposition by men with no discipline of experience, would have been subject to frightful abuses. The injustice and impracticability of many of the schemes of the unions today, after years of training, show what labour might have done to hamper prosperity and retard

progress had it been allowed to organize freely under the first wild compunctions of injustice.

In this way conservatism is an essential element of sound evolution, and Disraeli was not without warrant in claiming the name of Progressive for his own party against its exclusive appropriation by the Liberals. As a matter of fact all liberals, except those of the most radical dye, are ready to admit the necessity of conservatism as a wholesome brake on the wheels of change; but they are wont to look with something of contempt on a party whose function is of a purely negative sort. Disraeli had raised a laugh at Peel for stealing the clothes of the Liberals while they were in bathing, yet he himself did not hesitate on occasion to profit by the same kind of transaction, notably when he "dished the Whigs" by the Franchise Act of 1867 — an act which to the smitten Tories was "a political betrayal" without parallel, but for which Disraeli declared that he had been educating his party for years. It would, indeed, not be easy to deny the liberals their indulgence of superiority if conservatism had no other office than to eliminate the false starts and oppose a wholesome retardation to the wiser innovations of the really constructive element of government.

But to Disraeli, as to his predecessors, the Conservative party had its own programme of construction. As a negative force conservatism

is based on a certain distrust of human nature, believing that the immediate impulses of the heart and visions of the brain are likely to be misleading guides; whereas the liberalism which ran through the eighteenth century by the side of Whiggery, and finally absorbed it, being of the same parentage as the religion of Deism and the philosophy of "Enlightenment," rests on the assumption that, practically speaking, all men are by nature good and need only to be let alone to develop in the right direction. But this distrust of human nature is closely connected with another and more positive factor of conservatism — its trust in the controlling power of the imagination. These, as I analyse the matter, — the instinctive distrust of uncontrolled human nature and the instinctive reliance on the imagination, — are the very roots of the conservative temper, as their contraries are the roots of the liberal and radical temper, the lack of imagination, if any distinction is to be made, being the chief factor of liberalism and confidence in human nature being the main impulse of radicalism.

Certainly both of these conservative principles lay deeply imbedded in Disraeli's mind beneath his feeling that

Perilous is sweeping change, all chance unsound.

An instance of his distrust of the common intelligence of his fellows, running even into super-

cilious contempt, has already been given, and indeed too much stress, if anything, is ordinarily placed on what is called his cynicism. But it is not so often remembered that his reliance on the imagination was a companion of that distrust, and equally strong. And here, in Disraeli's opposition to the current of the age, we shall be brought face to face with some curious paradoxes. It should seem that a party whose theories are based on confidence in untrammelled human nature ought to present the aims and destiny of mankind in a fairer light than its adversary; yet the very contrary is the fact. It is no matter of chance that utilitarianism and liberalism and Manchester economics were coincident with the rise of a materialistic and pseudo-scientific philosophy; they are, in fact, branches from the same root. And against the most fundamental of these, the pseudo-science of the day, with its desolating notion of progress, Disraeli set himself with all the strength of his disposition. "Modern philosophy," he wrote, years before the advent of Darwinism, "with its superficial discoveries, has infused into the breast of man a spirit of scepticism; but I think that, ere long, science will again become imaginative, and that as we become more profound, we may become also more credulous." Again, still before Darwin's work, there is in his *Tancred* a delightful bit of satire of Chambers's *Vestiges of Creation*, which he dubs the *Revelations of Chaos*:

"It explains everything!" said Tancred; "it must, indeed, be a very remarkable book!"

"I think it will just suit you," said Lady Constance. "Do you know, I thought so several times while I was reading it."

"To judge from the title, the subject is rather obscure," said Tancred.

"No longer so," said Lady Constance. "It is treated scientifically; everything is explained by geology and astronomy, and in that way. It shows you exactly how a star is formed; nothing can be so pretty! A cluster of vapour, the cream of the milky way, a sort of celestial cheese, churned into light. You must read it, 'tis charming."

"Nobody ever saw a star formed," said Tancred.

