The Pickering Masters

The Early Novels of Benjamin Disraeli

The Wondrous Tale of Alroy (1833)

Edited by
Geoffrey Harvey

ROUTLEDGE

THE PICKERING MASTERS

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Volume 4

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INTRODUCTION

In the nineteenth-century climate of anti-Semitism, Benjamin Disraeli always felt that his identity as a Jew set him apart from others, both socially and intellectually, and his position on the social margin led him to compensate by indulging his inclination to mythologize his family. He wanted to believe that some of them had originated exotically in Venice, that meeting point of East and West, Judaism and Christianity, a theme that informs the novel preceding *Alroy*, *Contarini Fleming* (1832).

Between 1826 and 1830, young Benjamin Disraeli underwent what his biographer, Jane Ridley, regards as a spiritual crisis, during which he rejected the rationalist faith that he had been brought up in for imagination;[1] whilst Charles Richmond and Jerrold M. Post believe rather that the crisis was due to his 'complex, narcissistic personality'. [2] At any rate, it is clear that he suffered a prolonged serious nervous breakdown, and during much of this period of illness he remained in his father's country house at Bradenham, near Wycombe, ensconced in his library, avidly reading books on the Jews, Judaism, Islam and the Middle East. Among these obscure works, he came across the story of Alroy, the twelfth-century Jewish prince who rebelled against Muslim rule. The character of Alroy at once appealed to Disraeli because it contained a good deal of his own depressive personality, exhibiting bouts of childishness, arrogance, self-pity, self-aggrandizing fantasy, unfocused sexual desire, self-doubt and loneliness.

Disraeli's notes for *Alroy* cover the winter of 1829–30, during which he conceived the idea of visiting the Middle East. He wanted to absorb first-hand experiences that would contribute material towards the writing of *Alroy*, but he also felt a deep attraction to the region. Moreover, he had convinced himself that the recovery of his health was dependent on making an excursion there. The projected trip took place during 1830 and 1831. He found that his imagination was fired by the exoticism, luxury and sexual freedom of the East. In *Contarini Fleming* he revealed that he 'longed to write an Eastern Tale' (*Contarini Fleming*, V.12, see Volume 3, p. 240). The inspiration for *Alroy*, according to Disraeli, was his visit to Jerusalem in 1831. Although there is little description of Jerusalem in his letters, he kept a journal and recorded details about Jerusalem, and his responses to it, which came out in *Alroy*. Indeed, Robert Blake suggests that Disraeli's visit to Jerusalem was the most important aspect of his trip to the Middle East: 'There can be no doubt that of all his many experiences on his tour the one that left the

greatest and most lasting impression upon him was the visit to Jerusalem'.[3] It encouraged him to exult in his Jewishness, and it led him to describe the resulting novel as 'the celebration of a gorgeous incident in that sacred and romantic people from whom I derive my blood and name'.[4] The writing of *Alroy* probably commenced in the summer of 1832, after Disraeli's defeat in the parliamentary by-election at Wycombe, for he wrote to his sister Sarah, on 4 August 1832, that 'Alroy flourishes like a young cedar of Lebanon'.[5]

Although the story of Alroy seems far removed from Disraeli's experience, it nevertheless reveals a good deal about him. His depression was related to a crisis of identity and values, and he uses his unhistorical, romantic version of Alroy's Messianic movement to examine his own position as a Jew in an alien and inhospitable culture. Alroy's sense of shame and uselessness at his predicament as a Jewish prince under the Captivity also echoes Disraeli's frustration at his prolonged inertia at Bradenham, and his urgent need to make his way in the British political and social worlds.

The issue of assimilation or separateness was very much a live issue at the time of the writing of *Alroy*, since the first Jewish Emancipation Bill was introduced in 1833. This novel reveals a sharp divergence of views between Benjamin and his father. Isaac, a humanist, wanted to see the assimilation of Jews into British society. Alroy has to choose between the latitudinarianism represented by his worldly mentor in Baghdad, Honain, and the orthodoxy espoused by Honain's zealous brother Jabaster, the High Priest. In choosing assimilation, Alroy betrays his faith and his people, but defeat and despair lead to redemption, when he refuses to save his life by forswearing his Jewish faith. Disraeli's ideal, embodied in Alroy, was eventually realized in his secure pride in his Jewishness, his achievement of power, position and leadership, and in his refusal throughout a long and highly successful political career to be assimilated into British culture.

Another important personal dimension of *Alroy* was the influence of his adored sister, Sarah. Disraeli originally dedicated *Alroy* to his 'Sweet sister'. (In the second edition of 1846, the dedication is omitted, together with Disraeli's oblique reference to the death of William Meredith, Sarah's fiancé.) In the novel, the relationship between Alroy and his sister Miriam displays a similar deep emotional intimacy. Early in the novel, Alroy reveals that the only love he knows is his affection for his sister, but in spite of his insistence on the purity of this love, when a revised edition of *Alroy* was published in 1846, the many amorous terms that Alroy uses towards Miriam, which in their intensity are much more passionate than the languidly sensual relationship between Alroy and the Princess Schirene, were completely stripped out of the text. The close bond between Benjamin and Sarah deepened after the death of William Meredith, when Sarah became what Benjamin called his 'genius'. Even allowing for the special relationships between middle-class Victorian brothers and sisters, theirs was unusual. And it persisted. Indeed, some years later Disraeli's wife, Mary Anne, was so jealous that he was driven to

writing secretly daily letters to his sister at Bradenham from the Carlton Club.

As Disraeli said in his so-called 'Mutilated Diary', 'Poetry is the safety-valve of my passions – but I wish to *act* what I *write*. My works are the embodification of my feelings. In *Vivian Grey* I have portrayed my active and real ambition: In *Alroy* my ideal ambition: [*Contarini Fleming: A Psychological Romance*] is a development of my poetic character. This trilogy is the secret history of my feelings – I shall write no more about myself.'[6] Although the early novels are generically very diverse (*Vivian Grey* and *The Young Duke* are 'silver-fork' novels about high society, *Contarini Fleming* is a *Künstlerroman*, a novel about the development of the artist, and *Alroy* is a historical romance), they are also linked by one of the main themes of *Alroy*, that of responsibility, explored in terms of the conflict between the impulse to indulge in escapism and commitment to the public world of action.

