ROMANCING THE WRIT: THE MEDIEVAL "HOCUS-POCUS" OF BENJAMIN DISRAELI'S *SYBIL*

Kenneth Rowley

> "But, say what you like, our Queen reigns over the greatest nation that ever existed."
> "Which nation?' asked the younger stranger, "for she reigns over two."
> "THE RICH AND THE POOR." (76-77)

Considerations of the work of Benjamin Disraeli, and its implications for history, frequently have their genesis in this quotation from *Sybil: or The Two Nations* alluding to the gulf between the rich and the poor in Victoria's England. The putative historicity and political pithiness of the epigram often result in its being the sole focus in critiques of Disraeli's novel. Rather than simply pursue Disraeli's romantic, High-Tory attempt to create "One Nation," this article will concentrate on the manner in which the political solutions implicit in the novel fragment into a multitude of meanings by focusing on a single element of Disraeli's text: the "Writ of Right."[1]

In *Sybil*, a novel loosely cast in the tradition of the historical romances of Sir Walter Scott, Disraeli takes the characters of the Gerards, heirs to nobility but for a long time dispossessed, and creates out of them emblems of the natural and rightful aristocracy. Sybil Gerard, who believes the struggle to regain their rights is possible only through divine intervention, is cast as a religious (often sanctimonious[2]) figure and is even referred to as "The Religious." The Gerards' story constitutes, in Franco Moretti's words, another narrative of the "proper Ur-Novel of origins lost and rights restored" (207). Yet what remains most uncomfortable in Disraeli's narrative is the reliance on

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[1] The "Writ of Right" has its origins in twelfth-century England when inheritance became subject to the rules of the judiciary. The law began to recognise ownership and that the "right" to possession was an abstract legal concept which transcended, and could be invoked to displace, actual possession. At the time of Henry II's reign (1154-1189), Writs of Right replaced trial by combat and established a judicial solution by which the Grand Assize determined a claimant's "right" to "title." The Writ was used to initiate an action to recover lands unjustly withheld from the demandant. In the thirteenth century a new range of Writs developed called Writs of Entry; they attempted to place inquiry on a historical and factual footing. The Writ of Right fell into disuse at this time. Interestingly many of these Writs remained on the statute books and were only finally abolished by the Real Property Limitation Act, 1833 (the main plot action of *Sybil* takes place after this date) and the Real Property Act, 1845 (the year of *Sybil*'s publication). See Baker 201, Milsom 103-15, and Harding 44-47.

[2] Michael McCully presents one of the few arguments in print for the role of Sybil being considered the central focus of the novel (318), and whilst ably argued I must say I am more sympathetic to Thom Braun's notion of Sybil as a "do-gooder heroine" or "faceless seraph" who "smacks of self-righteousness" (108-09). Constance D. Harsh also sees Sybil as the author of Charles's future and as the instigator of a solution to the nation's ills (102-03).

documentation, because it seems that Disraeli's slight knowledge of the law has led him to predicate his narrative on false grounds.

A summary of the history of the Gerard claim would be useful here. At the time of his death Walter Gerard's father was employing Baptist Hatton as an agent to pursue the Gerard claim to inheritance. Hatton manages to gain possession of the "Writ of Right," a document that supposedly details the legitimacy of a centuries-old claim to the noble title, the lands and the castle of Mowbray. This document also provides the means of proving the incumbent Lord Mowbray's claim to the title of Baron through the female line. Hatton, realising the value of this document, acquires it by stealth and sells it to Lord Mowbray who seals the Writ away in a chest in the muniment room of Mowbray Castle. In the years following Gerard's friend, the radical Stephen Morley, motivated by his zealous love for Sybil, traces the whereabouts of the mysterious Hatton and finally —if fortuitously—locates him. Hatton, swayed to a sense of remorse by Sybil's beauty and grace, entreats Morley to steal the document by inciting a riot or by an act of burglary. Providence in the form of an insurrection at Mowbray Castle offers Morley his chance and he steals the Writ, thus making certain of Sybil's inheritance.