"Perhaps not. You must read *Revelations*; it is all explained. But what is most interesting, is the way in which man has been developed. You know, all is development. The principle is perpetually going on. First there was nothing, then there was something; then, I forget the next, I think there were shells, then fishes; then we came: let me see, did we come next? Never mind that; we came at last. And the next change there will be something very superior to us, something with wings. Ah! that's it: we were fishes, and I believe we shall be crows. But you must read it."

"I do not believe I ever was a fish," said Tancred.

"Oh! but it is all proved." . . .

"I was a fish, and I shall be a crow," said Tancred to himself, when the hall door closed on him. "What a spiritual mistress!"

More memorable than this *jeu d'esprit* was his epigrammatic conclusion to a speech at Oxford in 1864, in the full swing of the new Darwinistic

materialism: "I, my Lord, am on the side of the angels." You may take these things as excellent fooling; they are that, and they are something more than that. They are not an attack on science, properly so called; they are not, after the manner of Gladstone, an attempt to effect a reconciliation between science and religion by distorting both; they are a warning to science to keep within her own field, and any one who is watching the currents of thought to-day knows that the warning has begun to find heedful ears.

And Disraeli's political convictions ran parallel with his religious faith. As early as 1833 he wrote in his diary: "The Utilitarians in politics are like the Unitarians in religion; both omit imagination in their systems, and imagination governs mankind." Hence his kindred distaste for the Manchester School, because their trust in human nature as a purely economic machine was combined with a blindness to the finer feelings and all those less ponderable forces which we sum up under the name of spiritual. His charge was that these economists "counselled the people of England to lower their tone"; and he was right. It should never be forgotten that while Disraeli, the avowed champion of the soil, was yet, in his *Sybil* and in his speeches, setting forth the unspeakable condition of the miners and factory workers and educating his party for just labour

legislation, the virtuous John Bright, who believed that the control of government should be transferred from the despots of the land to the manufacturing classes, was nevertheless opposing laws for the regulation of the hours of work and for protection of children, or for the sheathing of machinery which had a habit of grinding up the workers. History pronounces the philosophy of Manchester one of the most heartless creations of the human brain. And Peel was the tool of Bright and Cobden. These things must be remembered when we hear Disraeli calling himself a *Radical-Tory*, and appealing to the people of England.

It is not strange, therefore, that when Disraeli, in his *Lord George Bentinck*, came to sum up the character of Peel, he should have laid his finger on this defect of imagination as the cause of that statesman's weakness and final failure. No writer on Disraeli can afford to pass by this superbly discriminating sketch:

Nature had combined in Sir Robert Peel many admirable parts. . . . Such a man, under any circumstances and in any sphere of life, would probably have become remarkable. Ordained from his youth to be busied with the affairs of a great empire, such a man, after long years of observation, practice, and perpetual discipline, would have become what Sir Robert Peel was in the later portion of his life, a transcendent administrator of public business and a matchless master of debate in a popular assembly. . . .

Thus gifted and thus accomplished, Sir Robert Peel had a great deficiency: *he was without imagination*. . . .

Sir Robert Peel had a peculiarity which is perhaps natural with men of very great talents who have not the creative faculty; he had a dangerous sympathy with the creations of others. Instead of being cold and wary, as he was commonly supposed, he was impulsive and even inclined to rashness. . . . He was ever on the lookout for new ideas, and when he embraced them he did so with eagerness and often with precipitancy; he always carried these novel plans to an extent which even their projectors or chief promoters had usually not anticipated. . . .

The Roman Catholic Association, the Birmingham Union, the Manchester League, were all the legitimate offspring of Sir Robert Peel. No minister ever diminished the power of government in this country so much as this eminent man. No one ever strained the Constitution so much. He was the unconscious parent of political agitation: he literally forced the people out of doors to become statesmen, and the whole tendency of his policy was to render our institutions mere forms. In a word, no one, with all his conservative language, more advanced revolution.

The strength and weakness of the British liberal were never more consummately depicted; change the name, and you have Gladstone to the life. The immediate offspring of the "Spirit of Whiggism" was the "union of oligarchical wealth and mob poverty," to use Disraeli's words; its living grandchild is a radicalism of a different voice, though the youngster's actions have not been altogether unlike those of its parent.