The tension between escapism and reality is felt acutely by Alroy after old Bostenay has made clear to him the inescapable fact of his inherited responsibility as the next Prince of the Captivity. In a passage deleted from the 1846 and subsequent editions, Alroy breaks down, longing for the irresponsibility of childhood, when he could play mock battles against the Muslims in the woods, and when he would cry in frustration to be a man. Now, with the real world closing in, he reflects, 'I'll sit me down and cry to be a child' (I.1, p. 14). He is galvanized into heroic action by the chance slaying of the Muslim governor Alschiroch in defence of his sister's honour. Similarly, as in *Alroy*, Contarini Fleming is torn between the desire to immerse himself in an imaginative world of fictions, the world of literary creation, and the claims of the rational public world represented by his father, Baron Fleming, in which he also wants to make his mark. Disraeli's concern in *Alroy* with the responsible use of power is reflected rather differently in *Vivian Grey*, whose Machiavellian hero also reveals something of Disraeli's fascination with power, and his relish of manipulation and political intrigue. And in *The Young Duke*, the Duke of St James, who has inherited extraordinary wealth, has to choose, like Alroy, between a life of indolence and dissipation and social responsibility, a theme that anticipates Disraeli's later thinking about the role of the aristocracy in the national life.

The secret history of Disraeli's feelings about his own family relationships also emerges in his presentation of Contarini Fleming's rejection by his mother, in Contarini's ambivalent feelings towards his benign but cynical father, Baron Fleming, in Vivian Grey's pursuit of a father figure, and in Alroy's intense relationship with his sister Miriam, his alter ego. Charles Richmond and Jerrold. M. Post, who see the roots of Disraeli's early mental breakdown in his narcissistic personality, argue that it is complicated by his mother's apparent coolness towards him. They also discern his Messianic sense of historical destiny, and conclude that '*Alroy* can be seen as representing the ego ideal for Disraeli – that is the idealized self'.[7] In *Alroy* he was also

fascinated by the cynical, manipulative rationalist Honain, who has transformed himself from a Jewish outsider into a powerful physician at the court of the Sultan in Baghdad, and the trusted adviser of the Princess Schirene. This is why Alroy is torn between visionary idealism and heroic struggle, and the complacently subtle exercise of power in Baghdad that Honain's philosophy offers. Other characters in these novels also reflect aspects of Disraeli's personality and thinking. In Beckendorff, in *Vivian Grey*, Disraeli presents a man who has shaped his own destiny by sheer force of will, while Baron Fleming too suggests the capacity to attain worldly success of a man who has schooled himself in pragmatism.

Alroy must be regarded as a seminal work in the evolution of Disraeli's political thought. The diary entry referring to this novel as an expression of his 'ideal ambition' was written in the same year as his *Vindication of the English Constitution* (1835). At this point Disraeli was considering a political career and this text reveals the importance to him of the overriding concept of tradition. Traditional beliefs and attitudes mattered deeply to Disraeli. The Tories defended institutions such as the Crown, the Church, the system of law, and as such secured basic human rights. His perception of the Tory party as a democratic party, an alliance of people and establishment institutions, was underpinned by the kind of traditionalism on which his Young England movement was founded. This was not the view of life espoused in *Alroy* by Honain, Schirene or even Bostenay, a life in which custom served material prosperity and moral and political inertia; a view associated in Disraeli's mind with the old Tory party. When Alroy proclaims himself Caliph of Baghdad, Jabaster speaks for Disraeli in his determination that national identity must depend on a traditional homeland, a religious creed and shared customs. At the heart of the Constitution was the power of the Crown, which Disraeli endorses in his *Vindication of the English Constitution*. Two years earlier, in *Alroy*, Disraeli had aired this issue in Abidan's temptation of Jabaster into revolt on the grounds that kings are essentially no different from other men, and as Daniel Schwarz has pointed out, 'Abidan's justification for regicide is a deliberate satire of Cromwell's views'.[8]

Alroy anticipates some aspects of the *Vindication*. It also looks forward to the nationalism of the Young England movement, and the thinking in the Young England trilogy. Alroy's Messianic mission is to rekindle racial pride among his followers, and enable them to reclaim their political status by rejecting the latitudinarianism of old Bostenay, under the Captivity, in favour of a religious zeal based on tradition and social custom, symbolized by the sceptre of Solomon. This unification of cultural institutions and the people, under a charismatic leader, anticipates much of the thinking of the Young England trilogy. As Richard Levine has pointed out, 'the conversation between Bostenay and David bears resemblance to a dialogue between the old and new Toryism';[9] while Jabaster (and early in the novel David Alroy) combine an allegiance to principle with a commitment to action that is found in

Sidonia, the Jewish Tory teacher in *Coningsby* (1844), who is something of an autobiographical sketch. Sidonia's assertion of the racial superiority of the Jews is an extension of the attitudes presented in *Alroy*, and passionately expounded later by Disraeli in the House of Commons, where he pleaded for Jewish emancipation, asserting that Judaism was the foundation of Christianity. Disraeli was a Zionist who felt race mattered more than religion. He held that the Jewish race, more than any other, ennobled Europe, and he had a romantic desire to see the restoration of the Jews to Palestine. Victorian intellectuals and politicians alike found his views offensive.

Another fundamental value that Disraeli proclaims in *Alroy* is imagination. It is Alroy's racial and religious imagination that fuels his quest for glory, just as Jabaster's own visions underpin his faith in Alroy as Messiah. While action is fed by the visionary power of Alroy's imagination, he is successful. He begins to fail as soon as he succumbs to rationalism, to latitudinarianism, to materialism and the temptations of the flesh. Pleasure and sloth lead to spiritual inertia. The central importance of imagination informs Disraeli's political thought. He eschewed rationalism (he had satirized utilitarianism in *Popanilla* (1828)), and he opposed the Liberal Toryism of Peel because it was founded on a belief in government by reasoned argument rather than leadership inspired by vision.

