

**William Cobbett's Correspondence
1800-1835**

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The vast majority of William Cobbett's personal letters have never been published. This thesis examines these manuscripts alongside the 'open letter' form that dominated his published writings, using correspondence to illuminate the hybrid and highly idiosyncratic form of Cobbett's radicalism. It shows how he responded to continued persecution from the government through a series of innovative epistolary strategies, creating a popular journalism that incorporated many of the tropes usually associated with letter writing, including familiarity, authenticity, the spontaneity of speech and the domestic scene of reception. These became inseparable from the idealized presentation of Cobbett's own radical and agrarian domestic life, and this thesis represents the first critical study to address the significance of Cobbett's family in the physical production and imaginative world of his writings, drawing on many of the letters written by his seven children. Individual chapters concentrate on a series of episodes in Cobbett's post-1800 career, including his friendship with William Windham, imprisonment in Newgate, exile in America, support for Queen Caroline and writings on the Captain Swing uprising. During these years, Cobbett's correspondence helped to establish the modern newspaper leading article as an open letter to readers, although Cobbett's are stamped with his own personal authority. However, while correspondence invested Cobbett's journalism with a sense of situatedness unmatched in radical writing of the period, it also highlights some of the tensions within his political and pedagogical practice. By the 1820s, Cobbett's correspondence bristles with the contradictions of wanting to recognize the individuality and difference of his readers' lives, and at the same time pull them within the orbit of a very paternal political vision.

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For my Parents and Grandparents

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A Note on References

The main argument of this study concerns the ways that Cobbett makes use of epistolary form. References have therefore been given in a form that allows the fullest understanding of the epistolary context of a particular quotation. Manuscript letters are cited with the name of the writer and addressee, as well as the date and place of writing. References to *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register* are given with the title of the article, which often signifies who Cobbett is addressing, and the date of the number in which it was first published. Exceptions – for example, *Paper Against Gold* and *Rural Rides* – concern those articles subsequently published as part of a separate volume. The typographical features of the *Political Register*, including italicization and capitalization, have been retained wherever possible.

List of Illustrations

- 1 Robert Cruikshank, 'Trans-Atlantic Luxury', *The Book of Wonders*, 1820 (p. 80).
- 2 'Installation of a Knight of the Bath, or delicate recreations on board a Polacre', George Humphrey, St James's Street, October 1820 (p. 136).
- 3 'Queen Caroline. Britain's best hope!! England's sheet-anchor!!!', John Fairburn, Broadway, Ludgate Hill, 19 October 1820 (p. 137).
- 4 'An Appeal to Britons', S.W. Fores, 41 Piccadilly, 23 August 1820 (p. 138).
- 5 'Boadicea, Queen of Britain, overthrowing her enemies, humbly dedicated to Caroline Queen of Great Britain and Ireland', John Fairburn, Broadway, Ludgate Hill, November 1820 (p. 139).
- 6 'John Bull's Trump', George Humphrey, St James's Street, August 1820 (p. 139).
- 7 'Steward's Court of the Manor of Torre Devon', George Humphrey, December 1820, attributed to Theodore Lane (p. 148).
- 8 George Cruikshank, 'A Free Born Englishman! The Admiration of the World!!! and the Envy of Surrounding Nations!!!!', Fores, 1819 (p. 204).
- 9 The December 1830 number of *Two-Penny Trash* in the Treasury Solicitor's archives, The National Archives, TS 11/73/237 (p. 234).
- 10 Annotated copy of Cobbett's indictment, Nuffield, XI/4/1-3 (p. 236).
- 11 A calculation by Cobbett of the cost of the Swing rising, labelled on the reverse, 'Hampshire Slaughter', Nuffield, XI/6/1 (p. 240).

It was one of those kid things you keep in your mind no matter how old you get, but whom he felt like out in Old Rimrock was Johnny Appleseed [...] Big. Ruddy. Happy. No brains probably, but didn't need 'em—a great walker was all Johnny Appleseed needed to be. All physical joy. Had a big stride and a bag of seeds and a huge, spontaneous affection for the landscape, and everywhere he went he scattered the seeds. What a story that was.

– Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*

Introduction

William Cobbett's diary of the final year of his life survives in the archive of his papers at Nuffield College, Oxford. After a few pages of notes – including a map of the farm at Normandy in Surrey and a list of the seeds he planned to plant in 1835 – there is an introductory statement: 'The preceding volume contains my Diary down to the end of March 1834. On the 29. of that mo. I set off, ill, to Normandy. – What took place there, from the 30. of March to the 14. of May, I wish to forget as soon as possible.'¹ The reference to 'the preceding volume' alludes to other journals, now lost (and it seems that this notebook only survives because John Cobbett continued using it as a memorandum book after his father's death) while the allusion to events which 'I wish to forget as soon as possible' hints at the family disputes which overshadowed the final years of his life. Cobbett had been estranged from most of his family since July 1833 and in April 1834 argued with William, his eldest son, who declared he 'would not live under such tyranny'. With apparent insouciance, Cobbett wrote to a friend, 'thus, you will see the last child goes'.² Cobbett was left at Normandy with four employees who supplied the roles of amanuensis, secretary, farm bailiff and accountant: in Thomas Macaulay's description, 'his egotism & his suspicion that everybody was in a plot against him increased and at last attained such a height that he was really as mad as Rousseau'.³ The diary is not discursive or reflective, but instead concentrates on the progress of agricultural work on the farm, interspersed with references to the *Political Register*, trips to London, parliamentary business and an itinerary of his two month tour of Ireland in the autumn of 1834. William

¹ Diary, 1834-5. Papers of William Cobbett in the library of Nuffield College, Oxford, XIX/1/1-90. Subsequent references will be given in the form 'Nuffield, XIX/1/1-90'.

² Cobbett to Gutsell, 24 April 1834, and to Oldfield, 25 April 1834 (Cornell), quoted in George Spater, *William Cobbett: The Poor Man's Friend*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), vol. 2, pp. 523.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 522.

occasionally re-appears, but is again 'sent off' at the end of April. On 6 June 1835, Cobbett enters, 'Began the great and terrible heat'. On 12 June, he makes the final entry, 'Ploughing Home field', only six days before his death: a characteristically practical last word, returning to the beginning of the autobiography he never wrote but planned under the title, 'The Progress of a Ploughboy to a Seat in Parliament, as exemplified in the in the History of the Life of WILLIAM COBBETT, Member for OLDHAM'.⁴

This haunting, final entry stands out from the rest of the archive by being, almost uniquely for Cobbett, part of a document which does not have any intended audience. After twenty million published words and thousands of letters, the last words Cobbett wrote were solely for himself. The unsettling experience of finding something written by Cobbett but not *to* anyone else paradoxically serves to emphasize the central place of correspondence in his work. He typically wrote not just with an eventual reader in mind but with the sense of specific audiences – his family, political opponents, sections of his readership – in front of him as he wrote. He is often – and justifiably – described as an egotistical writer, but he is also a supremely dialogic one, intensely aware of who he is corresponding with. Hazlitt's 1821 portrait attempts to describe the relationship Cobbett achieved with his readers, the direct, almost physical, impact that his writings had. It is a mode of address which distinguishes him from the delicate mediations of conventional print culture: 'one has no notion of him as making use of a fine pen, but a great mutton-fist; his style stuns his readers'. Hazlitt repeatedly describes Cobbett's prose in terms of voice – 'his style is that of a man who has an absolute intuition of what he is talking about' – and a continuous present

⁴ 'My Life', *Political Register*, 15 February 1834.

tense: ‘Cobbett keeps a day-book’, he is ‘always setting out afresh on his journey’. He never seems to have ‘thought on a question till he sits down to write about it’ and forms his ideas in the process of addressing his audience: ‘we feel delighted, rub our hands, and draw our chair to the fire [...] we sit down at table with the writer’, where ‘his ideas are served up, like pancakes, hot and hot’.⁵ Throughout his essay, Hazlitt describes Cobbett’s style in many of the terms often used to describe epistolary writing: it is inseparable from an intimate, domestic scene of production and reception, and through its measured, reassuringly ordinary process, manages to retain the spontaneity and intimacy of speech. However, the ability of Cobbett’s prose to continually refresh itself and delight the reader is also, for Hazlitt, inseparable from his ‘systematic opposition’, ‘outrageous inconsistency’ and want of ‘principle’. As a writer ‘feels his own strength only by resistance to the opinions and wishes of the rest of the world’, he must have both an audience to address and ‘an antagonist power to contend with’.⁶ Hazlitt’s essay demonstrates an understanding from within the world of early nineteenth-century journalism that Cobbett’s mode of addressing his readers and his political opponents was both essential to his success and a source of weakness.

Given Hazlitt’s reliance on the tropes of epistolary writing to capture the style of Cobbett’s prose and his relationship with his audience, correspondence seems to be a good handle with which to take hold of his vast and very diverse range of published and manuscript writings – which can otherwise seem as delightful, formidable and

⁵ Tom Paulin reads this as the ‘perfect image for the translation of copy into newsprint, for the heat of the moment which gives shape and form to the liquid power of driven, intelligent feeling. Cobbett as polemical journalist, editor and publisher is like someone at a fairground selling hot pancakes. It’s a vigorous image for the moment of production, for the passage of idea into form, into hot metal and fresh text’. See Tom Paulin, *The Day-Star of Liberty: William Hazlitt’s Radical Style* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 230-31.

⁶ ‘Character of Cobbett’ in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930-1934), vol. 8, *Table-Talk*, pp. 50-59.

outrageously inconsistent as Hazlitt initially suggests. Ian Dyck has given a persuasive account of rural popular culture as a unifying context and theme to Cobbett's work, and it is hoped that correspondence offers a similarly helpful approach from a formal or rhetorical perspective.⁷ Hazlitt viewed Cobbett as a writer who could only think when addressing his readers and a huge amount of his work is cast as letters, with open letters, always to a carefully selected target, representing the staple of the *Political Register* during its most successful and influential years. In an age of anonymous journalism, Cobbett's signed letters created the modern newspaper leading article as a letter from the editor to his readers, stamped with the editor's personal authority. Many of his most successful books were also framed as collections of letters, including *Paper Against Gold*, the *English Grammar* and the *History of the Protestant "Reformation"*, some of which were re-published from the *Political Register*, others first appearing as a bound series of letters. Letters also constitute the bulk of the surviving manuscripts and, in particular, the archive assembled at Nuffield College in the 1950s by G.D.H. Cole, which includes hundreds of papers preserved by Cobbett's descendants. One hundred and seventy five years after his death, the great majority of these letters have never been published and they reveal much about how Cobbett worked and the inseparability of his personal and public character.

The archive needs to be read sceptically: George Spater's research suggests how it was filtered in the decades after Cobbett's death, obscuring the final years of his life and preserving the myth of his idealised domesticity. This compounds the more general hazard of using family archives, which tend to preserve family letters over other kinds of papers. However, the range of Cobbett's published writings confirm the

⁷ Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

centrality of his family to his political vision and reading the printed and manuscript letters alongside each other yields many insights into his literary practice, his political imagination and the reasons for his incredible popular success. The expansion of his readership in the years after 1816 depended, of course, on the broader context of post-War discontent and on Cobbett's resourceful transformation of his prohibitively expensive newspaper into an unstamped, twopenny pamphlet. However, the form and context of Cobbett's writings do not alone explain their success: this also depended on his unique approach to political controversy and popular journalism, which he presented as a form of correspondence.

Letters are such a ubiquitous genre in eighteenth-century literary culture that by the beginning of the nineteenth century it is easy to view them as a mere convention: for example, the epistolary form of Burke's *Reflections* is rarely considered a central feature of the text. However, Cobbett's letters continually play on the specific meanings that epistolary writing had accrued and, while his reading is very hard to reconstruct, he was undoubtedly influenced by many works belonging to what Clare Brant has described as 'the eighteenth century's most popular genre'.⁸ The pervasiveness of letters in print and manuscript culture also shaped Cobbett's reception, with his readers bringing a wide range of epistolary expectations to his work, from the polemically open letter exposing political corruption to the personal letters that soldiers or emigrants wrote home. Across the diverse field of epistolary literature, a few qualities had become identified particularly closely with epistolary writing. Amanda Gilroy and Wil Verhoeven identify 'the most historically powerful fiction of the letter' as 'that which figures it as the trope of authenticity and intimacy'

⁸ Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 27.

and Elizabeth Cook similarly foregrounds ‘the epistolary tropes of immediacy, intimacy and authenticity’ – the same qualities that Hazlitt finds in Cobbett’s prose.⁹ Cécile Dauphin, writing about nineteenth-century letter-writing manuals, emphasizes that ‘the motif of naturalness was at the heart of the letter-writing craft’ and the appeal of the genre is in part explained by the way its authenticity and naturalness could appear to bypass the mediations of print and remain close to manuscript or oral culture.¹⁰ This is perhaps especially significant during the long eighteenth century when, as Cook writes, ‘the contradictions between private document and public book that the epistolary genre so insistently underlines can thus be said to allegorize the transitional relation of eighteenth-century readers to textuality.’¹¹

If this is true across the period, then it is especially true of a writer whose audience had only limited access to literacy and who therefore tried to maximise the strong connection that letters retained to oral communication, both in the cultural imagination and in material practice. Bridging the separation of correspondents, eighteenth-century letters were continually figured as absent bodies and voices, and so read as natural, authentic expressions – even extensions – of the writer. In Samuel Richardson’s metaphor, correspondence was ‘the converse of the pen’ and the description of letters as written conversation is found throughout letter-writing manuals of the period. The comparison is a way of describing the type of fluent, colloquial exchange that letter writers should aspire to in their style, but it also points

⁹ Amanda Gilroy and Wil Verhoeven ed., *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture* (Charlottesville and London: University of Press Virginia, 2000), ‘Introduction’, p. 1; Elizabeth Cook, *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. vii.

¹⁰ Cécile Dauphin, ‘Letter-Writing Manuals in the Nineteenth Century’ in Chartier, Boureau and Dauphin, *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Christopher Woodall (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p. 145.

¹¹ Cook, *Epistolary Bodies*, p. 2.

to the way that letters were read and shared. Eve Tavor Bannet argues that the tendency, after Richardson, towards ‘identifying letters with the solitude of the closet and the secret converse of the heart’ overlooks the way that eighteenth-century letters were treated as a ‘script’ to be ‘read aloud to family, friends and acquaintance.’¹² Letter writing as conversation was, then, more than a metaphor and Cobbett’s use of the form suggests this communal and oral scene of reception, staged in homes or taverns. Eighteenth-century habits of reading, particularly of reading letters, suggest that his prose would have often been read aloud and he occasionally writes this form of reception into his letters. In the first month of the unstamped *Register*, he uses an open letter ‘To the Readers of the Register’ to celebrate the fact that more households would now be able to buy their own copy of the newspaper, instead of having to rely on a shared copy in the local tavern. However, while the imagined scene of reading has moved into the domestic space, it is still collective: ‘many a father will thus, I hope, be induced to spend his evenings at home in instructing his children in the history of their misery, and in warming them into acts of patriotism’.¹³ His final *Rural Rides*, in Ireland in 1834, are cast as letters to an illiterate farm labourer:

Now, Marshall, I address thus letter to *you*, because you are the most able and skilful of my labourers, though all of you are able and good. You cannot *read* it, I know; but, Mr. Dean will read it to you; and he will, some evening, get you all together, and read it, twice over, to you all.’¹⁴

Cobbett’s use of the letter in writing about literacy and teaching grammar will be discussed in the second chapter, but throughout his correspondence the practice of reading letters aloud extends his reach beyond the already literate. Through this

¹² Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 47.

¹³ ‘To the Readers of the Register’, *Political Register*, 16 November 1816.

¹⁴ *Rural Rides In the Southern, Western and Eastern Counties of England, Together with Tours in Scotland and in the Northern and Midland Counties of England, and Letters from Ireland by William Cobbett*, edited by G.D.H. and Margaret Cole, 3 vols (London: Peter Davies, 1930), vol. 3, p. 884.

communal mode of reception, his letters construct relationships within his audience as well as between author and reader.

Eighteenth-century letter writing manuals were careful to balance the competing claims of nature and art and taught that a natural style had to be carefully cultivated and was best achieved by following the rules. Letters should be sincere, but also decorous, authentic, but also polite, and letter-writing manuals form part of the vast eighteenth-century conduct literature of politeness. Cobbett was capable of writing prescriptive conduct literature, as demonstrated in *Advice to Young Men, and (Incidentally) to Young Women, in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life*, and could, as that title suggests, maintain some fairly inflexible social distinctions. However, this should never be confused with an investment in the culture of politeness, which he condemned as a socially affected, hypocritical and impractical mode of behaviour, the insidious advance of novels and pianos into places where they did not belong.¹⁵ He refused to write politely or dissemble – the main exception being the letters he wrote during the Queen Caroline affair, explored in the third chapter – and his honest revolutions in opinion led to the charge of inconsistency that was so often levelled against him. Hazlitt observed that ‘he writes himself plain William Cobbett, strips himself quite as naked as any body would wish’, speaking and thinking in ‘plain, broad, downright English’. Moreover, Cobbett’s belief, expressed in a 1796 pamphlet attacking Joseph Priestley, that when anyone enters public life, ‘his Opinions, his Principles, his Motives, every Action of his life, public or private, become the fair

¹⁵ John Whale draws attention to Cobbett’s ‘undermining of the polite forms of culture, his ‘assumption that refinement is automatically false and morally debilitating’, combining ‘a moral, even puritanical attack on polite society with an appeal to the directness of his writing’. Whale goes on to argue that polite ideas of beauty and the aesthetic nonetheless play a role in Cobbett’s prose, a subject which will be returned to in chapter four. *Imagination Under Pressure, 1789-1832: Aesthetics, Politics, and Utility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 146-7.

Subject of public discussion', led him to place his character and domestic life at the centre of his life, creating an impossible ideal that in his last years bore no resemblance to reality.¹⁶ However, during most of his career he tried to inhabit this myth of himself and his letters combine a sentimental radicalism, displayed through his relationships with his family, readers and political allies, with an equally impassioned, sometimes spectacular, rudeness towards political opponents. An open letter to Wilberforce from 1823 opens with brilliant, almost physical, immediacy, 'WILBERFORCE, I HAVE you before me in a canting pamphlet', a stunning rejection of the pieties of polite exchange.¹⁷

Eighteenth-century politeness belongs to, and helps to underpin, a much broader system of social and economic commerce and Cobbett's iconoclastic approach to this system is signalled in the title of his 1807-08 series of articles in the *Political Register*: 'Perish Commerce'. The alternative model of exchange which he tries to construct through correspondence is explored in detail in the first chapter and is produced by his imprisonment in Newgate, his analysis of the national debt and paper money and his experimentation with different systems of circulation and exchange. However, his letters also serve a much more tactical purpose in appealing to readers, a technique which has something in common with the way that epistolary novels titillate by their supposed secrecy, allowing readers to intercept an apparently private exchange. As Christina Gillis points out, *Clarissa* is from the beginning 'speaking

¹⁶ *Observations on the Emigration of Doctor Priestley* (Philadelphia, 1794), re-printed in *William Cobbett: Selected Writings*, ed. Leonora Nattrass, 6 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), vol. 1, p. 19. He repeated this statement in *The Life and Adventures of Peter Porcupine* (Philadelphia, 1796), p. vii-viii.

¹⁷ 'To William Wilberforce', *Political Register*, 30 August 1823.

privately for the public'.¹⁸ Cobbett's use of correspondence compels readerly interest in comparable ways – his audience can 'listen in' on entertaining and idiosyncratic domestic relationships, friendships and feuds, just as public interest was, much more unwittingly, provoked when William Godwin's memoir of Wollstonecraft laid bare the private lives of the New Philosophers. However, the secrecy of the epistolary novel also lies in its investment in its characters' inner lives and the epistolary novel's display of interiority is sometimes viewed as a formal forerunner to interior monologue.¹⁹ By contrast, although Cobbett's letters convey a strong sense of character – and Clare Brant describes letters as 'forms of writing which in the eighteenth century were understood to be never far from character' – they show little concern with interiority.²⁰ Instead, they are always directed outwards, aiming to forge connections with readers and respond to political events. The post-Romantic obsession with peeling away the layers of a writer's inner life, through published works, diaries and letters, gains little traction with Cobbett's letters and he instead maintains a broadly consistent character in manuscript and printed letters.²¹ Only the final years of Cobbett's life, hidden for one hundred and fifty years after his death, before being revealed by George Spater through tangential references in scattered manuscript letters, fit within the paradigm of epistolary secrecy.²²

¹⁸ Christina Gillis, *The Paradox of Privacy: Epistolary Form in Clarissa* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1984), p. 3.

¹⁹ See, for example, Joe Bray, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2003).

²⁰ Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture*, p. 27.

²¹ See Julian North, *The Domestication of Genius: Biography and the Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) for a discussion of emerging models of literary biography in the Romantic period.

²² See Spater, *The Poor Man's Friend*, vol. 2, pp. 515-27, for the full account of the family split. Spater makes use of several manuscript letters, in archives at Cornell, Rutgers and Fordham, as well as an open letter from 'Philo-Cobbett', who he identifies as Cobbett's secretary Benjamin Tilly, which was printed in the *Political Penny Magazine*, no. 9 (29 October 1836), the only known copy of which is in Columbia University Library.

Instead of recording and revealing an unfolding inner life, Cobbett's letters are invested in addressing political subjects through the relationships he forms with his audience. Howard Anderson and Irvin Ehrenpreis observe that the eighteenth-century letter 'belongs to a human relationship in a way that is rarely seen in either earlier or more recent periods', while Bruce Redford describes how the best letter writing, often indicated by its 'sheer copiousness', represents 'a campaign for intimacy with the other' – reflections on the eighteenth-century familiar letter which could just as easily be applied to Cobbett's tireless campaign to create and reach an audience for his work.²³ In the attempt, he gives a glimpse of that readership, just as, in Janet Altman's view, epistolary narrative is 'unique among first-person forms in its aptitude for portraying the experience of reading [...] The epistolary experience, as distinguished from the autobiographical, is a reciprocal one'.²⁴ One caricature of Cobbett is as an endless booming voice, always re-iterating his views, never pausing to listen for a response. However, this is deeply unjust to a writer who is always acutely aware of who will read his letters, and where and how they will do so. The effects he achieves with the form of the letter include shrinking political contest down to a thrillingly direct and immediate single combat in letters to his opponents, layering his address, so groups of readers have the sense of 'listening in' on what Cobbett is saying to somebody else, and the almost dramatic creation of a range of competing voices. Far from being endlessly monologic, Cobbett uses the form of the letter to produce a Bakhtinian heteroglossia, drawing together many different strands of political

²³ Howard Anderson and Irvin Ehrenpreis, *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), p. 277; Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 10.

²⁴ Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1982), p. 88.

discourse, folk memory and popular culture.²⁵ Perhaps most famously, this is found in the scenes of dialogue in *Rural Rides* and in his parodic inversion of loyalist language – for example, the repeated, increasingly sardonic description of Pitt as ‘the Pilot that weathered the storm’ – but it is also present whenever he selects a specific audience to address, modifying his language and incorporating their perspective and anticipated response within his own prose. Throughout his letters, his concern with the dialogic nature of correspondence ensures that even his self-mythologizing never becomes solipsistic. As Hazlitt observes,

His egotism is delightful, for there is no affectation in it. He does not talk of himself for lack of something to write about, but because some circumstance that has happened to himself is the best possible illustration of the subject, and he is not the man to shrink from giving the best possible illustration of the subject from a squeamish delicacy.

In writing of himself, Cobbett is always convinced that he is taking the example nearest to hand and using it to build an epistolary relationship with his readers and address political topics through a shared political discourse.

By doing so, Cobbett was also building on a rich tradition of political letters. While authenticity and intimacy guaranteed the letter as a vehicle of sentiment in the epistolary novel and everyday life, these qualities were no less valuable in politics, where letters seemed to guarantee authenticity and dramatize the relationships between politician and public. In the same way that the epistolary novel operated by

²⁵ Interestingly, Bakhtin argues that heteroglossia is precisely what is absent from the epistolary novel, which ‘is characterized by psychology and pathos’ and ‘becomes associated with intimate situations and, losing the broad political and historical scope characteristic of the Baroque novel, combines with a didactic approach to the moral choices of everyday life and satisfies itself with the narrowly personal and family spheres of life. Pathos becomes associated exclusively with the kind of privacy found in one’s own room’. As already indicated, this is a compelling reading of how letters in the epistolary novel emphasize privacy and interiority, while Cobbett’s *journalistic* use of the letter form manages to create ‘the unordered and brute heteroglossia of life’ that Bakhtin celebrates in other forms of the novel. M.M. Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 396-7

publishing apparently private letters, the political letter drew attention to its abandonment of epistolary secrecy in favour of a polemical openness, ensuring that the letter was ‘the first choice genre for accusation and investigation, especially into corruption’.²⁶ Eighteenth-century political letter writing was, of course, dominated by the use of epistolary personae, most famously in the letters of Cato and, above all, Junius. Clare Brant gives a compelling comparative reading of these two series of letters: Cato’s letters to *The London Journal* in the 1720s ‘marked out an independent space coloured by nationalism that was close to, but not identical with, a Patriot agenda of opposition’, but were also supplemented by the many physical details revealed about the author, which can be contrasted with ‘the blankness surrounding Junius, about whom we know nothing personal or physical’. Restoring one of the tropes of epistolary writing, the real identity of Junius ‘was the eighteenth century’s best-kept secret’. Cobbett had much in common with the independence, patriotism and hatred of corruption proclaimed by many eighteenth-century epistolary personae, and might claim with Cato that ‘Every Ploughman knows a good Government from a bad’, but his decision to jettison his Peter Porcupine personae on his return from Philadelphia was far from incidental.²⁷

While the most well-known epistolary personae are all eighteenth-century letter-writers, the tradition continued into the anonymous journalism of the nineteenth century. For example, in 1810, William Godwin, who was to visit Cobbett four times in Newgate the following year, signed a letter to the *Morning Post* calling for the abolition of Smithfield livestock market, as ‘A LOVER OF TRANQUIL

²⁶ Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture*, p. 173.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-93.

IMPROVEMENTS'.²⁸ Godwin uses a pseudonym entirely at odds with his popular perception in order to persuade the editor of a fiercely anti-Jacobin newspaper to print his letter. At the same time, however, he seems to have been motivated less by the disinterested pursuit of social improvement than by the fact that Smithfield was close to his children's bookshop and damaging his trade. By contrast, Cobbett's decision to abandon Peter Porcupine, the crisply alliterative, slightly arch, pseudonym that he had used in Philadelphia during the 1790s – carrying a knowing campness, a sense of performance as well as prickly opposition – in favour of plain, bluff William Cobbett signalled his attempt to dissociate his journalism from epistolary personae and unite his public and personal characters.

By signing his letters in his own name, and then putting his life and family at the centre of his political project, Cobbett put his name at stake in a way that was unique in political journalism of the period. Other, more shadowy figures in the radical press may have been similarly reckless with their lives, families and reputations, but Cobbett's unrivalled success gave him the platform for a confident self-projection, which, in the symbiotic relationship between journalist and audience, further increased his popularity.²⁹ In the powerful description of E.P. Thompson, the *Political Register* became 'a circulating medium which provided a common means of exchange', ensuring that 'even when he was in America, his post-bag was heavy': celebrating the 'truly profound, democratic influence of Cobbett's attitude to his

²⁸ *Morning Post*, 6 April 1810. This letter, and the meetings between Cobbett and Godwin in Newgate, are discussed in James Grande, 'Nineteenth-Century London in William Godwin's Diary', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15.2, August 2010. See also *The Diary of William Godwin*, (eds) Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010). <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>.

²⁹ Alex Benchimol similarly recognizes that when discussing Cobbett alongside Thomas Spence and T.J. Wooler, 'Cobbett stands out as the most ideologically contradictory figure of the group in part because of the pressures and expectations imposed by his unprecedented popular following'. Alex Benchimol, *Intellectual Politics and Cultural Conflict in the Romantic Period* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p. 205.

audience', Thompson argues that his 'thought was not a system but *a relationship*'.³⁰ However, Kevin Gilmartin has qualified this assertion, arguing that 'impressionistic readings of "relationship" risk overlooking the logic and cunning that run through Cobbett's prose'.³¹ This study attempts to give a detailed evaluation of these relationships in order to demonstrate that it is here that Cobbett is at his most systematic. His main difference from a writer such as Paine is in his rejection of what he sees as abstract theory, and his concentration on how he can broaden the appeal of radicalism by addressing specific readerships and making connections between apparently unrelated subjects. The situatedness of his correspondence produces an idiosyncratic radicalism that is frequently nostalgic and overwhelmingly practical, combining a Burkean organicism with an insistence on the need for parliamentary reform. This political vision is developed in letters that dramatize a range of relationships, assailing his opponents and counselling his readers. Situatedness and relationship ensure that correspondence is both a metaphor for his politics and the means by which it will be carried out.

This approach is greatly indebted to Leonora Nattrass's study, the first extended literary analysis of Cobbett's style. Nattrass focuses on 'the rhetorical strategies operating in Cobbett's often apparently artless text' to insist that his work 'must not be viewed as political philosophy but as polemic aimed at specific readers in specific circumstances'.³² Drawing attention to the broad range of discourses at work in his writing, she uses the reader-response idea of a 'mock-reader' to discuss Cobbett's

³⁰ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working-Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), pp. 746, 749, 758.

³¹ Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 159.