Perhaps the purest example of the conservative distrust of human nature combined with trust in the imagination is the famous myth of Plato's *Republic*, by which the people are to be cajoled into believing in a caste of birth and so persuaded to perform contentedly each his own function in the hierarchy of society. That naked illusion of government, as it may be called, has haunted many minds since Plato's day, and sometimes in cruder forms. It may seem, to some it does seem, cynically low, but apparently it is the underlying fact of things: you will find it hard to escape, unless you care to rest order on the more brutal fact of the policeman's club — whose power after all depends on an illusion, in the end. For there is a true illusion, if the phrase will be accepted, whereby the lower nature of man is charmed by the voice of his higher instincts; and there is a false illusion, of the very contrary sort. The one is social and constructive, and is the work, properly speaking, of the imagination; the other is disintegrating and destructive, and is the product of the egotistic desires.

The great instance in government of this higher illusion working itself out in practical forms is the Roman Constitution, with its balances and checks, and its concealment of the harsh idea of caste in the refinements of institutions.

As for the Roman Constitution, it had three elements, each of them possessing sovereign powers; and

their respective share of power in the whole State had been regulated with such a scrupulous regard to equality and equilibrium, that no one could say for certain, not even a native, whether the Constitution as a whole were an aristocracy or democracy or despotism. And no wonder: for if we confine our observation to the power of the consuls we should be inclined to regard it as despotic; if to that of the senate, as aristocratic; and if finally one looks at the power possessed by the people it would seem a clear case of democracy. . . .

Whenever any danger from without compels them to unite and work together, the strength which is developed by the State is so extraordinary that everything required is unfailingly carried out by the eager rivalry shown by all classes to devote their whole minds to the need of the hour. . . . When these external alarms are past, and the people are enjoying their good fortune and the fruits of their victories, and, as usually happens, growing corrupted by flattery and idleness, show a tendency to violence and arrogance, — it is in these circumstances, more than ever, that the Constitution is seen to possess within itself the power of correcting abuses. For when any one of the three classes becomes puffed up, and manifests an inclination to be contentious and unduly encroaching, . . . the proper equilibrium is maintained by the impulsiveness of the one part being checked by its fear of the other.

So Polybius tells of the power of Rome, and this, precisely, was the eighteenth and early nineteenth century notion of that mysterious entity called the British Constitution as a balanced division of the powers of government among king, nobles, and commons. It is the idea which permeated Disraeli's mind from his reading of

Bolingbroke and Burke, and which he dinned into the ears of unwilling Whigs with most damnable iteration.

Now it needs no comment to show how this system of constitutional checks indicates on its negative side a distrust of the encroaching selfishness of men. Positively, a constitutional government is the interlocking harmony of those institutions which are "the realized experience of a nation." It was on institutions indeed, those symbols and efficacies of the imagination, which swallow up the individual man in involuntary actions and then render back to him his life enriched by manifold associations, and whose traditional forms are the hands of the past laid caressingly on the present, — it was on institutions that Disraeli most often dwelt, with an eloquence less magnificent no doubt than Burke's, but with a shrewder practical sense. "The rights and liberties of a nation can only be preserved by institutions," he declared. "It is not the spread of knowledge or the march of intellect that will be found sufficient sureties for the public welfare in the crisis of a country's freedom." And he added, — justly it will be conceded by those who know the man, — "I would address myself to the English Radicals."

He was justified in appealing to those who set the whole people above the ruling sway of a class, because the first and great institution is of

the people conceived as a nation. This is the root of the matter: the State to the imagination is a vital reality, to the unimaginative sense it is a mere name for a collection of men living together in the same territory. The consequences that follow this distinction are far-reaching and practical. Let us take an example. The governments of to-day are piling up huge debts, and if this tendency continues unchecked there will come a time, and that not remote, when men will stagger under the burden of obligations laid on them by their fathers without their consent and for objects which may not always seem to have been wisely chosen. When that moment arrives the conception of nationality will be of the first importance in determining the course to be pursued. As the borrowers of to-day are acting with little sense of responsibility towards the future, so then there will be men ready to deny the power of the past to lay a mortgage on the present, and who will decline to accept the theory of a State or nation as a continuous entity which can make contracts and be held morally accountable after the manner of an individual. Rationalists of this kind may for a season be held from the repudiation of debts by the consequent difficulty of borrowing for the future; but this practical difficulty is by no means insurmountable, as actual revolutions have proved. On the other side will be those who think that an entity grasped by the imagination is just as