John Murray, who had not found *Contarini Fleming* very profitable, declined *Alroy*. Saunders and Otley offered £300 for an edition of 1,000 copies. But they also wanted to sell three volumes at one and a half guineas, and needed a shorter story to fill the space. Another historical romance, *The Rise of Iskander*, was written rapidly at Bath in the company of Disraeli's fellow novelist, Edward Bulwer Lytton. It was a similar tale of rebellion against oppression, this time by a Greek Christian prince who revolts against Ottoman tyranny and, whilst Disraeli described it as a contrast to *Alroy*, it contains some clear parallels.

Alroy was published on 5 March 1833. Five hundred copies were subscribed before publication. It sold well, its sales exceeding anything that had been published since *Vivian Grey*. Critics warmed to its treatment of Judaism, and to its energy, but did not much like its style, a deliberate attempt to employ poetic prose. This was parodied wickedly by William Maginn, in the May issue of *Fraser's Magazine*.[10] However, William Beckford, the author of the oriental tale *Vathek* (1786), wrote in fulsome praise of *Alroy*: 'What appears to be *hauteur* and extreme conceit in Disraeli is consciousness, uncontrollable *consciousness* of superior power'.[11] Disraeli noted in a letter to Sarah on 26 March that 'the common readers seem to like the poetry and the excitement'.[12] What did cause a stir among readers was the novel's frank eroticism. Baghdad and Babylon represent a fantasy world of sensuality. Alroy's early dreams of a 'snowy bosom' on which to pillow his head find their fulfilment in Princess Schirene, whose sexuality is dwelt on at length by the narrator in

plainly erotic language. Disraeli makes clear that the essential relation between Alroy and Schirene is sexual. Daily feasting on delicate ortolans, sherbet pomegranates and golden wine from Mount Lebanon, accompanied by dancing girls, is ritualized seduction, and it is clear that Disraeli's latent homosexuality is also evident in his allusions to beautiful slave boys.

Disraeli was frequently in debt, but by the mid-1840s his debts had reached disturbing proportions. One resource was his fiction, and Henry Colburn republished *Alroy* and *Contarini Fleming* in 1846. Colburn wanted new prefaces and Disraeli took the opportunity to make marked alterations to the preface to *Alroy*, in the process considerably reducing its length, by deleting a long section defending his adoption of his new style of poetic prose. This experiment had not been a conspicuous success. Disraeli was now an established novelist (*Sybil* had been published successfully in 1845) and he did not wish to draw attention to his trials in another stylistic idiom. He was also a prominent Member of Parliament, had been involved energetically in the challenge of the Young England movement to the Tory establishment, and was engaged in sustained opposition to the leadership of Peel. An ambitious politician, he did not wish to remind his readers of his youthful indiscretions. Consequently, all of the more personal allusions to his tour of the Middle East in 1830–1 were also removed from the notes. The text was thoroughly revised and stylistic improvements were made, probably by his sister Sarah, for Disraeli was very reluctant to revisit his own novels. Indeed, the most striking revisions made to *Alroy* were those concerning Alroy's relationship with his sister Miriam.

The report of the story of David Alroy, by a medieval Jewish traveller, Benjamin of Tudela,[13] gives a sense of the contemporary religious fervour of the Middle East, and of its most significant Messianic event. At the time of the Second Crusade (1147–8), the Messianic expectations of many Jews were fuelled by the anticipated war between the Christians and the Muslims. The Messianic movement began before 1121, and arose out of the suffering and poverty of the Jews. It was believed that there was a real possibility of conquering Palestine and restoring Jerusalem once the Crusades had come to an end, and Jerusalem would no longer be held by the crusaders. A military rather than a visionary Messiah was required to meet the mood of the times. Alroy's great vision was to throw off the yoke of the Gentiles, capture Jerusalem, restore the Jews to their rightful status and put an end to the exile.

There were two Messianic leaders, father and son, about whom there are conflicting accounts, and which also include elements of myth. The historical figure behind old Bostenay's nostalgic reference to the heroic leadership of the old David Alroy was Solomon of Khazania who, together with his son Menahem, sent messengers into the surrounding Jewish communities, in order to gather together the exiles in rebellion, some time before 1121. Solomon declared himself to be Elijah, and claimed that his son Menahem was the Messiah.

Disraeli's interest is in the heroic exploits of the son. According to a contemporary account, Menahem ben Solomon, who assumed the name of David Alroy, or Al-Ruhi, as being appropriate to a Jewish Messiah, continued his father's movement and was at the centre of the most significant Messianic episode of the period. A man of imposing physique and formidable intellect, he was renowned for his great scholarship, having studied under Chisdai, the Head of the Captivity, and under Gaon Jacob, the Head of the Academy, in Baghdad. He was proficient in the law of Israel, the Talmud and Muslim religious teachings, as well as in literature, magic and fortune telling.

In 1147 David Alroy gathered together the Jews living in the mountains of Kurdistan to prosecute a rebellion against the King of Persia, to fight against all the nations, to march on Jerusalem with the aim of capturing it and to liberate the Jews from the yoke of the Gentiles. He gained influence over his followers by feigned miracles. At first the local Muslim authorities paid little attention to the modest victories of his movement, but after an audience with the King of Persia, to whom he boasted his divine role as King of the Jews, he was thrown into the king's prison. He was believed to have made a miraculous escape from prison, demonstrating in the presence of the king and his princes his magical power to assume invisibility, and making good his escape by spreading his mantle on the water in order to cross it.

David Alroy then attempted to gain a foothold in Amadia, by gaining influence with the governor, and he attracted to his Messianic cause a considerable number of Persian Jews. It is likely that possession of Amadia was a first step towards the conquest of Palestine. However, the King of Persia warned that unless the Exilarch and the Head of the Academy, Gaon Jacob, prevented Alroy's plans to march on Jerusalem, he would massacre all the Jews in Persia. They told Alroy that the time of the redemption was not yet come, and shortly afterwards the King of Togarmim, in thrall to the King of Persia, bribed Aloy's father-in-law to assassinate him in his sleep. After his death, the King of Persia moved against the Jews, but the Head of the Captivity negotiated a resumption of uneasy peace. However, some of the Jews in Azerbaijan continued loyal to their Messiah after Alroy's death, and were known as Menahemites.

