

INTRODUCTION

Grammar is to literary composition what a linch-pin 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.¹

As this vigorous and homespun passage suggests, for William Cobbett the study of grammar--by which he meant the practical business of "*how to make use of words*" (p.31) rather than the more theoretical investigation of language itself--was not a work of drudgery but an exciting challenge. His *Grammar of the English Language*, first published in New York in 1818, during his second residence in the United States, has been reprinted with a persistence that attests as much to its liveliness as to its utility. Hazlitt, in his *Table Talk*, found it "as entertaining as a story-book", ² and nearly half a century later Sir Henry Lytton Bulwer pronounced it "the only amusing grammar in the world." ³ Tom Moore, no friend of Cobbett's politics, recorded in his diary on July 25, 1819, that Lords Holland and Lansdowne "said they neither of them had ever read any English grammar till Cobbett's lately",⁴ and Sydney Smith, writing to Lord Grey earlier in the same year, declared: "You must read Cobbett's Grammar; it is said to be exceedingly good."⁵ More recently, G. D. H. Cole has described it as "in some ways his greatest work" adding that "Never was a grammar so readable..."⁶ Yet behind the book's high spirits there is an almost Victorian earnestness. If he insists that grammar is "a poor pitiful thing in itself", Cobbett is equally emphatic in adding that it is nevertheless "necessary knowledge"⁷ and that no one can expect to

¹*Political Register*, Nov. 29, 1817 (Letter to Benbow, dated from North Hampstead [sic], Long Island, Sept. 19, 1817), col. 1064.

²*Complete Works*, ed. P. P. Howe (London and Toronto, 1931), VIII, p. 53.

³*Historical Characters* (London, 1868), II, p. 156.

⁴*Memoirs, Journal, and Correspondence of Thomas Moore*, ed. Lord John Russell (London, 1853), II, p. 346.

⁵*Letters of Sydney Smith*, ed. Nowell C. Smith (Oxford, 1953), pp. 321-322.

⁶*Life of William Cobbett* (New York, 1947), pp. 233, 270.

⁷*PR*, Dec. 6, 1817, col. 1120.

“obtain and retain any great degree of influence over the minds”⁸ of others without it.

But the acquisition of such knowledge, Cobbett felt, did not need to be painful. The greatest popular journalist of nineteenth century England, he does not merely lay down rules—he carefully explains the reasons behind them. These reasons, however, he bases in a kind of plain yeoman’s logic rather than in linguistic theory. For Cobbett intended his book as a manual of instruction (“for the Use of Schools...Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-boys”, as the subtitle puts it) and not, like most grammars, as a description of the structure of the language. “Grammar, perfectly understood,” he wrote, “enables us, not only to express our meaning fully and clearly, but so to express it as to enable us to defy the ingenuity of man to give to our words any other meaning than that which we ourselves intend them to express” (p. 34). Had description been his primary aim, his book would now be of interest solely to linguists. But he preferred instead to prescribe what he believed to be good usage—and because his taste was for brevity, simplicity, and precision, his book, though now over 150 years old, remains a sound guide to clear and vigorous expression. “He who writes badly,” Cobbett declares, “thinks badly. Confusedness in words can proceed from nothing but the thoughts which give rise to them” (p. 152). And elsewhere in the *Grammar* he warns us: “One of the greatest of all faults in writing and in speaking is this; the using of many words to *say little*” (p. 150).

Cobbett’s zeal for clarity and vigor in English prose had, however, a more formidable basis than personal taste. Believing with Bacon that knowledge is power, he felt it a “duty to my country” to transmit a knowledge of good English to the “whole body of the people” in order that they might become “so completely capable of detecting and exposing the tricks and contrivances of their oppressors, that the power of doing mischief will die a natural death in the hands of those oppressors.”⁹ Like George Orwell much later, he saw that obscurantism and verbosity were the servants of political oppression. Englishmen could not hope to play an effective part in their country’s destiny until they could learn to see through the verbal “tricks and contrivances” with which the political establishment of pre-Reform days sometimes tried to conceal its real purposes. That Cobbett’s contempt for the prose of England’s rulers had some justification is clear from the specimens he gives us throughout the *Grammar*--and especially from those in Letter XXIV, which he added in 1823. His comments are sometimes pedantic and carping, but there is no

⁸*Ibid.*, col. 1106.

