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**Transatlantic Grammars: Lindley Murray
and William Cobbett**

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The American, Lindley Murray, and the Englishman, William Cobbett, define “grammar” in comparably inclusive ways. The first sentence of Murray’s 1795 *English Grammar* declares: “English Grammar is the art of speaking and writing the English language with propriety” (1). Cobbett understands his project in deceptively similar terms: “The business of grammar is to show the connexion between words and the manner of using words properly” (*Grammar*, ¶ 284). For both writers “grammar” is not primarily the systematic study of the structure of a language, but expands to rhetoric in general, the employment of language for persuasive effect, inseparable from the hierarchies of authority and power in society. These general terms acquire particular tensions because Murray, the American, publishes in Britain, and Cobbett, the Englishman, publishes in New York. At this reach, Murray’s “propriety” and Cobbett’s “properly” split apart. Tracking the convergences and divergences between Murray and Cobbett registers the traffic of persons and ideas across the Atlantic, and provides another instance of how fundamental political battles in each country were waged on the field of grammar itself.

Lindley Murray is characterized by Charles Monaghan as “the largest selling author in the world during the first four decades of the nineteenth century” (Monaghan, vii). Murray was born in 1745 in Pennsylvania to an Irish immigrant father, Robert Murray, and a Quaker mother; he was a student in Benjamin Franklin’s academy in Philadelphia before the family moved to New York in 1753. The Murray family became such successful merchants that their name is memorialized on Murray Hill in New York City; their trade with Britain was endangered by the politics of the increasingly revolutionary colonies, and in 1765, the year of the Stamp Act, Robert moved to London, where he was joined a year later by Lindley and his Quaker wife. They returned to New York in 1771, to encounter in 1775 the prohibition by the Continental Association of British imports. The Murrays surreptitiously tried to unload one of their ships, but were detected and publicly exposed. Robert and his brother were almost expelled from the city; Lindley withdrew to Islip on Long Island, remaining there until 1779 and quietly resuming trade with Britain. In 1784, with the colonists triumphant, Lindley left for Britain, “a sacrificial lamb,” concludes Monaghan, whose exile warded off the confiscation of his father’s property

in New York (86). Lindley and his wife settled amid the Quaker community in York, where he remained until his death in 1826 as an American citizen and legal alien, living from his closely monitored investments in the United States.

Teachers in a recently founded Quaker girls’ school at York urged Murray to compile a grammar for them, and from this request to contribute to “a chaste and guarded education of young readers” grew Murray’s immense publishing enterprise (*Memoirs*, 95; qtd also by Frances Austin, 53). His *English Grammar* appeared in 1795, first under a York imprint and then from Longman in London, followed by an abridgement and a set of exercises; his *English Reader* appeared in 1799; by 1810, the entire range, forming a curriculum, was available in the United States. By 1840, Murray’s total published output reached about fifteen and a half million copies, and his work was more popular in the United States than in Britain.

In Britain the *Grammar* was the staple; in the United States it was the *English Reader*, a volume which contained no selections from Americans. As David Simpson has wittily commented, “it was to prove more difficult to declare independence from Samuel Johnson than to reject George III” (Simpson, 33). The *Reader* included selections from the 18th century commonwealth-men, from Addison, Johnson, Steele and Francis Hutcheson; almost half of the selections were from Hugh Blair, the Scots minister and man of letters, whose *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783) were the standard manual of an earlier generation. As “belles lettres” suggests, Murray’s aim was to perpetuate the values of Enlightenment polite culture. In the *English Grammar* he sought “a careful selection of the most useful matter . . . with a special regard to the propriety and purity of all the examples and illustrations” (Murray, *Memoirs*, 91; qtd also by Allott, 27) a project extended in the *Key to the Exercises* (1799), in which he introduced “a great number of sentences, selected from the best writers, and distinguished by their perspicuity and elegance . . . to imbue his [the student’s] mind with sentiments of the highest importance, by interweaving principles of piety and virtue with the study of language” (Murray, *Memoirs*, 92). Stephen Allott neatly epitomizes the cultural formation: “Correct beliefs and correct idiom are both to be taught by an intensive process of memorisation” (60).