real to their spiritual life as an object visible before them is to their sensuous life. Their own happiness is so intimately bound up with these impalpable creations that to touch the honour or deny the moral sanctity of one of them would be an act of treason against the higher nature of mankind. They will sacrifice much of their physical ease to maintain the reality of these ideas, and it is hard to see how the foundations of morality can be preserved unless the material needs of the individual are held in check by this seemingly shadowy world of the imagination. I do not say that this is the whole of the matter, or that the idea of State responsibility is quite so insubstantial as it would appear to be from this argument. The material basis of the family points to something underlying the State of a similar, if vaguer and less stable, sort. But I believe that this sense of the reality of the large and traditional creations of the imagination will be one of the controlling forces in right conduct.

And here another distinction demands attention. This conservative acceptance of the imaginative entity of the nation might seem to point directly to the Rousseauistic theory of the *volonté générale* and to socialism. But in fact the two tendencies are diametrically opposed, although they both lie in that field of abstractions where distinctions are extremely difficult to maintain. One is the consecration of the past, with its

lessons of caution and its comforts of attainment, the other rests on the exclusive claims of the present, or snatches a sanction from some fanciful idea of the future as a creation of human desires untrammelled by the realities of experience; one looks for something permanent and immutable through the chances and changes of time, the other knows no parent but mutability; the one recognizes a binding law of duty which cannot be abrogated by the interests of the living generation, the other asserts boldly that whatever the actual majority at any moment declares to be right is right; the one tends to absorb the personal desires and impulses of a man in the wider meanings of tradition, the other tends to intensify these personal motives as factors going to create the "general will," and naturally tends also to see the "general will" reflected in them; the one may be called the true illusion of the imagination which confirms a man in the upward motions of his nature, the other is a part of the false illusion which promises liberty but in the end leaves the soul a prey to its own downward gravitation. It is thus that conservatism lays stress on the ideas of the family and the State and thinks much of the virtues of patriotism, whereas socialism and its radical kindred are always inclined to turn away from the influences and duties of these institutions in favour of a conception of mankind as a whole, since in the very vagueness of that con-

ception all restraints and limitations are lost. Indeed, humanitarianism is precisely the conception of the *volonté générale* carried to its logical conclusion. Hence we find a conservative like Disraeli commending the part played by Lord George Bentinck "in the great contention between the patriotic and the cosmopolitan [he meant what is now commonly called "humanitarian"] principle which has hardly begun, and on the issue of which the fate of this island as a powerful community depends."

More particularly, as I have said, it was in Disraeli's mind the task of the new statesmanship to carry out this patriotic idea of the nation in the working of the Constitutional institutions. "By the Conservative Cause," he said in a speech as early as 1838, "I mean the splendour of the Crown, the lustre of the peerage, the privileges of the Commons, the rights of the poor. I mean that harmonious union, that magnificent concord of all interests, of all classes, on which our national greatness and prosperity depends" — large words, no doubt, and suited to the winecups over which they were pronounced, yet not without specific direction. To Disraeli the House of Commons was never representative of the people as a nation, but of a special class. Full representation, he believed, could not be obtained by the rough machinery of the polls; and one of the best of his early epigrams, which time has not proved un-

true, was aimed at measures intended to discredit the representative power of hereditary office: "In a hasty and factious effort to get rid of representation without election, it will be as well if eventually we do not discover that we have only obtained election without representation."

For the representation of the whole people Disraeli looked to the sovereign, both by virtue of his isolated preëminence, which should enable him to embrace the interests of all classes without prejudice or partiality, and by virtue of his power as a visible symbol of the State to give life and unity to the sympathies of patriotism. He thought, too, that the Crown was the natural bulwark of the people, in the narrower use of the word, against the encroachments of an oligarchy or plutocracy. "The privileges of the multitude," he declared, having the history of the past with him, whatever the future may hold, "and the prerogatives of the sovereign had grown up together, and together they had waned."