⁹*PR*, Nov. 29, 1817, col. 1083.

quarrelling with his general contention that the prose of official utterance—then as now—can be abominable. By showing his countrymen how to write clearly and precisely he hoped to develop their critical sense and so, as it were, inoculate them against political oppression. In this regard Cobbett was well ahead of his time, for technological developments in the present century, as Roy Harris recently observed in the *Times Literary Supplement* (30 January 1981), have greatly increased the need for such inoculation:

With the modern communication explosion, more people are becoming exposed to public language — directed at them through “one-way” channels which afford no effective possibility of reply — than ever before in the history of the human race. Those who control this language — the politicians, the advertisers, the government officials, the journalists — have in their hands a weapon of quite frightening subtlety and power. So subtle and so powerful that for much of the time its potential victims are not even aware of the danger.

In order to illustrate his grammatical precepts, Cobbett ransacked the writings of his political enemies for examples of verbal confusion. He gives us colossal blunders from Pitt, Castlereagh, and the like—or, indeed, from Addison and Dr. Johnson, for he is as free with literary reputations as with political ones. Even when illustrating something as general as nouns of number he cannot resist a few digs at the abuses of established institutions; his examples are “Mob, Parliament, Rabble, House of Commons, Regiment, Court of King’s Bench, Den of Thieves” (p. 91). And when he comes to adjectives and their misuse, his relentless sense of logic gives us the following passage:

...amongst a select society of empty heads, “*moderate* Reform” has long been a fashionable expression; an expression which Major Cartwright, in one of his essays, ridicules by asking the gentlemen who use it, how they would like to obtain *moderate justice* in a court of law, or to meet with *moderate chastity* in a wife (p. 104).

Illustrative matter of this kind (and the witty, sometimes even irascible, commentary that accompanies it) is not, as one early critic complained,¹⁰ strictly relevant to a work on grammar; yet it imparts a liveliness which makes the book vastly more entertaining, and it entices the student to read on.

All this should suggest that one of the most interesting features of the *Grammar* is the bizarre personality which informs its every line. Cobbett was a titanic egotist (the book is, indeed, heavily autobiographical) and he would be unbearable were it not for the utter lack of affectation which Hazlitt found in him. It is this quality that turns what in a more pretentious writer might have been mere bombast into a fascinating psychic battle between the author’s ego and a reality which consists in the

¹⁰A *Critical Examination of Cobbett’s English Grammar* by “X” (London, 1819).

grammatical vices of his political and ideological antagonists. In every instance, of course, Cobbett emerges triumphant, and in most cases he has reason on his side. His book—which in modern terms is more a manual of usage than a grammar—thus becomes one of those rare works in which the personality of its author can legitimately interest us quite as much as his subject matter.

That Cobbett's immediate motives for writing an English grammar were in large part political should not lead us to suppose that he was without qualifications for such a task. Virtually self-educated, he reached the turning point of his life at the age of twenty-one when he enlisted in a regiment destined for service in Canada. But before leaving England for the wilds of Nova Scotia and the first of three visits to the New World, he taught himself the rules of grammar by writing out passages from Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762) and memorizing them while standing guard duty at the regimental depot at Chatham. Here he continued to develop "an extraordinary capacity for literary cultivation"¹¹ which had begun in his teens with the discovery of Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, a work of which he became immensely fond. His literary tastes, if in retrospect they seem appropriate, were highly idiosyncratic. Shakespeare and Milton never much appealed to him—nor did such contemporaries as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and Shelley. Throughout his life Swift and Pope were his favorite writers, and to Swift we can perhaps trace some of the clarity and trenchancy of what Arnold called "Cobbett's sinewy idiomatic English."¹²

While stationed in Canada, Cobbett found a ready outlet for his talents as a prose writer in preparing the reports of his semi-literate superior officers, and incidentally collecting evidence of their financial dishonesty. When he returned to England in 1791 he submitted a series of petitions to the regimental authorities indicting his former officers for their graft and incompetence; although the charges were ultimately dismissed, Cobbett must have found the incident instructive, for it was his first venture in sustained polemical writing.