³² Leonora Nattrass, *William Cobbett: The Politics of Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 204, 138.

deployment of a surrogate reader, which has the effect of carrying a particular text to another kind of audience. This ability to address ‘normally polarized audiences within a single text’ is also very relevant to Cobbett’s use of epistolary form, yet Natrass’s focus on a supremely flexible politician risks over-playing the purely pragmatic or strategic aspects of his writing.³³ Her description of him as ‘a rhetorician, whose writings are [...] a field where shared contemporary discourses are played out and exploited for political effect’ even risks implying a passivity and derivativeness that underestimates the focus, determination and significance of his work.³⁴ Reading his published writings alongside his manuscript letters complicates any understanding of Cobbett as a manipulator of different styles, instead showing an almost unnerving ability to inhabit his public persona. While his writings often carry out brilliant strategic manoeuvres, there is little sense in the manuscript letters of a self-conscious, pragmatic or tactical rhetorical operator, and the epistolary tropes of authenticity and intimacy become central to any reading of Cobbett’s style, his particular kind of radicalism and the relationships he constructs with his audience.

Cobbett’s use of correspondence is determined in part by the changing political control of both letters and newspapers. The eighteenth-century Post Office constituted part of the State’s intelligence network, with three separate offices devoted to the interception and deciphering of potentially dangerous letters. Stamp Acts made writing letters and reading newspapers prohibitively expensive for sections of the population that were most likely to be disaffected, while the Postmaster-General controlled both the exchange of correspondence and the circulation of newspapers. Habermas’s claim that the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 ‘made the influx of

³³ Ibid., p. 30.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

rational-critical arguments into the press possible’, creating the press as ‘an instrument with whose aid political decisions could be brought before the new forum of the public’, seems to ignore the many forms of censorship that still remained.³⁵ Restrictions on the press were often combined with limits on correspondence and Cobbett was only able to find a way of writing open letters to a truly popular audience by designing a newspaper that did not need to carry a stamp, the 1816 ‘Twopenny Trash’. The transformative effect of the unstamped *Political Register* was memorably described by Samuel Bamford:

At this time the writings of William Cobbett suddenly became of great authority; they were read 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. Their influence was speedily visible. He directed his readers to the true cause of their sufferings—misgovernment; and to its proper corrective—parliamentary reform.³⁶

The success of the cheap *Register* demonstrates how Cobbett’s best epistolary writing was produced in opposition to different forms of censorship. This necessitated new strategies to ensure that he could keep addressing his audience: the first chapter looks at Cobbett’s creation of a new form of correspondence while in Newgate, the second at his creative use of exile following the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1817 and the third at his potentially treasonous epistolary activity on behalf of Queen Caroline. The final chapter, on the July Revolution abroad and Swing riots at home, uses Home Office archives to show how the government intercepted and read Cobbett’s letters before bringing him to trial.

³⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 58.

³⁶ Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, 2 vols (London, 1844), vol. 1, p. 7.

During Cobbett's career, correspondence came under intense political scrutiny. As Terry Eagleton observes, epistolary writing had always raised a series of political challenges:

if letter-writing is in one sense free subjectivity, it is also the function of an ineluctable power system. Certainly no activity could be more minutely regulated. To 'correspond' is to implicate a set of political questions: Who may write to whom, under what conditions? Which parts may be cited to another, and which must be suppressed? Who has the authority to edit, censor, mediate, commentate?³⁷

Outside the covers of the epistolary novel, Nicola Watson draws attention to the

long 18th-century tradition of identifying all kinds of letters with generally 'oppositional' writing – whether of the classical republicans, of the commonwealthmen, of the salons, or of the Encyclopaedists' English counterparts (with their strong predilection for the philosophical 'familiar' style).³⁸

However, in the wake of the French Revolution, the sentimental and political possibilities of letters began to be read within a much more constricted fiction of epistolary writing. Carrying the dangerous, revolutionary associations of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, a work which seemed to exemplify 'the intimate relation between sentimental fiction and radical politics', the self-authorizing vehicle of individual feeling became 'a figure of criminal excess and threatening semiotic restlessness within a social and narrative order that consistently attempts to discipline it'.³⁹ The illicit exchange of letters suggested, or even enabled, sexual or political rebellion and Watson shows how, in the 'anti-Jacobin novel and its descendants', the letter is subjected 'to a process of re-circulation, surveillance, edition, censorship, and

³⁷ Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 50.

³⁸ Nicola J. Watson, *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel 1790-1825: Intercepted Letters, Interrupted Seductions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 16, n. 46.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 21.

commentary’.⁴⁰ Watson’s account is in some ways limited by its focus on the novel and the need to combine a political reading of letters in the period with a narrative of the epistolary novel being written out of literary history. Perhaps the most suggestive part of her account is the description of how the virtues of epistolary writing could quickly be seen as vices, a form associated with authenticity, sentiment and individual subjectivity becoming viewed instead as the agent of conspiracy, seduction and treason.

However, this development perhaps had less to do with the spectre of Rousseau than to the appropriation of letter writing by popular radicals, a move that anticipated Cobbett’s own use of the form. On its foundation in 1792, the London Corresponding Society declared its aim ‘to correspond with individuals, and societies of men who wished for a reformation, and to collect the opinion and sense of the nation as far as possible by that means’.⁴¹ The sense of collective political identity that Mary Favret finds ‘produced within this network of radical correspondence’ was quickly seen by the government as highly subversive – and, at the same time, all too convenient.⁴² When the Traitorous Correspondence Bill was introduced in March 1793, Fox complained that the name of the Bill – which was actually concerned with commercial communication with France – had been chosen ‘with no other view than to disseminate through the country false and injurious ideas of the existence of a correspondence between some persons and France’.⁴³ The following year, the Report from the Committee of Secrecy of the House of Commons on the London Corresponding Society and Society for Constitutional Information claimed that the

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 68, 70.

⁴¹ Quoted in Mary A. Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 28.

⁴² Ibid., p. 28.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 33.

societies had ‘by a series of resolutions, publications, and correspondence, been uniformly and systematically pursuing a settled design which appears [...] to tend to the subversion of the established constitution’. By ‘endeavouring to establish a general correspondence and concert among the other seditious societies in the metropolis, and in different parts of England and Scotland, as well as in Ireland’, radical correspondence aimed ‘to supersede the House of Commons in its representative capacity, and to assume itself all the functions and powers of a national legislature’.⁴⁴ According to these claims, the reform societies imagined letters as a form of political activity that hoped to replace parliamentary representation, a possibility that Cobbett’s letters later took up. During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the government increasingly used the Post Office,

as a vehicle of ministerial policy, with Parliament passing more postal acts between 1794 and 1813 (eight) than in the rest of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries (five and three, respectively). These years also marked the time of greatest intrusion into private correspondence: warrants for opening letters were so easily granted that postal surveyors hardly bothered to request official authorization.⁴⁵

At the same time, parliament introduced the Stamp Tax and brought the mail coach – originally a private enterprise of the 1780s – under the Postmaster-General’s control.

Cobbett returned to England in 1800 at the height of the controversy over correspondence and as a committed member of the loyalist cause. During the eight years he had spent in Philadelphia, he had, as Peter Porcupine, developed a personal, vituperative mode of pamphleteering, well-suited to the robust world of journalism in the capital of the new republic. In 1798, he had contributed to a transatlantic panic

⁴⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

about traitorous correspondence, publishing a packet of letters which had been written from Paris to Joseph Priestley in America and intercepted by the British navy. When Priestley wrote to Cobbett to try and minimize the damage caused, Cobbett published the letter, along with his own comments on it. Favret finds in the episode a reversal of the customary positions:

the reactionary publisher wants to broadcast the radicals' letters, even as he requires the fiction of a hidden conspiracy; the radical minister wants to restrict the circle of readers, even as he argues for openness in public discourse [...] each intercepts the fiction of the other.⁴⁶

However, Cobbett's actions as 'reactionary publisher' were in line with the government's belief in the existence of widespread epistolary conspiracy, expressed throughout the 1790s, and Pitt's Cabinet famously welcomed him back in 1800, valuing the work he had done in loyalist propaganda. During the next ten years, he moved towards his mature radicalism, which his biographers and critics have variously attributed to the government's handling of the war with France, the discovery of his true rural constituency or his essential antagonism to whatever he saw around him.⁴⁷ The conversion to radicalism took place over many years and can be examined in great detail through his weekly journalism. However, instead of returning to the reasons for this highly complex revolution in opinion, a new perspective on these years can be provided by his correspondence with William Windham between 1800 and 1806.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 43.

⁴⁷ 'Mature radicalism' here refers to the position Cobbett arrives at during the first decade of the nineteenth century, from which point all of his writings exhibit at least some degree of internal consistency. From this time, Cobbett is, as Ian Dyck emphasizes, an 'unqualified Radical' (*William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, p. 214) and descriptions of him as a Tory radical or reactionary utopian are distractingly wide of the mark. However, his radicalism does take a highly idiosyncratic form, which is explored in this thesis by focusing on the situatedness of Cobbett's correspondence.

This thesis will argue that after 1810, Cobbett maintained a consistent epistolary voice across printed and private letters, a unique and urgent style that is colloquial and practical, angry and sentimental, the creation of a writer who is always confident in his own abilities and at the same time deeply aware of the people he is writing to. This style can be thrown into relief by looking at the very different letters he wrote to Windham in his first years back in England, which perform a mannered version of a distinctive kind of eighteenth-century familiar letter. They are, at least until their breach in 1806, unfailingly polite, even obsequious, and remain highly conscious of the gulf in social class between correspondents – distinctions which Cobbett ignored in his later epistolary writing, with the exception of the chivalrous letters he wrote to Queen Caroline in 1820. Raymond Williams briefly refers to the relationship between Cobbett and Windham at the beginning of *Culture and Society* – ‘Cobbett began his political career in England under the patronage of William Windham, an intimate friend of Burke’ – and goes on to use ‘the association of Burke and Cobbett, through Windham’ to discuss how ‘in the convulsion of England by the struggle for political democracy and by the progress of the Industrial Revolution, many voices were raised in condemnation of the new developments, in the terms and accents of an older England’.⁴⁸ However, there is more to say about the relationship between Cobbett and Windham, and the intimate friendship of their letters can be read against the very different style of correspondence that Cobbett went on to develop.

⁴⁸ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967, first published 1958), p. 3. Tom Paulin finds these three writers and politicians evoked together in one of Hazlitt’s most well-known essays: ‘the casual mention of Windham in ‘The Fight’ is intended to remind us of both Burke and Cobbett, the other members of an associative system we might designate as ‘Windham’’. Paulin draws attention to how Hazlitt ‘respected Windham’s character and pursuits – he was a renowned pugilist’, but thought that his ‘whole political style was borrowed, artificial’ and ‘lacked force and originality’. This also offers a suggestive perspective on the Cobbett-Windham correspondence discussed below. See *The Day-Star of Liberty*, p. 81.

Cobbett's first letter was written in his first weeks back from America, accepting an invitation from Windham to dine with him, in the company of Pitt and Canning:

As my first wish ever has been to merit the commendations of men distinguished for their wisdom and loyalty, for their unshaken attachment to ancient establishments and their unequivocal abhorrence of innovation, I need not say how great is the satisfaction I feel at hearing that my humble efforts are honoured with your admiration.⁴⁹

There is then a gap of six months before the start of a correspondence that lasts from 19 February 1801, a few days after Windham's resignation, alongside Pitt, until 9 March 1806, a month after Windham's return to office as secretary for war and the colonies in the Ministry of All the Talents. At the beginning of this period, Cobbett and Windham were united by their fierce opposition to the Peace of Amiens, Cobbett describing to his patron how, 'the swinish multitude, having nothing better to do, have, all this day long, been assembled, to the amount of three or four thousands in St James's Park, waiting for the arrival of the ratification, and for the consequent firing of the guns.'⁵⁰ It was, he told Windham, 'now-a-days, so much the fashion to humour and to flatter this swinish beast, that very few people speak out [...] the cant of humanity will drown the united voice of reason, of justice, and of self-preservation'.⁵¹ In 1802, Windham helped to finance the launch of the *Political Register*, which was initially associated with Grenville and Windham's 'new opposition' to the Addington ministry. In his letters, Cobbett constantly re-iterated his faith in Windham's leadership: 'it is my firm persuasion, that you, and you alone, can save our country', 'if this nation is to be roused, some one man must begin to work its salvation; and I

⁴⁹ Cobbett to William Windham, 1 August 1800, Cobbett-Windham Correspondence, British Library Add. 37853, f. 1. Subsequent references to items in this collection will be given using the folio numbers of the relevant letter.

⁵⁰ Cobbett to Windham, Pall Mall, 7 October 1801, ff. 12-13.

⁵¹ Cobbett to Windham, Pall Mall, 20 October 1801, f. 16.

know of no one but you. The effect produced by Mr. Burke in 1791 is an example of what may be done. – Pray, Sir, think of this’.⁵²

The reality was that Windham ‘had become an unpopular, even slightly deranged, character. The suggestion that Burke’s ghost had become his inner inspiration was not entirely complimentary’.⁵³ The comedy of their sub-Burkean rhetoric and mutually reinforcing sense of hysteria is most evident during the renewed fears in 1803 of Napoleon’s invasion. Cobbett writes to Windham predicting that rumours of invasion would cause ‘the utter discredit’ of banknotes:

never was there a nation in such tremendous danger. The effect would be as quick as lightening. A mail could carry the bubble from London to Exeter in a night. It would literally sweep the bank notes along before it. At best, the monarchy will be shaken to its centre, and, whether it shall stand or fall will depend upon those who shall hold the reins of government [...] The object of all this, Sir, is to engage you to turn your serious thoughts to this great and terrible object. It will require all your wisdom and all your courage to devise and to execute a plan for insuring the safety of that throne and that country, to which every hour of your life has, for so long a time, been devoted.

Cobbett concludes by predicting that ‘that man will be best off, who has a sword in his hand, and certainly he will be more like to serve his king as a soldier than as a writer’ and therefore declares his intention ‘to go instantly into the army, taking wife and children to some tolerably secure place first’.⁵⁴ This is one of the few places in their correspondence that Windham’s reply survives and it shows how shaken he was by Cobbett’s predictions (‘I am altogether at a loss to know what can be done’) and emphasizes the homosocial tension of their exchange: ‘What sort of situation have

⁵² Cobbett to Windham, Pall Mall, 17 May 1801, ff. 33-4; 26 December 1802, ff. 64-5.

⁵³ David Wilkinson, ‘Windham, William (1750–1810)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2004; online edition, January 2008) [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/29725, accessed 9 January 2011]. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29725>.

⁵⁴ Cobbett to Windham, Pall Mall, 27 September 1803, ff. 92-3.

you thought of for yourself in the Army? It is a matter of some consideration in fact, whether you cannot be otherwise be better employed. I should wish that we could be somewhere together—'.⁵⁵ At a time when the political situation seemed increasingly desperate, even apocalyptic, the epistolary came to represent a space of private refuge – even if it was one which they used, above all, to indulge and play on each other's political fears. Through Windham's role in parliament and Cobbett's journalism, they were operating a parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition, based on royalism, implacable hostility to Napoleon, hatred of the 'swinish multitude' and suspicion of almost every politician, including Addington, Pitt, Grenville and Fox. However, while their letters were used to discuss the political situation, they clung to the epistolary as a place set apart from public life, a place of secrecy, absolute trust in each other and suspicion of everyone outside. Their shared despair reaches its comic apotheosis in Cobbett's description of Southampton, where he finds the people,

actually pulling down the noble old gate-way, under which the army of Henry V. marched to embark for Agincourt. "What worms," said you once, "creep out of the bodies of these dead heroes!" Alas! the sentiment may be applied to the whole nation!'⁵⁶

Throughout this correspondence, Cobbett's style is not that of the 1790s pamphleteer, the loyalist journalist of the early *Register* or the post-1810 writer, but an earnest, stilted attempt to perform the role of the eighteenth-century man of letters and retain Windham's patronage and trust.

The political context which Windham and Cobbett were working within, while at the same time defining themselves against, was the highly complex factionalism of the

⁵⁵ Windham to Cobbett, Audley End, 9 October 1803, ff. 95-98.

⁵⁶ Cobbett to Windham, Botley, near Southampton, 24 September 1804, ff. 134-5.

early 1800s. Part of what seems to have appealed to Cobbett about Windham was his reputation for independence away from parliamentary politics, both as an aristocratic landowner and a writer who had been friends with Johnson and Burke. In these years, Cobbett began cultivating his own version of rural independence by moving to Botley in Hampshire, which he told Windham is ‘the most delightful village in the world [...] “Would I were poetical,” I would write a poem in praise of Botley’. ‘We catch here some of the finest fish in the world’, he writes, ‘and Mrs. Cobbett as well as myself are very desirous that you should taste them’.⁵⁷ However, this desire seems to be linked to his guilt that Windham had not yet tasted the fish, which Cobbett had taken to dinner with Samuel Parr and seen parcelled up and sent on to Fox’s residence at St Anne’s Hill. Elsewhere in the letters, Cobbett continually justifies to Windham ‘my joining with Mr. Fox’, insisting that he is still opposed to Fox’s views on the French Revolution.⁵⁸ In Botley, ‘my house (for such I shall soon be able to make it) will contain a room for you’ and in October 1805 he invites Windham to stay with him and witness the single-stick tournament he had organised, the type of manly country sport they both championed and which he excitedly described to Windham:

The players use a stick three quarters of an inch in diameter, 2 ½ feet long, and having a basket hilt to defend the hand. They are stripped to the shirt; and the object is, to break the antagonists’ head in such a way, that the blood may run an inch [...] The arms, shoulders, and ribs are beaten black and blue, and the contest between the two men frequently lasts for more than an hour. Last Witsuntide there was a match at Bishop’s Waltham, where one of the players, feeling that he had a tooth knocked out, and knowing that if he opened his mouth the blood would be perceived, swallowed both blood and tooth, and continued the combat (with two others driven from their places in his gum) ’till he obtained the victory.⁵⁹

However, and to Cobbett’s disappointment, Windham refused the invitation.

⁵⁷ Cobbett to Windham, Botley, 12 August 1805, f. 177.

⁵⁸ Cobbett to Windham, Botley, 4 October 1804, ff. 136-38. See also 7 May 1804, ff. 121-2; 11 January 1806, f. 199 and 10 February 1806, f. 211.

⁵⁹ Cobbett to Windham, Botley, 6 October 1805, f. 184.

By this point, they were beginning to move apart. When it was announced in February 1806 that Windham had been appointed Secretary of State for War and the Colonies in the Ministry of All the Talents, Cobbett wrote comparing the news to his wedding day:

This day 22 years ago I 'listed for a soldier; to-morrow 14 years ago I was married. This month of February has always been a lucky month with me; for, I can truly say, that the news of this morning (I allude to the List of new ministers) has given me as great pleasure as I ever before felt in my whole life.⁶⁰

However, they had already begun to disagree, with a pained letter from Cobbett describing how, still trying to follow 'those great principles, for the having imbibed which I am so much indebted to you', he had been 'surprized, and mortified beyond description, that my new year's appeal to the people should have excited those fears, of which you speak, in a manner so well calculated to make me doubt of my prudence'.⁶¹ Cobbett's move towards a more popular form of address ('my new year's appeal to the people') created tensions in their relationship, which were then exacerbated after Windham joined the government, but was still commonly thought to have written or suggested 'all the most violent parts of the Register'.⁶² The final cause of the end of their correspondence was, appropriately, the Post Office. With his patron in power, Cobbett believed he could secure the removal of Francis Freeling, secretary of the Post Office, who he had long suspected of trying to limit his circulation. In 1792, Freeling had founded *The Sun* as an instrument of loyalist propaganda and his job in running the Post Office included monitoring anti-government publications.

'This old slave of the Pitt faction is the worst of its slaves', he told Windham, asking

⁶⁰ Cobbett to Windham, Upper Brook Street, 4 February 1806, f. 204.

⁶¹ Cobbett to Windham, Botley, 11 January 1806, f. 199.

⁶² Cobbett to Windham, Botley, 23 February 1806, ff. 218-20.

for his dismissal ‘upon grounds purely and disinterested’.⁶³ Windham’s angry refusal to carry out this favour led to the abrupt end of their friendship and confirmed Cobbett in opposition, where, over the next thirty years, he developed the extraordinary form of radical correspondence that is the subject of this thesis.⁶⁴ Cobbett would never return to an idea of the epistolary as a private space, distinct from his public journalism, but instead create a model of correspondence that refused to recognise a separation of private and public. And he would never again perform the decorous, mannered style of a particular kind of eighteenth-century correspondent, as he had attempted to do when writing to Windham, but inhabit an epistolary voice that was entirely his own.

The first chapter looks at the letters that Cobbett wrote during his 1810-12 imprisonment in Newgate, following his conviction for seditious libel. In *Paper Against Gold*, first published as a series of open letters, dated from Newgate and addressed to ‘the tradesmen and farmers in and near Salisbury’, he charted the emergence of a pernicious system of paper money and national debt, showing how the circulation of banknotes was used to sustain ‘Old Corruption’. At the same time, the letters he used to maintain contact with his family and direct work on the farm at Botley represent an experiment with a type of correspondence that could expose and subvert empty loyalist models of circulation. Cobbett’s intensely practical and heavily situated mode of correspondence comes to be central to his systematic analysis of society and his own radical response, yet it is also one that is spontaneous, contingent

⁶³ Cobbett to Windham, Upper Brook Street, 4 February 1806, f. 204 and Parson’s Green, 9 March 1806, ff. 225-6.

⁶⁴ See *The Diary of the Right Hon. William Windham, 1784-1810*, ed. Mrs Henry Baring (London: Longmans, 1866): ‘Came away in carriage with Fox; got out at end of Downing Street, and went to office, thence to Cobbett. Probably the last interview we shall have’ (28 February 1806, p. 460).

and founded on the familiarity of epistolary writing. This kind of letter writing found its ideal vehicle in the ‘Twopenny Trash’, launched in 1816.

Cobbett viewed the government’s suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1817 as a direct response to the success of the ‘Twopenny Trash’ and sailed for America. A print by Robert Cruikshank imagines the American pastoral explored in chapter two: Cobbett sits outside his Long Island farmhouse, surrounded by farmyard animals and scribbling letters home. Cobbett’s separation from his family and readers placed extra demands on the letter as a form used to bridge distance and time, and yet, despite the substantial delay before publication, he continued writing the open letters of the *Register* during his two years in America. At the same time, he reflected on how he could help his readers write back, through a series of letters on language, education and communication. These show the significant role language played in his three periods of American exile, each time writing himself home. The *English Grammar* he wrote in America, one of his most successful books, was aimed at ‘Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-boys’, but also inscribed within a much tighter, familial sphere, composed of letters addressed to his fourteen-year-old son. Meanwhile, the transatlantic seed business he establishes before returning to Britain became an equally characteristic product of his American pastoral.

The third chapter looks at the vast range of letters Cobbett wrote in support of Queen Caroline after his return from America. An examination of the manuscripts of his letters to Caroline shows an unusually extensive process of revision as he tried to calibrate his advice. Realising that these letters were being intercepted, Cobbett pursued a new set of epistolary tactics and wrote the letter from Caroline to George

IV that was sensationally published in *The Times* on the eve of her trial. This letter cast Caroline as a wronged sentimental heroine and helped to influence the attitude of visual satires, which increasingly identified Caroline with such symbols of patriotic femininity as Britannia and Boadicea. Cobbett also wrote petitions on behalf of groups around the country and authored many of the Queen's replies, the incendiary nature of which is suggested by a print portraying Cobbett as Guido Fawkes, setting light to his addresses in the House of Lords. Cobbett's letters during the Queen Caroline affair are concerned with issues of authenticity: his personal letters to Caroline show a rare case of Cobbett dissembling to achieve a more courtly, even chivalric address, while the 'Queen's letter to the King' had to be read as authentically Caroline's if Cobbett was to avoid imprisonment. Meanwhile, his role in writing and co-ordinating addresses to the Queen show his continued investment in how the unrepresented could write back and petition for political reform.

The fourth chapter concentrates on two hugely successful works that Cobbett wrote during the 1820s to give a more sceptical reading of his correspondence. *Rural Rides* attempts to bridge the epistolary distance between Cobbett and his audience, documenting 1820s England through tours of the countryside to meet his readers. His picaresque narrative of these encounters works to construct an allegorical landscape which will teach the causes of its post-War impoverishment. However, when read against another work of the decade, his *History of the Protestant "Reformation"*, it also suggests the tensions within Cobbett's critical practice. The *Protestant "Reformation"* portrays an idealised pre-Reformation England, where the poor are supported locally through monastic charity. Paradoxically, however, while Cobbett laments the subsequent centralisation of power he also mourns an age he imagines as

pre-dating dissent. Similarly, his communitarian approach to the problems of the 1820s is at odds with his desire to replicate the unity he finds in medieval England through a paternalistic vision of a reformed society. Reading *Rural Rides* alongside the *Protestant "Reformation"* emphasizes how his championing of independence is increasingly at odds with the paternalist dimension of his writing, his prescriptive urge to pull his readers within the orbit of a distinctive political vision. A comparison of *Rural Rides* with the lecture tours he made of the towns and cities of industrialized Britain, from 1829, further complicates a reading of Cobbett's reception, suggesting how he mythologized a southern, agrarian readership at a time when his audience was increasingly concentrated elsewhere.

The final chapter returns to southern England and the Swing riots, but also broadens the focus to examine the connections Cobbett's letters made between events in England and France in 1830-31. The historical debate over Captain Swing has concentrated on the question of whether the riots were a purely economic revolt, whose participants were motivated solely by local conditions, or a political uprising, linked to the Reform crisis at home and the July Revolution abroad. Cobbett's writings insist on the latter, drawing his readers' attention to the connections between different events. The *Political Register* of this period includes both letters from Cobbett's son in Paris and letters from Cobbett to newspaper editors in France, explaining the state of England. One of the most terrifying features of the revolt was the threatening Swing letters sent to farmers, with rumours persistently linking Cobbett to Swing. Home Office archives show the hermeneutic attention that the government brought to his letters during this period. This eventually led to Cobbett's

1831 trial, in which he conducted his own defence – before the entire Cabinet, who he had subpoenaed as witnesses – and was sensationally acquitted.

Chapter One

Prison and Paper Money

Cobbett was found guilty of seditious libel on 15 June 1810 at the Court of King's Bench, for publishing an article in the *Political Register* of 1 July 1809, vehemently denouncing the flogging of local militiamen at Ely. The government had served him with a writ and waited to see if this threat would temper his journalism, but Cobbett's support for Sir Francis Burdett in the controversy over the conduct of the Walcheren expedition ensured that he would be brought to trial. Encouraged by the success of James Perry in conducting his own defence in a libel trial earlier that year, and cheered by the subsequent abandonment of the case against John and Leigh Hunt, Cobbett decided to defend himself, with the Attorney General, Sir Vicary Gibbs, presenting the case for the prosecution. Cobbett insisted on the disproportionate nature of the punishment and identified closely with the militiamen – 'the greater part were then young fellows, probably in smock frocks, just taken from the plough, and ignorant of that subordination that is practised in the army' – but a Special Jury, presided over by Lord Ellenborough, consulted for only five minutes before pronouncing him guilty.⁶⁵ After the trial, there were a few days when it seemed that Cobbett would be allowed to avoid imprisonment if he discontinued the *Political Register*. However, he quickly began to suspect that the government wished to obtain his subjection before imprisoning him anyway, and withdrew the article he had written for the final number of the *Political Register*. On 9 July, Judges Ellenborough, Grose, LeBlanc and Bailey sentenced him to a fine of one thousand pounds and two

⁶⁵ 'Law Report [...] The King v. William Cobbett', from *The Times*, 16 June 1810, re-printed in *Selected Writings*, ed. Natrass, vol. 2, p. 261.

years imprisonment. As Leonora Nattrass writes, ‘this seminal moment shapes the rest of his career’.⁶⁶

In an open letter to Henry Hunt, written from a tavern near Harrisburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1818, Cobbett reflected that,

had it not been for the treatment I received in 1810, I might have become comparatively indolent. Easy circumstances, a love of a country-life, and an attention turned to other objects, might, possibly, have prevented the birth of the *Cheap Register*. But the imprisonment, the fine, the seven year recognizances, and especially the conduct of Perceval and Gibbs; these demanded a *life of exertion*.⁶⁷

The ‘Account of the Family’ by Anne Cobbett – very often her father’s most perceptive and acute observer – confirms this view, hinting at the reserves of determination and anger that Cobbett discovered in Newgate and would draw on for the rest of his life:

Papa’s health did not suffer in Newgate, but his temper did. He left it an altered man in many respects. Miss Mitford says truly that he never talked politics in society, never broached them at least. After Newgate he talked of little else. He was so angry at being so ill-used.⁶⁸

Nancy Cobbett, heavily pregnant, travelled to London the night her husband was sentenced and took lodgings close to Newgate on Skinner Street. The daughter she gave birth to lived for only three weeks and Cobbett always blamed her death on the forced removal from Hampshire.⁶⁹ The day after sentencing, Cobbett wrote to Anne at Botley, dating his letter ‘State Prison, Newgate’ and insisting she explain to the younger children what had happened:

⁶⁶ ‘Introduction’ to volume 2 of *Selected Writings*, ed. Nattrass, p. 6.

⁶⁷ ‘To Henry Hunt, Esq.’, *Political Register*, 25 April 1818.

⁶⁸ Anne Cobbett, *Account of the Family* (London: William Cobbett Society, 1999), p. 40.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

you must now take the Judges' sentence, as you find it in the news-papers, and read it to the boys, and point out what it is. Tell them what to think of it; and tell them how good the final consequences of all this will be to us. Put good spirit into them. Make them see my ~~base and detestable~~ enemies in their true colours, and God knows you need do no more. Explain to them who and what those enemies are, and why they are my enemies.