Cobbett vigorously contrasts with Murray's gentility, a contrast more pointed by the shared cross-Atlantic experience. Cobbett was born in Surrey in 1765, and "bred at the plough-tail," as he later recalled (*Year's Residence*, 17). From 1785 to 1791, he served as a soldier in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, then filled with American loyalists who had fled the Revolution to Canada, proving the connection between writing and access to power by rising to sergeant-major on the basis of his hard-won literacy. He returned to England to lay charges of corruption against four officers of his regiment, provoking the wrath of the military-political establishment. His response, the pamphlet *The Soldier's Friend*, extended the controversy, and, after a honeymoon in France that was also a self-protective flight, Cobbett and his wife settled in Philadelphia, making friends in the Quaker community. Distance reaffirmed Englishness: alarmed at the violence in France and disappointed in America, Cobbett established himself as a prominent journalist whose pamphlets and paper, *Porcupine's Gazette*, the most widely read in America, forcefully criticized democracy. Again embroiled in controversy, Cobbett left the United States for England in 1800 as a conservative, but renewed contact with English policy turned him into the anti-government radical publisher of the weekly *Political Register*, founded in 1802. In 1810, his protest against the flogging of English soldiers by German mercenaries brought him to a trial for sedition that landed him in Newgate. When he emerged from prison two years later his advocacy of reform made him a target for prosecution under the 1817 Gagging Acts, and Cobbett fled to the United States, taking a farm at North Hempstead, Long Island. The rural life that he saw being destroyed at home by the commercial, increasingly centralized economy epitomized for him by the growth of London, the "Wen," was recaptured on Long Island, yet it was close enough to New York City to permit his continuous dispatch of material for the *Political Register*. As James Grande has recently reiterated, the English farmer had become an international writer. Grande quotes from the August 16 *Political Register* (vol. 32, No. 20, Col. 609): "Mr. Cobbett's *Weekly Political Pamphlet*, though written in America, and first published in that country, relates chiefly to English affairs, and is especially intended for English Readers" (95). As Cobbett had written in a long letter on the Treaty of Ghent addressed to Major Cartwright, longtime champion of American rights and political reformer in Britain, "[t]he great question with regard to the excellence of *really free government* has now been decided in a way that must inevitably produce conviction throughout the whole world" (*PR*, vol. 27, no. 2, col. 48; January 14, 1815; the letter is quoted in part in

Ch. 4 of Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, the most trenchant discussion yet of the logic of Cobbett's shifting positions). Undone by internal violence and the imperialism of Napoleon, France had been succeeded as example by the United States, and it was from Long Island that Cobbett composed his analysis of the 1817 Acts that had driven him abroad, "A History of the Last Hundred Days of English Freedom."

In 1818, Cobbett published two books in New York that should be considered together: *A Grammar of the English Language*, the chief subject of this essay, and *A Year's Residence in the United States of America*, nominally addressed "to persons who intend coming to this country from England" (62). In the convenient paperback edition of Cobbett's *Grammar* that appeared from Oxford University Press in 1984, Robert Burchfield, then the chief editor of the Oxford English Dictionaries, acknowledges that he had been spurred to the publication by Henry Hardy, the editor of Isaiah Berlin's papers, and Marilyn Butler. In a textual note Burchfield writes: "Cobbett's *Grammar* was first published in 1818 in New York and was reprinted in unaltered form, but with a different typeface, in London the following year. . . . In the 1823 edition, the version reprinted here, Cobbett retained the original text, but added 'six lessons, intended to prevent Statesmen from using false grammar, and from writing in an awkward manner'" (xii). I will return to the six lessons, which are important and warrant addition, but the 1823 text is not that of 1818, and the differences are significant. Cobbett's title-page immediately makes clear the distance between his audience and the genteel Quaker girls' school that prompted Murray: *A Grammar of the English Language, in a Series of Letters. Intended for the Use of Schools and of Young Persons in general; but more especially for the Use of Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-Boys*. In the 1818 New York edition and the 1819 London edition the title page is followed by a Dedication to "Mr Benbow, Shoe-Maker of Manchester," which begins:

Dear Sir,

When, in the month of August 1817, you were shut up in an English Dungeon by order of Lord Sidmouth, without any of the rules or forms prescribed by the law of the land; without having been confronted with your accuser, without having been informed of the charges against you, while you were suffering the under the fangs of absolute power, I did myself the honour to address to you, from this place, two letters on English Grammars, and in those Letters I stated to you my intention of publishing a book on that subject.