But far and away the most important early influence on Cobbett the grammarian was the experience of teaching English to French refugees in Philadelphia at the beginning of his first residence in the United States (1792-1800). A wish to make the work of his pupils easier led him to publish *Le Tuteur anglais, ou Grammaire régulière de la langue anglaise* in

¹¹Edward Smith in the *DNB*. Cobbett joined the Brompton circulating library at this time: "The library was not very considerable, it is true, nor in my reading was I directed by any degree of taste or choice. Novels, plays, history, poetry, all were read, and nearly with equal avidity." (*Porcupine's Works*, London, 1801, IV, p. 44).

¹²*Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor, 1962), p. 364.

March, 1795. The book enjoyed a wide success both in Philadelphia, where a new edition appeared in 1805 as *Le Maître d'anglais*, and also in Paris, where it was first published in 1801 and as late as 1861 was going into a thirty-fifth edition. The explanation for such extraordinary longevity in a book of grammar perhaps lies in what its French editors, as Cobbett noted with satisfaction, insisted was its chief merit, "that I myself always *reason*, and that I, thus, *induce the scholar to reason*; that I am not content with his *memory*, but force him to give me the use of his *mind*."¹³

What impelled him to undertake an English grammar, he later recalled, was the arrival one day of an eloquent but ungrammatical letter from a Nottingham stocking weaver which reminded him of his own early efforts.¹⁴ Resolving to stress reason instead of the conventional rote, he began the earliest version of the book about 1808-09 in a series of letters addressed to his eldest daughter, then thirteen or fourteen. The lessons progressed so well that she became, as her father wrote, "a very good grammarian before I had advanced into the middle of my work."¹⁵ He then laid the *Grammar* aside until late in 1817 when, living as a farmer-journalist in North Hempstead, Long Island, he completed and revised the work, retaining the epistolary form but addressing the letters to his fourteen-year-old son James.

Although living at a time when an acquaintance with Greek and Latin was the mark of an educated person, Cobbett had no use for the "learned languages", even as a means to an understanding of English grammar. An intensely practical and literal man, proud of his own self-acquired knowledge, he had not needed Greek or Latin and did not see why others should. "Learning", he once wrote, "consists in the possession of knowledge and the capacity of communicating that knowledge to others; and, as far as my observation will enable me to speak, what are called the *learned* languages, operate as a bar to the acquirement of real learning."¹⁶ The *Grammar* clearly reflects this bias in the assumption (now, of course, commonplace, but rare in early grammars¹⁷) that its readers are not versed in Greek or Latin and, moreover, that those languages have no very useful part to play in a description of the English language.

A further important assumption underlying the *Grammar* was Cob-

¹³PR, Dec. 6, 1817, col. 1094.

¹⁴PR, Nov. 21, 1818, col. 254.

¹⁵PR, Dec. 6, 1817, col. 1095.

¹⁶PR, Jan. 10, 1807, col. 36.

¹⁷An exception is Hugh Jones's *An Accidence to the English Tongue, chiefly for the use of such boys and men as have never learnt Latin perfectly* (London, 1724), the first English grammar written in America.

bett's belief that brains had been distributed by the creator without regard to wealth or station. Since "genius is as likely to come out of the cottage as out of the splendid mansion,"¹⁸ the ordinary laborer on the land or in the factory could not be assumed to have any fewer natural gifts than the minority who held power. Yet England's rulers spoke of their natural fitness to govern. To Cobbett this was an arrogant presumption, for in neither character nor ability, it seemed to him, did they exhibit any superiority to the common people. In a grammar of the language he saw an admirable opportunity to provide the ordinary folk of England with precisely the knowledge which they needed in order to express themselves clearly and so win a larger part in the affairs of the nation. Addressing his chapters to his fourteen-year-old son was clearly to imply that what could be learned by an adolescent boy could also be learned by an adult, however imperfect his previous education might have been.

