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**Political Narratives and the Transformation of the State in the Novels of
Benjamin Disraeli**

In modern-day democracies, politicians are systematically turned into protagonists of narratives. Stories are being circulated about their character, their background, and their goals: positive narratives penned by PR and communications departments are supplemented by critical stories circulated by rival parties or the mass media. Seen from this perspective, we can identify a potential function of literature for the ‘transformations of the state’: having evolved, since the Romantic period, into a highly reflexive medium, literature – I will argue – can generate ‘second-order observations’ on these political narratives. It can imbue narratives with mythical power, create new genres of political narratives or reflect upon existing patterns in an ironic or satirical manner. Benedict Anderson’s theory of ‘imagined communities’ fails to comment on this link between the poetics of the novel and national politics: in Anderson’s view, novels seem to be media squarely in the service of nationalism, but what remains to be analysed is the novel’s potential to *reflect on* political conflicts. The question is no longer whether literature takes a primarily affirmative or critical view of political authorities, but: in what genre, in what tone do we tell stories about politics?

The novels of Benjamin Disraeli, British prime minister from 1874 until 1880, may serve as an interesting case study for looking at this question. His best-known novels – *Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil* (1845), and *Tancred* (1847) – in the words of his biographer Adam Kirsch, “each deals with the education of a young, well-meaning nobleman, whose high ideals come into conflict with the cynicism and

impotence of English politics.”¹ In *Coningsby*, Harry Coningsby, the hero of the novel that bears his name, undergoes a sort of initiation into political thought in his conversation with a mysterious stranger who later turns out to be the wealthy Jewish financier Sidonia. The stranger enlightens Coningsby as to the necessity of a political ‘guide’:

“But are these times for great legislators and great conquerors?’ urged Coningsby. / ‘When were they wanted more?’ asked the stranger. ‘From the throne to the hovel all call for a guide. You give monarchs constitutions to teach them sovereignty, and nations Sunday-schools to inspire them with faith.’ / ‘But what is an individual,’ exclaimed Coningsby, ‘against a vast public opinion?’ / ‘Divine,’ said the stranger. ‘God made man in His own image; but the Public is made by Newspapers, Members of Parliament, Excise Officers, Poor Law Guardians.’²

The historical background of this discourse about political ‘guides’ is the Reform Act of 1832, an electoral reform that increased the British electorate by about three hundred thousand voters. The significance of this reform, however, lies not so much in the actual shifting of political weight; rather, it was a step towards disempowering the aristocracy and increasing the political participation of the poorer (primarily urban) populace.³ In Disraeli’s novel, the question of the appropriate representation of the people – which had initiated this step towards democratisation – appears as an open problem:

“On one hand it was maintained, that, under the old system, the people were virtually represented; while, on the other, it was triumphantly urged, that if the principle be conceded, the people should not be virtually, but

¹ Adam Kirsch, *Dandy, Poet, Staatsmann. Die vielen Leben des Benjamin Disraeli*, übers. von Katharina Förts und Bernhard Jendricke, Berlin 2011, p. 125.

² Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby or the new Generation* [1844], new Edition, London [o.J.], p. 118.

³ Cf. Kirsch, *Dandy, Poet, Staatsmann*, S. 81f.

actually, represented. But who are the people? And where are you to draw a line?”⁴

At issue, to put it differently, is thus the difference between a qualitative and a quantitative interpretation of representation:⁵ Should the country’s elite define the will of the people or should the electoral law grant each citizen the same rights, including the uneducated (male) ‘hovel’ dweller? The quantitative definition of representation, which, in its idea, encompasses the *entire* people (though women were included in this definition only some time later), was born in France in the eighteenth century and was thus, in Disraeli’s time, associated by Great Britain’s conservative circles with the danger of revolution and mob rule.⁶ Most important, however, a quantitative notion of representation cannot disguise the fundamental divisions that exist within society; on the contrary, it can only emphasize those divisions. As the reader of Disraeli’s novel *Sybil* learns, there is not one, but two English nations:

“Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws. [...] THE RICH AND THE POOR.”

In *Coningsby*, Disraeli’s protagonist Sidonia stands for the conservative rejection of a quantitative notion of representation. While the above-mentioned ‘guide’ also represents the entire people (‘from the throne to the hovel’), his arrival, desired by

⁴ Cf. Disraeli, *Coningsby or the new Generation*, p. 36.

⁵ Cf. Paul Friedland, *Political Actors. Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution*, Ithaca, London 2003, p. 36.