An alternative account of this story finds Alroy in conflict with the Exilarch and the Head of the Academy, when Alroy's followers in Baghdad received erroneous messages that they should assemble at night on their rooftops and wait to be flown miraculously to Jerusalem, as a result of which the Persian Jews were threatened with severe persecution and David was assassinated. Another version of events has Alroy and his Jewish forces cooperating with the Muslims of Amadia against the crusaders, but tells how the governor detected the conspiracy and had him killed. However, other records suggest that it seems likely that Alroy survived attempts on his life and that, taking advantage of the great coming conflict between the Muslims and the

Christians, his messengers were spreading the idea that once Saladin had captured Jerusalem, he would give it to Alroy, the King Messiah.

Of course these contemporary records should be treated with caution, for they are unreliable, for instance the younger David Alroy's death is variously dated as 1135 and 1160, while other sources suggest that he was in still active in the 1180s. They blur lives and events, and mix fact and myth. Nevertheless, although a shadowy figure, David Alroy was of considerable importance to the Messianic movement of the period, and his fame eventually reached Yemen, Egypt and North Africa.

Disraeli's treatment of the sources that he read during his incarceration at Bradenham is deliberately unhistorical. They are the raw material for a historical romance. Disraeli's debts are clear. He develops the relationship between Alroy and Chisdai, the Head of the Captivity, and Gaon Joab, the Head of the Academy, conflating the two figures in the character of the fictional Alroy's mentor, Jabaster the Cabalist. The historical Alroy's learning in the law of Israel, in Jewish mysticism and in the Muslim way of life, which he experienced as a young man in Baghdad, informs the intellectual character of Disraeli's Alroy, enabling him to engage in philosophical debates on equal terms with old Bostenay, the Prince of the Captivity, with Honain, the apostate Jew whose rationalist philosophy he challenges, and with the Jewish visionary and zealot, Jabaster. It also explains why he finds some aspects of Muslim life so attractive. Like the historical Alroy, he is accepted as the Messsiah, gathers the Jews of Persia to lead a rebellion against the Caliph, and achieves widespread fame as a leader and warrior. However, in a deliberate and telling reversal of the historical record of the Alroy movement, he finds himself in conflict with Jabaster, the Israelite High Priest, over his refusal to march on Jerusalem and end the exile, and there is his apostasy in becoming Caliph of Baghdad. The attempt to murder him in his sleep is made not by his father-in-law on behalf of the Persians, but by the prophetess Esther, who is part of a Jewish conspiracy against his failed leadership. He is defeated by the Muslims, and Disraeli follows the historical record in having him captured and thrown into prison. Although throughout the novel Alroy is associated with visions and the supernatural, unlike his historical counterpart he eschews magic and, in his final confrontation with the King of Karasmé, he refutes all allegations of sorcery, relying, as he triumphantly asserts, on the power of his God.

Other aspects of Disraeli's treatment of history are also fascinating, and encompass the comic, the tragic and, one suspects, an element of game with his readers. Not surprisingly, the text is steeped in biblical allusion, which creates a profound sense of the living immediacy of history in Jewish experience. However, since *Alroy* is a romance, Disraeli does not scruple to mingle history with fiction. For instance the powerful physician of the Caliph of Baghdad, Honain, the apostate Jew whose rationalist philosophy Alroy finds so dangerously attractive, is based on a Christian Arab doctor and renowned

philosopher, Honain ben Isaac, who lived in Baghdad in the ninth century. Rabbi Maimon (Maimonides), historically one of the greatest Jewish scholars, who died in 1204, in *Alroy* is presented as a comic figure, aged almost one hundred and ten years old, who is used to illustrate the self-indulgence of rabbinical discourse and the impracticality of scholarship. A different use of history is evident in the great Battle of Nehavend that took place in AD 642, which signalled the end of the Persian Empire, when an army of thirty thousand Arabs routed a Persian army five times their number. It is on the plain of Nehavend that Alroy encounters his final and total defeat. The voice of Jabaster's spirit bidding Alroy to meet him on the plain of Nehavend, echoing that of the ghost of Caesar to Brutus before Philippi, builds a sense of Alroy's raw courage, but also of his impending nemesis. Even more striking is the fact that opposing Alroy in his campaign is not simply the great Alp Arslan, the Seljuk Sultan of Persia, but also his uncle, the formidable Toghril Beg, and his son, Malik-Shah. (Alp Arslan succeeded his uncle Toghril Beg in 1063 and was succeeded in his turn by Malik-Shah in 1072.) The reigns of these three sultans constituted the high water mark of Seljuk imperial power and it is as if the whole weight of Persian history is rising up against the Jewish upstart.

Romance inflates even the unreliable historical record. Disraeli greatly enhances Alroy's charisma, his military skills, the scale of his victories and his encounters with the supernatural. The elements of legend are also built up. Behind the wondrous tale of Alroy lie, for instance, such Jewish legends of victory against overwhelming odds as that of David and Goliath, or the legendary wisdom and power of Solomon, or indeed the earlier Alroy, to whom Bostenay refers in his conversation with young David.

Formally, the quest pattern of the romance gives the novel its taut structure. Alroy is introduced as a young romantic dreamer, deeply ashamed of his people's subservience to the Caliph, symbolized by the payment of the tribute. He regards his appointment as Prince of the Captivity as profoundly ironic and despairs of his capacity to influence the situation. However, he is forced to act by his killing of Alschiroch. Outlawed and alone, he is compelled to yoke his passionate imagination to the political quest of endeavour to free his people, which includes the dream of capturing Jerusalem and restoring Jewish nationhood. As in traditional romance, the heroic quester has to be tested. His initial quest for the sceptre of Solomon, upon which depends his claim to be the Messiah, is inspired by the Daughter of the Voice and by Cabalistic prophecy. Showing great fortitude, he survives the crossing of the desert, displays his physical courage when captured by bandits, renounces the temptations of Baghdad and finally enters the world of spirits and confronts the spectre of the great Solomon himself, wresting his sceptre from his ancient hand. Accepted as the Messiah, with the aid of his mentor Jabaster and the prophetess Esther, Alroy gradually attracts followers until, after several victories, at the head of a great army he finally conquers Baghdad.