He would continue to publish the *Political Register* throughout his sentence, doubling its frequency to twice a week during the first year of his sentence, and tells Anne that on his first day in Newgate he is 'engaged to-day in putting my room to rights, and in making all necessary preparations for future labour'. He would not accomplish this labour alone: 'in the course of a week', Cobbett writes,

I expect to be what I shall call settled, and then my dear William must come to help me to labour. I will not write or read by candle-light, but will make him do that for me. What a blessing it is to have such healthy and clever and sober and sensible and industrious and dutiful and affectionate children! The miserable, malignant, poisonous wretches, who hate me, have no such children. Their race is rotten in carcase and limbs as well as in heart. They are eaten up with infection from the top of their senseless heads to the bottom of their lazy feet.⁷⁰

When Cobbett entered Newgate, Anne was fifteen, William, the eldest son, eleven years old and John only nine. All three took turns over the next two years to stay with Cobbett in Newgate, helping him to survive his sentence and continue publishing the *Register*.

Cobbett's conditions in Newgate were much more comfortable than those of most prisoners, the result of his ability to pay twelve guineas a week for rooms in the lodgings of the head jailor. He was allowed to entertain as many visitors as he wished between noon and ten at night, receive books, food and drink brought in from outside,

⁷⁰ Cobbett to Anne Cobbett, State Prison, Newgate, 10 July 1810, Nuffield, XXIX/13/1-2.

have members of the family stay with him and send private letters and articles for publication out of Newgate.⁷¹ However, he faced a crisis of his financial affairs as a result of the fine, his legal costs, the fees he paid for his rooms, pressure from creditors, anxiety about the – already heavily mortgaged – farm at Botley and the discovery that many of his publishing projects had been run at a loss by his London agent, John Wright. These concerns were compounded by the anger he felt towards the government and his pain at being separated from the rest of the family and the farm: trapped in the ‘great Wen’, he exercised on the roof of the prison, overlooking the scene of executions, by going through ‘the motions of digging, raking, mowing etc with a dumb bell in each hand’.⁷² These feelings of anger, separation, material anxiety and imaginative escape are the context for the remarkable sequence of public and personal letters Cobbett wrote from Newgate over the next two years. They laid much of the formal and intellectual groundwork for the cheap *Register* of 1816, producing a broad analysis of the corrupt system of paper money and attempting to counter this pernicious form of circulation with a material, highly situated concept of his own correspondence.⁷³ In doing so, he discovered what would become the primary vehicle of his arguments in the unstamped *Register*: the open letter to a particular person or group of the population, capable of speaking to a mass audience while retaining an intimacy and specificity that would define his journalism. If during the first decade of the nineteenth century Cobbett had slowly progressed from anti-Jacobin to radical

⁷¹ G.D.H. Cole, *The Life of William Cobbett* (London: Collins, 1924), pp. 160-61.

⁷² Anne Cobbett, *Account of the Family*, p. 36.

⁷³ Many of Cobbett’s most persuasive critics have paid attention to what Jon Klancher calls the ‘extraordinary concreteness’ of his prose. Kevin Gilmartin identifies “this is very material” as a key phrase in his writing while John Whale shows how his empiricism must negotiate the loss of ‘transparency’, which ‘generates the need for the mediation of representation in the form of critique’. The focus here is on how the concreteness of his prose is specifically related to epistolary form. See Jon Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 126; Kevin Gilmartin, “‘This Is Very Material’: William Cobbett and the Rhetoric of Radical Opposition” in *Studies in Romanticism* 34 (1995), 81-101 and John Whale, *Imagination Under Pressure*, p. 161.

journalist by responding to individual events and adjusting his politics accordingly, during the 1810s he was emboldened by a totalising vision of the system of ‘Corruption’, stemming from the national debt, taxes and paper money. Both his understanding of this system and his strategies of combating it through his own writing were in significant ways the outcome of two years reading, thinking and letter writing in Newgate.

Paper Against Gold

Cobbett’s basic critique of the debt was nothing new, the fear that Britain’s rapidly growing debt would eventually shipwreck the nation having been a staple of eighteenth-century Country Party rhetoric. However, while Pope, Swift and Bolingbroke had, in Mary Poovey’s description, ‘tied speculation, the escalating national debt, and paper currency into a stick with which to spank the governing Whigs’, Cobbett’s own analysis was influenced less by earlier works such as Swift’s *Conduct of the Allies* (1711) than it was by a much more recent account, Thomas Paine’s *Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance* (1796).⁷⁴ The narrative in Cobbett’s *Paper Against Gold* claims that ‘by accident’ Paine’s pamphlet found its way into his library while he was in America, during which time he wrote a defamatory life of Paine (which passes unmentioned in *Paper Against Gold*).⁷⁵ *Decline and Fall* went unread until his return to England and, specifically, until 1803, ‘when there was much apprehension of invasion, and when great complaints were made of the scarcity of change’.⁷⁶ While Claribel Young disputes this account,

⁷⁴ Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2008), p. 175.

⁷⁵ *The Life of Thomas Paine, Interspersed with Remarks and Reflections by Peter Porcupine* (Philadelphia and London, 1797).

⁷⁶ William Cobbett, *Paper against Gold and Glory Against Prosperity. Or, An Account of the Rise, Progress, Extent, and Present State of the Funds and of the Paper-Money of Great Britain*, 2 vols

arguing that Cobbett actually read *Decline and Fall* before he wrote the scurrilous biography, in *Paper Against Gold* he finally makes fulsome acknowledgement of his debt to Paine.⁷⁷ The moment of reading ‘the little essay of PAINE’ becomes one of almost Damascene conversion:

Here I saw to the bottom at once. Here was no bubble, no mud to obstruct my view: the stream was clear and strong: I saw the whole matter in its true light, and neither pamphleteers nor speech-makers were, after that, able to raise even a momentary puzzle in my mind. (442)

Cobbett follows Paine’s critique of the ‘funding system’ of debt and paper money, based on how the government borrowed to pay for its wars and was then forced to issue increasing volumes of paper currency to service the interest on the debt. As the volume of paper in circulation increased, its value depreciated, leading to inflation and eventually, as witnessed in America and France, the inevitable ‘death of credit’ and collapse of the entire system.⁷⁸ Paine is convinced of the unnaturalness of the system: ‘do we not see that nature, in all her operations, disowns the visionary basis upon which the funding system is built? She acts always by renewed successions, and never by accumulating additions perpetually progressing’.⁷⁹ However, at the stage immediately preceding the ‘death of credit’, this unnatural system invests every citizen with the power to hasten its destruction. As the value of coins and notes will

(London, 1815), vol. 1, p. 442. Subsequent references will be given as bracketed volume and page numbers in the main body of the text. This work was first published in the *Political Register*, 1810-11. While the 1815 collected edition was sold for ‘20s. in *Paper-Money*’, a cheap four shilling edition was published in 1817 ‘for the use of schools, and of *young persons* in general’, which was later re-issued in twopenny parts, each containing a single letter from the series. In an advertisement for the 1817 edition Cobbett drew the reader’s attention to the relationship between the price of the text, its subject matter and site of production: ‘I have reduced the price in order to meet the poverty of the times, of which times the work itself is a prophecy [...] This work contains the fruit of part of the hours of that imprisonment, which my enemies hoped and expected to kill me’. See M.L. Pearl, *William Cobbett: A Bibliographical Account of his Life and Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 89-92 and ‘Advertisement’, *Political Register*, 4 January 1817.

⁷⁷ Claribel Young, ‘A Re-examination of William Cobbett’s Opinions of Thomas Paine’, *Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries*, 39 (1977) 7-28.

⁷⁸ Thomas Paine, *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance* (New York, 1796), p. 34.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

begin to diverge, the public are invested with authority over government simply by possessing the power to go to the bank and demand coins in exchange for their notes:

it puts it in the power of even a small part of the holders of bank notes (had they no other motive than disgust at Pitt and Greenville's sedition bills) to control any measure of government they found to be injurious to their interest; and that not by popular meetings, or popular societies, but by the simple and easy operation of with-holding their credit from the government; that is, by individually demanding payment at the bank for every bank note that comes into their hands.⁸⁰

Celebrating the democratic outcome of the funding system's ruin, Paine observes that 'every case of a failure in finances, since the system of paper began, has produced a revolution in governments, either total or partial'.⁸¹

Fifteen years after its first publication, *Decline and Fall* supplies Cobbett with the basic argument for *Paper Against Gold*. However, the two works are dissimilar in almost every other respect: Paine's pamphlet is the breezy, confident, optimistic work of a transatlantic democrat while Cobbett's longer and discursively mixed series of letters links the funding system to a far more fundamental critique of commercial society. Like Paine, Cobbett welcomes the prospect of political change that the debt and paper money seem to offer, yet he also has a much more pervasive mistrust of the workings of commercial society and a greater fear of how the government would try to resist change. While Paine separates the funding system from other parts of modern economics – which he welcomed – Cobbett's analysis forms part of a wider attack on the circulation of commerce.⁸² He had started this attack in 'Paper Aristocracy' (1804)

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 51-2.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 32.

⁸² See, for example, Gregory Claeys's discussion of how Part Two of the *Rights of Man* establishes 'the connection of democratic republicanism and prosperity' in a modern, commercial society: 'there is no worry here about the corrosive effects of luxury and avarice on either individual morals or public virtue'. Paine was 'manifestly a modern, commercial republican, and no friend to primitive or Spartan

and developed it in a series of articles entitled 'Perish Commerce' (1807-08), which argue that agriculture is the real source of a nation's prosperity and trade merely the unproductive circulation of goods and capital. Admitting that, 'for a long time, I regarded commerce as the life-blood of the nation', he writes that 'the state of things has made me reflect', and eventually decide that, 'England has long groaned under a *commercial system*, which is the most oppressive of all possible systems; and it is, too, a quiet, silent, smothering oppression, that it produces, which is more hateful than all others.'⁸³ Unlike Paine, Cobbett had come to view commerce as an unproductive form of circulation inextricably tied to the fraudulent paper system, concluding that 'the commercial and funding systems are inseparable'.⁸⁴ *Paper and Gold* is also shaped by the fact that Cobbett was writing in the aftermath of the 1797 decision by the government and Bank of England to suspend the right of exchanging bank notes for coins, which removed the democratic power Paine described the public as possessing, of 'with-holding their credit from the government', and contributed to the less optimistic tone of Cobbett's analysis.

Twelve years later, Cobbett remembered the origins of *Paper Against Gold* in a conversation he had with an American Quaker friend who came to visit him on his second day in Newgate. In talking to him, Cobbett resolved to use his imprisonment to write a work which would endure and eventually vindicate him:

equality of the type associated with Rousseau', valuing the work commerce did to unite individuals and nations. In Paine's own words, commerce represented 'the greatest approach towards universal civilization, that has yet been made by any means not immediately flowing from moral principles'. See Gregory Claeys, *The Revolution Debate in Britain: The Origins of Modern Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 38-9 and Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (London, 1795, first published 1791-92), p. 116.

⁸³ 'Perish Commerce', *Political Register*, 21 and 28 November 1807.

⁸⁴ 'Perish Commerce', *Political Register*, 12 December 1807.

I then described to him the outline of what I intended to do with regard to the paper-system; and after passing a very pleasant afternoon, during which we selected and rejected several titles, we at last fixed upon that of “*Paper against Gold*,” which I began to write and to publish in a few weeks afterwards [...] This was a new epoch in the progress of my mind. I now bent my whole force to one object, regarding every thing else as of no consequence at all [...] I had Newgate in my recollection, and the paper-money for my polar star.⁸⁵

In *Paper Against Gold*, he traced the history of the National Debt as far back as the 1690s, showing how the government had borrowed to pay for successive wars, while fund-holders and stock-jobbers invested in the debt and received the interest.⁸⁶ ‘Every loan,’ Cobbett explains, ‘occasions a fresh batch of paper to pay the interest upon it; that fresh batch of paper causes a new depreciation and a new demand for paper again’ (I, 449). The Sinking Fund – which ‘means, in other words, in words better to be understood, a *Lessening Fund*’ – was set up so that a portion of each year’s taxes might be used to start paying off the National Debt, and in 1786 the Grand Sinking Fund was established by Pitt, whose name cannot be mentioned ‘without exciting feelings that struggle hard against reason, and that, in some minds, overcome it’ (I, 56-7). Pitt’s Sinking Fund Commissioners were charged with buying up Stock and using the interest they were paid to buy up more Stock until ‘the government might burn the Great Book, and the National Debt would be paid off’. When introduced, many realised there was ‘something very whimsical in a nation’s GETTING MONEY by *paying itself interest upon its own Stock*’, but Pitt’s ‘flowery and bold speeches’

⁸⁵ ‘To Mr. Brougham’, *Political Register*, 20 July 1822. This conversation identifies *Paper Against Gold* as a product of what Iain McCalman, writing about Richard Newton’s 1793 prints of prison life, defines as ‘Newgate sociability’. There are many differences between Cobbett’s imprisonment and the experiences of mid-1790s radicals – notably Cobbett’s (self-imposed) isolation from other prisoners – but the volume of visitors he received once again recalls Newgate’s position during the 1790s as the ‘epicenter of British Jacobin cultural resistance’, encouraging ‘radical synergies’. By emphasizing his position, dating his letters from jail, ‘State Prison, Newgate’, Cobbett, like McCalman’s radicals, self-consciously turned ‘the private space of prison into an enlightened public sphere’. See Iain McCalman, ‘Newgate in Revolution: Radical Enthusiasm and Romantic Counterculture’, *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22.1 (1998) 95-110, pp. 102, 98, 96.

⁸⁶ By 1819, the £844m national debt represented over 200% of GNP and interest payments consumed more than half of total government expenditure. See Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?: England 1783-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 113-14.

reassured them (I, 66-7). However, the debt, taxes and interest continued to increase, with Cobbett arguing that ‘there is something so consummately ridiculous in the idea of a nation’s *getting money* by paying interest *to itself* upon its *own stock*, that the mind of every rational man naturally rejects it’ (I, 95-6).

The central episode in the recent history of the debt was the stoppage of payment in kind by the Bank of England in 1797, linked to the invasion crisis of the same year which led to a proliferation of paper money. The panic over French invasion and the suspicion that notes were worth less than coins led people to rush to the banks to exchange their notes, at which point the loyalist press declared the fears over invasion groundless, and – having formerly accused anyone who doubted the invasion of Jacobinism – now ‘*accuse the Jacobins, as they called them, of having exited the alarm, for the purpose of injuring public credit!*’ (I, 200) When challenged in the Commons to repay the Government debt to the Bank in gold in order to resolve the crisis, Pitt declared that the Government borrowed in paper money, would repay the Bank in paper money, that taxes were raised in paper money and ‘that the whole was become a *system of paper*’: ‘a fact of which the country had, till that moment been in complete ignorance’ (I, 274-6). To compensate for no longer exchanging paper for gold, the Bank of England had to issue a large volume of small denomination notes, to maintain the circulation of the country. These were supplemented by the notes issued by country banks, of which seven hundred were in operation by 1810.⁸⁷ The public were rightly concerned about the value of these notes, which were in practice often worth less than the same value in coins and lacked any substantial foundation in the bank’s reserves. As Mary Poovey writes, before the Bank Charter Act of 1833, ‘it was

⁸⁷ Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy*, p. 177.

impossible for anyone – even a Bank of England director – to say how much paper credit circulated in Britain at any given time.’⁸⁸ It was clear, however, that the number of notes in circulation was rising, prices were increasing and country banks were going bankrupt with increasing regularity, rendering all of their notes worthless.⁸⁹ When the government rejected the report of the Bullion Committee in September 1810, which suggested that payment in kind should be resumed, Cobbett proclaimed that the resumption of payments was impossible and the only solution lay in ‘a total destruction of the paper-money’ (II, 35).⁹⁰

This series of country bank failures determined the form of *Paper Against Gold*, which was published as a series of twenty-nine letters, dated ‘State Prison, Newgate’, and appeared in the *Political Register* between September 1810 and August 1811. Pioneering a technique Cobbett would use increasingly frequently from 1816 in the twopenny *Register*, they were addressed to a carefully circumscribed audience: ‘the tradesmen and farmers in and near Salisbury’, who, as Cobbett explained in the collected edition, ‘were, at the time, suffering greatly from the failure of a bank in that

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 162.

⁸⁹ The increase in low denomination notes also led to an ‘epidemic of forgery’, confirming Cobbett’s anxieties about the value and authenticity of paper money. This produced ‘a vigorous response on the part of the Bank’: Randall McGowen calculates that between 1797 and 1821, the period when the Restriction Act was in operation, the Bank of England, acting as a private prosecutor, brought over two thousand offenders to trial. Joseph Kaye, one of the solicitors acting for the Bank, wrote in 1809, that ‘the fabrication and circulation of forged Bank notes, has lately become so systematic a matter of business that the security of the circulating medium of the country is seriously menaced’. See Randall McGowen, ‘Managing the Gallows: The Bank of England and the Death Penalty, 1797-1821’, *Law and History Review*, Summer 2007, Vol. 25, No. 2 (241-82), pp. 243-44, 265. More than two hundred people were executed for forgery in this period and Anne Cobbett later remembered how during Cobbett’s time in Newgate ‘one distressing thing was the frequent executions for forgery, and other things, under his windows. Blinds were drawn down, but we heard what was going on. It was very sad, and so often occurred then.’ Anne Cobbett, *Account of the Family*, p. 36.

⁹⁰ This conviction culminated in Cobbett’s famous response to Peel’s Bill of 1819, promising that if the government succeeded in restoring payment in kind, ‘I will give Castlereagh leave to put me upon a gridiron, while Sidmouth stirs the fire, and Canning stands by making a jest of my writhing and my groans’ (‘To the Middle Classes of England’, *Political Register*, 13 November 1819). An image of the gridiron was later re-produced on the masthead of the *Register*. Restriction was only ended with the assistance of the 1822 Small Note Act, which allowed the banks to continue issuing small denomination notes and enabled Cobbett to claim victory.

city' (iii). In contrast to the universal address of *Decline and Fall*, underpinned by Paine's commitment to equal, natural rights, Cobbett identifies a very specific audience in the agricultural community he has been separated from through his imprisonment. In addressing a series of open letters beyond the political elite, he discovers both the arguments and the epistolary vehicle for those arguments that would sustain him throughout the Regency.

The letters exhibit great discursive variety: unlike the consistent 'intellectual vernacular' of Paine's pamphlet, Cobbett's letters include brilliantly colloquial satire ('my opinion is [...] we shall not hear the Minister say, that the Old Lady is ready with her cash', II, 52), Bunyanesque allegory – peopled by Thrifty, Silverlocks, Goldhair and Grizzle Greenhorn – and innovative historiography, drawing on the evidence of common experience.⁹¹ Appealing to the collective memory of his rural audience, he reminds them in the first letter that,

there are few of you who cannot remember the time, when there was scarcely ever seen a bank note among Tradesmen and Farmers. I can remember, when this was the case; and when the farmers in my country hardly ever saw a bank note, except when they sold their hops at Weyhill fair. People, in those days, used to carry little bags to put their money in instead of the paste-board or leather cases that they now carry. (I, 7)

This intimate, nostalgic address establishes common ground with his readers, drawing on the oral wisdom of 'country sayings' from an age before the proliferation of paper:

“*As good as the Bank;*” “*As solid as the Bank;*” and the like [...] We used to have other sayings about the Bank; such as, “*As rich as the Bank;*” “*All the gold in the Bank;*” and such like, always conveying a notion that the Bank was a *place*, and a *place*, too, where there were great heaps of money.

⁹¹ Olivia Smith's phrase for Paine's style in *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 34. Smith describes how Paine's writing feels like 'conversation at its best – free-ranging, intellectual and vivid' (p. 54), but goes on to describe how Cobbett's prose also has 'the energy and rhythm of spoken language' (p. 79).

These pieces of proverbial wisdom ‘were not altogether unfounded’ before 1797 and Cobbett’s appeal throughout *Paper Against Gold* is to the repository of truth contained in the collective memory and oral culture of the people, representing a stock of common sense that is now under threat (I, 13-14). As Alex Benchimol has observed, in Cobbett’s hands ‘the debate over the new commercial system was as much an argument about the elimination of a way of life as it was about national economic efficiency’.⁹²

The system of corrupt economics he describes is underpinned and perpetuated by the corruption of language. Cobbett views his own role as one of revealing how this process operates, showing the deliberate erosion of meaning through the over-circulation of certain words: terms such as ‘the FUNDS and the NATIONAL DEBT’, ‘are frequently made use of; but, like many other words, they stand for things which are little understood, and the less, perhaps, because the words are so very commonly used’ (I, 21). In discussing the Peace of Amiens, he draws attention to Pitt’s claim that the British had won ‘an immense mass of CAPITAL, CREDIT, and CONFIDENCE’, a boast he deflates with characteristic bathos: ‘the changes upon which words were rung over and over again, till the speech became full as enlivening and instructive as a peal of the three bells of Botley Church’ (I, 159). Mary Poovey has described the process by which Cobbett attempted to demystify the language of the paper system:

since terms like *the Funds* had gradually hidden the process to which they actually referred through the kind of repetition that causes metaphors to die, and because this linguistic ossification had substituted a new, *fictive* reality for the social process it obscured, Cobbett’s readers had to simultaneously experience the mystification and, somehow, dispel it. What they saw as

⁹² Alex Benchimol, *Intellectual Politics and Cultural Conflict in the Romantic Period*, p. 171.

Cobbett pulled back the veil was that the fictional universe created by dead metaphors was a self-enclosed system. In it, words led only to other words, both metaphorically (as when *the Funds* was another way of saying *the national debt*) and metonymically (as when the phrase *money in the Funds* led to a name being written in a book).

This process is achieved through the self-conscious use of ‘a feature associated with epistolary fiction of the eighteenth century’: the insertion of dialogues into the letters, either between author and imagined reader or between allegorical characters such as Messrs. Muckworm and Company and Grizzle Greenhorn. These can even be read as a script to be performed, with ‘Cobbett’s typographic alterations’, above all, his use of italicization and capitalization, becoming ‘stage directions intended to guide an actor’s delivery of his lines.’⁹³ However, at other points in the text Cobbett’s exasperation at the linguistic haze surrounding modern economics leads him to address his readers much more directly:

let us avoid confusing our heads with this worse than Babylonish collection of names, or sounds, and fully and clearly and constantly in our sight, these plain facts: FIRST, that *the Funds*, *the Stocks*, and *the National Debt*, all mean one and the same thing; SECONDLY, that this Debt is made up of the *Principal* money lent to the Government at different times since the beginning of the thing in 1692; THIRDLY, that the *Interest* upon this principal money is paid out of the taxes; and, FOURTHLY, that those persons who are entitled to receive this interest, are what we call *fund-holders* or *stock-holders*, or, according to the more common notion and saying, have “*money in the funds*.” (I, 26)

Despite his characteristic assurance of his ability to clearly explain complex subjects, he recognizes the potential of a modern system of finance to continually disrupt stable relations between words and objects. The Herculean task of demystifying this system forced him to adopt a sterner tone towards his readers: ‘I hope, that there is not, at this day, a man amongst you, who is to be amused with empty sounds: I hope, that your

⁹³ Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy*, pp. 189-91.

minds are not now-a-days, after all that you have seen, to be led away from the object before them by any repetition of mere names. *So long as we are taxed to pay the interest upon the Debt...*' (I, 38-9). With the tools of the loyalist press and a parliamentary majority, the government can corrupt and circulate words as easily as they can put extra bank notes into circulation, the circulation of corrupt language facilitating that of paper money.

Cobbett's appeal to 'the tradesmen and farmers in and near Salisbury' invests his letters with a specificity and intimacy that helps carry his arguments to this circumscribed audience and also to a much wider readership, who have the experience of reading the letters over someone else's shoulders. If the system he is arguing against can be reinforced by the government's ability to circulate paper money and propaganda, the form of his own writings is used to buttress his argument, basing their value on how securely they are situated: dated from 'State Prison, Newgate' and addressed to tradesmen and farmers living around Salisbury. This also allows him to develop as one of the key concerns of his letters the relationship between the centre and periphery of the country. The febrile state of credit and public opinion in the years Cobbett is describing ensures that this connection will be both essential and fragile, as a Privy Council order quoted from the 1797 invasion crisis implies, referring to 'the *unusual demands for specie*, that have been made upon the metropolis, in consequence of *ill-founded or exaggerated alarms* in different parts of the country' (I, 204). In this, official, version of events, rumours originating at the edges of the kingdom are blamed for creating panic at the centre, the Bank of England on Threadneedle-street, where the drama is focused. *Paper Against Gold* reverses this set of relations: instead of showing a central bank straining to regulate the circulation of

money around the country, Cobbett concentrates on the distress inflicted on the provinces by a corrupt financial system at the centre.

His own imprisonment, as he constantly reminds his readers, functions as a sign of this corruption at the centre of the body politic. Furthermore, he is writing from a London prison to the rural community he would otherwise be amongst, as he emphasizes just before taking leave of his readers at the end of the sixteenth letter. In uncovering yet another example of linguistic corruption, he describes the ‘Bank-RESTRICTION Act’ as,

a very convenient phrase, calculated to convey the notion, that the Bank is *able* and *willing* to pay; but, that it is *not permitted* to do it. I beg you to bear along with you the meaning of the word *Restriction*, which implies an act done by one party to prevent another party from doing *what he would do if not prevented*. To *restrict* is to *limit*, or *confine*. I am *restricted*, for instance, from going out of Newgate. I am here in a state of *restriction*. I should go home to my farm and my family, if it were not for this restriction; and so “the *most thinking* people of Europe” think, of course, that the Bank Company would pay their notes in Gold and Silver, if they were not *restricted* in the same manner. (I, 296-7)

Here, Cobbett’s own state of confinement is compared to the restrictions the bank is misleadingly said to be operating under, a point of convergence within the text between the economic and personal interests in confinement and circulation. One of the anxieties running throughout the letters is the hoarding of coins caused by the increased circulation of paper money, which, Cobbett believes, can only be liberated by the total destruction of paper money. More immediately, he escapes his own confinement by addressing the rural community he has been removed from, defiantly exposing the government’s economic system. The motto he chooses for the first *Register* to appear during his imprisonment shows how far he aspires above the empty networks he exposes in *Paper Against Gold*: ‘Sir Walter Raleigh wrote his History of

the World in a prison; and it was in a prison that Cervantes wrote Don Quixote'.⁹⁴

History and the picaresque novel represent an ambitious and generically diverse mix of precedents for Cobbett's prison writing, which he claims with a characteristic sense of pride, humour and bathos. In *Paper Against Gold* he discovers the epistolary form and style capable of transforming economic polemic into something more ambitious, combining popular address with a familiar, heavily situated form of correspondence in order to counter the corrupt networks of financial circulation.

The Newgate 'Chain of Correspondence'

The epistolary strategies of *Paper Against Gold* can be more fully understood in relation to the family letters that Cobbett wrote and received in Newgate, which show a high degree of self-consciousness about the practice of epistolary writing. While the privations of imprisonment exist as a subtext to the public letters, they are present throughout the private letters. However, what is equally present in both sets of letters is an investment in how empty networks of circulation associated with a corrupt government, paper money and a supine loyalist press can be opposed by a more fruitful practice of correspondence. In the first letter from prison that survives in the family archive, Cobbett, writing from the King's Bench prison before his conviction and transferral to Newgate, tells Anne, 'I have no time to write at any length to-day. — I have got your pretty letter of yesterday, and William's, and a great comfort they are to me.'⁹⁵ While this apology and acknowledgment might appear insignificant, it marks the beginning of an extraordinary sequence of letters, both by Cobbett and his family, characterized by a continual self-consciousness about epistolary writing. These letters contain very few direct political references, but

⁹⁴ *Political Register*, 14 July 1810.

⁹⁵ Cobbett to Anne Cobbett, King's Bench, 6 July 1810, Nuffield, XXIX/12/1-2.

instead attempt to bind together the two halves of the family, one in Newgate and the other in Botley, through their shared attention to the farm and to the practice of familiar letter writing. Despite the lack of overt political discussion, perhaps due to a fear that their letters were being read, they suggest how the government's targeting of Cobbett had politicised the entire family. A dark dualism runs through them, imagining the family surrounded by its many enemies: 'let them growl and curse and spit their venom as long as they please. We shall be up with them at last. Never fear them. They cannot hurt us, as long as we love one another and keep up our spirits. — Kiss dear Mama and the dear children for me'.⁹⁶ The entire family were punished through Cobbett's imprisonment and their letters show a sense of shared persecution and resistance: for example, Cobbett writes to his brother-in-law, 'your dear Sisters and Mother and Brother are all well, and so are all my family. We only want you to make our happiness complete, in spite of all the malice and all the power of our enemies.'⁹⁷

At many points in the sequence of letters the significance attached to letter writing is most conspicuous in Cobbett's anger at receiving what he considers to be inferior letters. Clearly an exacting correspondent, one letter to his son William after almost a year in Newgate is particularly critical:

I trust, that, in future, you will take time to read your letters carefully over, and see that you have said all that you meant. This letter of yours has no signature; and, in short, it clearly appears, that it was sent off in haste. But, as I have so often told you, begin your letters soon enough, and recollect, that one principal part of your business is to please me, and give me that sort of satisfaction that I require as to my affairs at home. Your letters are too short in general. You do not write half enough to me; and I assure you, that I think much more about this than I say about it. — I hope that this will be the case no more; but that all

⁹⁶ Cobbett to William Cobbett junior, Newgate, 6-7 October 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/57/1-2.