William Benbow, who, in addition to his trade as shoemaker, was one of the most radical of English booksellers, had been imprisoned after the suspension of *Habeas Corpus* in March, 1817, the act that had impelled Cobbett's departure to America. This dedication is replaced in the 1820 and subsequent editions by a Dedication to "Her Most Gracious Majesty, Queen Caroline," whose part Cobbett had taken when George IV banned her from his coronation and sought a divorce. If both dedications signal Cobbett's oppositional politics, the gulf between an address to an imprisoned shoemaker and a queen is nonetheless wide.

The letters to which Cobbett alludes in the vanished dedication to Benbow are even more defiant. Diagnosing in the *Political Register* of November 29, 1817, the ineffectuality of the agitations of the British radicals Cobbett comments:

There was one thing only in which any of you were deficient, and that was in the mere art of so arranging the words in your Resolutions and Petitions as to make those compositions what is called *grammatically correct*. Hence men of a hundredth part of the *mind* of some of the authors of the Petitions were enabled to cavil at them on this account, and to infer from this incorrectness of arrangement, that the Petitioners were a set of poor ignorant creatures, who knew nothing of what they were talking about; a set of the "*Lower Classes*," who ought never to raise their reading above that of children's books, Christmas Carols, and the like.

He continues:

For my part, I have always held a mere knowledge of the rules of grammar very cheap. It is a study, which demands hardly any powers of mind. . . . Grammar is to literary composition what a linchpin is to a waggon. It is a poor pitiful thing in itself; it bears no part of the weight; communicates nothing to the force; adds not in the least to the celerity; but, still the waggon cannot very well and safely go on without it; she is constantly liable to reel and be compelled to stop, which, at the least, exposes the driver to be laughed at, and that, too, by those who are wholly unable to drive themselves. Therefore, trifling, and even contemptible, as this branch of knowledge is *in itself*, it is of vast importance as to the means of giving the great powers of the mind their proper effect; and, also as to the means of enabling the People to criticise the speeches and the writings of the insolent Order of the Pigtail, not one of a thousand of whom knows any thing worth speaking of

even of this snivelling science. The grammarian from whom a man of genius learns his rules has little more claim to a share of such a man's renown than has the goose, who yields the pens with which he writes; but, still the pens are *necessary*, and so the grammar. (*PR*, vol. 32, 29 November 1817, cols. 1062-65)

One could scarcely imagine a contrast sharper than that between Murray, for whom grammar was a means to inculcate propriety and purity, piety and virtue, and Cobbett, for whom grammar is a weapon the disenfranchised need to empower their political voice.

The vivid images of the reeling wagon, the embarrassed and insecure driver, and the geese typify the pithy force of Cobbett's prose, summoning a picture of outdoor labor at the antipodes from Murray's drawing room and library. Cobbett's addressee is "My dear little James," his fourteen-year-old son, and his constant referent is the farm:

Grammar, as I have observed to you before, teaches us *how to make use of our words*; that is to say, it teaches us how to make use of them in a proper manner, as I used to teach you how to sow and plant the beds in the garden; for you could have thrown about seeds and stuck in plants of some sort or other, without any teaching of mine; and so can anybody put masses of words on paper; but to be able to choose the words which ought to be employed, and to place them where they ought to be placed, we must become acquainted with . . . Grammar. (¶2)