This is the point at which his second quest undermines the first. It is clear that Alroy's youthful moping had a sexual as well as a political cause. One aspect of his panicky renunciation of Baghdad is the temptation suggested by the beauty of the Princess Schirene, to whom Honain, the Caliph's physician, had introduced him in the guise of a deaf mute. Once he is the acknowledged ruler of Baghdad, Alroy finds himself utterly in thrall to the beauty of Schirene, which increases his susceptibility to sexual pleasure, moral torpor and the worldly culture of Honain, and also influences his tolerant attitude to the Muslims. In marrying Schirene he opposes Jabaster, ignores Esther the prophetess, abandons his quest to conquer Jerusalem and seeks to consolidate an empire based on his new role as Caliph of Baghdad. The rational pragmatist has subverted the zealous visionary. Secular considerations have displaced spiritual ones, and this marks the turning point in his career.

The third dimension of Alroy's quest is his need to achieve a mature sense of identity. He is prone to periodic lapses either into melancholic introspection, or into blind sexual worship. Ultimately, he is betrayed by Schirene, who is complicit in the murder of Jabaster, is defeated in battle, captured and imprisoned. In a repetition of his first visit to Solomon, in a visionary journey his sceptre is returned. The beginning of his spiritual regeneration comes with the stirring of his imagination before the final battle, when he is visited in a vision by Jabaster's spirit, which foretells his imminent fall. In prison, he resists the temptation of Honain to compromise and is resolute against the sexual wiles of Schirene. He triumphantly reasserts his faith in the God of Israel at the end, choosing martyrdom rather than renouncing his faith, and in the process ensures his historical status as a Messiah.

A dominant paradigm in *Alroy* is that of sexual entrapment and betrayal. Alroy's ensnaring by the allure of Schirene ironically re-enacts that of Solomon's relationship with the Queen of Sheba; but a more insistent parallel, to which Disraeli alludes, is that of Samson and Delilah, both the biblical story and Milton's poem *Samson Agonistes*. Alroy replicates the pattern of sexual temptation, falling under the spell of a scheming woman, betrayal of his faith, imprisonment, despair at his separation from God, the rejection of both the rational temptation of Honain and the sexual temptation of Schirene, who visit him in prison, a returning sense of his faith, his symbolic defeat of the King of Karasmé and his assertion of his Jewish faith in his choice of martyrdom.

In spite of Disraeli's assertion to the contrary, as well as romance, *Alroy* also has affinities with tragedy, both in terms of its themes and its form. Daniel Schwarz has rightly pointed out that 'Alroy's moral status *determines* the action'.[14] This is reinforced formally by a pattern of choice and consequence. For instance, the deserted city to which Alroy retreats in defeat was once the site of a great triumph, and his complacent embracing of the delights of Baghdad recalls his earlier explicit rejection of the moral dangers he felt the city posed. Alroy's is a tragic fall, following the traditional pattern of pride, ironic

reversal of fortune, recognition of his error, retribution, suffering and death. Like Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Alroy finally achieves a depth of understanding of himself and his situation, and a measure of triumph in his death. Here, too, there is an element of intertextuality. Disraeli's reading of Shakespeare's plays clearly coloured his imaginative treatment of the action of his novel. In *Alroy* are liberally scattered readily recognizable echoes of *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*, particularly registering Alroy's despair at the emptiness of life following his betrayal of principle, his encounter with the retributive spirit of Jabaster before the battle on the plain of Nehavend, and the all-embracing climate of anti-Semitism.

As a moral tragedy, as well as a historical romance, *Alroy* depends for its impact not only on its epic scale, extravagant emotions and dramatic action, but also on psychological realism. While the characterization may appear schematic (the polar opposition between the two brothers, Honain and Jabaster, between the two women who are in love with Alroy, Schirene and Esther, or between the zealot Abidan, described by Alroy as a dreamer, and the mercenary bandit Sherirah), and may seem to support the tragic pattern of Alroy's experience, Disraeli is able to sympathize with the emotional complexity of individual motives and presents his characters with psychological realism. Jabaster's fanatical commitment to rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem is driven by the egotism of a failed Messiah, and he is fatally prone to Abidan's appeal to his self-image as the Judge of Israel; while the attractiveness of Honain's rationality, his cultural sophistication, worldly tolerance and political skills, masks a fundamental self-interest that will not stop at fratricide. Schirene is reminiscent of Shakespeare's Cressida, who when forcibly parted from Troilus bends to political reality and makes herself at home among the Greeks. Her love and loyalty have a limited elasticity. The prophetess Esther confuses her hatred of Alroy's tyranny with sexual jealousy when she creeps into his bedroom intending to slay him. But the most complex character is Alroy, who encapsulates so many aspects of Disraeli's own personality: a visionary imagination, political ambition, melancholia, capacity for self-pity, susceptibility to women and pleasure, delight in power; and, of course, his remarkably intense relationship with his sister Miriam, who dies before having to witness her brother's execution.

Disraeli's delight in the wonders of the East during his tour in 1830–1 comes through in his set-piece descriptions of bazaars and banquets in exotic Baghdad, and of the great processions that accompany victories and the ceremonial marriage. Here he takes flight from realism into the 'wondrous' aspects of his tale that sit more comfortably with his treatment of the Cabalistic and the supernatural than with the complex motivation of his characters. He is successful in his creation of great dramatic scenes, and of the backstairs intriguing of the Jewish rebels. Less convincing is his experiment with prose poetry, the use of rhythm and rhyme to create heightened effects of emotional lyricism or oriental atmosphere.