Disraeli has effectively constructed, to use the words of his hero, a "fallacious medium" (123). It is doubly fallacious in the sense that ideology is then subjected to serving the demands of the narrative construct, and in this case, it is used to draw a picture of an idealised feudal past.[3] It seems that in order to dress his narrative in the finery of feudalism, which was itself an "historiographical image"—an anachronism imposed upon medieval history from another century (Baker 194-96)—Disraeli resorts to indulging in legal "hocus-pocus" (307).

Early in the novel, in a passage that has received the greatest critical attention in the whole of Disraeli's *oeuvre*, we find Charles Egremont wandering in a Wordsworthian solitude about the grounds of the ruined Marney Abbey where he meets two strangers, Stephen Morley and Walter Gerard. The three fall into conversation and, having discussed the socio-economic problems of the nation, they share a moment of religious intensity that is suffused not only with a flood of light but with the eerie spirituality of Sybil's song. It is a moment that irretrievably binds their fates together.

Egremont now shares his quest with characters who, despite ideological differences, enable him to reach his goal. By ultimately assuming Gerard's position,

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[3] In his one major constitutional treatise, *The Vindication of English Constitution* (1835), Disraeli outlined a paternalistic, quasi-feudal solution to the nation's ills which owed much to Edmund Burke and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Not surprisingly, in the nineteenth century when industrialisation was at its height and perhaps as a reaction to materialism, there was a burgeoning interest in romantic constitutional solutions. This is illustrated perfectly by Disraeli's High Tory political philosophy; it is, I suggest, pure romance. In the opening pages of *Vindication* Disraeli wrote that the "English Constitution was universally recognised as an august and admirable fabric, and counted among the choicest inventions of public intellect on record." However, he did not simply regard the *Vindication* as a history of England's constitutional matters; on the contrary, by seeking to "vindicate" the political processes he offers a template for his own conservatism. Some months later in *The Spirit of Whiggism* (1836), Disraeli anonymously presented a summarised version of these matters free from the excesses of style of its predecessor; an act which suggests in some measure how important he considered the original document.

Egremont is granted a righteousness of cause and a link to a history that legitimates his struggle, while Morley provides the necessary political activism that neither Disraeli nor his plots can do without, deny it as he may. Egremont's task is to forge a union between these elements, and it is a union that can be explored through the Writ of Right.

The textual dialectics are brought into focus at this moment of religious intensity: the three characters participate in a complicated relationship to time, one that means continuity is impossible unless primacy is given to a new relationship which encompasses all the disparate historical and political urges of the text. Of the three men, Gerard has only the past upon which to dwell and depend; a future appears denied him. For example, when Egremont asserts that Gerard pleads the cause of the Abbots with feeling, Gerard replies: "It is my own" (72). Morley, on the other hand, wilfully severs himself from the past and links his fortune with the future; indeed, Sybil says of him: "But then Stephen does not want to recall the past . . . he wishes to create the future" (194). Egremont is the man of the present, that is, as a nascent political entity he has neither a past nor, as yet, a future; he is the open ground upon which a dialectical struggle will occur.

Gerard, Egremont and Morley all have a special relationship to the Writ. Gerard, whose ancestor and namesake was once the lay Abbot of Marney, bemoans the passing of the monasteries. He is established as a true yeoman figure, powerfully built, stern and simple of manner, with regular and handsome features. The pre-lapsarian world of Gerard's imagination is a confusion of a quasi-socialist questioning of the notion of land-ownership and admiration of the church as landlords. Gerard's appeal is sheer artifice on Disraeli's part because it merely calls upon another reading of history, one that denigrates the role of the Whiggish aristocracy in favour of a selected feudal alternative. Indeed, Gerard's main interest in the old faith lies neither in its evangelical offering, nor in its spiritual and intellectual life, but in its relationship to the economic system of the country. Gerard refers constantly to the monastics as "proprietor," "landlord," "mortgagee," "master" and "guardian." Gerard's analysis of the role of the Church concentrates almost exclusively on economics, particularly tenure and the rights to property. The central and compounding paradox of Gerard's rhetoric is found in his desire to fall back on the language of "olde England" when he declares that "there were yeomen then, sir: the country was not divided into two classes, masters and slaves." The emotive resonance of the "yeoman" is just the sort of romanticism that Disraeli loved.[4] Bound up in Gerard's faith in the Monastics is his belief that the Writ of Right places him in a direct line of inheritance from the former Abbot Gerard. For Gerard, the Writ represents the continuity of a specific historical discourse backed by feudal judiciary. It is this historical heritage which Charles must appropriate. This, however, requires action—hence Charles's need for the man of the future, Stephen Morley.