The United States, which he came to admire for the general enlightenment of its citizens, was a case in point. "The American farmer," he wrote, "has other charms under his roof besides those attending his hospitality. He can converse with you upon almost any subject. The Bible alone does not form his library. He comes in from the heat of the sun, stripped to his shirt, takes down a volume of his Encyclopedia, or some book of science, travels, history, law, politics, or poetry. When he has rested himself, he returns to his fields or his yard."¹⁹ This enthusiasm is entirely understandable; Cobbett developed a great affection for the country which twice offered him hospitality. He was filled with admiration for a land which had no need for titles of nobility, standing armies, or expensive government. His hostility in the wake of the Revolution had gradually turned to esteem for what he called the "growing population and wonderful improvement of these immense regions".²⁰

This shift of opinion toward America coincided with another significant change--in his attitude toward Thomas Paine. Whereas he had earlier referred to the radical deist as "this traitor to his king and blasphemer of his God"²¹ and in 1802 had defended George Washington and the Federalists from his attacks, he later grew to admire Paine's work, particularly those portions dealing with finance and politics. In 1819 he exhumed Paine's bones and took them back to England, apparently intending to establish a memorial; this rather morbid act of

¹⁸*PR*, Dec. 6, 1817, col. 1107.

¹⁹*PR*, Jan. 13, 1816, col. 61.

²⁰*PR*, April 11, 1818, col. 413.

²¹*Annual Register*, Dec. 4-10, 1802, col. 763.

penance, which won him the nickname "Bone Grubber", elicited the following lines from Lord Byron:

In digging up your bones, Tom Paine,
Will. Cobbett has done well:
You visit him on eart again,
He'll visit you in hell.²²

Although never as radical as Paine, Cobbett firmly believed that the freedom of America's government and the opportunities afforded its citizens stemmed "not from the *great* learning possessed by any part of her citizens, but from the enlightened state of the minds of the whole population."²³ With his *Grammar* he hoped to encourage a similar state of affairs in England.

The readers Cobbett had in mind were, of course, working class; yet it seems likely that the book was bought primarily by ambitious members of the industrial middle classes and by relatively well-off artisans. The price of the *Grammar* was two shillings six pence. This figure looks low enough today, but in the 1820's it might well have been prohibitive for a member of the largest single group of workers, the farm laborers, who frequently received a wage of only eight shillings a week. Cobbett's *Grammar* was undoubtedly helpful to many of its readers—but it was not the instrument of social change that its author had intended.

Cobbett was born in 1763 in the attractive little town of Farnham, Surrey. His father kept an inn which even today stands beside the main road into town. Furnishing the traveller with food, drink, and lodging provided adequately for a family of six. Although he began to work on neighboring farms when only in his sixth year, young William was not forced by poverty into a life of hopeless drudgery. The elder Cobbett taught his children the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Years later his son likewise educated his own children, spending many hours gently guiding, suggesting, and posing questions, but never insisting upon conformity to a rigid educational pattern. Like Thomas Love Peacock, one of his early admirers, Cobbett had a profound distrust of formal education and preferred to assume the responsibility of educating his sons and daughters himself. One result of his labors was a family of seven healthy, mentally alert children in which the four boys became lawyers and one of the girls was later to carry on a publishing business. Another less direct result of this philosophy of self-help was, of course, the *Grammar*.

²²*The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals*, ed. Rowland E. Prothero (London, 1900), IV, p. 395.

²³*PR*, July 22, 1815, col. 68.