Even before this instruction Cobbett reminds James that "every young man . . . should be able to assert with effect the rights and liberties of his country. . . . When you come to read the history of these struggles in the cause of freedom, you will find, that tyranny has no enemy so formidable as the pen" (32). Whereas Murray chooses examples for students to emulate, Cobbett's examples are all of abuses, and though they enforce the same grammatical point the instances shift from edition to edition to ensure topicality. The Benbow of 1818 yields to Queen Caroline in 1820; "Sidmouth *imprisoned* Benbow" illustrates the active verb in 1818; "Pitt *restrained* the Bank" serves the same function in 1823 (¶83) . . . but Sidmouth remains in the wickedly funny illustration of the time of the verb: "Sidmouth *writes* a Circular Letter; Sidmouth *wrote* a Circular Letter; Sidmouth *will write* a Circular Letter" (¶90).

For Murray, influenced by the elocutionists, reading and pronouncing are nearly synonymous

terms, as reading and spelling are for him intertwined (Tieken-Boon von Ostade, 57). Faced with linguistic diversity, he sought to impose a standard. Cobbett savors local differences:

In some counties of England many words are pronounced in a manner different from that in which they are pronounced in other counties; and, between the pronunciation of Scotland and that of Hampshire the difference is very great indeed. But . . . the differences are of very little real consequence. For instance, though the Scotch say *coorn*, the Londoners *caun*, and the Hampshire folks *can*, we know that they all *mean* to say *corn*. (§17)

When, in *A Year's Residence*, Cobbett asserts that there "is no *brogue*, no *provincial dialect*," in America, it is not to deny the fact of (ever-increasing) regional difference, so much as to affirm the absence of linguistic stigmatization and rigid class division. The assertion occurs within a paragraph praising the general cultivation of the Americans: "every farmer is more or less of a *reader*. . . No class like that which the French call *peasantry*, and which degrading appellation the miscreant spawn of the Funds have, of late years, applied to the whole mass of the most useful people in England, those who do the work and fight the battles" (*Year's Residence*, ¶356). "Indeed, this is *the main thing*," Cobbett avers in the General Preface of the work: "this is really and truly a land of *farmers*" (*Year's Residence*, 16). It is a statement that he can sustain only by averting his gaze from New York City, but it enables him to mount a paean to the skill, energy, and resolution of the American laborer:

This is the stuff that gives us Englishmen an asylum; that gives us time to breathe; that enables us to deal our tyrants blows, which, without the existence of this stuff, they never would receive. This America, this scene of happiness under a free government, is the beam in the eye, the thorn in the side, the worm in the vitals, of every despot on the face of the earth. . . . Full pocket or empty pocket, these American labourers are always the same men: no saucy cunning in the one case, and no base crawling in the other. This too arises from free institutions of government. A man has a voice *because he is a man*, and not because he is the *possessor of money*. And, shall I *never* see our English labourers in this happy state? (§319-20)

"Us Englishmen": at the outset of *A Year's Residence*, in the General Preface signed and dated from "North Hempsted, Long Island," Cobbett confessed

that "I myself am bound to England for life" (*Year's Residence*, 18). Forty pages on he reiterates: "England is my country, and to England I shall return," as he did in 1819 (*Year's Residence*, ¶ 13). Because he understood American character as the product of the "free institutions" inherited from Britain but there eroded, Cobbett's New York residence intensified his Englishness. He valued the nascent United States both for what it had—favorable climate, fertile soil, ample land—and for what it didn't have. In the polemic of *A Year's Residence*, the predominant goods are the absence of the grinding taxation he attributes to the Boroughmongers, Fundholders, Standing Armies, and Priests of an established church. The Tithes are the principal oppression:

[t]he English farmer gives, and is compelled to give, the Parson a tenth part of his whole crop and of his fruit and milk and eggs and calves and lambs and pigs and wool and honey. They [the "laughing" American farmers] cannot believe this. . . . I sometimes wish them to be farmers in England. I said to a neighbour the other day, in half anger: "I wish your farm were at Botley. There is a fellow there, who would soon let you know, that your fine apple-trees do not belong to you. He would have his nose in your sheep-fold, your calf-pens, your milk-pail, your sow's-bed, if not in the sow herself." (*Year's Residence*, ¶429)