⁹⁷ Cobbett to Frederick Reid, Newgate, 27 September 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/50/1.

my letters will receive prompt and satisfactory answers; and that you will never bundle off a letter to me in haste. I hate all fly-away work. — When you have animals to draw in your letters, draw them first, as I told you before, and then you will not have to dig your letters about with the knife and make them so ugly. — When I get a slovenly letter from you I am in an ill temper all the evening.⁹⁸

Six months later William's epistolary style again fails to impress:

mind what I say; never write me such another letters as long as you live. — Your letters of late have been so full of blunders, so full of self-contradictions, so full of bad spelling, so full of blurs, and they have been so unsatisfactory in their contents, that, really, at last, I am got to hate to see them come. They are not a tenth part so good as the letters that you wrote a year ago. I shall be ashamed to bind them up, and I now never show them to any body. — I hope you will change your conduct in this respect immediately; but, if you do not; if you do not write me full and clear and correct letters, and answer all that I ask of you, you had better write me none at all, and let me save the pence that your letters now cost me.⁹⁹

Cobbett's demands as a correspondent include clarity, good spelling, full answers to his questions about the farm, pictures of the animals and even a particular way of signing off: 'P.S. Always close your letters with God bless you. I do not want you to tell me, that you are my affectionate daughter. — Tell James the same. — These reiterated assurances become too common-place in the end. — They are too much like a common-place compliment.'¹⁰⁰ It is Anne who is most successful both at mimicking her father's style and simultaneously cultivating a distinct epistolary style of her own, which she reserves for her uncle, Frederick Reid, who was serving in the Peninsula Wars:

⁹⁸ Cobbett to William Cobbett junior, Newgate, 11-12 June 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/22/1-4.

⁹⁹ Cobbett to William Cobbett junior, 12 November 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/68/1.

¹⁰⁰ Cobbett to Anne Cobbett, Newgate, 10 December 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/81/1. Two decades later, Cobbett gave a sentimental but very practical account of how the 'HAMPER, with a lock and two keys', which passed between Botley and Newgate, 'became our *school*': 'to every letter I wrote an answer [...] being sure that that was the way to produce other and better letters'. However, he misremembers how he 'always thanked them for their "*pretty letter*"; and never expressed any wish to see them write better'. *Advice to Young Men and (Incidentally) to Young Women in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life*, London, 1829-30, paras. 302-3.

I can assure you that Botley is become a very lively place; A M^{rs}. Lloyd and her two daughter's are living at Smith's, and I am told (for they came there since I have been here) that the two latter are very dashing girls. Then General Kemp is there with a cousin or two of his, who are officers in the navy; and then, you know M^{rs}. le Lever is a widow, and a very gay one too, I'll assure you, and Jacky Daddle is keeping a pack of hounds; only I am afraid if I do not go back to my post and stand between him and the fair daughters of M^{rs}. Lloyd, and put in my, till now, undisputed claim, I shall lose him; for I hear that he serenades them every evening with his claronet, and they answer him with their own sweet voices. All this wont do, it does not signify talking, I really must go back and make a stir amongst them. – So if you have a mind to come and marry one of these fair damsels, I will render you all the assistance in power; especially as I shall have an interest in so doing.¹⁰¹

Anne's epistolary style in writing to her uncle seems closer to Austen's Hampshire than Cobbett's, marked by frequent digressions and delighting in the social details and pieces of gossip that her father was uninterested in.

While Cobbett's demands as a correspondent often seem stringent, the criticisms contained in many of the letters to his wife during 1811 are perhaps explained by his ongoing distress at being divided from his family.

after receiving such a letter as that of to-day, I am fit for nothing for many hours [...] and, the torment is so much the greater because of the delay in getting an answer to you [...] I could not eat my breakfast after receiving your letter. I was compelled to sit down and ease my heart by writing to you [...] Poor Billy writes as if his soul was wrapped up in yours, and so it is. He is a dear good boy for his affectionate feelings; but, I am afraid of his feeling too much. Consider also, that dear Nancy feels a great deal upon reading these letters, which never fails to plunge us both into melancholy. It is a very trying time for us; but, it does not become us to sink under it, even if it were a great deal more so than it is.¹⁰²

A week later another worried letter from Nancy produces a similar reply:

the letter that I have just got from Botley has sunk my heart within me [...] Do not thus harass my mind, I beseech you; or, at least, do not do it at this time.

¹⁰¹ Anne Cobbett to Frederick Reid, Newgate, 27 August 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/39/1-2.

¹⁰² Cobbett to Nancy Cobbett, Newgate, 25 October 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/61/1-3.

— I have no human being to speak comfort to me [...] I could cry like a child at the receipt of these letters. They kill me by inches.¹⁰³

The reliance on letters during his two years in Newgate emerges strongly here, and his joy at receiving a good letter is just as powerfully expressed as his criticisms elsewhere.

I have no franks yet, and I must, therefore, write upon a single sheet to-day, though I very much wish to write dear William a farm letter, in answer to his most beautiful letters of yesterday and the day before; and such letters I have never seen from any body. One really fancies that one sees the things he is describing; and the kindness of his disposition, towards every living creature, breathes through every sentence that he writes.

This day brought us so many good things, and objects so pleasing to me, especially when I see them coming from under the hands of my sweet Nancy, that I know not where or how to begin my acknowledgements of your kindness. All were excellent; but, the two things that I admired most were the Indian Corn and the Myrtle boughs. The first came without the smallest injury, owing to its being so carefully and judiciously packed up. The Milk we have not yet uncorked; but we shall try one bottle of it to-morrow. Some of the bread and poultry appear to come from Botley Farm; and I beg you to thank dear Ellen and M^r. Warner for them. They are both excellently good.¹⁰⁴

The main function of the family letters was to carry information and relay instructions about the farm, a process which begins only three days after Cobbett's conviction, with an entire paragraph devoted to whether clover or turnips should be grown in a particular field. Trying to retain complete control of every detail of the farm from Newgate, many of the letters contain sketches and plans and the letter quoted at length above shows Cobbett's delight at being able to picture the farm through William's letter – and even touch and taste the gifts sent with the letter. Unsurprisingly, he is just as exacting about how produce is sent as he is at how letters are written – 'I shall be very much pleased to have some of my wall fruit [...] What I do have I wish to have

¹⁰³ Cobbett to Nancy Cobbett, Newgate, 1 November 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/66/1-2.

¹⁰⁴ Cobbett to Nancy Cobbett, Newgate, 14 September 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/45/1-2.

nicely sent; for it would vex me exceedingly to have them spoiled'¹⁰⁵ – and equally critical on discovering that something has been done contrary to his demands, 'Newgate, 2. Decr. (last month in the year), 1811 [...] Tell M^r. Smith that I have been informed of his beating the horses, and that I am very angry about it indeed. Read this to him [...] As to the Turneps in Tyers field, they ought now to be bigger than my fist.'¹⁰⁶ At points his confidence in what his letters are able to accomplish becomes comically absurd:

P.S. You say, that letters do you more good than Physic; but, mind, then; that, if you have letters, you are not to have Physic. Indeed, that damned doctor's stuff is a most terrible thing [...] Try one month what regular rising, good exercise, lean meat, little butter, little tea, and good water and wine will do; and, above all half an hour's walking and washing before breakfast. — I am very proud to hear you say, that my letters do you good; but, it is no great compliment to them to say that they do you more good than the Doctors; for, they do you infinite harm; and their drugs are worse than they are. — Pray try my prescription, and, at the end of the month, I will see how you look.¹⁰⁷

However, the letters also show an immersion in an imaginative world far removed from Newgate. Cobbett occasionally refers to the enormous numbers of visitors he received, 'the number of people that are crowding in'¹⁰⁸, which included Admiral Cochrane, Major Cartwright, Henry 'Orator' Hunt, John Philpot Curran, William Godwin and representatives from clubs and societies in 197 cities around Britain.¹⁰⁹ But the letters provided an alternative reality, combining advice and instruction with imaginative escape,

the seedling Ashes must also be removed, or spoiled; and, though it will cost something to do it, the sight of such a fine stock of young trees will make your

¹⁰⁵ Cobbett to Nancy Cobbett, Newgate, 6 August 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/33/1-2.

¹⁰⁶ Cobbett to Anne Cobbett, Newgate, 2 December 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/75/1-2.

¹⁰⁷ Cobbett to Nancy Cobbett, Newgate, 6 August 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/33/1-2.

¹⁰⁸ Cobbett to Frederick Reid, Newgate, 28 June 1812, Nuffield, XXIX/121/1.

¹⁰⁹ Spater, *The Poor Man's Friend*, v. 2, p. 326 and *The Diary of William Godwin*, eds. Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010).
<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>.

heart glad next year, when you see them all growing so finely as they will [...] the knowledge of the progress of these plantations will be a great source of delight and of hope with me. It is a source of pleasure that I should in vain endeavour to describe¹¹⁰

Writing to William about Nancy, he expresses his hope that ‘she rode into the coppices and looked at the roads; for those are the most beautiful things in the world. Those are the things that I think most about.’¹¹¹ The family letters show Cobbett attempting an epistolary escape from Newgate, writing letters and demanding replies that allow him to make an imaginative return to the farm.

His continued ability to run the farm from Newgate was, no less than exposing the paper system, a way of defying his enemies, and the letters are grounded in the everyday details of agricultural life:

Before you come away, you should show the Bailiff how to make out an amount of the work every day to be sent to me, just as you send it; and you should rule him out, and put the writing, into a dozen of Weekly returns of Stock, and tell him how to fill up with the figures. For I would not have the chain of correspondence broken upon any account. You must also write him plenty of covers for his letters, and show him how to put them up; for they must be in our family handwriting or else L^d. Folkestone’s servants will not send the letters here.¹¹²

However, the attention paid to accurate description and neatly-drawn plans is not merely functional and from the time they were written Cobbett knew he wanted to preserve the ‘chain of correspondence’ created during his imprisonment. Unlike other family letters in the Nuffield archive, the Newgate letters are collected into a single bound volume, an end that Cobbett seems to have planned from an early stage in the correspondence.

¹¹⁰ Cobbett to Nancy Cobbett, Newgate, 27 February 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/19/1.

¹¹¹ Cobbett to William Cobbett junior, Newgate, 11-12 June 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/22/1-4.

¹¹² Cobbett to William Cobbett junior, Newgate, 6 September 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/43/1-2.

Do you consider, that all these Farming Letters are to be bound; and that they are all to be seen by the bookbinder? — Therefore I send back the letter of yesterday to be copied, leaving out the parts that I have crossed. — When you have any thing of a private nature to say, put it on another piece of paper. — As to any thing about the men, any of their bad conduct, any thing about wanting money, or any thing really connected with the Business, put it in the Farm Letter; for of all these matters I want a faithful record. I do not care who reads them; and it will be a great satisfaction to recur to them hereafter. — Better not, in these Letters, make use of nick-names; nor say any thing which you would not say to people's face; which, indeed, is, at all times, a good rule.¹¹³

The 'great satisfaction' the letters will continue to give after his release from Newgate identifies them as durable, tangible texts that will record the family's continued work on the newspaper and farm and embody their determination and solidarity during a period of persecution and trial. Nicholas Roe describes how Leigh Hunt's trellised plot of flowers and young trees in the yard outside his rooms in Horsemonger Lane prison, 'created an imaginative stronghold within the walls of tyranny', which 'for many contemporaries [...] came to represent an inspired, lyrical resistance to oppression'.¹¹⁴ In Newgate, the entire family became a publicly available spectacle: Cobbett was talked about, written about, his friends came to dine on food brought up from the farm and the curious came simply to see the spectacle of the radical journalist in prison, surrounded by children who were engaged in helping to produce the *Political Register*. The letters between Cobbett and members of his family during 1810-12 came to represent the family's bold and imaginative resistance to his imprisonment.

The simultaneous sequences of letters, the published letters to tradesmen and farmers around Salisbury concerning paper money and the family letters preoccupied by the

¹¹³ Cobbett to Anne Cobbett, Newgate, 10 December 1811, Nuffield, XXIX/81/1.

¹¹⁴ Nicholas Roe, *Fiery Heart: The First Life of Leigh Hunt* (London: Pimlico, 2005), p. 188.

Botley farm, evince a shared belief in the efficacy of epistolary writing. Letters are held to be capable of maintaining the farm and exposing the paper system from the distance of Newgate, both ways of writing against a government that was responsible for the funding system and the family's persecution. The epistolary styles of each series overlaps and converges, a feature that will be characteristic of Cobbett's correspondence over the next two decades. *Paper Against Gold* transforms the potentially dry subject of forms of currency through an intimate, familiar use of epistolary address, carrying a strong sense of Cobbett's own position in Newgate and a close identification with the rural audience he is writing to. Looking back in the final letter from Newgate, Cobbett writes that 'I had long entertained the design to make the subject familiar' (II, 45-6). However, in *Paper Against Gold*, he not only familiarizes his readers with modern economics but achieves a different kind of familiarity through his use of epistolary address, fulfilling a promise made at the beginning of the very first letter: 'before we part, we shall become well acquainted' (I, 2). This was only achieved with the assistance of Cobbett's children, who were also essential in maintaining the farm during his imprisonment and would occupy an increasingly important role within his published writings. Indeed, Cobbett's description of the family letters places them somewhere between the published and personal: they are destined to be 'seen by the bookbinder' and achieve a permanent form through being bound together as 'a faithful record. I do not care who sees them'. Prison severely limited any kind of personal or familial privacy and, despite their precautions, the family knew that their letters might be intercepted and read. However, Cobbett would increasingly embrace a lack of separation between the public and personal, using a consistent epistolary style to suggest his life and work was part of one, great project. This unchanging style also worked to invest his

correspondence with an authenticity capable of distinguishing it from loyalist circulation.

Circulation Against Correspondence

By presenting his economic polemic in the anti-Paineite form of a series of letters to a narrowly defined audience, and by emphasizing the unbroken 'chain of correspondence' constructed by the family's letters, Cobbett tried to distinguish the movement of his writings from the corrupt circulation of ideas, texts and bank notes. The hegemonic metaphor of the circulation of capital as the lifeblood of the healthy body politic is one which David Trotter traces back to Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), in which money 'nourisheth' by 'circulating'. Trotter shows how circulation becomes a central theme in Defoe's writing, which polemically promotes an economy based on trade through the metaphor of circulation, while remaining fascinated by uneconomic characters such as Moll Flanders and Roxana who resist, overwhelm or otherwise threaten healthy systems of circulation. The circulation of capital continued to be the fundamental category of economic analysis until the 1820s, when it was replaced by production, but, for writers from Adam Smith to Dickens, had to be supplemented by other systems of circulation, notably the circulating library. Trotter identifies the importance of Newgate in both Defoe and Dickens's thinking and writing about circulation: a place that 'holds those who have tried in some way or other to fix the circulation of trade, to interrupt or divert it'.¹¹⁵ Imprisoned in Newgate for his journalism, Cobbett has himself been taken out of circulation and the epistolary mode of correspondence he develops in both *Paper Against Gold* and the family letters privileges a very different metaphor for the movement of texts.

¹¹⁵ David Trotter, *Circulation: Defoe, Dickens and the Economies of the Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 45.

While circulation is concerned simply with how widely a text travels, correspondence – such a naturalised metaphor for letter writing – is interested in achieving a degree of equivalence, a fact that is embodied for Cobbett in the differences between paper and gold. At the head of the seventh letter, he inserts a quotation from Burke, layering his own emphasis over Burke's words through the use of italics and capitalization:

'REAL MONEY' is 'the *certain sign of the increase of* TRADE, of which it is the measure, and consequently of the soundness and vigour of the whole body', but the increase of paper money 'IS NOT THE MEASURE OF THE TRADE OF ITS NATION, BUT OF THE NECESSITY OF ITS GOVERNMENT' (I, 107).¹¹⁶ In the same letter, Cobbett reduces this argument to even more stark terms: 'real money is the *representative of* MONEY'S WORTH THINGS: promissory notes are the *representatives of* DEBT' (I, 118). Cobbett predicts that in a parallel system of currencies, in which a given amount in coins is effectively worth more than the same in paper, the nebulous, fraudulent system of circulation of debt, loans and taxes will continue dealing in paper but the everyday exchanges of the population will rely on the closer correspondence of coins to goods: 'Beef and Pork and Biscuit could not be bought without real money. These are commodities that do not move without an equivalent' (I, 480). Here, Cobbett may have in mind another phrase from Burke, this time from *Reflections*, where he insists that 'the prattling about the rights of men will not be accepted in payment for a biscuit or a pound of gunpowder'.¹¹⁷ Paper money, like loyalist propaganda, has no true relation and – as a result – no real purchase on

¹¹⁶ Quoting from Edmund Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America*, 2 vols (third edition London, 1760, first published 1757), vol. 2, p. 307.

¹¹⁷ *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790; ed. by Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 370.

the material lives of Cobbett's audience, who rely on the closer equivalence offered by 'real money' and embodied in Cobbett's epistolary practice.

Cobbett's ideas of circulation and correspondence re-write some of the most influential conservative representations of radical writing, a canny rhetorical move which perhaps owes much to his experience as an anti-Jacobin propagandist during the 1790s. Jon Klancher takes Arthur Young's 1792 *Travels in France* as an example of the conservative distinction between an 'intricate, systematic social network' of circulation, by which 'a public is shaped to read discourses in deliberate, directed ways', and its dangerous Jacobin alternative, writing which 'constitutes a kind of negative circulation [...] it does not circulate at all, but "disseminates"'. Klancher shows how, for Young at least, Jacobin texts were thought to spread from Paris to the provinces with a speed and force that by-passed circulatory networks:

to circulate is to follow a path, however circuitous or labyrinthine its windings, along an ordered itinerary [...] to "disseminate" is to flood through the interstices of the social network, into the social cracks of the ancien régime. Dissemination takes place where there is no circulation, where there are no pre-formed patterns to guide the flow of language or ideas. What is disseminated "propagates" or reproduces itself without the orderly expansion of circulation.¹¹⁸

While Young's account is one that Cobbett endorses in one of the three letters added to *Paper Against Gold* in 1815, the overall effect of Cobbett's analysis is to re-cast Young's model of radical dissemination into his own demonized system of loyalist circulation. Cobbett's circulation, like Young's dissemination, is a pernicious system which floods an older network of distribution and destroys existing social and textual

¹¹⁸ Jon Klancher, *Making of English Reading Audiences*, pp. 33-4.

relations.¹¹⁹ This can of course be read either as evidence of Cobbett's residual conservatism, his nostalgia for a lost social order, or as a shrewd political move that positions his own writing at a distance from the furtive and threatening associations that English Jacobin writing carried from the 1790s.

In Klancher's reading of Young, regulated circulation 'conflates the distance between reader and writer' while 'the radical writer accentuates it'; circulation 'gravitates to sunlit coffeehouses', while 'the fermenting of radical subculture' takes place in alehouse kitchens, 'bypassing the carefully prepared channels of middle-class circulatory patterns'.¹²⁰ Klancher goes on to discuss Coleridge's attack on the absence of an 'individuated reader, a "future self"' in radical prose. To Coleridge,

no such "implied reader" haunts the radicals' texts. They confront their readers as collectives and representatives of collectives – "an *inseparable* part" of the social order, undetachable members of an audience contesting its position in social and cultural space. The radical text was not meant to form a singular bond between reader and writer, but to bind one reader to another *as* audience [...] unlike the novelist, the radical writer always claims the last word, laying bare the rhetorical stance which his middle-class interlocutors find intolerably fixed.¹²¹

The open letters that would increasingly dominate the *Political Register* after Waterloo, when Cobbett's attention shifted back to domestic politics, might seem to 'confront their readers as collectives and representatives of collectives', defining their audience by geography (the men of Kent, the people of Scotland) or by their place in the social body (the journeymen and labourers, the Luddites).¹²² However, they

¹¹⁹ Cobbett draws on Young's account in Letter XXXI of *Paper Against Gold*, see II, 61 ff.

¹²⁰ Klancher, *Making of English Reading Audiences*, p. 35.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹²² After his release from Newgate, Cobbett did not always continue the method of addressing open letters to non-elite groups of the population, which was only resumed in earnest after Waterloo and with the creation of the cheap *Register*. In 1814, there are only two such open letters in the whole of the

simultaneously offer a much less monolithic model as Cobbett attempts to maintain a dialogue with his readers, incorporating their comments, printing their letters and directing their attention towards the abundance of reforming texts. An early cheap *Register* refers to the speeches made at a public meeting in Scotland, sent to him by one of his correspondents:

Look then at these *tradesmen*; read their luminous, eloquent and powerful speeches; compare these with the few disjointed members of sentences, which a Lord frequently, on such occasions, stammers out; or, with the redundant and senseless trash of a brawling “*learned* friends;” [...] *Great* national evils generally, in the end, bring their antidotes; and, as this is a season of uncommon distress and peril, so it has brought forth such a portion of public spirit and of talent.¹²³

It is not Cobbett’s texts alone but the breadth and vitality of reforming discourse throughout the country that shows the strength of the reform movement, which an epistolary or dialogic model of radical textuality can account for better than any claim that, unlike the novelist or polite essayist, ‘the radical writer always claims the last word’.

Furthermore, the conservative attempt to brand Cobbett a demagogue completely fails to explain why the cheap *Register* was so compelling. It did not become essential reading for vast sections of the population because it addressed them as collectives, but through its ability to combine angry polemic with something new, a paradoxical mixture of radical politics and familiar style. This continued to owe much to Cobbett’s private letters, as can be shown by a comparison of two letters to Henry ‘Orator’ Hunt, one private and one published as an edition of the cheap *Register* on 14 December 1816. The personal letter is only eleven lines long:

year’s *Register* (‘To the People of Southampton on the Corn Bill’, 4 June 1814 and ‘Address to the Electors of Westminster in behalf of Lord Cochrane’, 16 July 1814).

¹²³ ‘To the People of Scotland’, *Political Register*, 9 November 1816.

Botley, 16. April, 1816.

My dear Hunt,

You will see the Petition has been presented; and you see, that Sir Fr. said, that he heartily agreed with us in opinion. Methuen said he should have a counter petition. We shall see what they will do. I shall send you a side of Lamb next week, or the latter end of this. It is cruelly cold yet. When it gets warmer, pray ride over and stay here a week. I mean in about a month; for the children have got colds, and Richard is very poorly. The paper-money is coming out again, be you assured. The rascals find, that this is the real remedy for them. They endeavoured to avoid it; but could not. M^r. Spooner may now see, ~~perhaps~~ perhaps, that you were a deeper politician than he, with all his gabble about the effects of peace. Freemantle shot the largest woodcock yesterday that I ever saw. Remember me very kindly to M^{rs}. V. your brother and sons. The Boys desire to be remembered to all of you.

Yours sincerely,

W^m. Cobbett.¹²⁴

The clipped sentences suggest that this was written in haste, yet the association of ideas as Cobbett's mind shuttles back and forth between farming and politics shows his ability to combine apparently disparate topics within the same text, something epistolary form is particularly well suited to. The triumphant announcement of securing Burdett's agreement over the petition prompts the offer of 'a side of Lamb', leading him to think of the farm, the cold spring weather and his children's colds. These downbeat subjects lead Cobbett back to paper money, Hunt as 'a deeper politician' and then, in a final, triumphant flourish – 'Freemantle shot the largest woodcock yesterday that I ever saw'. The kinship of ideas in this letter becomes more telling when compared to an open letter to Hunt in the *Political Register* eight months later, which transforms the man portrayed as a demagogue by the conservative press into a humble cottage dweller:

¹²⁴ Cobbett to Henry Hunt, Botley, 16 April 1816, Nuffield, XXXIV/20/1-2.

A Letter to Henry Hunt, Esq.
Of Middleton Cottage, near Andover.
LONDON PLOTS

London, 13th Dec. 1816.

SIR.—The summer before last, when you came over to Botley and found me transplanting Swedish turnips amidst dust, and under a Sun which scorched the leaves till they resembled fried parsley, you remember how I was fretting and stewing; how many times in an hour I was looking out for a south-western cloud; how I watched the mercury in the glass, and rapped the glass with my knuckles to try to move it in my favour. But, great as my anxiety then was, and ludicrous as were my movements, ten thousand times greater has been that of Corruption's Press for the coming of a PLOT, and ten thousand times more ludicrous its movements in order to hasten the accomplishment of its wishes! You remember how my wife laughed at me, when, in the evening, some boys having thrown a handful or two of sand over the wall, that made a sort of dropping on the leaves of the laurels, I took it for the beginning of a *shower*, and pulled off my hat and held up my hand to see whether more was not coming, though there was nothing to be seen in the sky but stars shining as bright as silver. Just such has been the conduct of Corruption's sons upon hearing of the *discovery* of Mr. Watson's and Mr. Preston's *papers*! They sigh for a PLOT. Oh, how they sigh! They are working and slaving and fretting and stewing; they are sweating all over; they are absolutely pining and dying for a Plot!¹²⁵

Here, the extended analogy between Cobbett's wait for rain and the attempts of the loyalist press to implicate Hunt can be read as a continuation of the repeated shifts between agriculture and politics that feature throughout Cobbett's private correspondence with Hunt, positioning the readers of the *Political Register* where they have the experience of looking in on a letter between two friends. Leonora Natrass analyses how 'the texture of the sentence – created by the layers and complexity of the information – mirrors the layers and complexity of sensory perception' and yet this stylistic sophistication must be matched by a careful response to the volatile political context.¹²⁶ A fortnight after the second Spa Fields meeting, which Hunt addressed, had broken up into riot, Cobbett must answer the accusations that he and Hunt had plotted to start the disturbances: 'the TIMES, SUN, COURIER,

¹²⁵ *Political Register*, 14 December 1816, re-printed in *Selected Writings*, ed. Natrass, vol. 3, p. 384.

¹²⁶ Natrass, *The Politics of Style*, p. 140.

and others have stated “on *authority*,” that you and I were in *close consultation*, on the Sunday before the riots, *with Lord Cochrane in the King’s Bench Prison*.¹²⁷ A familiar, epistolary address to Hunt helps him to carefully balance his article, keeping him at the head of the reform movement while avoiding prosecution. He does not distance himself from Hunt or the Spenceans but uses the intimacy of the letter form to defuse some of the danger from the situation, reminding Hunt that ‘your country life, your sober habits, your dislike of feasting and carousings; these are great securities’ and ridiculing the fascination of the loyalist press with Hunt:

I should not wonder if they were to have a “*Court News Writer*” to give an account of all the movements of your body; and, after what I have seen within these ten days, I do not despair at seeing them announce, that “on Monday, Mr. Hunt took the diversion of shooting till three o’clock. On Tuesday, Mr. Hunt went to inspect his barns, and was graciously pleased to express his high approbation of the ingenious mode of laying the crab-stick on upon the sheaves of wheat. On Wednesday...”¹²⁸

At the same time as protesting their innocence, this letter includes plenty of encouragement to his readers and warnings to the government and press:

The truth is, that these men and their assistants and encouragers see their certain doom in *the enlightening of the people*. They see clearly enough, that conviction must follow facts and arguments like mine *rendered familiar*. They see, that I am uniting the *mind* with the *muscle* of the country; and, above all things they see, and they tremble at my incessant, and I hope, successful efforts, to convince the Labourers and the Journeymen, that they are men who have *rights*, and that the way to obtain those rights is to pursue a *peaceable* and orderly conduct.¹²⁹

Only through the supremely flexible form of the letter can Cobbett play so many roles in the space of a single article, while remaining engagingly readable. The strategy of open letters continues throughout the first few months of 1817 before an abrupt, three-

¹²⁷ *Selected Writings*, ed. Natrass, vol. 3, p. 385.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 387, 394.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

and-a-half month break in publication of the *Political Register*.¹³⁰ With the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, Cobbett had decided his strategy was too risky, and that the direct, open letters of the twopenny *Register*, which had their origins in the many kinds of letters he wrote from Newgate, would lead him back to jail. After fleeing to America he would continue his letters in relative safety, but the lag-time between writing on Long Island and publication in London ensured that the immediacy of the open letters of winter 1816-17 had been lost, to be replaced by an even more innovative use of epistolary form.

¹³⁰ The open letters in the first three months of 1817 include 'An Address to the Men of Bristol', *Political Register*, 11 January 1817; 'An Address to the Men of Norwich', *Political Register*, 18 January 1817; 'An Address to the "Weaver-Boys" of Lancashire', *Political Register*, 25 January 1817; 'A Letter to the Life-and-Fortune Men', 8 February 1817; 'A Letter to the People of Hampshire', *Political Register*, 15 February 1817; 'A Letter to all True-Hearted Englishmen', *Political Register*, 1 March 1817; 'To The People of Hampshire', *Political Register*, 8 March 1817; 'To the Good and True Men of Hampshire', *Political Register*, 15 March 1817; 'A Letter to the "Deluded People"', 22 March 1817 and 'To the Paper-Money Men', *Political Register*, 29 March 1817.

