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A man of imagination

by [Joseph Tartakovsky](#)

On *Benjamin Disraeli* by Adam Kirsch

I am not an admirer of contemporary biography,” Benjamin Disraeli told an admiring contemporary biographer of his in 1860, “and I dislike to be the subject of it.” This was one of the few wishes the extraordinary statesman did not realize. Fascination with the eccentric middle-class Jew whose genius and invincible drive placed him in the pantheon of English immortals remains unabated by time; four respectable biographies have appeared in the U.S. since 2006 alone. “But to appreciate the significance of his achievement,” writes Adam Kirsch, the latest in this line, “it is necessary to understand Disraeli’s life as a Jewish story.” Kirsch was the gifted book critic of the late lamented *New York Sun*, and has written with force and perspicuity on an impressive range on topics, from the Second World War to Shelley and Keats. This versatility serves him well; a political turn and discriminating poetic eye assist any biographer of this most eminent Victorian. Did ever a man appear more riddled with contradiction than Benjamin Disraeli?

Disraeli was an English Jew at a time when being English *and* Jewish was inconceivable; he was flamboyant in an age of formality; illiberal in an age of liberalism; an advocate of spiritualism during the ascent of utilitarianism, socialism, and materialism; a self-declared Tory Radical; the champion of a conservative party founded in birth and property, of which he had neither. And this was just the first half of his career. Kirsch’s argument is that “Disraeli’s Jewishness was both the greatest obstacle to his ambition and its greatest engine. It inspired his most original ideas about politics and history, while insuring that his very originality made him a perpetual outsider in the country he rose to lead.” He reviews the life of this “enduringly provocative figure” in good part by examining many of his thirteen novels, which are generally autobiography draped in silk.

Disraeli was born in London in 1804 to Isaac D’Israeli, the man of letters whose *Curiosities of Literature* was praised by Byron. Benjamin’s grandfather had immigrated from Italy in 1748, though the family probably originated in the Middle East. (“Israeli” was a common surname of Jews in Arab lands.) In 1817, after a dispute with his synagogue, Isaac had Benjamin and his two siblings baptized in the Church of England. Disraeli’s formal education ended at age fifteen; thereafter the precocious boy steeped himself in history and poetry. In 1821 he apprenticed as an attorney but left after three years for travel and letters. His debut novel, *Vivian Grey* (1826), made him a public figure at twenty-one, though it was savaged by critics. Over the next few years his only success was in amassing a spectacular debt. He was defeated in a bid for Parliament in June 1832—and lost three more times in as many years, until July 1837, when he entered the House of Commons as a member from Maidstone.

His dramatic rise from back to front bench was so improbable, writes Kirsch, that it seemed like

“something only magic could explain.” Contemporaries thought so. One described the

potent wizard himself, [who] with his olive complexion and coal-black eyes, and the mighty dome of his forehead (no Christian temple, be sure), is unlike any living creature one has met. . . . The face is more like a mask than ever, and the division between him and mere mortals more marked. I would as soon have thought of sitting down at table with Hamlet, or Lear, or the Wandering Jew.

The young Disraeli flaunted lacquered curls, wore gold rings over white gloves, and showcased himself in green velvet trousers and pirate-like girdles brimming with pistols and daggers. This ultradandyism, says Kirsch, let him feel that “his extraordinariness was a matter of choice, and therefore a kind of virtue, rather than a matter of birth, and therefore a curse.”

The curse was being born Jewish. It was the “central fact about him,” says Kirsch, the reason he met suspicion and resistance at every turn in his long career. Mostly it was snobbery, with Jews seen as lowly, or xenophobia, with Jews as aliens. It began with childhood fistfights. During his 1841 campaign hecklers waved pork in his face; one arrived on a donkey shouting “I come here to take you back to Jerusalem.” Gladstone could attribute Disraelian policy to “crypto-Judaism.” In 1868 he became prime minister for the first time, having served in Parliament for thirty years and as a party leader for twenty, yet Lady Palmerston still snorted, “We are all dreadfully disgusted at the prospect of having a Jew for our Prime Minister.” He had learned decades earlier to steel himself against it. His response was rarely more than a sally of sarcasm.

But woe betide the recipient. Disraeli was a weapon. In an age when three-hour orations were common and where the public devoured reports of speeches on the front pages of newspapers, he towered above all. *Fraser’s Magazine* described his inimitable style:

he seems so careless, supercilious, indifferent to the trouble of pleasing . . . his words are not so much delivered as that they flow from the mouth, as if it were really too much trouble for so clever, so intellectual—in a word, so literary a man to speak at all. . . . 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.

His verbal brilliance, allied to originality and defiant courage, shone characteristically during the controversy over Jewish disabilities. Under William III (1689–1702) an oath had been imposed on MPs requiring them to deny allegiance to the deposed Stuarts by swearing “upon the true faith of a Christian.” In the 1820s and ’30s, England’s Jewish community, numbering 28,000, had agitated for its removal, but only in 1847, when Lionel de Rothschild became the first practicing Jew to be elected, did the problem become practical. Gladstone argued pragmatically: a few Jews would hardly “paralyse and nullify the Christianity of all those who sit there.” Macaulay spoke for natural rights: “Why a man should be less fit to exercise . . . power because he wears a beard, because he does not eat ham, because he goes to the synagogue on Saturdays instead of going to the church on Sundays, we cannot conceive.” But Disraeli’s great mind, as usual, poured its thought into a different vessel. His case was theological:

The very reason for admitting the Jews is because they can show so near an affinity to you. Where is your Christianity if you do not believe in their Judaism? . . . The Christian religion was first preached by men who had been Jews until they were converted; every man in the early ages of the Church by whose power, or zeal, or genius, the Christian faith was propagated, was a Jew. . . . I will not take upon me the awful responsibility of excluding from the legislature those who are of the religion in the bosom of which my

Lord and Saviour was born.