Disraeli's wit, for the most part suppressed in this novel, comes through in odd ways, for instance when he makes Rabbi Maimon a comic figure, or his bringing three Sultans of the Seljuk dynasty simultaneously into conflict with Alroy, or the falseness of Schirene's romantic pose, which is revealed by her borrowing of Byron's poem, 'She walks in beauty, like the night' in her song to Alroy, 'He rose in beauty, like the morn' (VIII.4, p. 147). Another aspect of Disraeli's wit emerges in the notes that he provides for the reader, upon which an understanding of the text to a large extent depends. These alternate between memories of his eastern tour and his allusions to Jewish culture. In the latter, in spite of his intensive reading of scholarly sources during his period of depression at Bradenham, Disraeli was skating on thin ice. Although he confidently asserts the authenticity of the novel's Cabalistic 'supernatural machinery' in his preface, and marks out the path of Alroy's career with geographical detail, he knew that both the Cabala and the history of the Alroy movement were obscure. And there is also an elaborate humour in the way he parodies scholarly notes. The important point, which Daniel Schwarz draws attention to, is Disraeli's creation of a poet-scholar who can fulfil Miriam's hope that some future Jewish writer will memorialize Alroy.[15] The scholarship serves to authenticate this tale, but curiously at the same time it subverts it, enforcing its status not as history but as a 'wondrous tale'. But the wondrous tale of Alroy was important to Disraeli in the early stages of his political career as a symbol of what might be achieved by a superior alien Jew with imagination and ambition who, by asserting his separateness from the British aristocratic and political spheres, nevertheless sought to climb to the top of society. The truth of this story is, after all, an emotional truth.

Note on the Text

According to Disraeli, the writing of *Alroy* was begun after the publication of *Vivian Grey* in 1826, and was continued on his return from a tour of the Middle East in 1830–1, which included a visit to Jerusalem. This first Jewish historical novel about a glorious, though short-lived, rebellion against Muslim rule by a Messianic Prince of the Captivity was based on Disraeli's voracious reading of Jewish and Muslim history among the books in his father's library at Bradenham, during his prolonged nervous breakdown between 1827 and 1830.

After *Alroy* had been declined by John Murray, the publisher of Disraeli's previous novel, *Contarini Fleming*, the profit from which had been disappointing, Saunders and Otley offered Disraeli an advance of £300 for an edition of 1,000 copies. Five hundred copies were subscribed before publication and, in order to justify the price of one and a half guineas, the three volumes were padded out by another historical romance, *The Rise of Iskander*, written hurriedly during the winter of 1832–3.

The copy text for the present edition is the Saunders and Otley text, which is reprinted without alteration, except for the silent correction of obvious typographical errors and the movement of Disraeli's notes, which were originally placed at the end of each volume, to the foot of the page. The first edition of *Alroy* is dedicated to Disraeli's sister, Sarah, whose grief at the sudden death of her fiancé, William Meredith, is tactfully alluded to. There is also a lengthy preface, in which Disraeli ventures into literary theory, attempting to explain the experimental poetic style he has adopted for this novel.

A new edition of *Alroy* was published, with *Contarini Fleming*, by Henry Colburn in London in 1846, with a preface dated 1845. Although critics have often assumed that the text of *Alroy* published in the later 1853 uniform edition of Disraeli's novels was the first to be extensively revised, in fact it was the earlier 1846 Colburn text to which significant changes were made, probably at the instigation of Disraeli's sister, Sarah. He responded to Colburn's request for a new preface by severely pruning the original, including the account of his adoption of a new literary style. He was by now the author of *Sybil* (1845) and wished to deflect attention from his early experiments. The dedication to his sister was also removed. Other omissions included numerous allusions to the ambiguous relationship between Alroy and his sister Miriam. Passages early in the novel that convey Alroy's adolescent emotional turmoil were also taken out. A further degree of detachment was achieved by omitting some of Disraeli's explanatory notes that included personal references.

The 1846 edition formed the basis for all subsequent editions, and when David Bryce published a uniform edition of Disraeli's novels, up to and including *Sybil*, in London in 1853, it confined itself to minor stylistic revisions. These were adopted virtually wholesale by a new edition published in London and New York by Routledge, Warnes, and Routledge in 1859, and by a later new edition published by Frederick Warne and Co., with *Sybil*, in 1868, also in London and New York (with Scribner, Welford and Co.). When the new collected edition was published in London by Longmans, Green, and Co. at monthly intervals in 1870–1, volume 8 included *Alroy*, *Ixion in Heaven*, *The Infernal Marriage* and *Popanilla*. This edition was meticulously produced, correcting original errors in the 1833 text, as well as those that had crept into subsequent editions. It also made minor but significant stylistic improvements. This edition formed the basis of the standard Hughenden edition, published in London by Longmans, Green, and Co. in 1881.

The reviews of *Alroy* that appeared during 1833 were on the whole favourable. The *Athenaeum* responded warmly to the novel's evocation of the spirit of Judaism, and to its pictures of the East; the *New Monthly Magazine* praised the novel's bold conception of its subject, its original plot and dramatic presentation; and the *American Monthly Review* was reasonably positive about Disraeli's handling of character.[16] But most reviews also drew attention to weaknesses. Most damningly, for the *Literary Gazette* the hero simply failed to engage the reader's sympathy, whilst the *American Monthly Review* was

severely critical of the novel's hybrid form, and the *Atlas* pointed to excesses of language.[17] A number of reviews lamented what they saw as Disraeli's adoption of the style of Ossian, and the *Literary Gazette* noted Disraeli's perceived debts to Beckford's *Vathek*. Beckford himself was warm in his praise of Disraeli's genius,[18] and *Alroy* was sufficiently popular among readers for it to have been re-published several times during Disraeli's lifetime.