Chapter Two

Cobbett's American Pastoral

When the government suspended Habeas Corpus at the beginning of March 1817 Cobbett believed that they were acting with him in mind. Terrified at the prospect of returning to Newgate, he sailed for America on 27 March, a move that would impose huge constraints on his journalism. The gap between writing in America and being published in England often exceeded two months and, given the similar delay in receiving news from England, a lag-time of several months existed between political events taking place in England and Cobbett's audience being able to read his response. This chapter will consider his American pastoral as Cobbett's creative response to these constraints, compensating for the inevitable loss in topicality by finding ways in which America might be the ideal space from which to continue his political project. The use he makes of his 1817-19 American stay is highly unique, determined by political expediency and by his own, highly idiosyncratic imagination, yet it has certain affinities with the traditions of pastoral. Central to Cobbett's American writings is the belief that his spatial and temporal distance from British politics can paradoxically increase the effectiveness of his attack on 'Old Corruption', joining a long pastoral tradition of contrasting pastoral life with the corruption of courts and cities.

America of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had been an especially fertile site for ideas of the pastoral, and one where pastoral was not confined to the realm of the literary but seemed to represent a genuine possibility for the direction of American life. This had been written into the idea of America ever since the first European settlers arrived, discovering a New World where,

it actually seemed possible, as never before, for migrating Europeans to establish a society that might realize the ancient pastoral dream of harmony: a *via media* between decadence and wilderness, too much and too little civilization. For the revolutionary generation of Americans, notably Thomas Jefferson, this Rousseauistic possibility was represented by the captivating topographical image, or mental map, of the new nation as an ideal society of the “middle landscape”, midway between *l’ancien régime* and the wild frontier. Hence the citizens of such a nation might reasonably aspire to the hitherto unattainable balance of the classic mean: the best of art combined with the best of nature.¹³¹

As the possibilities of pastoral were sharpened and re-focused in the decades after Independence, they became allied to progressive, even utopian political thought, famously presented by Thomas Jefferson in stark moral terms: ‘those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.’¹³² Cobbett had written to Jefferson, then Secretary of State, when he arrived in America in 1792, enclosing a letter of introduction from the American Ambassador in Paris, asking for a job and placing his political sympathies with American ideals of freedom. ‘Ambitious to become the citizen of a free state,’ Cobbett wrote, ‘I have left my native country, England for America: I bring with me youth, a small family, a few useful literary talents and that is all’.¹³³ Jefferson’s reply contained a neat republican irony: the government of the nascent state was so small that there were no jobs to be had, with the State Department only employing seven people.¹³⁴ Twenty-five years later, Cobbett had travelled through a period of deep disenchantment with America during the 1790s to arrive at a renewed sense of American possibility – though one now

¹³¹ Leo Marx, ‘Pastoralism in America’ in Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen eds., *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 38.

¹³² Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia* (1782), quoted in Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 122.

¹³³ Cobbett to Thomas Jefferson, Wilmington, Delaware, 2 November 1792, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Department of Literary and Historical Manuscripts, Misc. English, 206247.

¹³⁴ Richard Ingrams, *The Life and Adventures of William Cobbett* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 21.

complicated by a much deeper awareness of his own ties to England. While the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal was one he was equally sympathetic to in England and America, he was by instinct drawn to the cultivated landscape valorized in American pastoral over the rugged, mountainous landscape glorified by European Romanticism. Working from ‘the raw state of the continental terrain’, American pastoralists had stressed that ‘it was first necessary to transform the wilderness into a garden’.¹³⁵ As Leo Marx writes elsewhere, ‘beginning in Jefferson’s time, the cardinal image of American aspirations was a rural landscape, a well-ordered green garden magnified to continental size [...] a chaste, uncomplicated land of rural virtue.’¹³⁶ In similar terms, Cobbett wrote in an early *Register* from America of a vanished English arcadia, made up of ‘farms which are so many gardens on the top of the land’, a paradise his writings would help to re-gain.¹³⁷ The affinities between his ideal England and America’s myth of itself extended to the polemical moral and political significance of a rich land composed of ‘chaste, uncomplicated’, and independent farmers. For Cobbett, this land had existed in England as recently as his childhood in the 1760s and 1770s, could be found in America and would eventually be restored in a reformed England.¹³⁸ By contrast, Jefferson, for all his lofty rhetoric, was capable of a much more practical assessment of whether his agrarian ideal was attainable, privately describing it, soon after *Notes on Virginia*, as ‘theory only, and a theory which the servants of America are not at liberty to follow. Our people have a decided taste for navigation and commerce’.¹³⁹ The year before Cobbett arrived on Long Island,

¹³⁵ Leo Marx, ‘Pastoralism in America’, p. 49.

¹³⁶ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, p. 141.

¹³⁷ ‘To Earl Fitzwilliam’, *Political Register*, 22.11.1817.

¹³⁸ Raymond Williams identifies the recurring motif of the just-vanished arcadia throughout literature of the period in *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), *passim*. It is also discussed, for example, in Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 9.

¹³⁹ Thomas Jefferson to Count Hogendorp, 13 October 1785, in *Jefferson: Political Writings*, ed. Joyce Appleby and Terence Ball (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 553.

Jefferson had accepted that ‘we must now place the manufacturer by the side of the agriculturalist’, realising, after the War of 1812, that resistance to manufacture and commerce would force the republic into a continuing reliance on European exports.¹⁴⁰

Whether or not pastoral represents a realistic social model, it is, of course, capable of embodying a set of values and standing as a critique of alternative ways of living. Cobbett’s pastoral works from an experiential base, and draws on a collective body of oral wisdom and memories concerning rural life. His vision of ‘cottage economy’ – the freedom to cultivate a piece of land, however small – celebrates a space outside the corruption of government and paper money, which practically evades these systems through the replacement of taxed goods with home-grown equivalents. In 1817-19, the rural idyll Cobbett created for his family on Long Island and saw reflected around him in the lives of many Americans was used primarily to sustain an attack on the government of post-War England. The first *Political Register* he sent back from America describes spring on Long Island as a scene of human activity and natural abundance, harmoniously entwined:

The people are engaged busily in planting their Indian Corn. The Cherry Trees, of which there are multitudes, planted in long avenues, or rows, or round the fields, have dropped their blossom and begin to show their loads of fruit. The apple and pear orchards, in extent from one to twenty acres on each farm, are in full and beautiful bloom.

His paradise regained¹⁴¹ is at once ideal and characteristically specific: ‘Indian Corn’, trees ‘planted in long avenues, or rows, or round the fields’, orchards ‘from one to twenty acres’, an attention to the particularities of American agriculture that would become increasingly important during his two years there. The inn he is staying at has

¹⁴⁰ Jefferson to Benjamin Austin, 9 January 1816, *Political Writings*, ed. Appleby and Ball, p. 568.

¹⁴¹ Hazlitt described Cobbett in America ‘looking about him like Adam in Paradise’. ‘Character of Cobbett’, *Table-Talk*, 2 vols (London, 1821-22), vol. 1, p. 121.

sugar ‘in good thumping pieces’ and, in case any readers have missed the pointed contrast to post-War England, he reminds them that, ‘all this is the effect of good government; of just and mild government, which takes so little from the people in taxes, that they have the means of happiness fully left in their hands.’¹⁴² The following week he addresses himself to Lord Sidmouth, telling him that, ‘your Warrants and the cries of hunger are unknown under the shade of the groves of Accacias where I am now sitting, and whence I send my writings along with my kindest wishes to my suffering and insulted countrymen’.¹⁴³ Similar descriptions of American pastoral run through his writings of the next two years: in an article on ‘The Last Hundred Days of English Freedom’ he signs off, ‘in good health, and in the midst of an abundance of cherries, and with pine-apples to eat at 2s. English, each, I remain, my worthy and beloved friends, Your faithful friend, Wm. COBBETT’, while he tells the ‘labouring classes in England, Scotland and Ireland’ that he has not ‘seen, or heard of, a *pauper* or a *beggar* since I have been here.’¹⁴⁴ His cornucopian descriptions of life on Long Island never leave behind his memories of Newgate or anger at the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, as a letter simply addressed ‘To the Boroughmongers’ makes clear:

Ah! Boroughmongers! It is much pleasanter to sit here under the shade of trees, loaded with fruit, and only wanting hands to gather and mouths to eat it, than to be begging Lords Sidmouth and Castlereagh permission to breathe the sweet air! Much better amusement is it to be drying fruits in the Sun to please my little boys and girls when they come, than to be peeping through the iron grates and bars of the jails and listening to hear whether their prayers have obtained them access to my damp and dreary cavern.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² ‘To the People of England, Scotland and Ireland’, *Political Register*, 12 July 1817.

¹⁴³ ‘A Letter to Lord Viscount Sidmouth’, *Political Register*, 19 July 1817.

¹⁴⁴ ‘A History of the Last Hundred Days of English Freedom [...] Letter III’, *Political Register*, 16 August 1817; ‘To the Labouring Classes in England, Scotland and Ireland’, *Political Register*, 23 August 1817.

¹⁴⁵ ‘To the Boroughmongers’, *Political Register*, 6 September 1817.

These descriptions of the good life on Long Island, tantalising his audience and taunting his political opponents, appear most frequently in the first *Registers* from America, before Cobbett goes on to develop a progressively more sophisticated version of American pastoral over his two years there. Some of his political enemies wrongly suspected Cobbett of having long planned his move to America, and he repeatedly pointed out the disastrous financial implications of leaving England so soon after establishing the cheap *Register* – adding, as additional proof, that ‘I last year sowed about a million of *ash seeds*’.¹⁴⁶ Having left England the same month that Habeas Corpus was suspended, he was unprepared for the move in financial, agricultural or literary terms, and only gradually worked out the most effective way to employ his exile and present it in the *Register*. This careful construction of his American pastoral can be seen more clearly by looking at the criticisms he made of competing accounts of America, notably those of Joseph Priestley and Morris Birkbeck. Many of his readers would have seen the irony in Cobbett seeking political refuge in America after attacking Priestley for making the same journey a quarter of a century earlier. However, there is also some consistency with the vituperative *Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley* (1794), published when Cobbett was still writing as Peter Porcupine in Philadelphia and lambasting Priestley for expecting ‘like too many others, to find America a Terrestrial Paradise; a Land of Canaan, where he would have nothing to do, but open his mouth and swallow the milk and honey’. Contemplating him instead amongst, ‘his rocks and his swamps, the music of his bull frogs and the strings of his musquitos’, he confidently predicts that Priestley is,

¹⁴⁶ ‘A History of the Last Hundred Days of English Freedom [...] Letter I’, *Political Register*, 26 July 1817.

a bird of passage that has visited us, only to avoid the rigour of an inclement season; when the re-animating sunshine of revolution shall burst forth on his native clime, we may hope to see him prune his wings, and take his flight from the dreary banks of the Susquehannah to those of the Thames or the Avon.¹⁴⁷

In 1794, there are two reasons Cobbett gives for Priestley being especially ill-suited for emigration. As a self-proclaimed citizen of the world he will not be welcome – ‘let all those citizens of the world remember, that he who has been a bad subject in his own country, though from some latent motive he may be well received in another, will never be either trusted or respected’ – and as a philosopher he is ill-equipped to settle in America. Of immigrants arriving in America, ‘the most numerous as well as the most useful are mechanics; perhaps a cobbler, with his hammer and awls, is a more valuable acquisition than a dozen philosophi-theologi-political-emperics with all their boasted apparatus.’¹⁴⁸

In 1817, Cobbett tried to avoid repeating the mistakes he had accused Priestley of making. Instead of returning to Philadelphia, writing for the American press or becoming involved in American politics, he announces from the beginning that ‘it is my intention to be a downright farmer’, a practical worker of the land, rather than an émigré intellectual.¹⁴⁹ And, by staying on the Eastern seaboard and trying to remain uninvolved in American politics, he is also, in one of those conservative moves essential to the success of his mature radicalism, sending a clear signal that he does not regard himself as a citizen of the world. Instead, he attempts to remain as close to England and closely involved in English politics as possible, continuing the *Political Register* with a sustained commentary on radical politics, despite the formidable lag-

¹⁴⁷ *Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley* (Philadelphia, 1794), reprinted in Natrass, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, p. 60.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 49.

¹⁴⁹ ‘A History of the Last Hundred Days of English Freedom [...] Letter I’, *Political Register*, 26 July 1817.

time imposed on him. However, there is also an inevitable tension between these two gestures, a difficulty in reconciling the practical emigrant with his assertions of continuing and unrepentant Englishness. This points towards a strain of scepticism that runs throughout his American pastoral, for all the bravado about cherry trees, cheap pineapples and sugar ‘in good thumping pieces’. In his published account of his first year in America he writes that, ‘though truth will compel me to state facts, which will, doubtless, tend to induce farmers to leave England for America, I advise no one so to do [...] I myself am bound to England for life’, and he elsewhere reminds his readers that, ‘as I said in my leave-taking Address, a *Palace* here, with the whole of this beautiful and happy Island for my domain, would be less dear to me than a thatched cottage on the borders of Waltham Chase or of Botley Common.’¹⁵⁰ The possibilities of America will, as soon as the risk of prosecution has diminished, be rejected for a foothold in England.

In contrast with many other nineteenth-century manuals for English arrivals in America, Cobbett’s *A Year’s Residence in the United States of America* remains finally undecided about emigration. It faithfully describes the attractions of the country – and Cobbett is as convinced as ever that his audience would model their own lives on his and follow him to America – but refuses to fully endorse emigration on a large scale. Instead, the enthusiastic descriptions of the potential for farming in America are balanced by the letters to Morris Birkbeck which are added to the book and which attack Birkbeck’s plan of settling English immigrants in Illinois. Cobbett is almost incredulous at plans that would force English arrivals, ‘to boil their pot in the gipsy-fashion, to have a mere board to eat on, to drink whisky or pure water, to sit and

¹⁵⁰ *A Year’s Residence in the United States of America* (second edition, London, 1819, first published 1818), p. 6; ‘To the Major Cartwright, the Venerable Leader of Reform’ *Political Register*, 4 October 1817.

sleep under a shed far inferior to their English cow-pens, to have a mill at twenty miles distance, an apothecary's shop at a hundred, and a doctor no where'.¹⁵¹ He accuses Birkbeck of writing a romance to ensnare unwary English readers:

You do indeed fairly describe the rugged woods, the dirty hovels, the fire in the woods to sleep by, the pathless ways through the wildernesses, the dangerous crossings of the rivers; but, there are the beautiful meadows and rich lands at last; there is the fine freehold domain at the end! There are the giants and the enchanters to encounter; the slashings and the rib-roastings to undergo; but, then, there is, at last, the lovely languishing damsel to repay the adventurer.¹⁵²

Cobbett's visions of the 'plain, plodding English Farmer' trying to acclimatise to frontier living are offered with the same conviction that Dickens was to show in plotting the disenchantment of Martin Chuzzlewit in the 'hideous swamp' of 'Eden', and Cobbett is just as earnest and unintentionally comic ('Can they live without bread for months? Can they live without beer?').¹⁵³ He urges would-be emigrants to remain near the Eastern seaboard and even doubts the American push westwards, opining that, 'the rapid extension of settlements to the West of the mountains is, in my opinion, by no means favourable to the duration of the present happy Union.'¹⁵⁴

Cobbett's American pastoral is therefore qualified by his reservations about the move West and his doubts as to whether English emigrants will be able to sever their ties with home. He is convinced that he would never be able to do so, and, throughout his two and a half year stay in America, maintains a constant correspondence with his English audience. In their epistolary form, his American writings follow the formal conventions of pastoral which, in order to make its critique of urban or courtly life,

¹⁵¹ *A Year's Residence*, p. 525.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 521-2.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 541, 529. Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), p. 325.

¹⁵⁴ *A Year's Residence*, p. 575.

must first journey away but then, equally importantly, return home: ‘whatever the locations and modes of pastoral retreat may be, there must in some sense be a return from that location to a context in which the results of the journey are to be understood’.¹⁵⁵ The second part of this pattern of retreat and return is fulfilled in the epistolary form of Cobbett’s writing from America, which continually returns to his English audience in order to explain the significance of his exile. Writing of an earlier period, Annabel Patterson has argued that the form of pastoral establishes the natural condition of writers as one of distance or exile:

Renaissance humanism, however different its manifestations, tended toward a relationship with pastoral that stressed above all its capacity to stand as a metaphor for the condition of the writer-intellectual, whether that condition was seen as a privileged status or, on the contrary, one of extreme dependence and vulnerability.¹⁵⁶

During his exile, Cobbett makes real this metaphorical condition, separated from his audience in a way that enabled him to escape persecution, but also threatened to sever his ties to his readers. In his more confident moments, his exile is cast in providential, almost Biblical terms, subsumed within the irresistible movement towards parliamentary reform. In describing the voyage out, he tells his readers that,

in all respects that can be named our passage was disagreeable; and, upon one occasion, very perilous from lightning, which struck the ship twice, shivered two of the masts, killed a man, struck several people slightly, between two of whom I was sitting without at all feeling the blow.¹⁵⁷

If he has been protected from the dangers of the journey, it is so he can continue to fight ‘Corruption’, and his American pastoral might more accurately be described as georgic: ‘Think, I pray you: think, for a moment, of the *labour* necessary to the

¹⁵⁵ Gifford, *Pastoral*, p. 81.

¹⁵⁶ Annabel Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 133.

¹⁵⁷ ‘To the people of England, Scotland, and Ireland’ *Political Register*, 12 July 1817.

transmission of these papers; of the writing, the copying, the reading, necessary to keep up this combat so steadily.¹⁵⁸ His epistolary return to England in the open letters of the *Register* and private letters to his family and others complete the circuit of pastoral, constructing a complex, literary American pastoral and inviting his audience to place it in the context of Regency England. He eventually would return to England having disinterred Thomas Paine's bones – an unexpected product of his American pastoral, which he offered up as rallying point for reform – and gave an account of English politics to his son that concluded, 'you see, they have really called the Parliament to meet me, or, rather, to receive me.'¹⁵⁹

Despite his conviction that his own exile was part of a providential journey towards parliamentary reform, Cobbett's previous experiences of America had made him well aware of the fragility of his position and the potential for miscommunication within a transatlantic exchange of letters. Twenty years before, at the beginning of one of the pamphlets he published in Philadelphia, he had made an imaginative, public and epistolary return to his family in England:

"Dear Father, when you used to set me off to work in the morning, dressed in my blue smock-frock and woollen spatter dashes, with my bag of bread and cheese and bottle of small beer swung over my shoulder on the little crook that my old god-father Boxall gave me, little did you imagine that I should one day become so great a man as to have my picture stuck in the windows, and have four whole books published about me in the course of one week." – Thus begins a letter which I wrote to my father yesterday morning, and which, if it

¹⁵⁸ 'Letter, C, to the Freemen of the City of Coventry', *Political Register*, 9 May 1818. Cobbett is especially keen to draw attention to his industry when addressing himself to the electors of Coventry, to whom he intends to present himself as a parliamentary candidate on his return, adding, 'think of what I should be able to do, if placed in parliament by you.' In another of his letters to them, while taking up an old law suit in Philadelphia, he proclaims, 'Here am I, amidst the woods and snows of Pennsylvania, reading and answering an article in the London Morning Chronicle, and addressing my answer to you with as much certainty of its reaching you as I should have, if I were writing in London! What cannot a man do if he *will*!' 'Letter, B, to the Freemen of the City of Coventry', *Political Register*, 18 April 1818.

¹⁵⁹ Cobbett to ?John Morgan/James Paul Cobbett, Liverpool, 22 November 1819, Nuffield, XXX/67/1-2.

reaches him, will make the old man drink an extraordinary pot of ale to my health. Heaven bless him! I think I see him now, by his old-fashioned fire-side, reading the letter to his neighbours. “Ay, Ay,” says he, “*Will* will stand his ground wherever he goes” – And so I will, father, in spite of all the hell of democracy.¹⁶⁰

When writing this, he did not know that his father had died three years earlier. The prodigal son might have taught himself to write and made himself a famous American pamphleteer, but he still had no way of corresponding with his poor and largely illiterate family in England. When he returned to England in 1800, after eight years in Philadelphia, he wrote to his friend Edward Thornton, Secretary to the British Embassy in the United States and, like Cobbett, the son of an innkeeper. He described how his loyalist writings had been rewarded by the government – ‘Mr. Windham gave me a most polite and flattering letter of invitation and at his house I had the honour of dining with Mr. Pitt’ – but his pride at this metropolitan reception is tempered by the bleak rural account that follows:

I have been to see my brothers (those who are in England). My father is dead, and my brothers I found with very large families, and, though not miserable, far from being in easy circumstances; indeed, I may call them *poor*; for, though one has the little paternal estate, and though both of them pay to the poor-rates, they are obliged to work very hard, and their children are not kept constantly at school.¹⁶¹

The ability to correspond with his family and his audience is not one that is taken for granted in 1817-19 and the strenuous correspondence Cobbett maintains suggests an awareness of its fragility.

¹⁶⁰ *Remarks of the Pamphlets Lately Published Against Peter Porcupine* (Philadelphia, 1796), reprinted in *Porcupine's Works*, 12 vols (London, 1801), vol. 4, p. 114.

¹⁶¹ Cobbett to Edward Thornton, 4 September 1800, *Letters from William Cobbett to Edward Thornton, 1797-1800*, ed. G.D.H. Cole (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 109, 111.

There is also evidence that, while away in America, Cobbett's readers saw him as primarily engaged in writing home. Hazlitt's portrait, written two years after Cobbett had returned from America, remembers 'the graphical descriptions he sent us from America: what a transatlantic flavour, what a native *gusto* [...] What a noble account of his first breakfast after his arrival in America! It might serve for a month.'¹⁶² Most of the visual representations of Cobbett in America show him disinterring Paine's bones – an obvious gift to the satirists – but Robert Cruikshank's 'Trans-Atlantic Luxury' (see Figure 1) imagines Cobbett sitting in his Long Island farmyard, caught in an act of specifically epistolary writing. The print is one of the illustrations for *The Book of Wonders*, a collection of contradictory and egotistical statements selected from across Cobbett's oeuvre, published in 1820 and dedicated to Queen Caroline as a warning of the true character of her champion in the radical press.¹⁶³ However, despite the damage that *The Book of Wonders* hoped to inflict on Cobbett's reputation, Cruikshank's woodcuts lack the bite of many other caricatures of Cobbett.¹⁶⁴

'Trans-Atlantic Luxury' is partly based on Thomas Fearon's *Sketches of America*, the dilapidated state of the farm in the background corresponding to Fearon's description of visiting Cobbett and finding 'this celebrated man leading an isolated life in a foreign land, a path rarely trod, fences in ruins, the gate broken, a house mouldering to decay' – an account that Cobbett bitterly refuted in an appendix to *A Year's Residence*.¹⁶⁵ In the foreground, the shirts drying in the sun illustrate Cobbett's exhaustive, absurd account in the accompanying passage from *A Year's Residence* of how many times a day he had to change his shirt in the Long Island summer: 'August

¹⁶² William Hazlitt, 'Character of Cobbett', *Table-Talk*, 2 vols (London, 1821-22), vol. 1, p. 121.

¹⁶³ *The Book of Wonders* (London, 1820), cols. 25-6.

¹⁶⁴ Cobbett's vanity was, of course, a well-established target of visual satire, especially after Hannah Humphrey published James Gillray's *The Life of William Cobbett, written by himself* (London, 1809).

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Fearon, *Sketches of America* (London, 1819), quoted in *A Year's Residence*, p. 602.

1. I take off two shirts a day wringing wet [...] 15. *Three* wet shirts to-day. Obligated to put on a dry shirt to go to bed in....'. At the centre, Cobbett sits under a tree, wearing a broad-rimmed hat, surrounded by animals and, with a look of rapt concentration on his face, writing a letter to 'My dear Hunt'. In front of the rickety writing table there



Figure 1: Robert Cruikshank, 'Trans-Atlantic Luxury' (*The Book of Wonders*, 1820).

are letters lying on the ground, including another to Henry Hunt and one 'To the old batter'd hack Tierney'. Here, Cruikshank draws on another part of the accompanying text from *A Year's Residence*: 'I fight the Borough villains stripped to my shirt, and with nothing on besides, but shoes and trousers. Under the shade of a fine umbrageous walnut-tree, I wrote my Letter to the old battered hack Tierney'. On the same page, the anonymous author of *A Book of Wonders* satirically suggests that the tree under

which Cobbett wrote may be no less interesting than the places where Milton or Pope wrote.¹⁶⁶ The target of the satire is Cobbett's egotistical assumption that, even while he is away, people in England will be anxiously awaiting his *Register* for a very belated reaction to political events. Continuously writing letters, surrounded by farmyard animals, Cruikshank's Cobbett is deluded by his vanity, perhaps even slightly mad. However, Cruikshank's sympathies seem to be conflicted and 'Trans-Atlantic Luxury' is relatively mild, even affectionate, in its tone. It is a rare visual account of a radical political figure in a pastoral setting, the political content glimpsed only in the letters he is writing. Alongside Cobbett's own account in the *Register*, the tone of the print finds something almost reassuring in Cobbett's continuous stream of letters home and the relationship with his readers that they maintain.

Cobbett refers again to the 'fine umbrageous Walnut tree, under which I wrote the letter, last summer, to the old battered hack Tierney' in the *Register* of 14 August 1819, in which he updates his readers on his current circumstances:

I have, lately, met with an accident *from fire*. The house, in which I lived, was burnt down. This threw me out for a month. I should have gone to New York, and remained there till the time of my departure for England. But, when I considered the *interruptions* which such a removal would occasion, and when I thought of the injury that these and the air of a city might be to my literary labours; I resolved on making a sort of *thatched tent*, in which I might enjoy tranquillity and in which I might labour without intermission. From this tent, made of poles, thatch, and *English news-papers*, I now have the honour to address you. Happiness never depends upon mere *place*. It depends little more on food or raiment. My diet all comes from my own fields, and my cow is my vintner and brewer. I am asleep on my straw by nine o'clock, and I am in my orchard before four o'clock. Yet, who can be happier? My *mind* is, for the far greater part of my time, in *England*.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ *The Book of Wonders*, col. 26.

¹⁶⁷ 'To Messrs. Johnson, Baguey, and Drummond. On their imprisonment, and on the line of conduct which they ought to pursue...' *Political Register*, 14 August 1819.

Kevin Gilmartin reads this powerful image of Cobbett living in a tent of English newspapers as suggesting, ‘that the system had produced Great Cobbett [...] he literally inhabited a corrupt English press.’¹⁶⁸ However, his description of building the tent might also be read as part of a move to re-define his American pastoral, away from the Edenic cornucopia he had celebrated in the first months after his arrival and towards the practical, island survival of Robinson Crusoe. Displaced first by the suspension of Habeas Corpus, and then by fire, he has signally refused to go to New York, or Philadelphia – his home during the 1790s – but instead continues his journalistic struggle as a form of guerilla warfare, operating from a tent on Long Island.¹⁶⁹ He insists that he is untroubled by exile or fire, flexible enough to adapt to his surroundings, and largely oblivious to them: ‘My *mind* is, for the far greater part of my time, in *England*.’ The act of writing home, performed in his *Register* articles and pictured in ‘Trans-Atlantic Luxury’, is as much part of Cobbett’s American pastoral as his Long Island farm, following the retreat-and-return structure of pastoral tradition. The closely related forms of epistolary and pastoral writing, integrated during Cobbett’s first months on Long Island, helped to shape the most important work of his American exile.

A Grammar of the English Language

Cobbett’s *Grammar* evades many of the debates that preoccupied writers of grammars and dictionaries in the period and that have dominated critical accounts of

¹⁶⁸ Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, p. 181.

¹⁶⁹ Cobbett echoes Rousseau’s practice in *Émile* through the pedagogical significance he accords to *Robinson Crusoe*: in *Rural Rides*, he writes that it is the first book he gave Richard to read and that it ‘made him a passable reader’. The significance this text had within the family is further suggested by a reference in a letter from William Cobbett junior to James (who was still in America) two years later. William describes a friend of the family, Mr Budd at Newbury, living ‘like a true Robinson Crusoe, or, rather, a true-born Englishman, for he has no privations’, using Defoe’s novel to connote a specifically English kind of freedom. *Rural Rides*, ed. G.D.H. and Margaret Cole, 3 vols (London: Peter Davies, 1930), vol. 1, p. 346. William Cobbett junior to James Paul Cobbett, Kensington, 20 December 1821, Nuffield, XXX/157/1-2.

late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century ideas about language. It is uninterested in the authority of custom, the rate of linguistic change, the analogy between the English language and constitution and other major topics of debate well set out by critics such as John Barrell.¹⁷⁰ Cobbett does not join either side in the struggle described by David Simpson between Locke and Johnson's conservative vagueness about where linguistic authority resides and the energetic 'transatlantic tradition trying to make the language more democratic' through innovation, a tradition which included such diverse moves as the French re-naming of the months, Thomas Spence's new system of orthography and Webster's attempts to align spoken and written language in his dictionary.¹⁷¹ While uninterested in linguistic innovation it is, however, very radical in the audience it chooses to address. Barrell describes the common eighteenth-century assumption that those engaged in trade would benefit from being taught to write, but that such an education was unnecessary for those working the land. Reading and writing were not yet viewed as two sides of the same coin but separate, hierarchically ordered activities, so that Hannah More could advocate reading but insist in 1801 that, 'I allow of no writing for the poor. My object is not to make fanatics, but to train up the lower classes in habits of industry and piety.'¹⁷² The implication in such statements is very clear – reading may help to teach obedience but writing will only encourage restless, presumptuous 'fanatics'.

¹⁷⁰ See John Barrell, *English Literature in History, 1730-80: An Equal, Wide Survey* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), chapter 2, 'The Language Properly So-Called: The Authority of Common Usage'.

¹⁷¹ David Simpson, *The Politics of American English, 1776-1850* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 61.