But if Disraeli looked askance at a factious oligarchy, he kept his hopes in a prescriptive and landed aristocracy. In the General Preface to the Novels, written in 1870, after long years of practical politics, he still professed faith in the old forms: "The feudal system may have worn out, but its main principle — that the tenure of property should be the fulfilment of duty — is

the essence of good government. The divine right of kings may have been a plea for feeble tyrants, but the divine right of government is the keystone of human progress, and without it governments sink into police, and a nation is degraded into a mob." Leaders the people will have, leadership there will be — if by no other means, then by brute force or deceptive flattery. Disraeli believed that in England this leadership was best obtained by an hereditary aristocracy. He was building again on the power of the imagination, holding that the insignia of authority handed down in one family were likely to bring to the wearer a surer sense of responsibility, and to others a willingness to be guided and to find in the upward-glancing comfort of reverence some compensation for the relative deprivations which discontent and envy have never yet abolished. And he would have subscribed heartily to this defense of prescription by a living leader of conservatism:

It can hardly be doubted that the credit and respect by which all public employment in this country is surrounded, and which operates to make men sit on local bodies, value the distinction of the magistracy, and work with unremitting energy to obtain a seat in the House of Commons, is partly due to the union in the House of Lords of the two ideas of high rank and civic service.

Disraeli dwelt much on the value of an hereditary aristocracy, but he regarded it from no bigot's

point of view. "It is not true," he says, in his *Lord George Bentinck*, "that England is governed by an aristocracy in the common acceptation of the term. England is governed by an aristocratic principle. The aristocracy of England absorbs all aristocracies, and receives every man in every order and every class who defers to the principle of our society, which is to aspire and excel." He knew that the real force and stability of prescription must rest in the end on its success in fostering and symbolizing and absorbing that natural aristocracy which is the creation of character and talent. And if he failed in his philosophical system, and still more in his political practice, to bring the forms of government into harmony with this natural aristocracy, his failure was not entirely to his discredit.

The task of the conservative statesman, as a matter of fact, is in itself far more difficult than that of the liberal or radical. It is not required of the liberal that he should have any consistently elaborated scheme of government. His rôle is to face conditions as they are, in the spirit of an honourable opportunism, and to let the future take care of itself. He is content if he has, like Gladstone, "considered actions simply as they are in themselves." And as for the radical, he has in his favour all the vast powers of flattery, the natural feeling of men that what they at the moment desire is good and should be granted without

hindrance. More particularly his programme is easy at a time when man's innate restlessness has been lifted by false deductions from evolutionary science into a philosophy which regards all change as life and progress and condemns stability as stagnation and death.

Against these impelling forces what has the conservative to offer? To the seductions of flattery he can oppose only the cautions based on a distrust of human nature which in times of ordinary tranquillity wears the face of sullen pride. To overbid an opportunism which deals frankly with the material needs of the hour he is often forced to appeal to the intangible considerations of remote consequences and ancient precedents. It may be true that society is ultimately governed by the imagination, but he who in an assembly of practical men rises to defend existing institutions on this seemingly insubstantial ground is at an enormous disadvantage in comparison with one who has behind his arguments the urgency of the eager present. The conservative may at times have the selfishness of possession on his side, and indeed his strength is likely to depend on this contingent motive; but, especially in an age permeated by humanitarian sympathies, this occasional advantage may be often used by the radical to discredit him, while the liberal may be cajoled into siding with the radical by the belief that a

particular concession will entail no considerable loss or will even accrue to the profit of property.

It is not strange, therefore, that the history of England since the Revolution of 1688, with intervals of timid delay, has been the record of a gradual yielding to the steady thrust of opportunism. And this movement has been aided by the accidental fact that the leading conservatives have proved themselves inadequate to the great charge laid upon them. Some of them, such as Laud and his master, confused conservatism with an unwholesome reaction. Others, such as Hobbes, based their politics on a strained and logic-ridden philosophy. Filmer was childish. Bolingbroke lacked common honesty. Burke, the noblest of them all philosophically, was practically inefficient. And Disraeli had not only his origin against him, but suffered from disabilities of a more personal sort.