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[4] The word "yeoman" has a central contradiction that brings an especial irony to Disraeli's argument. Yeoman may well mean "a man owning and cultivating a small estate, a freeholder under the rank of gentleman," but it also means "a servant or attendant." Yeoman is clearly a position within a hierarchical structure: in fact, the *OED* offers a quotation which firmly places the yeoman in a hierarchy: "which worde now signifieth among us a man well at ease and having honestlie to live and yet not a gentleman."

Morley, the Chartist and journalist, may have an intellectual brow but he is balding and scarred by smallpox. Sadly, in the pursuit of Sybil's affections he is poor competition for our aristocratic hero. Jealous, dishonest and duplicitous he uses his relationship with Gerard for more than political ends and even attempts to murder Egremont and blackmail Sybil. And as if that were not enough, even Sybil's aristocratic Saxon bloodhound, Harold, growls in his presence. Yet despite all, Disraeli is preparing to appropriate Morley's actions and achievements as a means to effecting a solution to both his narrative and political problems. Without Morley, also a contender for Sybil's affections, Egremont would be little more than an ineffectual social anthropologist, a visitor to the working world with no means at his disposal to unlock the past. It is only through the political action of Morley that Egremont realise his hopes.

Morley's suit is characterised by his reckless disregard for conventional morality: he dedicates his life to Sybil's father in hopes of winning Sybil; he attacks Egremont when he sees the threat arise; he surrenders his principles to regain the Gerard inheritance; and ultimately he dies for Sybil, but not before securing the means to resolve her inheritance and in doing so bringing the plot into resolution. Morley is central to the operation of the Writ. It is his detective work and good fortune which lead to the uncovering of the Writ. He is also responsible for carrying out the physical assault on Mowbray Castle and securing the documents. As seeker and restorer of the Gerard fortune, Morley usurps Charles Egremont's heroic role and in doing so relocates power into the "desired" historical discourse. His role involves textual contradictions because he is directly involved in manipulating archetypal symbols which exhibit a high level of ambiguity. When he casts out the box containing the Writ from the tower, he is not merely throwing out the old order as an act of wanton anarchy, he is also ironically facilitating the action of the Writ by restoring an order previously dispossessed. Indeed, as Gary Handwerk has noted, Morley is "the agent of Sybil's restoration" and "almost alone, he is responsible for the political promise of the end of the novel" (338).

Morley suffers the defeat nobly, and in the words he puts into Morley's mouth Disraeli unconsciously reveals his own sense of discomfort: "Why I am here is a mystery; let it remain so. The world will misjudge me; the man of peace they will say was a hypocrite. The world will be wrong, as it always is. Death is bitter . . . more bitter from you; but just. . . . Your star has controlled mine; and now I feel I have sacrificed life and fame . . . for your profit and honour (482). Egremont confronts Morley for the last time in this scene, a scene in which Morley steals Egremont's heroic position because he insists on retaining the mystery for his motives, but acknowledges that his own great sacrifice of "life and fame" are all for Egremont's "profit and honour." Morley's mistake, he suggests, is not to have realised the extent to which he was controlled by other events; that is, Morley's star was controlled by Egremont's. There is no place in the universe Disraeli presents here for the political theorist, the statistician or the ideologue. Morley's position could never have triumphed; all his effort was for nought since fate and the unforeseen controlled and guided his progress.