Geoffrey Harvey

NOTES

1. Jane Ridley, *The Young Disraeli* (London, Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), p. 64.
2. Charles Richmond and Jerrold M. Post, 'Disraeli's Crucial Illness' in Charles Richmond and Paul Smith (eds), *The Self-Fashioning of Disraeli* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 66.
3. Robert Blake, *Disraeli's Grand Tour: Benjamin Disraeli and the Holy Land 1830–31* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), p. 106.
4. Preface to *The Revolutionary Epick*, 1834.
5. Quoted in Ridley, *The Young Disraeli*, p. 125
6. Quoted in Daniel R. Schwarz, *Disraeli's Fiction* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1979), p. 8.
7. Richmond and Post, 'Disraeli's Crucial Illness', p. 83.
8. Schwarz, *Disraeli's Fiction*, p. 46.
9. Richard A. Levine, *Benjamin Disraeli* (New York, Twayne Publishers, 1968), p. 53.
10. William Maginn, 'Gallery of Literary Characters. No 36. Benjamin D'Israeli Esq.', *Fraser's Magazine of Town and Country*, 7:41 (May 1833), p. 602.
11. Quoted in Ridley, *The Young Disraeli*, p. 129.
12. Quoted in ibid., p. 129.
13. Yosef Levanon, *The Jewish Travellers in the Twelfth Century* (Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1980), pp. 293–300.
14. Schwarz, *Disraeli's Fiction*, p. 45.
15. Ibid., p. 49.
16. Reviews of *Alroy* in *Athenaeum*, 280 (9 March 1833), pp. 150–1; *New Monthly Magazine*, 37 (March, 1833), pp. 342–6; *American Monthly Review*, 4 (1833), pp. 279–82.
17. Reviews of *Alroy* in *Literary Gazette*, 842 (9 March 1833), pp. 146–8; *Atlas*, 8 (24 March 1833), pp. 178–9.
18. See Ridley, *The Young Disraeli*, p. 125.

THE

WONDROUS TALE

OF ALROY.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"VIVIAN GREY," "CONTARINI FLEMING," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I

LONDON:
SAUNDERS AND OTLEY, CONDUIT STREET.
1833.

LONDON:
IBOTSON AND PALMER, PRINTERS, SAVOY STREET, STRAND.

TO

* * * * * * * * * *

SWEET Sister![1] as I wandered on the mountains of Sion, behold! a gazelle came bounding o'er the hills! It perceived me, it started back, it gazed at me with trembling surprise. Ah! fear not! fair creature, I fondly exclaimed, fear not, and flee not away! I too have a gazelle in a distant land; not less beautiful her airy form than thine, and her dark eye not less tremulously bright!

Ah! little did I deem, my sweetest friend, that ere I pressed that beauteous form again, Sorrow should dim the radiance of thy smile, and charge that brilliant eye with many a tear![2] Yet trust thee, dearest, in a brother's love, the purest sympathy of our fallen state! If I recall one gleam of rapture to thy pensive cheek, not in vain I strike my lonely lyre, or throw these laurels at thy fairy feet![a]

PREFACE.

THE time of this Romance is the twelfth century.

At that period, this was the political condition of the East.[a]

The Caliphate[3] was in a state of rapid decay. The Seljukian Sultans,[4] who had been called to the assistance of the Commanders of the Faithful,[5] had become like the Mayors of the palace in France,[6] the real sovereigns of the Empire. They had carved four kingdoms out of the dominions of the successors of the Prophet,[7b] which conferred titles on four Seljukian Princes, to wit, the Sultan of Bagdad, the Sultan of Persia, the Sultan of Syria, and the Sultan of Roum, or Asia Minor.

But these warlike princes, in the relaxed discipline and doubtful conduct of their armies, began themselves to evince the natural effects of luxury and indulgence. They were no longer the same[c] invincible and irresistible warriors who had poured forth from the shores of the Caspian over the fairest regions of the East, and although they still contrived to preserve order in their dominions, they witnessed with ill-concealed apprehension the rising power of the Kings of Karasmé,[8] whose conquests daily made their territories more contiguous.

With regard to the Hebrew people, it should be known that after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Eastern Jews,[9] while they acknowledged[d] the supremacy of their conquerors, gathered themselves together for all purposes of jurisdiction, under the control of a native ruler, an asserted[e] descendant of David,[10] whom they dignified with the title of "The Prince of the Captivity." If we are to credit the enthusiastic annalists of this imaginative people, there were periods of prosperity when "the Princes of the Captivity" assumed scarcely less state, and enjoyed scarcely less power than the ancient Kings of Judah[11] themselves. Certain it is that their power increased always in an exact proportion with[f] the weakness of the Caliphate, and without doubt in some of the most distracted periods of the Arabian rule, the Hebrew Princes rose into some degree of local and temporary importance. Their chief residence was Bagdad, where they remained until the eleventh century, an age fatal in Oriental history,[12] and from the disasters of which "the Princes of the Captivity" were not exempt. They are heard of even in the twelfth century. I have ventured to place one at Hamadan,[13] a favourite residence of the Hebrews, from being the burial-place of Esther and Mordecai.[14]

In this state of affairs arose Alroy,[15] a name perhaps unknown to the vast majority of my readers; yet, if I mistake not, a memorable being, and the dry

record of whose marvellous career I have long considered as enveloping the richest materials of poetic fiction.[a]

With regard to the supernatural machinery of this romance, it is Cabalistical[16] and correct. From the Spirits of the Tombs to the sceptre of Solomon,[17] authority may be found in the traditions of the Hebrews for all these spiritual introductions.[b]

I believe that the character of Oriental life is not unfaithfully portrayed in these pages. It has undergone less changes than the genius of the Occident. I have had the advantage of studying the Asiatics in their most celebrated countries and capitals. An existence of blended splendour and repose, varied only by fitful starts of extravagant and overwhelming action, and marvellous vicissitudes of fortune, a strong influence of individual character, a blind submission to destiny, imagination, passion, credulity: these are some of the principal features of society in the most favoured regions of the globe.