⁶ Cf. Disraeli, *Coningsby or the new Generation*, p. 37: »In treating the House of the Third Estate as the House of the People, and not as the House of a privileged class, the Ministry and Parliament of 1831 virtually conceded the principle of Universal Suffrage. In this point of view the ten-pound franchise was an arbitrary, irrational, and impolitic qualification. It had, indeed, the merit of simplicity, and so had the constitutions of Abbé Siéyès.«

Sidonia, does not not occur as a result of an election but of divine sending, which accords the ‘guide’ immediate authority. This argumentation shows Sidonia to have read Thomas Carlyle’s treatise on heroes and hero-worship. The ‘heroic’ political leader, wrote Carlyle in 1841, can claim “a divine right over me”⁷ – and thus save the nation from the revolutionary egalitarianism of the modern age: “While man is man, some Cromwell or Napoleon is the necessary finish of a Sansculottism.”⁸

The encounter between Coningsby and Sidonia thus stages a key political conflict in mid-nineteenth century Great Britain. This does not, however, fully explain the importance of this scene for Disraeli’s novel. The scene provides a dramatic highlight of the plot by planting in Coningsby, the main protagonist, the idea of embarking on a political career: After his encounter with the stranger, Coningsby’s ‘fancy’ is filled with very British visions of political power: of “statesmen giving up cricket to govern nations, beardless Jesuits plunged in profound abstraction in omnipotent cabinets.”⁹ Disraeli’s novel does not leave it at that, but continues with a reflection on the life-changing power of the word:

“There are some books, when we close them; one or two in the course of life, difficult as it may to analyse or ascertain the cause; our minds seem to have made a great leap. [...] What is this magic? It is the spirit of the supreme author, by a magnetic influence blending with our sympathising intelligence, that directs and inspires it. [...] All of us encounter, at least once in our life, some individual who utters words that make us think for ever. [...] A great thing is a great book; but greater than all is the talk of a great man.”¹⁰

⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* [1841], London, New York, Toronto 1950, p. 261.

⁸ Ibid., p. 267.

⁹ Disraeli, *Coningsby or the new Generation*, p. 122.

¹⁰ Ibid.

This reflection connects the external plot – the meeting between Coningsby and the ‘stranger’ – with the “inner history”¹¹ of the protagonist – to use a term from Christian Friedrich von Blanckenburgs 1774 *Essay on the Novel* – and thus explicitly places Disraeli’s novel in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*.¹² The conversation appears to be the turning-point at which Coningsby decides to ‘educate’ himself. To make clear the connection between the novel’s plot and the protagonist’s inner development, the passage develops a metaphysics of the word: Every ‘great leap’ of the mind requires a stimulus, which can come from great books, but, even better and stronger, from the ‘talk of a great man,’ the spoken words of a great man, whose magnetic influence appears to know no bounds.

When read in connection with Sidonia’s speech, it becomes obvious that Disraeli here establishes a clear hierarchy of different media (for example, of newspapers versus books) and their political tendencies. In his conversation with the stranger, Coningsby gives the reason why it is not an auspicious time for ‘great legislators and great conquerors’: What rules is ‘public opinion,’ which consists of an amalgam of different voices: Newspapers, members of parliament, excise officials, and – strangely enough – poor law guardians are all part of this public, so Sidonia’s harsh judgment – that public opinion is a purely human product and shows no divine traits – comes as little surprise. Through Sidonia, Coningsby gets to know the power of the spoken word (‘talk of a great man’) and of the written word (‘a great book’), which is juxtaposed to public opinion: While the latter is only a representation of the former, the ‘great book’ gives voice to the ‘spirit’ of the ‘supreme author’ and – in accordance with the creation theology model of the *pneuma* – inspires the reader. Authorship and authority are inextricably linked: listening to the voice of a ‘great man’ corresponds with a belief in the need for political guidance by such great men. Coningsby’s encounter with the ‘stranger’ thus opens up to the young aristocrat not only a new perspective on politics, but also an appreciation of the power of words, more specifically of literature. Disraeli’s novel thus does more than illustrate the political problems of its time: it

¹¹ [Christian Friedrich von Blanckenburg,] *Versuch über den Roman*, Leipzig, Liegnitz 1774, p. 146.

¹² Cf. Rüdiger Campe, »Form and Life in the Theory of the Novel«, in: *Constellations* 18/1 (2011), pp. 53–66: 56.

also tells a myth of literary power. Only a politician inspired by literature can become a *real* leader wise enough to overcome the country's division into two hostile nations. The possibility of bringing about a healthy transformation of the state is accorded to a politician who must also be a man of letters.

In Disraeli's novels, the literary power of the word takes at least equal place with the political power of action. *Coningsby* describes not only a fictional politician's life, but also a vision of powerful authorship. For this reason, Disraeli was able to forego a heroic representation of Coningsby. Towards the end of the novel, the reader takes leave of Coningsby, who is blessed with all the gifts and talents of a charismatic politician, with a series of open questions:

“Coningsby passed his next Christmas in his own hall, with his beautiful and gifted wife by his side, and surrounded by the friends of his heart and his youth. [...] What will be their fate? [...] Will their skilled intelligence subside into being the adroit tool of a corrupt party? [...] Or will they remain brave, single, and true; refuse to bow before shadows and worship phrases; sensible of the greatness of their position, recognise the greatness of their duties [...] and restore the happiness of their country by believing in their own energies, and daring to be great?”¹³

Translated by Manuela Thurner.

¹³ Disraeli, *Coningsby or the new Generation*, p. 477.