When Morley physically penetrates the castle's stronghold—the bastion of a system of domination and suppression—he finds the essence of the feudal system: the

Writ. Furthermore, the document in the box, while quite insubstantial physically, represents the means to vindicate the system. Power, rather than being based upon might, is apparently based upon a quasi-legal scrap of documentation which Morley is simply responsible for transferring from the hands of Lord Mowbray to those of Sybil. Instead of changing the system, he has merely facilitated its operation, thus proving that his star was truly controlled by Egremont's who will now take up the reins of power thanks to Morley's action. At the centre of *Sybil* lies the interweaving of the two quests coupled with the competition of the two men. In pursuing their respective goals in parallel, Disraeli is able to appropriate the successes of Morley, which were sometimes achieved underhandedly and deviously, as a means to assure the success of his rival Egremont. In doing so Egremont remains unsullied and Morley is damned to the final conflagration. In short, Disraeli exploits Morley to serve and to protect Egremont's political and amatory quests.

However, it is the irony of the first exchange between Egremont and Morley that highlights the almost-tragic flaw: Morley's disregard for history: "There is so much to lament in the world in which we live," said the younger of the strangers, "that I can spare no pangs for the past" (75). The dramatic irony of Morley's words reveals Disraeli at his best, because it is Morley who seeks to uncover Sybil's past, and it is Morley who locates and liberates the past in the form of the legal documents. From this point in the narrative Morley ceases to develop as a political individual; his Chartism and radicalism become subservient to his pursuit of Sybil.

Egremont's uneasy position in this romance is cut adrift from political realities by the final separation of the two quests. Morley's acceptance of anarchy as political tactic separates him from the romantic Tory philosophy of Egremont, yet both politically and narratively his actions are necessary for Egremont's success. Morley's active role is an integral part of the narrative, directed more often towards conflict with Egremont than towards the specific aims of his philosophy. Ultimately Disraeli has attributed the use of force to Morley and as soon as it has achieved both its necessary political and narrative ends, he seeks to distance himself from such tactics. Quite simply, Morley must die for Disraeli's polity. The deaths of Gerard and Morley enable Egremont, through his marriage to Sybil, to inherit Gerard's noble history; but this happy ending is the fruit of Morley's anarchy. In both cases the Writ is central.

Thus the narrative of the Writ raises genuine questions about the relationship between the right to title which Walter Gerard seeks, and the property itself. While the Writ seems to be used by Gerard as a means to validate the historicity of his own heritage, it is paradoxical that the main symbol of that inheritance is Mowbray Castle. The Writ is responsible for opening up the text's central irony. Mowbray is a pretentious Gothic folly, as shallow in its historical authenticity as the present incumbents of the house and the title are in theirs. "The great estate of the late Lord Fitz-Warene was situate at Mowbray, a village which principally belonged to him, and near which he had raised a Gothic castle, worthy of his Norman name and ancestry; . . . his coat of arms was emblazoned on every window, embroidered on every chair, carved in every corner" (92).

The relationship between setting and the political intent of *Sybil* is important: Mowbray Castle must be apprehended as one of the central symbols of Disraeli's political structure as he works towards the castle's destruction. Clearly the castle's position as the scene of the dramatic closure of the plot, providing as it does the setting for the very moment of Charles and Sybil's union, is important; however, the castle's sacking enacts the symbolic destruction of the Whig order and consequently involves the castle in the ideological struggles of the novel. The castle is a political space in which plot and polemics meet because it represents an obstacle both to an idealised political solution to the nation's woes and to Charles's amatory quest. The phoenix symbolism is doubtless intentional, as a new England—symbolised by the union of Charles and Sybil—rises from the ashes of the old. The history of the struggle for Mowbray, like the novel as a whole, points to significant distinctions between the historical preoccupations of the author and social and political realities.