¹⁷² Quoted in Barrell, *English Literature in History*, p. 139. Hannah More's Cheap Repository Tracts (1795-98) represented a phenomenon in popular literature that Cobbett wanted to emulate and rival. More was drawn back into political polemics in 1817-19 specifically to counter Cobbett's influence, through contributions to publications such as *The Anti-Cobbett*.

Cobbett sets out to reach agricultural workers, soldiers and sailors, the groups that he most closely identified with and that writers such as More thought should only be instructed to read obediently. For Cobbett, the ideal style is the one that will be accessible to the largest possible audience, with the assumption that this will closely correspond to spoken language: ‘I beg you, my dear James, to bear in mind, that the *only* use of words is *to cause our meaning to be clearly understood*; and that the best words are those, which are familiar to the ears of the greatest number of persons.’¹⁷³ This sentence is appropriately balanced between the intimate family circle (‘my dear James’) and the wider public sphere (‘the greatest number of persons’), and between the spoken (‘familiar to the ears’) and written: for Cobbett, an ideal English style can effortlessly traverse such boundaries. Grammar is merely ‘to literary composition what a linch-pin is to a wagon’,¹⁷⁴ ‘*in itself*, contemptible’, but,

the key to all the means of communicating our thoughts to others. It is by the possession of this knowledge, that, sitting here in Long Island, I am able to tell you in England, what I think; and it is the possession of this knowledge by me, that has driven the Boroughmongers to those acts of desperation, which will end in their ruin.¹⁷⁵

This characteristic move outwards, the relentless pursuit of an idea to its furthest consequences, suggests that Cobbett’s competency in grammar will lead almost inevitably to reform, encapsulating his expansive faith in the possibilities of language. The significance of grammar for Cobbett is its precision, the ability, as he perceives it, to put things beyond doubt. Without grammar, ‘those who write are never sure that they put upon paper what they mean to put on paper’, but a sure command of grammar, ‘enables us, not only to express our meaning fully and clearly, but so to

¹⁷³ *A Grammar of the English Language* (London, 1819, first published 1818), pp. 71-2. Subsequent references to this edition will be given as bracketed page numbers in the main body of the text.

¹⁷⁴ ‘To Mr. Benbow, Of the Town of Manchester’, *Political Register*, 29 November 1817.

¹⁷⁵ ‘To Mr. Benbow, Of the Town of Manchester’, *Political Register*, 6 December 1817.

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' (13-14).

In structure, the *Grammar* is much less digressive than works such as *Paper Against Gold*, with Cobbett exercising greater discipline over his material. His natural digressiveness is largely contained within the examples he chooses to illustrate individual grammatical rules, in which he unsurprisingly fails to keep the promise he made to William Benbow, that 'no scoundrel hypocrite shall be able to call my book *sedition* or *blasphemous*. It shall allude neither to politics nor religion.'¹⁷⁶ In his examples, the anger which is suppressed throughout most of the text rises to the surface: different tenses are illustrated by the sentence, 'Evans *defies* the tyrants; Evans *defied* the tyrants; Evans *will defy* the tyrants', and participles by, 'I am *working*; *working* is laudable; a *working* man is more worthy of honour than a titled plunderer who lives in idleness' (48, 51).¹⁷⁷ Use of the hyphen is shown by, 'the never-to-be forgotten cruelty of the Borough-tyrants' and possessives by, 'John, the old farmer's, wife. Oliver, the spy's, evidence' (82, 89). All of Cobbett's master arguments of the 1810s are condensed within his examples, including the deceptions of paper money and the cruelty of the government:

The personal pronouns in their *possessive case* must, of course, agree in number and gender with their correspondent nouns or pronouns: "John and Thomas have been so foolish as to sell *their* land and to purchase what is called stock; but their sister, who has too much sense to depend on a bubble for her daily bread, has kept *her* land: *theirs* is gone for ever; but *hers* is safe." (97-8)

Which, though, in other cases, it cannot be employed as a relative with nouns which are the names of rational beings, is, with such nouns, employed in asking questions: as, "the tyrants allege, that the petition was disrespectful.

¹⁷⁶ 'To Mr. Benbow, Of the Town of Manchester', *Political Register*, 6 December 1817.

¹⁷⁷ In the 1820 fourth edition, and subsequent editions, the first example was revised to 'the Queen *defies* the tyrants; the Queen *defied* the tyrants; the Queen *will defy* the tyrants' (p. 48).

Which of the tyrants?” Again: “one of the petitioners had his head cleaved by a soldier: *Which?*” That is to say, “Which of the petitioners was it?” (109)¹⁷⁸

Cobbett’s politics at this stage in his career are perhaps particularly well suited to formulation as grammatical precept: during his American exile, his analysis of corrupt government is at its most comprehensive, encompassing every part of English society, and his list of ‘Nouns of numbers, or multitude’ appropriately links ‘*Mob, Parliament, Rabble, House of Commons, Regiment, Court of King’s Bench, Den of Thieves*’ (96). The remorseless logic of his analysis is well conveyed by the plain syntax and stark dualism of examples such as, ‘the people every day *gave* money to the tyrants, who, in return, *gave* the people dungeons and axes’ (133).¹⁷⁹

While direct allusions to contemporary politics are largely contained within such examples, the *Grammar* as a whole carries much broader political connotations. Cobbett places his epistolary grammar lessons from America in opposition to government control of education, which he sees as inherently damaging: ‘I believe that every Seminary of learning, established by any Government, and supported by a forced contribution upon the people at large, is a great evil.’¹⁸⁰ He is naturally opposed to the universities’ claim to controlling knowledge and the open letter in the *Register* to Benbow announcing the *Grammar* contains one of Cobbett’s most brilliantly vitriolic attacks on the universities:

In a company, however numerous, they soon smell each other out. One or the other soon finds occasion, or makes occasion, to let it be known, that he has been at *Oxford* or *Cambridge*. The other, like gun-powder ready for the match, instantly catches, and off they both go inquiring of each other by turns after

¹⁷⁸ Following the Peterloo massacre, the phrase ‘cleaved by a soldier’ was replaced with ‘cleaved by the yeomanry’, in the 1820 and subsequent editions (p. 109).

¹⁷⁹ ‘Dungeons and taxes’ would apparently make better sense here, but if this was a mistake it was never corrected.

¹⁸⁰ ‘To Major Cartwright [...] Letter VI’ *Political Register*, 7 March 1818.

Jack such-an-one and Tom such-an-one; and then, to it they fall, reminding each other of all their college pranks; of all the drunken bouts, all the gettings out of windows; all their dances and dinners and suppers, not forgetting their duels and their amours. Now and then an empty woman, or her gaudy daughters, admire their trash; but, men of sense and of decent manners hear them with surprise and disgust.¹⁸¹

By contrast, his *Grammar* is conceived as an adequate tutor in itself, enabling his readers to study in the army, at sea or at the plough, without infringing on their work: ‘there will need nothing but the *leisure time* of an apprentice, or of a plough-boy, for one year at the most’.¹⁸² His vision is ultimately of a nation of self-taught individuals – or, of individuals following Cobbett’s own instruction – joined together by a single grammar. This form of political affiliation sees individuals retaining their independence while being enabled to communicate and act together, a political vision which runs throughout Cobbett’s mature radicalism.

The audience that Cobbett’s *Grammar* hopes to reach is signalled in its full title: *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*. His faith in the ability of this audience to learn grammar is founded on his conviction that writing is a supremely natural act, standing in metonymic relation to family and farming: ‘you have read and have written’, he advises his son, ‘because you saw your elders read and write, just as you have learned to ride and hunt and shoot, to dig the beds in the garden, to trim the flowers and to prune the trees’ (5). These lines carry the implication that his audience should not only aspire to full literacy but are, like his son, better prepared to become good writers if they are already embedded within agrarian society. In the link he establishes

¹⁸¹ ‘To Mr. Benbow, Of the Town of Manchester’, *Political Register*, 29 November 1817.

¹⁸² ‘To Mr. Benbow, Of the Town of Manchester’, *Political Register*, 6 December 1817.

between language and rural life there is an analogue with the linguistic project of *Lyrical Ballads*, in which, as Olivia Smith writes, linguistic purity is identified with ‘living apart from social pressures and under the moral influence of beauty’.¹⁸³ The theory of language developed in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, founded on a belief that words originate in the naming of substantial objects – an empiricism that Coleridge would come to be deeply suspicious of – finds an echo in Cobbett’s *Grammar*.¹⁸⁴ Moreover, the sense of strangeness which Smith retains in her description of how *Lyrical Ballads* ‘somewhat mystically’ proposes that ‘rustics speak a pure language because they live among and are surrounded by the origins of words, as if they were standing in a landscape of language’, could equally be applied to Cobbett’s project.¹⁸⁵ For Cobbett, purity of language is derived from ‘living apart’ from the pernicious ‘social pressures’ of urban and commercial life and within a different kind of society, the cottage farms that are largely self-sufficient but at the same time affiliated politically through common experience, shared politics and the medium of Cobbett’s own journalism. It also necessitates falling ‘under the moral influence’ of more than nature’s ‘beauty’, addressed to an audience that has been shaped by the experience of working the land. While Cobbett’s *Grammar* and Wordsworth’s theory of language can be usefully compared, they can too easily become subsumed within vague and mysterious ideas about Romanticism inheriting the traditions of pastoral and re-working them, until language itself becomes part of an unpolluted landscape. If this is not true of the *Lyrical Ballads*, it is even less true of Cobbett’s *Grammar*. To avoid subsuming the *Grammar* within this amorphous

¹⁸³ Smith, *Politics of Language*, p. 218.

¹⁸⁴ See the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802): those in ‘low and rustic life [...] hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived’, and live ‘less under the influence of social vanity’. Olivia Smith emphasizes Coleridge and Cobbett’s shared influence in Horne Tooke’s *Diversions of Purley* (1786-1805). *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2000), p. 597. Smith, *Politics of Language*, pp. 213-15, 236-39.

¹⁸⁵ Smith, *Politics of Language*, p. 215.

Romantic mix of language, nature and rural life it is necessary to trace the specific ways that Cobbett's thinking about language evolved in response to post-War England.

Two letters to Lord Viscount Folkestone, which Cobbett published in the *Political Register* at the start of his American exile, just before beginning the *Grammar*, present one of several histories he will give of the connections between language and rural life. Gratified at the news that Lord Folkestone has been visiting the political prisoners in Reading, Cobbett goes on to deliver an eulogy for the late Duke of Richmond, whose 'famous Letter, which was first published in 1783' had advocated parliamentary reform, and whose life embodied a virtuous version of aristocracy:

proceeding upon the wise maxim that labour ought to be sweetened by recreation, amongst all ranks of men, he was a pattern with regard to the sports of the field; and his Park was the scene of all those manly sports and exercises, in which the people of England so much delight, and which distinguish them from all other nations in the world. When he died, as I once before observed, *his neighbourhood died with him*; and, a Sussex gentleman who met me afterwards upon Portsdown Hill, told me that I had never uttered truer words in my life.¹⁸⁶

Duke and neighbourhood are bound together through rural life, and 'manly sports and exercises' are inseparable from the commonsense, clear thinking approach that characterizes the Duke's early attitude to parliamentary reform. Furthermore, Cobbett's written assessment of the Duke's character is confirmed by the oral testimony of a reader who tellingly meets him on Portsdown Hill. However, the significance of these letters does not end with a lament for an Edenic England. Equally significant is the careful placing of the eulogy for Richmond in letters

¹⁸⁶ Cobbett here chooses to forget Richmond's later career in Pitt's Cabinet and his abandonment of parliamentary reform.

commending Folkestone for his present day political action in visiting the Reading prisoners. They also give Cobbett the opportunity for contrasting the idealized commonsense Englishman – whose character is revealed in his style of rural living as much as in his speech – with the present government, asking his readers to compare the late Duke’s speeches with ‘the loose verbiage of the CASTLEREAGHS, the CANNINGS’.¹⁸⁷ The Duke of Richmond’s language is inseparable from his rural life and in the next letter Cobbett continues his attack on Castlereagh,

he, whose public papers are a tissue of ungrammatical and inexplicable sentences; and, whose everlasting verbosity, whose heaps of words without a meaning; whose slippery nonsense, would not be endured for two minutes in any well-informed and independent assembly upon earth.¹⁸⁸

In these letters, Cobbett is preparing the ground for the *Grammar*, working out his own ideas and laying them before his readers, as part of an ongoing process. His ideal conception of rural life, which unites Duke and labourer and helps both to think and write clearly, also animates his attack on present day politicians. Furthermore, it offers him the hope that the great majority of the population, living in close contact with the land, are well-equipped to acquire the tools of literacy and then put them to use against the Castlereaghs and Cannings of the government.

This belief in the potential of the people for political engagement is the driving force behind the *Grammar*, making it a natural extension of a project which began with the re-orientation of the *Political Register* towards a much wider audience in 1816. If the people can be addressed directly, they are also capable of acquiring the linguistic tools that will allow them to write back, and Cobbett makes the argument for the

¹⁸⁷ ‘To Lord Viscount Folkestone’, *Political Register*, 1 November 1817.

¹⁸⁸ ‘To Lord Viscount Folkestone [...] concluded’, *Political Register*, 8 November 1817.

intellectual capabilities of the people in the *Political Register* of 22 November 1817 – a fortnight after the second letter to Folkestone and a week before the letter to William Benbow announcing the *Grammar*. Addressing himself to Earl Fitzwilliam, who is attacked as ‘one of the principal causes of this sorrowful change in the situation of the labourers of England’, he examines the intellectual abilities of the labourers.

‘BURKE, called them plainly “*the swinish multitude*;” while the tenor of his writings plainly said that he considered them very little above real and literal swine’, but Cobbett presents evidence to show that the people can no longer be deceived. He cites the story of ‘a woman in one of my cottages’ who, ‘had a printed letter, purporting to have been written by Jesus Christ, which informed her, amongst other things, that she must abstain from meddling with politics’. After doing some research, Cobbett discovers that this letter, ‘was very common about the country, where it was hawked and given away.’ He accepts that ‘this letter, if you could by any means get the people to believe in it, would go a great way in rendering the dungeon and gagging laws unnecessary’. However, he argues that,

the people would not relish this letter. They would know it to be a cheat. They would believe it to come from the persons who passed the Dungeon Bills, and they would disbelieve every word of it, accordingly; or read it backwards, as witches are said to do their prayers.

In this powerful image of epistolary reception and political critique, the people are presented as being able to read through the letter to reach its real meaning, justifying Cobbett’s claim to the Earl that,

I have talked with some hundreds of men, labourers, mechanics and tradesmen, and I most solemnly declare, that I have very seldom met with one who was ignorant of scarcely any one material point upon the subject of politics [...] The questions of political economy, formerly thought so intricate, as to be comprehensible to only few minds, are now as familiar to the people

as that butter-milk and oat-meal which have supplied the place of their bread, bacon and beer.

Political questions are familiarized and made material through a dialectical process at work throughout the post-War English countryside: the message of the letter can be read backwards, the changed diet makes ‘questions of political economy’ more real and familiar and ‘if misery brings its suffering, it brings, also, that knowledge, which, when acted upon, prevents the recurrence of similar misery’. The whole of Britain’s recent history is compared to an act of reading which produces a single, indisputable meaning:

as in the reading of a novel we are let by degrees into the history of things existing previous to the commencement of the novel, so the people have now been led to *look back* and to examine into the real motives of the late wars; and thus they have a fair and clear view of a chain of causes and events, all making a complete whole.¹⁸⁹

Having established confidence in the hermeneutic abilities of the people, their ability to decipher government propaganda and read living conditions and recent history against the grain to interpret their true significance, Cobbett views grammar as the tool that will enable them to write back.

However, while the *Grammar* is undoubtedly aimed at the widest possible readership and written in a highly accessible style, it is simultaneously directed to several different, much more specific, audiences. The title itself suggests Cobbett’s hesitation about making universal, Paineite appeals as he qualifies his initial claim, ‘*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*’, naming two of the occupations,

¹⁸⁹ ‘To Earl Fitzwilliam’, *Political Register*, 22 November 1817.

soldier and plough-boy, that he had experience of himself. Although he is not named in the text, it is also directed towards Sir Francis Burdett as an attack on his aristocratic and increasingly hesitant leadership of the reform movement. Having suffered a breach with his former ally and friend, the *Grammar* and Cobbett's other writings of the same period place their faith in the ability of ordinary, working people to win reform by themselves, making the baronet's leadership redundant. Burdett's apostasy is, for Cobbett, signalled by the degeneracy of his language, which has been corrupted by his ambition and involvement in parliamentary politics:

To hear him by the side of his breakfast table; to hear the fine and consequent reasoning, the profound remarks, and the simple and strong language that comes from his lips; and, in a few hours afterwards to find all this as it were wholly forgotten, and to hear him labouring 'till he is out of breath, in the utterance of sentences two minutes long, each containing in its belly two or three parentheses, and each of these two or three little ones one within another, as SWIFT calls it, "like a nest of pill-boxes," while the sentence closes, at last, without any memory being able to collect its ideas into any rational point or conclusion, and leaving no other impression upon the minds of his hearers, than that which is produced by declamatory rant; to hear him thus, in these two different situations, is enough to make any sensible man avoid the rock of misguided ambition.¹⁹⁰

In these lines, mimicking and satirising long-winded parliamentary style, Cobbett contrasts the good sense, solidity and intimacy of Burdett's speech in the domestic context of his Leicestershire breakfast table ('simple and strong') with his 'declamatory rant' at public meetings and in Parliament, where his language becomes an unnatural, self-generating kind of birth – 'labouring 'til he is out of breath [...] each containing in its belly' – endlessly reproducing itself. In contrast to Burdett's ambition and egotism, editions of the *Grammar* from 1820 carried a dedication to Queen Caroline who, unlike Burdett, 'justly estimated the value of The People':

¹⁹⁰ 'A History of the Last Hundred Days of English Freedom [...] Letter IV', *Political Register*, 13 September 1817.

‘during your Majesty’s long, arduous, magnanimous, and gallant struggle against matchless fraud and boundless power, it must have inspired you with great confidence to perceive the wonderful intelligence and talent of your millions of friends.’¹⁹¹

The *Grammar* was discussed extensively in Cobbett’s open letters from the time of its composition, associating it with or presenting it in opposition to Lord Viscount Folkestone, Earl Fitzwilliam, William Benbow and others. Benbow, imprisoned in Manchester following the suspension of Habeas Corpus, is a particularly significant reader. Cobbett chooses to announce the project in two open letters to him, attempting to tie the project to Benbow’s imprisonment as well as his own exile and, in doing so, betraying some of his anxieties about being sidelined within the reform movement during his American exile. Most immediately, however, the letters that make up the *Grammar* are inscribed with a much tighter, familial sphere, addressed to Cobbett’s fourteen-year-old son, James Paul. In the introductory letter, he announces that, ‘I have put my work into the form of Letters, in order that I might be continually reminded, that I was addressing myself to persons who needed to be spoken to with great clearness’ (10). Meanwhile, in a private letter to a Mr Tipper, one of his creditors in England, Cobbett lists the literary projects by which he hopes eventually to be able to pay his debts and goes on to give a more precise motive for addressing the *Grammar* to James: ‘this, which is a work which I have always desired to perform, I have put into the shape of a series of letters, addressed to my beloved son James, as

¹⁹¹ ‘Dedication to her Most Gracious Majesty, Queen Caroline’, *A Grammar of the English Language*, fourth edition (London, 1820).

a mark of my approbation of his affectionate and dutiful conduct towards his mother during her absence from me.’¹⁹²

The letters comprising the *Grammar* were written after the family had been re-united on Long Island in the autumn of 1817, but Cobbett seems to have planned the project over the summer when the family were divided, Cobbett on Long Island with William (18) and John (16) while Nancy, again pregnant, was at home with the rest of the children. Cobbett landed in New York at the beginning of May and in a letter of 19 May advises Nancy on when to make the voyage: ‘pray, my dearest Nancy, do not venture too soon. – Mr. H. has told us, that you must be confined first. The Autumn is boistrous. Do not set off later than first of September.’¹⁹³ It is unclear exactly when Nancy, James and the rest of the family did leave, but the family letters stop in the middle of June and so they are likely to have arrived on Long Island at some point before mid-October, the latest date they could have arrived if they followed Cobbett’s advice on avoiding the autumn storms. Cobbett wrote the first letter to Benbow announcing the project on 19 September and appears to have written the *Grammar* between 6 December, the date at the top of the first letter, and 9 April 1818, when he sent the complete manuscript to England. The letter to Tipper, however, suggests that he saw the epistolary form of the *Grammar* as a product of the period of separation that the family had endured over the summer of 1817. He only refers to it being dedicated to James for his ‘affectionate and dutiful conduct towards his mother during her absence from me’ in this private letter, and one of the public letters to Benbow includes a bullish display of gratitude for the opportunities afforded by exile:

¹⁹² Cobbett to Mr. Tipper, Long Island, 20 November 1817, Lewis Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Cobbett in England & America*, 2 vols (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1913), vol. 2, p. 104.

¹⁹³ Cobbett to Nancy Cobbett, Long Island, 19 May 1817, Nuffield, XXX/40/1.

as the Boroughmongers and their underlings, by shutting me up in Newgate for two years, gave me leisure to expose the Funding System, in my work entitled "*Paper against Gold*;" so, by their passing of laws, putting my life in hourly danger, they have given me leisure to expose a part of their general system, still more mischievous than that of Funding, because its object and tendency is to keep the *minds* of the people in a state of darkness and subjection.¹⁹⁴

The 1810-11 writing of *Paper Against Gold* in Newgate is here aligned with writing the *Grammar* during the winter of 1817-18, one exposing the fraud involved in the government's circulation of paper money and the other subverting government control of education and language. Both were written while Cobbett was the target of government persecution, in prison and exile, and if some of the first readers wrongly supposed that he was still separated from his family while writing the *Grammar*, and that the letters had actually been sent across the Atlantic to a son back in England, then this illusion would have invested the work with extra significance.

If the *Grammar* is rooted in the separation of the family in 1817, it is also tied in less direct ways to Cobbett's two previous periods in America. Grammar is, for him, a subject tightly bound up with his American experiences, as the open letters to Benbow announcing the project make clear. He stresses that he is the ideal author of a guide to grammar because he is able to understand the situation of his readers. In particular, the work is informed by his experience of teaching himself grammar while serving in the army in North America, a period he recalls with characteristic hyperbole:

My studies had been prosecuted amidst the woods and snows of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, and the time for them snatched by minutes from a greater quantity and variety of military and other duties than, I believe, were ever the lot of any other man living.

¹⁹⁴ 'To Mr. Benbow, Of the Town of Manchester', *Political Register*, 29 November 1817.

Even before leaving the army, learning grammar created a range of opportunities for Cobbett. He recalls with particular relish an adjutant who relied on his assistance to disguise his own poor grammar, granting him leave as a reward for helping him complete a report: ‘tacked on to the pigeon-shooting the Report became an object of importance.’ The memory happily brings together field sports and the hypocrisy of Cobbett’s seniors in the army, and his acquisition of grammar eventually led to his exposure of corruption amongst senior offices and his decision to leave the army. Another memory from serving in North America incorporates an even broader range of associations as Cobbett recalls,

one of our own Serjeants, whose name was SMALLER, and who was a Yorkshireman, who began learning his A, B, C, and who, at the end of a year, was as *correct* a writer as I ever saw in my life. He was about my own age; he was promoted as soon as he could write and read; and well he deserved it, for he was more fit to command a Regiment than any Colonel or Major that I ever saw. He was strong in body, but still stronger in mind. He had capacity to dive into all subjects. Clean in his person, an early riser, punctual in all his duties, sober, good-tempered, honest, brave, and generous to the last degree. He was once with me in the dreary woods, amongst the melting snows, when I was exhausted at night fall, and fell down, unable to go farther, just as a torrent of rain began to pour upon us. Having first torn off his shirt and rent it in the vain hope of kindling fire by the help of his pistol, he took me upon his back, carried me five miles to the first dwelling of human being, and, at the end of his journey, having previously pulled off his coat and thrown it away, he had neither shoe, nor stocking, nor gaiter left, his feet and legs were cut to pieces, and covered with blood; and the moment he had put me down and saw that I was still alive, he bursted into a flood of tears that probably saved his own life; which, however, was then saved only to be lost in Holland, under the Duke of York.¹⁹⁵

Smaller’s story becomes an archetypal modern history of England: self-taught, courageous, surviving one colonial adventure and then sacrificed by the inept handling of the Walcheren expedition.

¹⁹⁵ ‘To Mr. Benbow, Of the Town of Manchester’, *Political Register*, 6 December 1817.

If writing can lead to promotion in the army, letter writing carries particular importance for soldiers serving far from home. In the following week's *Register*, Cobbett invests this with political significance through another specific memory of the army:

I remember, that, in our Regiment, which was the West Norfolk, when an old man was going home discharged, he took with him his knapsack full of letters into the county, and though he might not fulfil all his promises in delivering the messages of those who could not write, he would naturally fulfil many of them.

The old regimental structure is contrasted with recent changes in army organisation, 'the grand object' of which 'is totally to efface from the mind of the soldier all recollection of paternal and filial affection; to make him as insensible as the musket that he wields'. While making a clear political point about a 'system of estranging the soldiers from the people', Cobbett's recollection carefully preserves both the 'knapsack full of letters' and 'the messages of those who could not write', drawing on his memory of the 'old man [...] going home discharged' as he explores the relationship between grammar, letter writing and political agency.¹⁹⁶

Grammar was also an important part of his second period in America, which Cobbett began by teaching French émigrés in Philadelphia. This encouraged him to prepare a work that would help French students to learn English grammar, a time that he remembers to Benbow with a strange sense of detachment.

At the time when I wrote it, I was incessantly occupied, during the day-light in teaching French people English; and, during a month out of the seven or eight weeks that I was engaged upon it, I seldom had my clothes off, being occupied with the hope, which, at last, proved vain, of saving the life of a then only child, and having to assuage the grief of his young and most affectionate

¹⁹⁶ 'To William Hallett, Esq. Of Denford in Berkshire', *Political Register*, 13 December 1817.

mother. There were these anxieties at home, while my scholars were importuning me, the bookseller and printer bothering me, and their devils haunting me, all the time that this Grammar was writing. The event which I had been so anxious to prevent, made me disgusted with every thing, and to *finish* the Grammar was the object, not to write it as I was able to do it. I stopped at the part, where it was my intention to have taken great pains; and hurried on as if *to get rid of a job*. And yet, this Grammar, only because its ideas are simple, and because it appeals to the *reason* of the Scholar, is esteemed beyond any other having the same object in view.¹⁹⁷

Through these diverse experiences, spread over four decades, grammar becomes closely entwined with Cobbett's ideas of America. More specifically, English grammar comes to stand for different experiences of exile, even while in another Anglophone country. Teaching himself in Nova Scotia to write the language he was never taught to write at home, returning to teach French émigrés and finally composing a grammar to teach an English audience he has been exiled from all contribute to this process and shape Cobbett's ideas about language. The language that is learnt in exile is, for Cobbett, proudly independent, yet in these diverse American experiences, and in trying to recall them, he his always trying to write himself home. In this, he is largely successful: teaching himself grammar while stationed in Nova Scotia helped to create a route out of the army, teaching and journalism in 1790s Philadelphia led to a triumphant return home in 1800 and a warm reception from Pitt's cabinet, and the *Grammar* helped to maintain the readership he was concerned about losing while away in America. His ideas about language are shaped by the experiences of learning, teaching and writing about language in America and both the *Grammar* and the letters that discuss his aims and motivation in writing it give a material history to the subject, one that is at once very personal and highly intersubjective, linked to a range of audiences. Shaped by Cobbett's experiences of America and designed as a political tool for his audience at home, the

¹⁹⁷ 'To Mr. Benbow, Of the Town of Manchester', *Political Register*, 6 December 1817.

Grammar became the most significant product of his American pastoral. G.D.H. Cole recognises this in describing how ‘exile [...] brought him a new intellectual freedom’ and saw him reach, ‘full maturity as a writer. He wrote hard during practically the whole of his stay; and he refused to return to England until he had finished the more pressing of the literary tasks which he had taken in hand.’ Cole describes the *Grammar* as ‘in some ways his greatest work’ and Cobbett claimed that 100,000 copies were sold in its first fifteen years of publication.¹⁹⁸ Towards the end of his exile, he wrote an open letter to Henry Hunt in which he looked back at his two years in America:

Every place and every person and almost every animal and vegetable that has, in any way tended to give me health and spirits to combat the ruffians, is dear to my thoughts. This spot and all belonging to it, will ever be dear to my recollection. We cannot help associating with thoughts relating to our deeds of importance, thoughts relating to all the objects, by which we have been surrounded at the time of performing these deeds; and, it will, during my life, be impossible for me to get rid of an affection for every thing belonging to this spot, the scene of my anxious and heart-rending cares; the scene of my most acute pains, of my most exhilarating joys, and of my greatest exertions.¹⁹⁹

The Transatlantic Seed Business

The *Grammar* may have been the most successful product of Cobbett’s pastoral and epistolary American writing, yet a scheme he established at the very end of his exile is just as characteristic. Cobbett always boasted of his ability to create an idyllic rural environment wherever he went – ‘I never sat myself down on any spot in my whole life without causing fruits and flowers and trees (if there was time) and all the beauties of vegetation to rise up around me’ – and by 1819 he had formulated a plan which would enable him to share this with his readers, proposing a version of

¹⁹⁸ Cole, *Life of William Cobbett*, pp. 228, 232, 233. Pearl, *Bibliographical Guide*, p. 106.