"Throughout the whole of this extensive country," Cobbett rejoiced, "there exists not one single animal of that description," the "prying, greedy Parson" (*Year's Residence*, 111-12). For Lindley Murray, who exhorted his readers to "Avoid *low expressions*," even such as "Topsy turvy" and "hurly burly" (*English Grammar*, 180), the vignette of the parson with his nose in the sow violently affronts propriety, but in Cobbett's sense coarse speech is proper for the occasion, a dramatic encounter designed to awaken through the naive American interlocutor the political consciousness of the English reader.¹

For Cobbett the United States was a vision of what England and Englishmen had been, and might be again if stripped of an established Church, a credit economy—what he elsewhere insisted was a debt economy—entrenching economic and status inequality in statute law made by a corrupt Parliament. "The People of America," he wrote, passed constitutions that forbade "*Titles of Nobility, any Privileged Class, any Established Church, or, to pass any law to give to any body the power of imprisoning men otherwise than in due course of Common Law*" (*Year's Residence*, ¶414). Their forefathers brought English common law with them, and "the 'English Hospitality'" a capitalist regime had destroyed at home; a cleansing re-

turn to the old institutions would “restore to England the ‘hospitality,’ for which she was once famed, but which now really exists no where but in America” (*Year’s Residence*, ¶352; ¶324).

The epitome of the old English hospitality, and of his alertness to the influence on character of the economic and political structure of nations, are the Pennsylvania Quakers, to whom Cobbett returned in early 1818:

Here I am amongst the thick of the Quakers, whose houses and families pleased me so much formerly, and which pleasure is now all revived. Here all is easy, plenty, and *cheerfulness*. . . . Their minds, like their dress, are simple and strong. Their kindness is shown more in acts than words. Let others say what they will, I have uniformly found those whom I have intimately known of this sect, sincere and upright men; and I verily believe, that all those charges of hypocrisy and craft, that we hear against Quakers, arise from a feeling of *envy*; envy inspired by seeing them possessed of such abundance of all those things which are the fair fruits of care, industry, economy, sobriety, and order, and which are justly forbidden to the drunkard, the glutton, the prodigal, and the lazy (*Year’s Residence*, Part I, March 10, 1818).

In England, by contrast, Cobbett excoriated the Quakers as hoarders and speculators who robbed the farmer of the profit of his labor: “the Quaker gets rich, and the poor devil of a farmer is squeezed into a gaol. The *Quakers* carry on the far greater part of this work. They are, to the products of the earth, what the Jews are to gold and silver” (*Rural Rides*, 26 July 1823, 73.) And later, praising the open dealing of the market at Devizes:

Almost every where else the corn is sold by *sample*; it is sold by *juggling* in a corner; the parties meet and drink first; it is night work; there is no *fair and open market*; the mass of the people do not know *what the prices are*, and all this favours that *monopoly* which makes the corn change many times, perhaps, before it reaches the *mouth*, leaving a profit in each pair of hands, and which monopoly is, for the greatest part, carried on by the villainous tribe of the *Quakers*, none of whom ever work, and all of whom prey upon the rest of the community, as those infernal devils, the wasps, prey upon the bees. (*Rural Rides*, September 3, 1826, 317).

In America the Quakers are themselves the industrious bee-like farmers; in England, barred from de-

grees at the universities, like the Jews they enter commerce (as did the Murrays), manufacturing, and banking (Barclays and Lloyds Banks have Quaker roots) becoming part of “the Thing,” the financial system Cobbett fought.