The curiosity is that with the fall of the House of Mowbray, both symbolically in the castle's fire and legally in the face of a documented challenge, Sybil still finds herself condemned to rely upon an external object—the Writ—in order to substantiate her position. The spirituality of her sacred mission has been replaced, even usurped, by a scrap of paper which is also ironically emblematic of the system she supposedly seeks to overturn, and which nineteenth-century parliamentary acts have already overturned. Property ownership and documentation aided by violence seem to be the necessary conditions for the entrance of spirituality and grace, although ideally or even philosophically the divine should replace the old system by its presence alone. Even if we read the Writ itself as being a survival from a pre-Reformation aristocracy and its processes (therefore seemingly legitimating Sybil's rights), then the Writ is still problematic because it has been corrupted by the present century: both Morley and Hatton taint its operation. Furthermore, in order to establish their rule at the end of the book, Charles and Sybil still rely on the full weight of the forces at the call of Parliament: the yeomanry and the county regiments who suppress the insurrection. I can only concur with both Gary Handwerk (332) and Catherine Gallagher (215) when they assert that the ultimate irony consists in the fact that Morley's insurrection directly results in the return to power of the Gerards. However, I would go further than either critic and suggest that the rule of the new oligarchy can only be made safe by the wholesale use of force and violence, which Disraeli achieves in a grand insurrectional blood-letting at the novel's end, and through legitimation by the judiciary symbolised in the Writ.

It seems that the grounds for position and authority have shifted away from some divine, transcendental source producing a natural order and hierarchy to a system of horse trading in paper documents wielded by Machiavellian bureaucrats like Hatton, and morally corrupted radicals like Morley.[5] Thus, despite her religiosity, Sybil's status is

[5] Gary Handwerk's argument, which focuses on Morley and Hatton, attempts to substantiate his "claim that the text's underlying theme, is that politics revolves around persons rather than principles" (322). While I agree with his analysis of the centrality of Morley and Hatton, I wish to challenge his notion of "persons" above "principles" by arguing that the Writ is central to the narrative.

questionable purely because any external spiritual authority is ultimately underwritten by the Writ's recent history. In consequence the Writ becomes a performative text which proves that right of title and lineage are central to buttressing the aristocratic order and in which the transcendental has no place. Finally we ask, what is it that guarantees or underwrites the value of these documents? The answer is simple: possession. Possession of the document seemingly gives right of title; however, possession of Mowbray is only secured by force of arms. And it is in the ephemerality of the paper that the central weakness of Sybil's inheritance lies. It is a fundamental contradiction in Disraeli's narrative that the same writ underwrites both Sybil's claim and Mowbray's title. That is, the Writ has become a mediator between "possession and dispossession,"[6] between dissolute aristocracy and true nobility, and ultimately between the union of Charles's political will and Sybil's spiritual idealism.

It is curious that the restoration of the Gerards should be haunted by political intrigue, bureaucratic dissembling, riot, force of arms and death. In addition, the narrative resolution reveals the utter impossibility of spiritual regeneration without the Writ. However, returning to the possible transcendental nature of history, we could ask rhetorically: what is history if not, indeed, this very piece of paper? Has not History conferred power and authority to the paper in the same way it confers nobility? It could be argued that few writers owe their literary reputation to a single phrase extracted from one of their novels to quite the same extent as does Disraeli to his concept of the "two nations." However, in opening this discussion I suggested that Disraeli's text intimates something about history as a "fallacious medium."