¹⁹⁹ ‘Letter XI to Henry Hunt, Esq.’ *Political Register*, 11 September 1819.

transatlantic pastoral that could be sent through the post.²⁰⁰ After five months of living in the tent of newspapers with his son James Paul (now 16 years old), Cobbett sailed for England with Paine's bones at the end of October. However, he left James on Long Island to conduct the American side of a transatlantic seed business, which would involve him sending seeds to Cobbett, who would sell them to his English audience. This plan, rich with father-son symbolism, entailed further separation and distress for the family. By the beginning of October, Cobbett was waiting to leave America and worrying about William, who was sick in England,

My dearest Johnny,

Your and dear N's letter of the 10th August told me of William's relapse! I have no letter since. I am half mad with apprehension about him. I shall go in the *Hercules*, I believe, in about 15 days. Mr. Benbow will see you, if he can.

God bless you all, and restore poor, dear William.²⁰¹

Meanwhile, he was also thinking about having to leave James, who he discusses in the postscript of an open letter to Hunt: 'Many, many things, make him sigh for *home*; but, convinced that he ought to remain, remain he will. *How I shall leave him behind me*, I do not know; but, the thing must be, and, therefore, I shall get through it as well as I can.'²⁰²

After leaving him, Cobbett wrote James a distraught letter from onboard *The Hercules*, still waiting to leave New York, which continues and intensifies the sentimental, practical tone of the public letter to Hunt:

My dearest little son,

My heart seems dead within me! My dear, kind, good child, God almighty bless you. Your dear health is all I can now think of. Pray, think for

²⁰⁰ 'To the people of England, Scotland, and Ireland' *Political Register*, 12 July 1817.

²⁰¹ Cobbett to John Morgan Cobbett, New York, 9 October 1819, Nuffield, XXX/65/1.

²⁰² 'Letter IX to Henry Hunt, Esq.' *Political Register*, 28 August 1819.

nothing in comparison with that. Get you good cloths; good fires; good warm bedding; keep a house ready for you at all times. Do all that is good for your health. Think about no interests compared to that [...] all I care for on this side the water is your health. My dear, dear child, if you were to die, I should die. I always loved you in a peculiar manner; and your dutiful, affectionate, sober, and thoughtful deportment, while alone with me, has made an impression on my heart never to be effaced. Be assured, that you shall not remain one hour after prudence will permit me to call you home [...] Now, while the tears pour down my cheeks, God bless, bless, my dear and dearest child!²⁰³

It is not clear whether James, left alone in America to make the mail order seed business a reality, was still feeling so affectionate towards his father. He was to remain in America for another three years and there is some evidence to support the idea that the family were not always entirely willing participants in Cobbett's American pastoral. The first letter in the resumption of correspondence after Nancy returned to England with most of the children in summer 1818 refers to 'the memorable thunder storm at this place', which seems to be an oblique reference to an argument that had taken place before the family separated. In the same letter, Cobbett goes on to describe to his daughter how he will divide the profits from *A Year's Residence* between his sons and allow them to leave for England if they wish, before going on to discuss their misgivings about pastoral life on the Long Island farm.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, Narrows, 30 October 1819, Nuffield, XXX/66/1-2.

²⁰⁴ Cobbett to Anne Cobbett, Hyde Park, Long Island, 19 June 1818, Nuffield, XXX/48/1-2. 'My heart, which was, for many weeks, sunk within me, has recovered its usual tone, which has been, in part, produced by the cheering prospect, described in my letter to Mr. Richard Hinxman, and which prospect has bursted upon me like the sun through the gloomy clouds, which enveloped the horizon on the evening of the memorable thunder storm at this place. Tranquillity of mind is absolutely necessary to any exertion of mind; and that tranquillity I now enjoy, unalloyed by one single bitter reflection as to any one act of my whole life [...] I have always been the kindest of fathers, and the kindest of fathers I will remain. A "second part", to follow the "part", given to Johnny, shall reach Mr. J. Hinxman in September. William hesitates to accept of it with any conditions; and, though I think him in error, I will not insist on any. I will retain the controul over the contents of the book, and will bestow the proceeds on him, and these proceeds, be they what they may, Mr. Hinxman shall retain for his use. The Third Part shall be James's; and, though he be young, I am resolved they shall be at his disposal in the same way, if he choose it. I scorn to suspect my children of any thing unworthy of them or of their father; and, I will, therefore, place no restraint on their minds. If I had the dollars to give them, they should have the dollars. I have them not; and, therefore, I give them the produce of my talents in kind. As for yourself and your sisters and dear, dear Richard, you must have a little patience. Before I go beyond the 200£ a year, I must owe not a farthing in the world. The "Boys", as dear Richard calls them, are boiling to be in the great and busy world. They are eminently endowed for great things; and though I would

The seed business would place further strains on the family, yet Cobbett seems to have viewed it as a wholly necessary project, expecting the government to increase the tax on cheap publications and thereby limit his circulation and profits. Soon after arriving in England, he writes to tell James how, ‘I am very anxious to keep my foot on the American soil’ and by the following year his letters to James are brisk and businesslike:

You have heard enough from others about our affairs. Only observe, that I am in as full spirits as I ever was in all my life, and much more at ease in my mind, as to the means of making us all happy, than I have been for many years back. All are well, and all full of life and hope. But, as a good deal will depend on your attention, I now write to you about trees, which will, I think, be an object worthy of great care and exertion.²⁰⁵

In 1821, his letters to James are even more to the point, one reading, in its entirety:

My dear James, I find, that we have not one ounce of Broom-Corn Seed left.—Pray, without losing a moment’s time, send a few [?]gallerns, to me.—Send by Liverpool.—Ship to Mr. Thos. Smith, No. 13. Paradise Street Liverpool.—Ship it; or, I shall not get it.—Pray do this; for, I did not know, until this very moment, that I had not a plenty!—I could bite my hands off—If you send off directly, it will come in time.²⁰⁶

A month later, James writes mournfully to his sister that, ‘I shall never forget you as being the most constant (and best) correspondent that I have had, while in the

have preferred for them the plough and the pruning hook, it is their happiness, and not my taste, that is to be considered. Therefore, the moment the means are in my possession, or are in the hands of Mr. Hinxman, from whatever source, William and James shall have full liberty to return to England; that is to say, if they wish to do it before my departure. For, though uncertainty, as to this matter, is not calculated to give uneasiness to me, whose mind is soothed and cheered with constant hope of accomplishing great things; and who am naturally pleased with the attention which I attract; the case is different with them, who may think, that the time is flying away from them, and in whose breasts lives and burns a desire to figure upon that spot, where they are destined to remain. To them this state of seclusion and of suspense; this state of apparent penury that hides itself from the world, may become not only irksome, but painful; and, if compelled to remain in it, may engender, in time, feelings with regard to me, to suspect the existence of which would be a source of misery unbearable.’

²⁰⁵ Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, Botley, 23 December 1819, Nuffield, XXX/68/1-2; London, 28 April 1820, Nuffield, XXX/82/1-2.

²⁰⁶ Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, London, 9 February 1821, Nuffield, XXX/141/1.

transatlantic regions'. Anne's letters to her brother are more sympathetic than her father's, but still recognise the practical advantages of the project: 'it seems that you are destined to pass another winter in that cold country [...] It does seem a cruel thing to keep you so long away from us, but [...] an American Nursery in the hands of Papa would be an excellent thing indeed.'²⁰⁷ Cobbett purchased a farm at Kensington to act as a nursery for the trees and by 1823 was advertising American apple trees, hickory, black walnut, persimmon, occidental plane, tulip trees, white oak, sweet chestnut, paper birch, catalpa and althea frutex shrubs and locust trees.²⁰⁸

His letters to James in these years contain detailed instructions on growing trees and exhaustive lists of seeds to send. However, the family archive of correspondence also suggests just how precarious the family felt their position was in these years and show why the seed business was viewed as a necessary back-up to the *Register*. In 1820 alone, Cobbett made an abortive attempt to start a daily paper, campaigned unsuccessfully as a parliamentary candidate in Coventry and, on his return to London, was forced to declare himself bankrupt, sell the farm and Botley and live for five months within the rules of the King's Bench Prison. The return of Queen Caroline in the same year offered the prospect of complete political transformation, if not revolution, uniting royalists and radicals. The family often seem to have been unsure how to respond to unfolding and volatile political events. Cobbett suspected their letters were being read, a possibility Anne mentions and dismisses ('the Govr. is always apprehensive that our letters are read on their way, but I think that cannot be'),

²⁰⁷ James Paul Cobbett to Anne Cobbett, New York, 3 March 1821, Nuffield, XXX/125/1-2; Anne Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, Kensington, 25 May 1821, Nuffield, XXX/146/1-4.

²⁰⁸ Quoted in Molly Townsend, *This Happy Land: William Cobbett on America, 1794-1835* (London: New European Publications, 2007), p. 325.

and she is as ever the most indiscreet correspondent in the family.²⁰⁹ Her letters include tantalising references to the possibility that Cobbett would be invited to join the government and, following the experience of exile and bankruptcy, show some weakening of political resolve: instead, she writes, the family should concentrate on making some money.²¹⁰

Throughout all of these changes, the development of a transatlantic seed business seems to have been immensely reassuring for Cobbett. In February 1821, he writes to James about their continued financial difficulties: ‘Benbow has turned out the greatest rogue and villain of all. In short, it is become necessary for us to rely only on ourselves’. After moving to Kensington, ‘William will print there; and John is publishing in Town’, and the four acres of walled garden will become an American nursery: ‘it is prudent and pleasant to be independent of courts and courtiers.—And, besides, I take great delight in trees and gardens, and it gives me great pleasure to introduce and spread things of this sort.’²¹¹ The alliteration, repetition and reassuring rhythms of this sentence work towards a declaration of pastoral independence, reiterating to James the importance of the project. Before leaving Long Island, he had

²⁰⁹ Anne Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, Brompton, 13 October 1820, Nuffield, XXX/103/1.

²¹⁰ See, for example, Anne Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, Botley House, 22 November 1819, Nuffield, XXX/57/1-2: ‘We had a certain Godfather of yours with us, several times, just before we came down here, to intrigue with us, for the Governor to join the Govt. But we told him that we would have nothing to do with money by the way of bribe; but I told him that if the Govt. wanted to keep the people quiet they must have P. on their side, and that they never would buy him, neither would they gain any thing by abusing him, and treating him as a low man. He admitted that they had acted very unwisely in making P. their enemy, and said that they ought years ago to have treated him in a more gentlemanly manner. I advised him to tell Ministers that their best way would be, upon the Governor’s arrival to go to him and buy his assistance. So away he went, saying, “aye, aye, they must behave with civility, civility, civility”!!! And ever since, the Courier has abstained from making any allusion to the Governor. A sure sign of “civility” [...] The death of the King will cause a great sensation, and make the government afraid of exercising harsh measures, and in the mean time the people will be going on; and P. will be getting money, for this let me tell you, ought to be his main object; then he may set all the world at defiance. As for the people, they are not worth a rush. Many who courted his acquaintance before he went to America, appear afraid of being known to him now, that he is not here, and that he is poor, short sighted mortals! He may kick all the world by and bye’.

²¹¹ Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, Brompton, 7 February 1821, Nuffield, XXX/140/1.

addressed an open letter to radicals imprisoned in England, encouraging them to take advantage of their imprisonment by teaching themselves grammar, and discussing his own plan of returning to England with American seeds:

That melancholy, mean fellow, DOCTOR JOHNSON, observes, that when a man *plants a tree*, he begins *to think of dying*. If this were the fact, is that to prevent the planting of trees? I have been planting of trees in every spot that I have ever *occupied*, all my life time; and I am now collecting seeds of trees to carry home, and to sow in England next spring [...] All my plans in private life; all my pursuits; all my designs, wishes, and thoughts, have this one great object in view: *the overthrow of the ruffian Boroughmongers*. If I write grammars, if I write on agriculture; if I sow, plant, or deal in seeds; whatever I do has *first* in view the destruction of those infamous tyrants.²¹²

Identifying with the radicals reformers who had taken his own place in jail – a fate that could still await him in England – this letter becomes a final, autobiographical formulation of his American pastoral. Taking Samuel Johnson’s quotation as a point of opposition and departure, grammar, seeds, writing, sowing and planting, ‘all my plans in private life; all my pursuits; all my designs, wishes and thoughts’, are, however various they might seem, united by a common pastoral and political aim.

²¹² ‘To Messrs. Johnson, Baguey, and Drummond. On their imprisonment, and on the line of conduct which they ought to pursue...’ *Political Register*, 14 August 1819.

Chapter Three

Cobbett and Queen Caroline

Sailing home from America with Thomas Paine's bones, Cobbett hoped they would act as a rallying point for democratic change. His readers, however, showed less interest in Thomas Paine's remains than in the plight of a German princess, who for a few months became the unlikely figurehead for parliamentary reform. Cobbett's writings on the Queen Caroline affair show his ability to quickly adjust to events, the excitement of Caroline's return captured in one of Anne's letters to James in America:

we were preparing for a dull heavy Summer of work, when to the astonishment of every body over comes the Queen; away goes gardening books, Grammar, seeds, and every thing else except what related exclusively to the lady herself. So instead of finding the Summer dull, we have been all alive in high spirits, though we have had work enough to do, in all conscience.²¹³

Caroline's return from exile, six months after Cobbett's own, allowed him to identify with her as an exiled icon of opposition, and even to maintain the providential reading of his own career felt throughout his American writings. This providential sense of their political project seems to have been shared by the entire family. Anne wrote to James Paul in February 1820, 'only think that the King should die on the very day that our first paper was published! so that the second paper was clothed in black.' This letter goes on to anticipate that, 'there will be sad work about the new Queen. She is abroad, and there is a strong party here for her, who want her to come home and be crowned with her husband, and she has quite spirit enough to do any thing.'²¹⁴

²¹³ Anne Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, London, 7 October 1820, Nuffield, XXX/102/1-2.

²¹⁴ Anne to James Paul Cobbett, Botley, 15 February 1820, Nuffield, XXX/77/1.

The unhappy story of Caroline and Charles went back twenty-five years, to 1795, when the Prince of Wales was reluctantly married to Princess Caroline of Brunswick, his German cousin. The Prince, who had already been secretly married for ten years to the Catholic Maria Fitzherbert, largely consented to the marriage in order to persuade parliament to pay off his gambling debts, which had reached half a million pounds. His new mistress, Lady Jersey, was enthusiastic about the idea and helped to choose the most unattractive bride available, and the engaged couple found each other mutually repulsive on their first meeting. Caroline thought him ‘very fat and [...] nothing like as handsome as his portrait’, while George had to turn round and ask for a brandy.²¹⁵ He was noticeably intoxicated during the marriage ceremony and insisted on taking Lady Jersey with them on their honeymoon. Incredibly, a daughter, Princess Charlotte, was born in January 1796, but George and Caroline separated the following year. When rumours began circulating that Caroline had given birth to an illegitimate child, an official inquiry – the misnamed ‘Delicate Investigation’ – was launched into her behaviour, and when she left England in 1813 to travel around the Mediterranean, she was followed by her estranged husband’s spies. Stories filtered back to England of her extravagant behaviour and, in particular, her alleged relationship with the pretended Milanese baron, Bartolomeo Pergami.

By 1820, public interest in the failed marriage had already invoked a range of responses, revolving around monarchy, popular literature and gender. Cobbett’s unsympathetic attitude to Caroline during the ‘Delicate Investigation’ had been ‘widely deplored as “unmanly” in its betrayal of the Princess’, ironically anticipating the importance of ideas of chivalry in 1820-21, when Cobbett would accuse others of

²¹⁵ Quoted in Jane Robins, *Rebel Queen: How the Trial of Caroline Brought England to the Brink of Revolution* (London: Pocket Books, 2007, first published 2006), p. 16.

the same failing.²¹⁶ As Iain McCalman observes, by the time of her return to England, Caroline ‘was already the heroine of a gothic-romantic fantasy’, and the scandal had produced a deluge of popular literature by writers such as ‘the dissolute, blackmailing hack, Captain Thomas Nash’, who re-wrote the report of the ‘Delicate Investigation’ as ‘sentimental literary propaganda’, a romance in epistolary form, while imprisoned in Newgate in 1811 (the same time as Cobbett).²¹⁷ George III’s presentation of himself as the father of the nation was contrasted with the Prince Regent’s reputation as, in the *Examiner* libel, a ‘despiser of domestic ties’, and the sentimental dimensions of the affair intensified after Princess Charlotte died in labour in November 1817.²¹⁸ The outpouring of public grief underscored the contrast between the domestic happiness briefly enjoyed by Charlotte and Leopold and the failure of George and Caroline’s marriage. Furthermore, the death of Princess Charlotte at the age of twenty-one made the Prince Regent’s refusal to allow her to see her mother during much of her life seem even more cruel, contributing to a ‘posthumous cult of Charlotte, built around her sex, youth, virtue, imminent maternity and tragic demise.’²¹⁹ When George III died at the beginning of 1820, his son ordered that Caroline be excluded from the liturgy and was determined above all that she should not be crowned Queen. He still wanted a divorce, which his ministers were warning him against for the likelihood that it would lead to further revelations about his own personal history, while many newspapers rumoured that Caroline was about to return.

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

²¹⁷ Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 163.

²¹⁸ *Examiner*, 22 March 1812, p. 179.

²¹⁹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 221. Colley observes that the death of Princess Charlotte marked the first time newspapers were published with a black border, a very visual way of conveying the news, and one that would be used again – including by Cobbett – after her mother’s death.

However, amidst this speculation, Caroline was not even mentioned in the *Political Register* until she returned to England at the beginning of June. For the first few months of the year, Cobbett's attention was divided between several different subjects, the predominant themes of which would be subsumed within the Queen Caroline affair. His own disillusionment with parliamentary corruption was deepened by the experience of standing, unsuccessfully, as a candidate at Coventry in the general election following George III's death. He related the events of the election in an open letter, published in the *Political Register*, to James. Inscribed within the familial sphere, the letter describes the attacks of a gang of thugs hired by Cobbett's opponent. In the Hogarthian scene at the hustings, he gives a comic self-portrait of his own nonchalance in front of the howling mob – 'I never had so good an opportunity to *philosophise* before', as he 'looked at and heard these brutes, till they became a subject of amusing speculation; and I could not help concluding that it would be a species of impiety to consider them as partaking in the smallest degree of the same nature of such men as POPE or PAINE.' This was followed by the altogether more terrifying experience of being attacked in the house where he was staying: 'I in my room, with your sister, fixed the bedstead in a way to let the door open no wider than to admit one man only at a time, and stood with a sword to send the first that should attempt to enter, to receive from the devil the arrears that might be due to him.' He goes on to wish for 'a couple of good blunderbusses, loaded with old nailheads and the like' and offers a contorted, almost parodic, argument that 'if we had killed a score or two of the worthless brutes [...] to this would have succeeded a quiet and lawful election.'²²⁰ This open letter to his sixteen-year old son in America was written days after the events it describes and shows Cobbett caught off-balance, enraged,

²²⁰ 'History of the Coventry Election [...] To Mr. James Paul Cobbett, at New York', *Political Register*, 25 March 1820.

vulnerable and genuinely afraid after surviving an attempted assassination and witnessing the reality of unreformed electioneering.

Lord Castlereagh reacted with similar violence to the discovery of a conspiracy to assassinate the Cabinet during a dinner hosted by the Earl of Harrowby: when the plot was uncovered, he suggested the Cabinet should go to dinner armed to fight off the would-be assassins. Evidence at the trial of Arthur Thistlewood and his accomplices suggested that the government spy who infiltrated the plot, George Edwards, was also acting as *agent provocateur*, and Cobbett's writings on the Cato Street conspiracy continue his attack on Sidmouth's spy system. In an open letter to the judge, he reproduces a moment of comedy from the trial to attack the way his own writings had been handled:

MY LORD,

I mean to remonstrate with you on the subject of what you said against my Register, during the late trials of Mr. THISTLEWOOD and his companions, at the Old Bailey. The Reporter states, that you asked a witness, whose name was CHAMBERS, and who has said, that he had been tempted by Edwards to take a part in the conspiracy, and that he had *resisted the temptation*; the Reporter states, that you asked this worthy man, "what *books* he generally read," to which he answered, that "he read *no books, except the Bible and Cobbett's Register*;" and that you then observed to him, "that he could not read a worse book than Cobbett's Register;" on which the honest fellow rejoined: "I think, my lord, I cannot read a better; for, by following *Cobbett's advice*, I have kept out of many hobbles and squabbles." It is said, that upon this, there was a *loud laugh* in the Court. *Who* was the object of the laughter, I cannot say; but, I am quite satisfied, that it was not I nor my Register.²²¹

This quick-witted rejoinder – with its knowing, proverbial wisdom in the rhyming, assonantal sound of 'hobbles', 'squabbles' and 'Cobbett' – only has to be repeated in Cobbett's letter to evoke the comedy and tension contained within the courtroom

²²¹ 'To Mr. Baron Garrow, A Gentle Remonstrance with His Lordship', *Political Register*, 27 May 1820.

laughter, and felt more broadly throughout the post-War years of radical agitation and persecution. Thistlewood and four others were hanged and decapitated outside the gates of Newgate on 1 May. Soldiers were sent to fill the surrounding streets and prevent the crowds from hearing the final words of the condemned men, but Cobbett printed their speeches in the *Register*, including their protests at the behaviour of Edwards and a final, patriotic speech by Thistlewood: ‘Albion is still in the chains of slavery—I quit it without regret—I shall soon be consigned to the grave—my body will be immured beneath the soil whereon I first drew breath. My only sorrow is, that the soil should be a theatre for slaves, for cowards, for despots.’²²² In taking a sympathetic position towards the Cato Street conspirators, Cobbett was clearly taking a significant risk: under the Blasphemous and Seditious Libels Act (1819), he would face transportation if convicted for a second time of seditious libel. Few were prepared to run such risks and Vic Gatrell identifies Samuel W. Fores’s *A May Day Garland for 1820*, sold at Fores’s Piccadilly print shop, as ‘the only critical response in graphic satire to the executions’. In the print, the ministers ‘caper around the conspirators’ decapitated and impaled heads, while Edwards, the execrated government spy who broke the case, plays the fiddle top right’.²²³ Gatrell describes the equally brutal designs of Thistlewood’s gang, who planned ‘to impale Castlereagh’s and Sidmouth’s heads on pikes and parade them around London. Three of the pike-heads, made from the arrowed tops of sawn-off iron railings, still rattle about in a box kept in the Treasury solicitor’s papers’.²²⁴

²²² Quoted in *Political Register*, 6 May 1820.

²²³ Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007, first published 2006), p. 658, n. 6.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

The violence and grim humour of events such as the Coventry election and Cato Street conspiracy suggest the popular mood around the time of the Queen Caroline affair. Cobbett came to view the Queen's trial as a continuation of the trials of radicals over the past decade. The same ministers, lawyers and journalists were involved: for example, William Hone – whose three acquittals for blasphemy in 1817 had made him an icon of free speech, sought out by older radicals such as William Godwin – worked with George Cruikshank and William Hazlitt on pro-Caroline pamphlets at the Southampton Coffee House in Chancery Lane, Cruikshank sketching his plans for his next caricature on the table in beer.²²⁵ As Marcus Wood writes, the Queen's cause 'was delightedly espoused by the entire radical popular front', uniting a loose alliance of liberals and radicals who were bolstered by a considerable body of public opinion.²²⁶ Cobbett had already started writing directly to a specifically female readership, addressing the final *Register* of 1819 to 'the Female Reformers Of Manchester, of Bolton-le-Moors, and of Ashton-Under-Lyne'. Thanking them for the gift of a writing stand and pen – 'emblems of the social compact and [...] implements which convey ideas from mind to mind' – he defends their involvement in politics and expresses his anger at seeing them 'represented as masculine termagants.' Beginning a dialogue with Burke and other British accounts of the French Revolution that would continue throughout the Caroline affair, Cobbett is anxious to refute any parallels between female reformers in Britain and the fishwives of Paris. The letter ranges from a discussion of Peterloo to a more quixotic attempt to convince the women of

²²⁵ Following Hone's trials on 18, 19 and 20 December 1817, Godwin called on him on 24 and 26 December. *The Diary of William Godwin*, (eds) Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010). <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>. The meetings between Hone, Hazlitt and Cruikshank in the Southampton Coffee House are described in W. Carew Hazlitt, *Memoirs of William Hazlitt*, 2 vols (London, 1867), vol. 1, p. 300.

²²⁶ Marcus Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture 1790-1822* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 149.

Manchester to substitute untaxed ‘ROASTED WHEAT’ in place of ‘noxious tea and coffee’.²²⁷

With Queen Caroline’s return, Cobbett brought together the divergent themes of recent *Registers* around a single subject, linking her cause to parliamentary corruption, the persecution of radicals and the increased political awareness of specific groups of the population, particularly women. Over the months that followed, thousands of pages of the *Political Register* were devoted to the Queen’s cause, as Cobbett worked as part of an uneasy coalition of politicians and journalists and tried to address an even more diverse audience. A study of his epistolary writings, including the open letters of the *Register*, his private correspondence with the Queen, the Addresses sent to her and the letters between members of his family, show how he exploited the sentimental, domestic side of the drama while making the affair part of a much broader struggle for greater political representation. For a few short months, the melodramatic and democratic dimensions of the affair – the rush of popular sentiment which had been foreshadowed in earlier responses to the royal marriage and the Regency – found their ideal vehicle in Cobbett’s epistolary writing.

Cobbett’s Letters to the Queen

After returning from the Coventry election, Cobbett was twice arrested for debt. His finances were in disarray after his two year exile and friends, including the banker and radical Timothy ‘Equality’ Brown, advised him to declare himself bankrupt. Anne’s later account of the bankruptcy and Queen’s affair is especially

²²⁷ ‘To the Female Reformers Of Manchester, of Bolton-le-Moors, and of Ashton-Under-Lyne’, *Political Register*, 29 December 1819. The co-option of chivalry within radical discourse, which would become central to Cobbett’s writings on Queen Caroline, can also be seen in the emphasis in prints of Peterloo on the female victims of the yeomanry’s sabres. See, for example, George Cruikshank’s ‘Manchester Heroes’ (Fores, 1819).

suggestive of the way the family saw their own lives in terms of political events, remembering her father entering the Rules of the King's Bench 'just a day or so, before the poor people, Thistlewood and others were executed. Troops of soldiers passed by that way, which had been brought into Town before daylight the morning of the execution.' To qualify as a bankrupt, Cobbett had to live within the Rules for five months and took lodgings in Lambeth Road, 'a small dirty place, in a dusty road, glaring with a spring sun, and a cold wind [...] not *enlivening* at all: until the Queen came and then we were all alive again, and so to speak, had it all our own way.' Throughout the summer, Anne stayed with her father and assisted his campaign for Caroline. They were 'very poor all the while. Papa, John and I often and often dined on cauliflowers or salad. But we were in high spirits. I, for my part, think Papa never would have got thro' that hard time so well, if it had not been for the Queen's affair.' Cobbett took Anne to Shooter's Hill to watch Caroline's return to London, waving laurel boughs to welcome her, and 'that eveng I copied a paper wh. Papa addressed to her.'²²⁸

Eight letters addressed to Caroline survive in the Cobbett archive at Nuffield College, Oxford, all dating from within the space of three weeks.²²⁹ The advice conveyed in the letters is clear: Caroline should refuse to concede any of her rights and privileges and avoid a compromise with the King's ministers. In particular, she must refuse the offer made in late June of an annual pension of fifty thousand pounds, introduction at foreign courts and the re-insertion of her name into the liturgy, in return for leaving the country. This, Cobbett argues, would be a tacit admission of guilt and would

²²⁸ Anne Cobbett, *Account of the Family*, pp. 49-51.

²²⁹ Cobbett to Queen Caroline, 8, 10, 12, 15, 20, 23, 25 and 29 June 1820, Nuffield, XXX/87/1-2, XXX/89/1-2, XXX/88/1-2, XXX/90/1-4, XXX/92/1-2, XXX/93/1-3, XXX/94/1-2, XXX/100/1-3. Subsequent references to these letters will be given in the main body of the text.

jeopardise the popular support which was her advantage over her husband. Through a comparison with other manuscripts, it is evident that the process of revision in these letters is unusually extensive for a writer who – as his style, as well as the sheer scale of his output, suggests – was accustomed to write fluently and make few revisions to his texts. The evidence of revision provided by the manuscripts, when combined with clues from other family papers, helps to elucidate the place of the letters within the huge variety of texts Cobbett wrote on the Queen Caroline affair. Furthermore, they suggest Cobbett's difficulties in determining whether his letters were reaching the Queen and suggest possible explanations for the abruptness with which he abandoned his strategy of addressing her directly.

The surviving letters are working drafts which, in itself, suggests the importance these letters held for Cobbett. He did not usually make or keep drafts of letters and, for other correspondents, surviving letters were often sealed and sent to their recipients, before being returned and incorporated within the family papers at a later date. The Queen Caroline drafts which survive were never intended to be sent, and for each there would have been a second, fair copy, made, on the evidence of the letter already quoted, by Anne. This fair copy then had to be personally delivered to Caroline's lady-in-waiting, Lady Anne Hamilton. One of the most outrageous insults to Caroline was felt to be her husband's failure to provide her with a royal residence on her return to London. Instead, after initially staying with Alderman Wood on South Audley Wood, the Queen lodged with Lady Anne Hamilton at 22 Portman Street, Portman Square, where crowds of supporters frequently surrounded the house. Cobbett's son would make the four mile journey over the river with the letters, passing from the lodgings outside the debtors' prison, representing Cobbett's political and financial

struggles, to the private house which symbolised Queen Caroline's ignominious return to London.