In 1791, after his seven years in Canada, Cobbett returned to England with his regiment. Then began an exciting year during which he unsuccessfully brought charges of corruption against his former officers, witnessed the growing radicalism of the French Revolution at first hand, and fled to America. Settling in Philadelphia with his young wife, he became first (as we have seen) a teacher of English to French emigrés, and then a publisher. In this latter capacity Cobbett defended his native land from attacks in a city where memories of the late War of Independence were still strong. This enthusiastic championing of all things British won him the nickname "Peter Porcupine", an allusion to the sharp quills of argument and denunciation which he shot out in all directions.²⁴ Indeed, his caustic comments on the American scene involved him in litigation and in 1800 he was forced to sail for England. Cobbett was then thirty-seven, the father of a growing family, with his real career just before him.

The England to which he returned was caught up in a terrible struggle against Revolutionary France that was to culminate in Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. To the horror of men as different as Cobbett and Shelley, a conservative reaction followed and came to a head in the Peterloo Massacre of 1819--in which a cavalry charge on a Manchester reform meeting is said to have killed eleven persons and injured six hundred.

But other domestic developments, subtler and more far-reaching, had also left a mark upon the nation. England was ahead of all other countries in industrial development and was well on the way to becoming the workshop of the world. Yet despite a steady rise in the national income, hunger and misery were frequently the lot of the worker, both on the land and in the factory. Conditions of life were changing at a rate unprecedented in English history. This was happening too rapidly for society to adjust itself smoothly, and while able or merely shrewd individuals were amassing fortunes, the burdens of war and economic dislocation fell on those least able to bear them. Political and social institutions were slow to respond to the profound transformation of the nation's economy. The inventive genius which Englishmen displayed in industry and trade did not extend to politics. Their country, although leading the world in the production of manufactured goods, was still governed by landed interests. An oligarchy of a few thousand people determined to hold on to their authority dominated England, unable and unwilling to grapple with the problems which industrialism had brought.

²⁴The ultimate source of the nickname may have been Joseph Hall's *Virgidemiarum* (1598):

...satire should be like the porcupine./ That shoots sharp quills out in angry line,/ And wounds the blushing cheek, and fiery eye,/ Of him that hears, and readeth guiltily.

The obvious suffering of the once independent hand-loom weaver, now imprisoned in a stifling factory (or worse still, unemployed), and the sturdy agricultural laborer, now a hungry, cowering pauper, roused Cobbett to fury and led him to dedicate his powerful pen to the restoration of the materially abundant and socially tranquil England which he believed had existed in his youth. This last point is crucial. For here he parted from those who also protested against abuses but who desired a brand new society. When Cobbett urged reform he was thinking of a return to the past, a restoration of the plenty which had once been the blessing of the common English laborer. In his mind was a vision of a lost Eden, not unlike that of Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*, where a happy yeomanry tilled the soil and with their families enjoyed the healthy hard work and simple cheer of rural England. Although Cobbett has persistently been identified with radical movements, his ends were in large part reactionary. And like William Morris and John Ruskin later in the century, he was more conspicuous for the vigor of his criticisms of social conditions than for feasible suggestions for improving them. The ultimate purpose of reform, he felt, should be to restore to the laborer the happy condition which had been stolen from him by a foul conspiracy which he called "The System".

This conspiracy was dominated by two groups that had waxed wealthy at the expense of the people: "boroughmongers" (owners of seats in the House of Commons) and "fundholders" (government creditors). It also included the nobility, the leaders of the Whig and Tory parties, and the hierarchy of the Church of England. This interlocking aggregate of privilege was, Cobbett believed, the source of virtually all evil in the kingdom: corruption in government, harsh laws, terrible factory conditions, and absentee landlords and clergymen. For all this he blamed "The System" rather than the impersonal economic forces which many modern historians hold responsible; yet despite his exaggeration and oversimplification, he attacked oppression with a wit and style which today's critics of "establishments" might do well to emulate.