As the novel closes Sybil, trapped at Mowbray Castle during the uprising, finds her escape cut off in the confusion; just when all seems lost Charles arrives wielding his sabre. This monumental dramatic set-piece—the sacking of the castle and the rescue of the would-be Saxon princess—represents a popular romantic trope.[7] However, every detail used by Disraeli is being consciously tied to his personal romantic Tory philosophy: the pseudo-Norman aristocracy and rebellious rabble all perish either literally or symbolically in the conflagration at that very moment and as a direct result of the attack Charles Egremont and Sybil Gerard are united. Gone are both the dissolute lords and the angry mob, replaced by a politically sympathetic aristocrat and the spiritual representative of the workers. It is the moment when the novel's romantic solution is forged. Such textual dynamics have received wide critical attention: for example, Gallagher suggests that Sybil "relegitimises" the aristocracy by a cyclical "undoing" of history, which effects a "reversal of a displacement" (215-16). However, my opinion

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[6] Robert O'Kell quite rightly suggests that the "theme of dispossession" has "not [been] recognized more widely as the structural framework of the novel" (211). However, O'Kell's solution is to argue for an allegorical framework which supports Sybil's emblematic role by relating it to the significance of other characters, particularly Aubrey St Lys, the vicar at Mowbray. He argues that Sybil can only guarantee a solution by being bound ideologically to a much broader spectrum of political and spiritual views, particularly those of St Lys and Egremont.

[7] The scenes, for example in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), provide a suitable romanticised version of history, particularly the siege of Torquilstone Castle when King Richard attempts to rescue Lady Rowena, Cedric, Ivanhoe and Rebecca from Norman tyrants.

accords more with Patrick Brantlinger who argues that Sybil's ennoblement is an illusion based upon dubious qualifications. Brantlinger suggests that the union of Charles and Sybil is one dogged by serious contradictions because Sybil is elevated "to a station of doubtful value" (16).

The surface narrative—the tale of Charles's love for Sybil—owes much to the genre of the Romantic novel. However, the story of the nation and its condition reaches a point at which the resolution is anything but ensured: Sybil's religious spirit, which receives only slight attention in Disraeli's narrative, hardly has the strength to suggest that a new age of enlightenment is about to dawn, especially if we consider Sybil's twelve-month absence from England after her marriage. The ethereal union of that spirit and the desire to save England (epitomised in Charles) may be admirable, but the irony is that the narrative of the Writ intimates an alternative reading.

If the Writ of Right is viewed as the symbolic text of Disraeli's romanticism, then the novel is faced with another major problem in relation to the Writ's operation, namely the character most responsible for the Writ's manipulation, Baptist Hatton. Romantic harmony in narrative terms is ultimately secured by a Machiavellian character who manipulates power and possessions in mysterious circumstances, and who ultimately dupes the upholder of Chartist principles into compromising his political integrity. Morley, once his flaw is exposed, is killed off. On the other hand, in perhaps the most unsatisfactory element of a book so scrupulously "tidied up" in the narrative sense, Baptist Hatton simply disappears. Disraeli provides the reader with the traditional rounding up of detail about the respective outcomes of all the various characters except Hatton, other than to suggest his continued trading in documents and titles. Whatever the changes in the political system and whatever their value for the benevolent treatment of the populace, Hatton's escape serves to remind us that the forces that dominated the old political economy are still in power.

Disraeli's text appears to be open to an *ad hoc* polysemy which ends up lacking either consistency or certitude. Baptist Hatton's ability, at this late stage in the drama, to turn Morley towards anarchy may be consistent if one follows Morley's decline within the romantic structure of the book. After all, by this stage Morley has already attempted murder and blackmail. However, the political ramifications of this act are not in any way consistent with Disraeli's Tory values. The simplest and neatest way of resolving the political crisis brought about by the heady events that conclude the novel is for Morley, whose political views are quite expendable, to accede to the machinations of Baptist Hatton. It is surprising that once that is accepted, Hatton fades from the book without explanation or, even more surprisingly from Disraeli's point of view, without condemnation; thus leaving in place the very source of all that was rotten. One man, who had created more titles than the monarch, manages to effect substantial changes in the ranks of the ruling elite by extraordinary manipulation of those around him. Morley, as a moral Chartist, does not espouse the use of force in the political arena (whatever his faults in the cause of love). However, under the influence of Hatton he becomes a pawn in the power games of the invisible class of political mandarins: a class seemingly left intact.