Above all things it behooves the conservative, who appeals to the imagination of men, to see that his own imagination is sound and true; and it is a fact which no admirer of Disraeli can deny, that his words sometimes ring false. One feels this shabby strain running through his novels; one regrets it now and then in the rhodomontade of his political addresses; the emotion which floats in his imagery is sometimes shallow when it pretends to be profound. The question of sincerity is inevitably raised. It is not fair to

charge Disraeli with treachery to Protection, as his enemies charged him so furiously in Parliament and on the hustings. Protection in his view was merely an incident in the larger cause of conservatism; and we now know that almost immediately after the Repeal he started to wean his party from their narrower self-concern. But withal one is bound to admit that certain of his actions, such for example as his denial of seeking office from Peel and his notorious plagiarism from Thiers, were below the Parliamentary standard of honour. In comparison with Gladstone he was a philosopher and statesman; he was a genius opposed to a man of great talent — as it is fair to say that conservatism is in general the intuition of genius, whereas liberalism is the efficiency of talent. But there was yet something in the character of Gladstone which inspired confidence despite the most flagrant vicissitudes of his policy; something that Disraeli lacked. Sincerity is an elusive quality, hard to define. When in 1852 Disraeli, in the new rôle of Chancellor of the Exchequer, brought forward his first budget, it was not only torn to pieces by Gladstone, but was made the occasion of a scathing diatribe against his political foe. So bitter was Gladstone's personal antipathy that it is plausibly given as one of the motives which led him to refuse office in Derby's Cabinet and to throw himself openly into the Liberal party. And this is Gladstone's

account of the debate to his wife: "I had therefore to begin by attacking him for these [personalities]. . . . My great object was to show the Conservative party how their leader was hoodwinking and bewildering them. . . . *God knows I have no wish to give him pain.*" There is in that underscored clause a mark of the particular sort of self-deception that is often, and not unjustly, denounced as British middle-class cant. Of that kind of insincerity Disraeli was singularly free. But there was a strain of falseness in Disraeli's mind which, if not exactly a mark of insincerity, comes perilously near throwing discredit on his whole career.

No candid man can endure patiently the falsetto note in his laudation of the Jews, or the cloudy mysticism in which he wrapt up his everlasting allusions to the "Eastern Question." Critics and biographers have asked in bewilderment what he meant by this eastern question; the answer is too disconcertingly simple. Doubtless Disraeli had some genuine theories in regard to the indestructible virtues of race; doubtless, too, he believed in a way that the spiritual elements of civilization come entirely from the Semitic peoples, and that theocracy, which in his mind seems to have been identified with spirituality, is the only safeguard in a State against a retrogressive equalitarianism; but in the end I fear that by the mystery of the East Disraeli

meant just himself. He was to himself the embodiment of race; he was to be the Messiah of the State. The truth is that, alongside of the conception of religion which he took over from Burke, and which rests on the power of the religious imagination as an inward-drawing check on man's outreaching desires, he was too fond of preaching what may be called a creed of infinite expansion from himself as the centre of the universe.

And something of the same sort may be said of Disraeli's political philosophy. The sound elements of his system, those on which I have dwelt almost exclusively in this essay, were borrowed largely from Burke and dressed up in his own lively style. But the imperialism associated with Beaconsfield's name is not only foreign to Burke's theory of prescriptive and natural aristocracy, but is in some respects directly hostile to it. The aim of Burke was to set the stability of aristocratic institutions against the innate restlessness of human nature and to use the imagination as a force for order and self-restraint and political health. Disraeli also saw the need of this practical organ of control, but it must be admitted that, for the renown of success, he was too ready to preserve the aristocracy as a kind of ornament of society, while diverting the people with the glamour of imperialistic expansion as a sop for their lust of power.

There is this duplicity, if not insincerity, at the centre of Disraeli's mind, and our attitude towards him is likely to change as we look at this or the other aspect of his career. But after all reservations are made, I believe that the balance must be set down in favour of his courageous and shrewd insistence on the principles of a sound conservatism. Personally, we shall, perhaps, long continue to picture him as "that old Jew gentleman"; but the time may come when, alarmed by the policy of drifting, we shall be glad to think of him as still, through his philosophy of government, "sitting on the top of chaos."