For thirty-five years, in his famous books *Advice to Young Men* (1829) and *Rural Rides* (1830), and particularly in the weekly *Political Register* (1802-1835), which he largely wrote himself, Cobbett carried on his trenchant, highly personal attacks upon those whose greed and malice, he felt, were ruining England. The quantity of his writings was so prodigious that one is not surprised to learn that he often composed by dictation. Cyrus Redding, who credits him with "some of the most vigorous writings in the English language, worthy of preservation for style and grammatical purity", describes his working method as follows:

It is singular that almost all his published political works were dictated. He kept a secretary. I was informed by a baronet whom he had visited for eight or ten days,

that he composed walking up and down the room, or reclining upon a sofa. Having fixed upon a subject, he dictated, with considerable facility and little subsequent alteration, the whole of the matter he intended for the hebdomadal number of his *Register*.²⁵

Although Cobbett laid no claim to objectivity and was often inaccurate and wrong-headed, he was read by all classes. Sir Henry Lytton Bulwer reported that

Whatever a man's talents, whatever a man's opinions, he sought the *Register* on the day of its appearance with eagerness, and read it with amusement, partly, perhaps, if De la Rochefoucauld is right, because, whatever his party, he was sure to see his friends abused. But partly also because he was certain to find, amidst a great many fictions and abundance of impudence, some felicitous nickname, some excellent piece of practical-looking argument, some capital expressions, and very often some marvellously-fine writing, all the finer for being carelessly fine, and exhibiting whatever figure or sentiment it set forth, in the simplest as well as the most striking dress.²⁶

The *Register* was read aloud in inns and public reading rooms all over the country and, because the tax on newspapers made its price high, workers would often band together to purchase a copy. Then one of their number who enjoyed a smattering of letters would read it to them. A cheap edition which evaded the tax was read, a contemporary informs us, "on nearly every cottage hearth in the manufacturing districts of South Lancashire, in those of Leicester, Derby, and Nottingham, also in many of the Scottish manufacturing towns."²⁷ But his influence was not confined to the working classes. When Cobbett was imprisoned in Newgate, William Beckford allowed his gardener to consult him on the planting of American trees,²⁸ and Thomas Love Peacock sent copies of the *Register* to Shelley after the latter had left England for Italy. "Cobbett is indefatigable", wrote Peacock (May 30, 1818):

He gives us a full close-printed sheet every week, which is something surprising, if we only consider the quantity, more especially if we take into account the number of his other avocations....it is impossible that his clear exposures of all the forms of political fraud should fail of producing a most powerful effect.²⁹

But Shelley, although he had sent Cobbett a copy of his pamphlet *A Proposal for Putting Reform to the Vote* in 1817, seems at first to have considered him far too great a firebrand. "You much amused me," Peacock wrote to Shelley late in 1818,

²⁵*Yesterday and To-day* (London, 1863), III, p. 283.

²⁶*Historical Characters* (London, 1868), II, pp. 178-179.

²⁷[Samuel Bamford], *Bamford's Passages in the Life of a Radical* (London, 1903), II, pp. 11-12.

²⁸J.W. Oliver, *Life of William Beckford* (London, 1932), pp. 271-274.

²⁹*Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. H.F.B. Brett-Smith and C.E. Jones (London, 1934), VIII, pp. 192-193. Peacock's library, sold by Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge, 11-12 June, 1866, contained 74 volumes of the *Political Register*.

by telling me to part your letters from the "Cobbetts", more especially as, on the following Saturday arrived a packet of "Cobbetts" which were lying on my table Sunday morning when your last letter arrived, and was inadvertently laid upon them. However, no explosion ensued.³⁰

Six months later, writing to Peacock from Livorno, Shelley's attitude had changed:

Cobbet still more & more delights me, with all my horror of the sanguinary commonplaces of his creed. His design to overthrow Bank notes by forgery is very comic.³¹

And after a further nine months he wrote from Pisa:

Every thing seems to conspire against Reform.—How Cobbet must laugh at the "resumption of gold payments". I long to see him.³²

So influential, in fact, had Cobbett's journalism become that Hazlitt, using a now famous expression for the first time, dubbed him "a kind of *fourth* estate in the politics of the country."³³ All this occurred during a terrible period of economic distress after the battle of Waterloo, which brought to a close a generation of war. Existing economic difficulties were aggravated by the discharge of hundreds of thousands of servicemen and the glutting of Continental markets. Cobbett's writings were responsible for turning thousands of potential rioters away from violence and into the path of peaceful reform.