It was a “rhetorical masterpiece,” says Kirsch—Christianity recast into an expression of Jewish pride. (Still, Rothschild was not allowed to take his seat until 1858.) But it was not merely rhetoric: it was “psychologically necessary” for a Jew seeking to lead a Christian nation. When Disraeli spoke of “our religion” in speeches, he meant Protestantism; when he spoke of “my race,” he meant the Jews. “I am the blank page between the Old Testament and the New,” he wrote. By considering Jewishness a matter of race Disraeli could remain part of his ancient people; and to claim descent from Sephardic nobility, as he did, unfactually, was to assert a magnificent lineage that antedated the Norman barons who landed in 1066. This racial pride made sense in defending against an anti-Semitism grounded in social contempt. But when myths about Jewish race and power were wedded to pseudoscience and conspiricism, a lethal danger emerged. In *Lothair* (1870), Disraeli has an acolyte of Gobineau insist that “Aryan races” must be “extricated from Semitism.” Disraeli saw this as a fading relic of medieval ignorance. Even one of the most farsighted of men could not imagine what would happen to his people.

He did however anticipate the other great event in modern Jewish history. Kirsch argues that the *Wondrous Tale of Alroy* (1833) constitutes the first expression in modern literature of Zionism. It was published sixty-three years before Theodor Herzl’s *Jewish State*, yet conceives the enterprise in similar terms. Kirsch wonders what might have happened had a prime minister intimate with the kings and ministers of Europe determined to help restore Jews to their ancestral homeland.

He believed in the chosen people, but also that he was more chosen than others. In *Contarini Fleming* (1832), a character speaking for Disraeli owns to a “deep conviction that life must be intolerable unless I were the greatest of men.” He polished himself into a man of serene confidence, of calibrated idiosyncrasy, of dignity, patience, and fearsome ambition, perfecting an outward nonchalance and inner alertness. Eventually he became the cool, ironic Sphinx described above—proud, sovereign, mystical, dazzling, fearless. Years earlier, in 1833, already having lost two elections in six months, Disraeli listened to speeches from the gallery of the Commons and afterwards wrote his sister: “Between ourselves, I could floor them all. . . . The time will come.” This of course foretold the legendary line that closed his maiden speech in 1837. Hissed, jeered, laughed at, and drowned out by hostile MPs, Disraeli at last shouted above the fray in an “almost savage” voice: “I will sit down now, but the time will come when you will hear me.”

Kirsch’s prose is crisp and unadorned. He recounts the sweep of events—the Reform Bill of 1832, the defeat of Peel over the Corn Laws in the 1840s, the fight over Jewish rights in the 1850s, the Second Reform Bill of 1867, the acrimony between Turcophile and Russophile factions in the 1870s—with admirable clarity and concision. And what could be more refreshing than a book on complex political thought that never once uses the loathsome Napoleonic loanword “ideology”? Kirsch hasn’t the space for the extensive (and always delightful) Disraeli quotation of longer biographies, yet his analysis of the novels in unraveling the author’s mind is superior to that of Robert Blake’s *Disraeli* (1966), recognized as the standard one-volume life.

In 1874 Disraeli again became prime minister. He was sixty-nine, in poor health and worse spirits, lonely and widowed after a long, happy marriage. Yet the 1860s and 1870s saw him act on his conservatism, a half-romantic benevolent feudalism that conceived it Tory duty to relieve the condition of the poor and attend to the dislocations of the industrial revolution. His social welfare reforms made it legal for trade unions to strike, established standards of food safety and purity, and limited the working hours of women and children. According to a Labour MP of the period, the Conservatives did more for the lower classes in five years than the Liberals did in fifty. Disraeli was no democrat—he once proposed an extra vote for men of income and education—yet his Reform Act of 1867 enfranchised a million Englishmen in a nation of 21 million. Gertrude Himmelfarb called it the act that “transformed England into a democracy.” (This is a rare instance in which

Kirsch cites a non-Victorian.) In April 1880 the Conservatives were defeated and Disraeli, created Earl of Beaconsfield in 1876, left office. He had served for nearly forty years. The “foreign” upstart of 1837 withdrew a fixture and a legend, already considered one of the greatest Parliamentarians who ever lived. “All the real chivalry and delight of party politics seem to have departed,” said one MP. In September he completed his final novel, *Endymion*, and died that April.

Kirsch is sympathetic. Disraeli is portrayed as a bit calculating here, somewhat reckless there, visionary throughout, but Kirsch takes Disraeli’s side in disputes. At times Disraeli rises to become a Jewish hero. And still the book maintains a reserve, an unwillingness to become a panegyric. One can regret that Kirsch did not apply his limpid thought more directly to the question of Disraeli’s enduring renown as a modern statesman. He never led his nation through a mortal war, like Lincoln or Churchill. He did not redraw Europe, like Napoleon or Bismarck. Nor does he represent principles of much consequence today; his speeches are unanthologized and his books unread. Kirsch accepts Disraeli’s own view that he was less a politician than (in Kirsch’s words) a “man of imagination.” Imagination is a term Kirsch uses again and again; it seems to express everything about Disraeli that remains inscrutable, inexplicable, impossible, which is a great deal: “his political career, in fact, could be considered a greater imaginative achievement than any of his books.” But ultimately it was Disraeli’s “imagination of Jewishness,” the theme on which Kirsch begins and ends, that

gave him the confidence to compete with the best-born men in England; it gave him the dignity he sustained through the most wounding attacks; it licensed him to see his passage through the world as a noble adventure. Finally he could say, like Myra at the end of *Endymion*, “All I have desired, all I have dreamed, have come to pass.”

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