And now for my style. I must frankly confess that I have invented a new one. I am conscious of the hazard of such innovation, but I have not adopted my system without long meditation, and a severe examination of its qualities. I have in another work already ventured to express my opinion that the age of Versification has past. I have there observed, "The mode of composition must ever be greatly determined by the manner in which the composition can be made public. In ancient days, the voice was the medium by which we became acquainted with the inventions of a poet. In such a method, where those who listened had no time to pause, and no opportunity to think, it was necessary that everything should be obvious. The audience who were perplexed would soon become wearied. The spirit of ancient poetry, therefore, is rather material than metaphysical. Superficial, not internal; there is much simplicity and much nature, but little passion, and less philosophy. To obviate the baldness, which is the consequence of a style where the subject and the sentiments are rather intimated than developed, the poem was enriched by music, and enforced by action. Occasionally, were added the enchantment of scenery, and the fascination of the dance. But the poet did not depend merely upon these brilliant accessaries. He resolved that his thoughts should be expressed in a manner different from other modes of communicating ideas. He caught a suggestion from his sister art, and invented metre. And in this modulation, he introduced a new system of phraseology, which marked him out from the crowd, and which has obtained the title of 'poetic diction.'

"His object in this system of words was to heighten his meaning by strange phrases, and unusual constructions. Inversion was invented to clothe a common-place with an air of novelty; vague epithets were introduced to prop up a monotonous modulation; were his meaning to be enforced, he shrank from wearisome ratiocination and the agony of precise conceptions, and sought refuge in a bold personification, or a beautiful similitude. The art of Poetry was to express natural feelings in unnatural language.

"Institutions ever survive their purpose, and customs govern us when their cause is extinct. And this mode of communicating poetic invention still remained, when the advanced civilization of man, in multiplying manuscripts, might have made many suspect that the time had arrived when the poet was to cease to sing, and to learn to write. Had the splendid refinement of Imperial Rome not been doomed to such rapid decay, and such mortifying and degrading vicissitudes, I believe that Versification would have worn out. Unquestionably that empire, in its multifarious population, scenery, creeds, and customs, offered the richest materials for emancipated Fiction, materials, however, far too vast and various for the limited capacity of metrical celebration.

"That beneficent Omnipotence, before which we must bow down, has so ordered it, that Imitation should be the mental feature of Modern Europe; and has ordained that we should adopt a Syrian religion, a Grecian literature, and a Roman law. At the revival of letters, we behold the portentous spectacle of national poets communicating their inventions in an exotic form. Conscious of the confined nature of their method, yet unable to extricate themselves from its fatal ties, they sought variety in increased artifice of diction, and substituted for the melody of the lyre, the barbaric clash of rhyme.

"A revolution took place in the mode of communicating Thought. Now, at least, it was full time that we should have emancipated ourselves for ever from sterile metre. One would have supposed that the Poet who could not only write, but even print his inventions, would have felt that it was both useless and unfit that they should be communicated by a process invented when his only medium was simple recitation. One would have supposed, that the Poet would have rushed with desire to the new world before him, that he would have seized the new means that permitted him to revel in a universe of boundless invention; to combine the highest ideal creation with the infinite delineation of teeming Nature; to unravel all the dark mysteries of our bosoms, and all the bright purposes of our being; to become the great instructor and champion of his species; and not only delight their fancy, and charm their senses, and command their will, but demonstrate their rights, illustrate their necessities, and expound the object of their existence; and all this too in a style charming and changing with its universal theme, now tender, now sportive; now earnest, now profound; now sublime, now pathetic; and substituting for the dull monotony of metre, the most various, and exquisite, and inexhaustible melody."*

While I have endeavoured to effect my own emancipation from the trammels of the old style, I do not for a moment flatter myself that the new one, which I offer, combines those rare qualities which I anticipate may be the ultimate result of this revolution. But such as it is, it stands upon its own merits, and may lead abler men to achieve abler consequences.

* Contarini Fleming, vol. iii.

It has been urged by a very ingenious and elegant critic, when commenting, perhaps with the apprehensive indignation of a versifier, upon the passage which I have quoted, "that the melodies of language are the echoes of the melodies of thought: as in hearing martial music, the step involuntarily takes a statelier tread, as to gayer airs, a lighter and more buoyant one; so does the elevated idea take a more noble, or the feelings of tenderness a sweeter tone, than those of ordinary discourse."

I perfectly assent to this remark, which was intended to show "the fallacies" of my system. I do not oppose Melody because I oppose Verse. Thoughts are not always melodious, ideas always noble, and feelings always tender. The curse of metre is, that it makes all thoughts, ideas, and feelings – all action and all passion alike monotonous, and is at the same time *essentially limited in its capacity of celebration*. As for myself, I never hesitate, although I discard verse, to have recourse to rhythm whenever I consider its introduction desirable, and occasionally even to rhyme. There is no doubt that the style in which I have attempted to write this work is a delicate and difficult instrument for an artist to handle. He must not abuse his freedom. He must alike beware the turgid and the bombastic, the meagre and the mean. He must be easy in his robes of state, and a degree of elegance and dignity must accompany him even in the camp and the market-house. The language must rise gradually with the rising passions of the speakers, and subside in harmonious unison with their sinking emotions.

With regard to the conduct of this tale, it will speedily be observed to be essentially dramatic. Had, indeed, the drama in this country not been a career encompassed with difficulties, I should have made Alroy the hero of a Tragedy. But as, at the present day, this is a mode of composition which for any practical effect is almost impossible, I have made him the hero of a Dramatic Romance. The Author, therefore, seldom interferes in the conduct of the story. He has not considered it his duty to step in between the reader and the beings of his imagination, to develop and dwell upon their feelings, or to account for their characters and actions. He leaves them in general to explain every thing for themselves, substituting on his part Description for Scenery, and occasional bursts of lyric melody for that illustrative music, without which all dramatic representations are imperfect, and which renders the serious Opera of the Italians the most effective performance of modern times, and most nearly approaching the exquisite drama of the ancient Greeks.

To the Tale of Alroy I have added the history of a Christian hero placed in a somewhat similar position, but achieving a very different end; and I hope the reader will experience the pleasure of an agreeable contrast in the Rise of the great Iskander.[a]