His outspokenness, however, cost him dearly. Even before the war was over he had spent two years in jail as a result of an article denouncing the flogging of some militia-men for a trivial offense. And in 1817 the narrow, reactionary government, dominated by Tory agricultural interests, was frightened by riots and strikes into reducing traditional English liberties. Parliament began by suspending the *Habeas Corpus* Act; this was followed by legislation especially designed to curb the now enormous influence of the *Political Register*. Public reading rooms were required to secure a license from a magistrate with the power to prevent the circulation of writings of "an irreligious, immoral, or seditious tendency." The unenviable lot of such independent publishers as Cobbett became intolerable. Once again he felt compelled to leave England

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 212-213.

³¹*Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford, 1964), II, p. 99.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 176-177. Shelley has recorded his debt to Cobbett's *Paper Against Gold* in his *Philosophical View of Reform*, and it may be that the shift towards more concrete imagery in his poetry at this time—especially in "England in 1819"—was an indirect result of his reading of Cobbett. See Kenneth Neill Cameron, "Shelley, Cobbett, and the National Debt", *Journal of English and German Philology* (XLII, no. 2), April, 1943, and T.A. Birrell, "The *Political Register*: Cobbett and English Literature," *English Studies*, Supplement (XLV), 1964.

³³*Table-Talk* in *Complete Works*, VIII, p. 50.

hurriedly and reside for over two years in America where, on a Long Island farm at North Hempstead, near New Hyde Park, he wrote his *Grammar*.

On his return to England in 1819, Cobbett found himself in a state of bankruptcy. The circulation of the *Political Register*--and with it his influence--had declined badly during his absence. And in the 1820's an improvement in trade took the edge off the people's hunger and consequently their demand for reform. But in 1830 the death of George IV, the outbreak of another revolution in France, and a split in the ruling Tory party made conditions more favorable for political change. Although still suspicious of the Whigs, Cobbett was an early supporter of the famous Reform Bill of 1832 which, by widening the franchise and removing inequalities in parliamentary representation, reduced political corruption and made possible his own election to Parliament the following year. Cobbett, more than anyone else, had rallied the masses behind the bill; he was able to end his career with a seat in the House of Commons and with his reputation partially restored. He died in June, 1835, having characteristically provided his own epitaph: "He was a friend of liberty, his power he derived from the spirit of freedom, and his exertions were directed to the benevolent purpose of bettering the condition of England."³⁴

Published in New York on July 17, 1818, the first edition of Cobbett's *Grammar* was quickly exhausted. A London edition of 5000 copies followed in December and in two weeks was sold out. Two further London editions appeared in 1819, and within six months, Cobbett estimated, over 13,000 copies had been sold. By the end of 1822 combined sales in England and America came to 50,000; by 1834 Cobbett felt justified in raising the figure to more than 100,000.³⁵ New editions continued to appear through the second half of the century: the 'sixties saw four separate editions (not issues) printed in London; the 'eighties, two in America. There was even a Madras piracy as early as 1823, and there were numerous German reprints. Altogether the *Grammar* has seen over forty editions, the most recent in 1923.

Were it not for this prolonged currency it would be easy to account for the initial success of the *Grammar* simply by pointing to its political inspiration. But the issues to which Cobbett directed his broadsides were politically dead well before the middle of the century. Why, then, did it continue to be read? The answer clearly must have something to do with

³⁴*PR*, Oct. 31, 1810, col. 782.