What *A Year’s Residence* argues at the scale of political institutions, *A Grammar of the English Language* argues at the scale of the language that embodies and perpetuates them. Cobbett’s determination to sever English grammar from the conceptions and terminology of Greek and Latin grammars, his running attack on “the learned languages,” forms a central part of his assault on the institutions which sustain their hegemony. “[O]f what *use* to us,” he demands of his son,

to enter on, and spend our time in, inquiries of mere curiosity? It is for monks, and for Fellows of English Colleges, who live by the sweat of other people’s brows, to spend their time in this manner, and to call the result of their studies *learning*; for you, who will have to earn what you eat and what you drink and what you wear, it is to avoid every thing that tends not to real utility. (*Grammar*, ¶127)

Unlike Murray’s elegant extracts, Cobbett’s specimen sentences are openly combative: “*There* are many men, who have been at Latin-Schools for years, and who, at last, cannot write six sentences in English correctly” (*Grammar*, ¶61). Throughout the *Grammar*, Cobbett takes potshots at Lindley Murray and his favored authors Blair, Addison, and Johnson. He repudiates the pedagogy of memorisation through which Murray would pass on the heritage of privilege and politeness: “Never attempt to *get by rote* any part of your instructions,” he advises James. “Whoever falls into that practice soon begins to esteem the powers of *memory* more than those of *reason*; and the former are despicable indeed when compared with the latter” (*Grammar*, ¶137).

The six lessons added to the 1823 edition, aimed at “prevent[ing] Statesmen from using false grammar,” cap the exposure of establishment hegemony. Doggedly anatomizing the solecisms, blunders, confusions, and evasions in the writings of Lord Castlereagh, the Prime Minister, and the Duke of Wellington, Cobbett demystifies the authority of government and simultaneously raises the stature of the plain speech he advocates and exemplifies.

A visitor to the Murrays in York in 1819 commented that though it was thirty-four years since they had left New York “their feelings are still American” (qtd in Allott, 42). The irony that their model

of linguistic propriety was delivered by an American was not lost on the British, but the weight Murray carried in America grew from the reverse national attribution: his *English Grammar* and *English Reader* embodied Anglophile gentility, at once aspired to and declining by the mid-19th century as the United States developed its own complicated multilayered identities, frontier, Southern, commercial. If Murray's ideal America grew from polite enlightenment sociability, Cobbett's reached back still further, to the vision of a pre-Tudor hearty yeoman farmer. In the *Year's Residence* Cobbett quotes a lengthy passage from the 15th century champion of the common law, John Fortescue, celebrating "the happy state of the English, produced by their *good laws*, which kept every man's property sacred, even from the grasp of the king" (*Year's Residence*, ¶351).² The Civil War was to test the vision of American "universal civility" epitomized for Cobbett in the Pennsylvania Quakers, as the Napoleonic Wars had tested the British social fabric. Cobbett's *Grammar* was reprinted several times in America across the 19th century; Murray's works lost their hold, yielding to the *Readers* of William Holmes McGuffey, born in 1800 in far western Pennsylvania to Scots emigrants, and at first a traveling instructor along the frontiers of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kentucky—but Murray's works did not entirely disappear. Sometime after 1856, in a notebook devoted to "Words," perhaps intended for a future study of the English language, Walt Whitman wrote:

Murray's Grammar

The fault ~~principally~~ that he fails to understand ~~to where~~ those points where the language [is] strongest, and where [the] developments (*sic*) should [be] most encouraged, namely, in being elliptic and idiomatic.—Murray would make of the young men merely a correct and careful set of writers under laws.—He would deprive writing of its life—there would be nothing voluntary and in-socient left.

— (Walt Whitman, *Daybooks and Notebooks*, III, 666-67)³

And so I conclude with a fantasy of triangulating Lindley Murray, William Cobbett, and Walt Whitman, "one of the roughs," to extend a study of the contexts shaping 19th century English across the Atlantic.

NOTES

¹The sharp attack on parsons and tithes is consonant with Quaker belief that God might speak directly to each individual, without the intermediary of a church structure.

²Cobbett expanded his argument for the superiority of pre-Tudor England to the modern state in *A history of the Protestant reformation in England and Ireland: showing that the event has impoverished the main body of the people in those countries* (1829). On this text see my "The History in Cobbett's *History of the Protestant Reformation*," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 64 (2001), 429-43.

³I was directed to this passage by Thomas Gustafson, *Representative Words: Politics, Literature, and the American Language, 1776-1865*, 342.

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