In comparison with its outset, the use of force and violence at the climax of the novel provides a deceptive parallel. As the book opens the warning beacons of the agricultural labourers, with their taciturn nature and stolid support of the demands for social improvement, are clearly admired both by Disraeli's narrator and Egremont. However, the odious expression of violence at the end of the book, which appears as anathema to those who encounter it, is necessary if the machinations of Baptist Hatton are to be effective. Consequently the need for violence to liberate the Writ also throws Egremont's sabre wielding into a curious relationship with the political infrastructure of the nation. Indeed, had it not been for the fact that Hatton's tactic involves the necessary suppression of violence (once it has completed his political objectives) in favour of the Writ's legal operation, Egremont's dramatic arrival may have only been necessary in terms of the romantic demands of the narrative. It is a notion which places Egremont in the same relationship to Hatton as Morley; that is, he is little more than a political puppet used to secure the required result of those who truly rule. Morley incites riot, Egremont suppresses it: both are actions which facilitate the operation of the Writ.

The central problem for Disraeli's *Sybil: or The Two Nations* is the desire for closure or resolution. For example, there is an understandable desire to counter the period's revolutionary tendencies that seems to necessitate both a narrative and a thematic closure. However, moving the political focus away from Charles and Sybil and onto the Writ allows the reader to see the fragmentation of Disraeli's political panacea. The principle that underwrites *Sybil* is the constitutional and political urge of Disraeli's fiction to establish the fundamental tenets of a romantic Tory philosophy which finds a symbol in the Writ of Right. Seen in this light the quirky manipulations of Morley's character become more understandable as part of the narrative of the Writ. Ultimately, however, it is the Writ and not the characters that opens up the numerous ideological dilemmas inherent in the novel, because it is the Writ that forges a narrative union not only between Egremont and Sybil, but also between Egremont, Morley, Gerard, and Hatton, the agents of the Writ's operation.

Sybil herself describes the historical relationship between the "two nations" as being dominated by an "impassable gulf." This is a characterisation of the contemporary political situation that would seem to offer little prospect of even a symbolic rapprochement, despite the palpable practical and narrative obligations to do so. If the surface narrative of Charles and Sybil is our guide, then "One Nation" is not without hope, indeed in Franco Moretti's words rights are "restored." On the other hand, however, the tale of the Writ and particularly the timely disappearance of Baptist Hatton at the novel's end suggest otherwise.

Taken at face value, the tale of *Sybil* is banal, puerile and excessively contrived. It is a tale in which the hero drifts into the action and is largely carried by the narrative rather than effecting it. Even his ultimate union with the religious Sybil has little to do with planning and more to do with fortunate timing. The mawkish comic rescue of Sybil, flanked as she is by the sabre-rattling Charles, and Harold in a fit of bloodhound lust, is definitely romantic, but overall the emotional atmosphere is at best twee. For Disraeli, Sybil's triumph is that she brings religious purity into a blessed union with the

newly acquired political purpose and integrity of Charles Egremont. The novel's political solution has triumphed only as a system of domination won by conquest over a rabble dependent upon its superior strength, and backed by the historical, quasi-transcendental power of bureaucratic property relationships.

The novel inhabits the shady regions between literature as a creative reinterpretation of history, as romance, and as a realist form. It is the confounding of such regions which create the problem for analysis. If, as has been argued here, the Writ of Right is just such a fallacious medium already defunct in legal and parliamentary terms and shown to be open to "hocus-pocus claims," then Disraeli conjures up a quasi-documentary history simply to bind his text together. However, central to its operation are elements which will hasten its undoing: violence, rebellion and power politics which operate beyond Westminster behind the closed doors of Baptist Hatton's apartments.

Put simply, Disraeli's mistake was to invoke legal arrangements which had not been used for five centuries and had in fact recently been abolished. Furthermore, he misunderstood the very nature of these Writs because they were never admitted as proof of title; they merely initiated the process of recovery. The Writ of Right is, indeed, more than a "fallacious medium," it is medieval "hocus pocus."

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