³⁵M.L. Pearl, *William Cobbett: A Bibliographical Account of His Life and Times* (London, 1953), pp. 105-106.

Cobbett's skill not as a grammarian in the technical sense but as an expositor of good English usage. There "is no doubt," George Saintsbury declared, "that the book contains about as clear an account of the practical and working nature and use of sound English speech and writing as can anywhere be found."³⁶ But this is not the whole explanation. The political inspiration behind the book adds to its value in a way Cobbett could never have anticipated. Here is no arid text devoid of contact with everyday reality, but a vital product of a period superficially different from our own but actually, in its rapid economic development, its struggle for political rights, and its questioning of traditional values, very much akin to the contemporary world. Cobbett's career as a journalist spanned the period when the casual, unsystematic way of life of pre-industrial England, where privilege and tradition held sway, was challenged by the restless, dynamic, iconoclastic spirit which we associate with our own times. This is exemplified in demands for the reform of such institutions as Parliament, the Church, and the law on grounds of practical efficiency. Caught up in this spirit, Cobbett embodied an intriguing mixture of the old and the new. He was poised between two worlds and shared some of the characteristics of each. The *Grammar* reflects this ambivalence in being as critical of such "new" men as Peel and Horner as it is of Castlereagh and Pitt.

Yet the book itself, of course, is the clearest possible witness to the ideals of the future: it is a manual of instruction in the practical skills of grammar for humble men and women eager to improve themselves. In his advocacy of what later became known as "self-help" and the "gospel of work", quite as much as in his agitation for parliamentary reform, Cobbett looks forward to the Victorians. James Thomson considered him "the only man since Swift who has known how to write in prose for the masses with something of the same directness and vigour"³⁷ and Carlyle, who called him "the pattern John Bull of his century", regarded him as "a greater improviser even than Walter Scott: his writing, considered as to quality and quantity, of Rural Rides, Registers, Grammars, Sermons, Peter Porcupines, ever-fresh denunciations of Potatoes and Paper-money, seems to us still more wonderful."³⁸ Cobbett's declaration that the poor and simple had the capacity to learn, with its implication that they had also the right and duty to put their learning to practical use, was as revolutionary as any social doctrine advanced during the present century.

But the *Grammar* is unusual in quite another sense, in the notion that

³⁶*Essays in English Literature, 1780-1860*, second series (London, 1895), p. 70.

³⁷*Selected Prose*, ed. W.D. Shaefer (Berkeley, 1967), pp. 282-283.

³⁸*Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (London, 1899), IV, pp. 39, 81.

wit should relieve the student's labors. This is the more difficult to assess because, like so much else in Cobbett's writings, his wit often stems from the more eccentric and egotistical side of his character. He was opinionated and cantankerous; yet there is much truth in Hazlitt's description of his egotism as "delightful, for there is no affectation in it."³⁹ We may smile when he writes that "in grammar, as in moral conduct, one fault almost necessarily produces others" (p.108), but what of our response to his illustration of the rule that two or more nouns separated by *or* must take a singular verb? "A soldier *or* a sailor", Cobbett writes, "who *has* served his country faithfully, *is* fairly entitled to a pension; but who will say that a prostituted peer, a pimp, *or* a buffoon, *merits* a similar provision from the public?" (p. 110) Do we in fact frown, or toss the book aside—even though we may happen not to share his implied opinion of civil service pensions? The truth is that Cobbett's personality (and of how many grammarians can this be said?) often interests us quite as much as what he is actually saying. Perhaps it is the spirited directness combined with the simplicity, even naïveté, of his polemics that finally wins us over. Nor is this particularly surprising, for the tendency toward simplicity that is so damaging to Cobbett's political thinking is the chief asset of the *Grammar*: it makes his book one of the most amusing grammars ever written, and perhaps also one of the most lucid.

³⁹*Table-Talk* in *Works*, VIII, p. 52.