Two of the drafts, dating from 10 and 29 June, are in Anne's hand, which is as clear as her father's, while being easily distinguishable by its longer strokes, more consistent sloping and greater angularity. It seems highly probable that these letters were dictated to Anne, with Cobbett composing out loud. The second sheet of the 29 June letter provides further evidence for Cobbett's presence at the time of composition. There, after multiple crossings out and evident confusion over spelling, 'parrallel' is added – albeit still incorrectly – in Cobbett's own hand.²³⁰ While this letter is not signed by Cobbett, the other letter in Anne's hand is signed in her father's hand, and this confusion over spelling seems to confirm that Cobbett was standing over Anne while she wrote, dictating the letter along with any changes he wished to make. A comparison with other letters suggests that the sheer number of revisions in the Queen Caroline letters is exceptional. However, these revisions were not noted in the only two texts in which they have been re-printed, Cobbett's own *History of the Regency and Reign of King George the Fourth* and Lewis Melville's 1913 life-and-letters biography.²³¹

The revisions frequently suggest that Cobbett was not writing as quickly as he normally had to write, given his astonishing productivity. In many places he appears to have hesitated over words, taken care over avoiding repetitions, and, when

²³⁰ The interlineation of 'grateful to', fifteen lines earlier in the same letter, also appears to be in Cobbett's hand, on the basis of the smaller, thinner letters and the almost obscured 'e'.

²³¹ Cobbett, *History of the Regency and Reign of King George the Fourth*, 2 vols (London, 1830-34), paras 428-33; Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Cobbett*, vol. 2, pp. 148-62.

deliberating over the choice of a particular word, crossed words out only to then re-insert the same word above the line:

This would, ~~[illeg]~~ it is humbly presumed, put an end
procrastination;
to all ~~procrastina~~ and bring the question to ifssue at once; and
^
[....] his Majesty's ~~dutiful and~~ dutiful and affectionate subjects.
[15 June]

~~the the publication~~
....by ~~the publication~~
of the documents relating to the negociation between the ~~deleg~~ delegates
[20 June]

In many of the letters Cobbett's revisions suggest an anxiety about addressing the Queen. His deletions and insertions show a persistent concern with trying to establish his relationship to Caroline in a way that is respectful without being overly obsequious. Below, one of Cobbett's most cringing gestures of deference is crossed out and replaced with a phrase that more elegantly combines his own respect with a compliment to the Queen.

....a point ~~with regard to which it~~
~~would be embarrassing in an humble to presume to offer an opinion,~~
which it becomes an humble individual to leave to her Majesty's
superior judgement;
[12 June]

In the letter of 15 June there are three separate places, each at the beginning of a paragraph, where the deletions and interlineations suggest deliberations over how to flatter Caroline and express his own humility.

~~possible~~
It is ~~with the most profound greatest diffidence that~~
^
The writer throws himself on her Majesty's gracious
all possible
indulgence, which he, ~~though with the greatest~~ diffidence, ventures
^

The rhetorical device of tricolon is one which the revisions particularly favour, as in these examples from the letters of 12 and 15 June:

....it cannot be repealed
~~or altered~~ altered, or amended, during the present session of Parliament;

obvious, notorious, and
to attempt to withhold established and [illeg] rights
 ^

The same technique is used in the revisions of the 23 June letter in emphasizing Parliament's insolent attitude to the Queen in advising her to surrender some of her rights.

and has also
though her Majesty has ~~lately arrived from abroad, [illeg] the~~
~~and~~ and has also lately arrived from abroad,
lately become Queen, and has still more recently sent a Mefsage to the House,
 ^

While fewer changes are made in the letters written in Anne's hand, the following exception to that rule shows extensive revision, the interlineations creating impressive aural effects through the balanced phrasing and use of tricolon:

bear in mind, that though
 He beseeches her Majesty to ~~observe that already~~
 have been, ^ ^{thus far,} ~~have~~ baffled ~~discord~~ and ^ discomfitted, disappointment
~~have~~ those enemies ~~been filled with apprehension; and~~
 may [ill] tend to teach ^ them dissimulation as well as sharpen their malignity; and that
~~to reflect, that~~ what they cannot effect by force, they may
 endeavour to effect by craft; [10 June]

The letter of 23 June is unique in containing an answer to the Commons which Cobbett drafted for the Queen. Four of the eight changes are made in the closing lines:

I have derived unspeakable consola-
~~tion~~ ^{loyal,}
~~from the warm and constant attachment of this just and gene-
people~~
[^] rous ~~nation~~, of whom you are the faithful Representatives, and to cherish
[^] at home with
and live ~~surrounded by~~ whom will be the chief happiness of the remainder
[^]
of my days.

Interestingly, the revisions Cobbett makes here to a statement dramatizing the Queen's voice are of a similar kind to those he makes when writing in his own voice. His changes make the statement more rhetorical, through employing tricolon and substituting more affective, emotive words and phrases, adding 'people' and 'at home with' in place of 'nation' and 'surrounded by'.

The revisions also finely calibrate the advice carried in the letters: for example, the opening sentence of the first letter is changed to make the danger faced by the Queen both more serious and more immediate,

think
....who ~~view~~ with ~~alarm~~ the greatest
~~with~~ are and [^] ~~[fill]~~ will be employed against
alarm of the numerous arts which ~~perfidy~~ is ~~preparing to~~ ~~assail~~
her ^Δ [^]
her,

In the letter of 12 June, Cobbett's revision stresses the arbitrary nature of the King's power, as he tries to make Caroline aware of the potential danger posed to her by the Alien Act (1705):

That Acts invests His Majesty's Ministers with
at their ~~[fill]~~ mere will and pleasure,
the ~~the~~ absolute power of sending aliens out of the kingdom.
[^]

While many more changes are of this variety – for example, in the letter of 25 June, the phrase ‘as speedily as possible’ is inserted to describe the urgency with which Caroline must reassure the public that she does not intend to leave the country – not all of the revisions work towards a ratcheting up of the rhetoric. At two later points in the 25 June letter, Cobbett’s conviction that the Queen must stay in the country, reassure the people, refuse any compromise and defy Parliament leads him towards phrasing which he then revises to make less strident.

	her present
	remain in an attitude
	^
of defiance for some days	

	short time
If this line be pursued with firmness, her a little patience will	
	^

In telling Caroline to be patient, and to adopt an ‘attitude of defiance’, Cobbett evidently feared he had gone too far. The revisions show his sense of the need for his advice to be finely calculated, warning the Queen of the danger she faces in vivid terms, yet without straining the boundaries of decorous, respectful address. These examples suggest that political calculations sometimes dictated the need for a more moderate style.

This type of revision can also be seen in the changes made to the following lines from the first letter Cobbett writes to Caroline:

	the people
....they know that that will look upon such a compromise	
that there is some^truth in the accusations against her,	
as a proof of conscious guilt ,	
	^

Besides revising in favour of a more moderate tone, these lines could also be read as complicating our understanding of Cobbett's faith in the Queen's innocence. He is often described as one of the few who continued to believe in Caroline's complete innocence: to most people, the Queen might have been guilty of adultery with Count Bartolomeo Pergami, but certainly did not deserve the grossly hypocritical treatment of being stripped of her rights by a husband whose own sexual immorality was notorious.²³² However, while Cobbett is admittedly only describing a possible interpretation of the Queen's actions, writing 'guilt', before changing it to the milder and more circumlocutory 'some truth in the accusations against her', might suggest that he is less than certain of her innocence. Interestingly, the word 'conscious' is also struck out of another, later letter –

strong in
her Majesty, ~~conscious~~ of her own innocence,
 ^

[15 June]

– opening up the possibility that Cobbett is again trying to censor himself from examining too closely what the Queen might be 'conscious' of. With its connotations of personal awareness and responsibility – semantically and etymologically close to 'conscience' – the word, twice deleted in the letters, introduces the possibility that Cobbett either does not feel able to write about what Caroline is 'conscious' of, due to his respect for her, or, alternatively, that he does not wish to pay too close attention to the Queen's conscience if he is to remain personally convinced of her innocence.

Cobbett clearly wanted to measure his advice carefully, making precise political calculations and writing in a way that would achieve the greatest possible effect.

²³² See, amongst others, Daniel Green, *Great Cobbett: The Noblest Agitator* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), pp.427-8.

Without personal access to the Queen, the letters presented his only opportunity to intervene and urge a course of action very different to that prescribed by Brougham and Denman – the Whig lawyers conducting her case, whom Cobbett suspected of manipulating it for their own political advantage.²³³ But the need to press his advice does not alone explain the extent of revision in the letters. Although he had only seen her from a distance, Cobbett had been an ardent supporter of the Queen since the early 1810s, believing absolutely in her innocence and viewing her as a much wronged ideal of royalty and femininity. This personal affection was to continue growing and, combined with his vanity, helps to explain the time he took over the letters, and his frequent clumsiness in addressing her. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the letters require a very different, more elevated style than writing for the *Political Register*. Cobbett clearly had to revise extensively before he felt he had moved far enough away from the style of ‘Twopenny Trash’ and achieved the style he wanted to adopt in addressing the Queen.

Given this uncertainty over the Queen’s answer to the Commons, the question of whether the letters ever reached Caroline remains. Doubts on this score are given further support by an unfinished letter from three months later, probably by John Cobbett and addressed to James in America, relating Cobbett’s difficulties with Caroline’s other advisers. Cobbett wrote, ‘as well as he could in her favour, and against Brougham, who was evidently selling her.’ Seeing the danger of compromise with the government

he wrote some letters to her, and sent them, by one of us, who left them at the door. After the third or fourth had been sent, the man at the door said he could not take in any thing without having the name of the person who sent it. So

²³³ Cobbett, *History of King George IV*, vol. 2, chapter 8 *passim*.

that, P. with the next was under the necessity of sending William to go in and ask for Lady Anne Hamilton. W. found her at breakfast with the Ald^m. who upon W's coming in, looked confounded and guilty. W. asked her to give the letter to the Queen, upon which she asked if the Alderman's having it would not do the same (for, you see, she and the Queen thought P. was in correspondence with the Alderman and, depend on it, he had lied finely about it) upon which W^m. said no, that it must go to the Queen and nobody else, to which she consented, and W. came away.

The letter goes on to describe how, a few days before, Alderman Wood's brother had appeared at Cobbett's shop in the Strand, 'to say that the Queen wanted to buy the back volumes of the Registers, hoping, you see, to satisfy him with that.'²³⁴ This is confirmed by Cobbett's letter of 19 June to Alderman Wood, which promises to send the *Registers* and 'make them as complete as we can'.²³⁵ However, the September letter indicates that this was subsequently seen by the family as a ploy, designed to give the impression that the Queen was pleased with Cobbett's advice, while Alderman Wood meanwhile contrived to prevent the letters reaching her.

Other evidence confirms that the first few letters did not reach the Queen, but that later letters did. John's letter to James refers to Wood's deception being uncovered after Cobbett's 'third or fourth letter' to Caroline, from which point William appears to have been instructed to give his father's letters directly to the Queen. In his *History of George IV*, Cobbett does not print the first four letters, only referring to them in a single clause. Describing the danger of the Queen agreeing to live abroad with a pension, he writes, 'it was at this critical moment that I thought it necessary to make a private communication to the queen [...] I had written several letters to her before, and upon this occasion I wrote her the following:—', before inserting the letter of 20 June. Before the next letter, he describes how he 'took care that the letter reached her

²³⁴?John Morgan Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, London, 14 September 1820, Nuffield, XXX/101/1-2.

²³⁵ Cobbett to Alderman Wood, London, 19 June 1820, Nuffield, XXX/91/1.

hands', while he boasts that the last letter had, 'its salutary and most complete effect'.²³⁶ In this way, Cobbett's account in the *History of George IV* suggests that Queen Caroline's decision not to go abroad or renounce any of her privileges was entirely a result of his interventions. However, his uncharacteristic silence on the first four letters, unprinted and referred to by only a single phrase ('I had written several letters to her before'), may be read as revealing his own doubts as to whether these early letters ever reached the Queen. The difficulties of ensuring the letters reached Caroline must have been particularly frustrating given the time he spent composing and revising them. His persistent anxiety over whether Alderman Wood was intercepting the letters may well have contributed to his decision to stop writing them, having sent eight letters in three weeks. Cobbett decided he had to find new ways of using his correspondence to supplant Wood's position, which Wood enjoyed through his position and power as M.P. for the City of London and his direct access to Caroline. At the end of June, Cobbett stopped writing to the Queen, instead switching his epistolary tactics to a campaign of public letters.

The Queen's Letter to the King

While Cobbett's letters to the Queen were being intercepted by Alderman Wood, Caroline was reading Cobbett's open letters to the Alderman in the *Register*, which were – in a plot twist as convoluted as that of any epistolary novel – being sent to her by Cobbett's readers. The letter from John Morgan quoted above describes Cobbett's conversation with Wood's brother:

upon P.'s asking him if the Queen had seen the Register of that week, he answered he believed not, for, he knew she had given positive orders that no paper whatever should be taken in during the proceedings against her!! We all

²³⁶ Cobbett, *History of King George IV*, vol. 2., chapter 8, paras. 428, 431, 433.

set it down as a monstrous falsehood, and the two or three days after, when the Ald. came, he let it out that the brother had been sent to return the Queen's thanks to P. for what he was then doing for her! and he further said that the Queen had received, by post, 50 copies of the Register from different people who were anxious she should see it.²³⁷

The *Register* that Cobbett is specifically referring to could be that of either 17 or 24 June, which each lead with 'A Letter to Alderman Wood; Containing the Proverbs of "Absolute Wisdom;" or, A History of the Advice Given to the Queen at the Several Periods of her Long and Unparalleled Persecution.' These open letters attack the advice of Caroline's lawyers, Cobbett's principal anxiety concerning their negotiations with Wellington and Castlereagh to try and reach a compromise that would see Caroline leave the country in return for the re-insertion of her name in the liturgy; the payment of an annual pension; or her recognition as Queen of England at European courts. Leaving Britain, Cobbett argues, would be a tacit admission of guilt and could not be right: if she is innocent, why should she leave the country? And if she is guilty of adultery, why should the public pay her a pension to live on the Continent? Ridiculing the failure of the lawyers to agree a compromise through secret negotiations with the ministers, he advises that, 'in publicity are her safety and the discomfiture of her enemies. In secrecy; in *concealment*, are her certain ruin and degradation.'²³⁸ The Green Bags of evidence placed before Parliament – already a symbol of the persecution of radicals – should be opened and Caroline's innocence proved.

²³⁷ ?John Morgan Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, London, 14 September 1820, Nuffield, XXX/101/1-

2.

²³⁸ 'A Letter to Alderman Wood', *Political Register*, 13 June 1820.

In July, Cobbett stopped writing to Wood and directed open letters in the *Register* to the Queen's enemies. To Lord Chancellor Eldon, he made the sensational and recklessly brave revelation that while in Newgate,

in 1812, a *thousand pounds were offered me*, not, to write *against* the Queen, then Princess of Wales, but *to write no more on the side of her Royal Highness*; and to this fact I am ready to swear if produced as a witness at the Bar of the House of Lords. When I will name the person who made the offer, who was a clergyman of the church of England. I rejected the offer, though I was then in a prison.²³⁹

He also addressed Canning, whose position was especially awkward given his past friendship, or rumoured affair, with Caroline. The King demanded his resignation when he refused to take part in Caroline's trial, only to be told that Lord Liverpool would resign with him. When Canning conveniently disappeared from London, Cobbett was merciless: 'if we are not allowed to laugh at this fellow; then, there must be a law against laughing. Whither he is gone, what is become of him, nobody pretends to be able to tell.'²⁴⁰ His open letter to Canning in July incorporates the moment when the news arrived that the secret committee had reported on the evidence and recommended the Queen be tried for adultery in the Lords and divorced by Act of Parliament:

... since I wrote this last sentence, I find, that the secret inquiry has taken place, and that the report has actually been made!

I have now (6th July, in the morning) the *famous Report* and also the *Bill of Pains and Penalties* before me! And you, Sir, have been one of the Ministers all this time! You, who have such an "*ardent affection*" for her Majesty, the Queen.²⁴¹

²³⁹ 'To the Lord Chancellor', *Political Register*, 15 July 1820.

²⁴⁰ 'To the Weaver Boys of Lancashire. Things to Laugh At and Things to Remember', *Political Register*, 23 September 1820.

²⁴¹ 'A Letter to Mr. Canning', *Political Register*, 8 July 1820.

The *Register* also carries open letters to Wilberforce, Castlereagh, and George IV. While the private letters were being intercepted, these open letters were reaching Caroline and in mid-July she approached Cobbett – having already failed to win Canning’s support – and asked him to become one of her advisers. While Brougham led Caroline’s legal team, Cobbett effectively became her press secretary.

His most important contribution was to write the letter from Caroline to the King on the eve of her trial in the Lords, which was delivered to George IV, went unanswered, and was then published in *The Times* on 14 August and extensively re-printed. The allegations levelled against George IV in this letter could only be sanctioned by coming from Caroline herself. However, the letter was clearly drafted by someone else on her behalf and speculation immediately began as to the real author of the letter, with Cobbett an obvious candidate. He only seems to have been saved from identification – and a potential trial for seditious libel – by the style of the letter, which commentators saw as too far removed from that of Cobbett’s ‘Twopenny Trash’. The *Courier* believed Dr Parr and Dr Reynolds had been behind it, while the *New Times* entertained the idea of Cobbett’s involvement, but believed any contribution of his must have been re-written by ‘a more classical pen.’²⁴² The language of the Queen’s letter is the same elevated, highly rhetorical and slightly stilted style that Cobbett had worked out in writing to Caroline in June. Therefore, it is likely that the work he had put into formulating a new style in his private letters to Caroline in June helped to prevent him from being identified as the author of the Queen’s letter to the King two months later. Anne later recalled how the family was ‘in absolute terror’ at the time, describing a visitor reading it to them,

²⁴² Spater, *The Poor Man’s Friend*, vol.2, pp. 581, n. 92.

with great feeling. Papa and I affecting wonder and admiration the while. He the writer, I the copyer. Papa got up and went away and tore up his rough copy. We had been bothered by people coming to tell us all manner of things ab[ou]t this letter, it having got about that she *had* written one to the king. A fortnight or so elapsed from the time of her sending it, and various rumours were afloat. We kept our counsel and the day we knew that she *had* sent it off, we ordered a post chaise to take us to Bromley, and we went on our way, rejoicing.²⁴³

Cobbett waited until it had already been published elsewhere before inserting it into the *Register*, cautiously adding that,

With respect to the *facts* of the Letter of her Majesty, or, with respect to the *language* of it, I shall say nothing; or, rather, I shall offer *no opinion*. I am not living in what I deem a state of freedom; and, as I *dare not* say that I approve of the contents of the Letter, so I *will not* say that I disapprove of them. I publish the Letter itself, because all other periodical publications contain it.²⁴⁴

John wrote to James the following month that ‘a letter to the King which, I dare say, you have seen, was written by a person that you very well know. I am afraid to say who, for it is High Treason, and all the Devils in H. have bestirred themselves to fix it upon some ones head, but it is all secret.’²⁴⁵ When asked in person, Cobbett always told people – doubtless relishing the opportunity for revenge – ‘I believe it was written by Alderman Wood’.²⁴⁶

The letter became the definitive statement of the Queen’s position: a few weeks later, Cobbett observed in the *Register* that it had been published in France, Spain, Holland, Germany, and Italy and advises Caroline that she must never ‘*flinch* from your noble

²⁴³ Anne Cobbett, *Account of the Family*, pp. 52.

²⁴⁴ ‘To the Middle Class of People (Who are enemies of Reform), On The Letter, and on the Trial, of her Majesty the Queen’, *Political Register*, 19 August 1820.

²⁴⁵ ?John Morgan Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, London, 14 September 1820, Nuffield, XXX/101/1-2. The letter is incomplete and was never sent. One of Anne’s letters to James Paul Cobbett, also incomplete, suggests that it may have been considered too indiscreet to be posted: ‘the Govr. is always apprehensive that our letters are read on their way, but I think that cannot be.’ Brompton, 13 October 1820, Nuffield, XXX/103/1.

²⁴⁶ Anne Cobbett, *Account of the Family*, p. 52.

resolution, expressed in your letter to the King. That letter is our Polar Star. To that we look; and on the spirit, which that letter breathes, we rely for your Majesty's restoration to rights and dignities'.²⁴⁷ Anne later reported that Caroline, 'says she owes all to the Govr. and as for the letter she says if it had not been for that her head would have been upon Temple Bar long before this', and her appreciation was evident in her decision to be painted holding the letter after her trial.²⁴⁸ The contents of the letter cast Caroline as the sentimental victim of a long campaign of persecution by her husband. George III plays the role of benevolent father-in-law, 'one whose upright mind nothing could warp, in whose breast injustice never found a place, whose hand was always ready to raise the unfortunate, and to rescue the oppressed'. When his influence was removed, even 'the interest of the nation' was 'sacrificed to the gratification of your desire to aggravate my sufferings, and ensure my humiliation'. 'Bereft of parent, brother, and father-in-law', with 'my husband for my deadliest foe', 'I had one consolation left – the love of my dear and only child', until 'your advisers, more inhuman than the slave-dealers, remorselessly tore the mother from the child'.²⁴⁹ The letter gives a melodramatic account of that separation and the death of Princess Charlotte while Caroline was in exile on the Continent. Then, comparing her husband to Henry VIII, she protests at being tried by a group of peers who are under George IV's command and whose own interests will be served by finding her guilty of adultery. Only the need to protect her honour could, she insists, have forced her to write this letter.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ 'To Her Most Gracious Majesty', *Political Register*, 2 September 1820.

²⁴⁸ Anne Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, Brompton, 31 January 1821, Nuffield, XXX/139/1-2.

²⁴⁹ 'The Queen's Letter to the King', *The Times*, 14 August 1820, p. 2.

²⁵⁰ A draft of a second letter from the Queen to the King in Cobbett's hand exists in the Nuffield College archive, running to nine pages and with evidence of extensive revision. It is not clear whether it was ever sent, though this seems unlikely, and it has never been published. It was written after the more famous letter: 'once more, 'ere the fatal die be cast, I controul my feelings, I restrain my swelling bosom, I master my disdain and remonstrate with [^ demand justice from] your Majesty.' It

While the text is styled as a private letter addressed by a wife to her husband and justified by female modesty, it plays on the willingness of the reader to discover intercepted correspondence – a similar dynamic to the epistolary novels Cobbett so often warned his readers against. Surveying the enormous field of pro-Caroline popular literature, McCalman concludes that,

Gothic melodrama and domestic romance were two of the pre-eminent forms of English working-class fiction, and the incorporation of Caroline's history and grievances into the framework of their fictional aesthetic immeasurably increased her popular appeal. Moreover, both literary forms were characterised by a powerful Manichean moral structure well-suited to conveying intense anti-establishment feelings.²⁵¹

The sentimental appeal from Caroline to her husband could become an appeal to each individual reader, *The Times* declaring that 'there is no generous, or manly, or moral feeling, which it does not rouse with animated and unadorned eloquence'.²⁵² Ordinary members of the public could, through reading her letter, be raised to the chivalric feelings of protection towards her that her royal husband so evidently did not feel. Through the device of the letter, Cobbett is able to fully exploit an aspect of the affair he had begun to develop as soon as she returned, transforming Caroline into a sentimental, chivalric symbol of reform in the same way that Burke had transformed Marie Antoinette into an emblem of France's *ancien régime*. On 17 June, less than a fortnight after she had landed in Dover, he had written:

When the late Queen of France was only gently constrained by the populace to join her husband in a procession from Versailles to Paris, BURKE exclaimed that the days of chivalry were gone, or thousands of swords would have flown from their scabbards, to prevent what he, in his insolence towards the people,

concentrates on the injustice of different elements of the trial, the long history of persecution faced by the Queen and insists that 'to resist oppression is both a right and a duty'. Nuffield, n.d., XXX/98/1-9.

²⁵¹ McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 176.

²⁵² *The Times*, 14 August 1820, p. 2.

called an indignity offered to this Queen of France! What, then, shall be said now, when apparently not an unhired tongue is, in any eminent station, moved in defence of this injured Queen of England? [...] However, the age of chivalry is not wholly gone. The spirit of that age is still left in England, but it appears to live only in the breasts of the people; that people, which have been charged with a want of loyalty, with a want of reverence for the Throne, with a want of attachment to Kings and Queens; and who now are charged with factitiousness and sedition, because they set up an unanimous shout of “GOD SAVE THE QUEEN!”²⁵³

Tim Fulford has argued that Cobbett here re-locates chivalry in the people, thereby ‘turning the anti-jacobin Burke against the establishment he had sought to defend’ and making ‘support for Caroline both chivalric and patriotic’.²⁵⁴ In doing so, Cobbett demonstrates once again the strange and complicated afterlife of Burke’s paean to Marie Antoinette. Burke is, of course, one of the whipping boys of the *Register*, castigated for the work *Reflections* did in turning British opinion against the French Revolution and for his pension, a symbol of ‘Old Corruption’. However, Fulford’s claim that ‘Cobbett’s insistence on Caroline’s personal innocence was not, in fact, quixotic but tactical’ is in some ways misleading.²⁵⁵ The Queen Caroline affair did present to British radicals ‘a cause through which they could refute the establishment’s smears that they were pro-French jacobin revolutionaries’, as Fulford argues, yet Cobbett’s Burkean representation of Queen Caroline is not simply a neat tactical manoeuvre, but an indication of Cobbett’s deeper affinities with Burke.²⁵⁶ Instead of seeing in Caroline a figure who could be appropriated for the radical cause, Cobbett was, as John Stevenson has argued, ‘genuine in his regard for Caroline’ – and as blind to any contravening evidence as Burke was to anything said or written against

²⁵³ ‘A Letter to Alderman Wood’, *Political Register*, 17 June 1820.

²⁵⁴ Tim Fulford, ‘Cobbett, Coleridge and the Queen Caroline Affair’ *Studies in Romanticism* 37 (Winter 1998), 523-43, pp. 531, 535.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 535. Fulford’s conception of Cobbett has much in common with Leonora Natrass’s emphasis on a strategic and supremely versatile rhetorician, on which, see the introduction.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 327.

Marie Antoinette.²⁵⁷ And, like Burke, he viewed feelings of chivalry towards the injured Queen as representing an older set of values, swimming against the tide of a modern, commercial society. To give another example, in an open letter to the King, Cobbett expressed his disbelief that no member of parliament had offered to protect the Queen:

really, Sir, in this huckstering, stock-jobbing age, the love of fame seems to have been obliterated from the human heart! There are *young* men; officers of the *army*: and not one, even of these, has stepped forward! In such men, and in such a case, even indiscretion and temerity are right, and the want of them almost a crime. Miserable indeed is that state of society when, in such a case, men are under the sway of cold calculation!²⁵⁸

Again, he slips into a recognisably Burkean idiom, only differing from him in his choice of injured Queen. Throughout the Queen Caroline affair, Cobbett domesticizes the chivalric, with the defence of the injured Caroline becoming part of popular, not aristocratic, culture.

McCalman and Fulford both stress the broad reach of sentimental, pro-Caroline literature, Fulford arguing that ‘Cobbett had extended the political sphere to include a female reading public which his rhetorical appeals had helped to create and to politicize’.²⁵⁹ However, Cobbett also used his writings in support of the Queen to demonstrate who was *not* part of his audience. The ‘gothic-romantic fantasy’ explored by McCalman was not a single, monolithic Queen Caroline aesthetic, but a range of competing discourses, some of which were strenuously excluded from the *Political Register*. Indeed, Cobbett vigorously attacked the scurrilous tone of much commentary on the affair, one which dominates the visual satires and which relished

²⁵⁷ John Stevenson, ‘The Queen Caroline Affair’, in John Stevenson ed. *London in the Age of Reform* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), p. 140.

²⁵⁸ ‘A Letter to his Majesty the King’, *Political Register*, 29 July 1820.

²⁵⁹ Fulford, ‘Cobbett, Coleridge and Queen Caroline’, p. 531.

the allegations made against both King and Queen. This bawdy enjoyment of the affair Cobbett associated with metropolitan libertines – or ‘the vile, glittering, corrupt wretches at the West End of the Town’ – who were not part of his audience, but instead,

pour out upon the public and worm into every cottage in the kingdom the grossest and most loathsome obscenity; and thereby make the common talk of the people such as has hitherto been confined to the circles of the debauched, the degenerate and beastly crews, that distinguish the west end of the Metropolis.²⁶⁰

This vision of contamination suggests the risks perceived by Cobbett in the Queen Caroline affair: his readers might be roused to feelings of chivalry, but could otherwise be infected with a prurient enjoyment of the scandal. The latter tone dominates many of the most useful sources on the episode, letters by cynical aristocrats and exhaustive collections of visual satires compiled by Whig grandees.²⁶¹ By comparison, Cobbett argues that such enjoyment of the affair was not shared by the wider public: ‘the people of this country, who, generally speaking, and almost universally speaking, live very moral lives, and are happy in their own domestic relations, stand in need of no such gratification.’²⁶² Any contamination of these ‘very moral lives’ by aristocratic degeneracy threatened society due to a political logic (‘as domestic fidelity is the basis of all morality in families; and as all societies must consist of families...’) that is, once again, thoroughly Burkean.²⁶³

²⁶⁰ ‘A Letter to Mr. Canning’, *Political Register*, 8 July 1820; ‘To the Weaver Boys of Lancashire. Things to Laugh At and Things to Remember’, *Political Register*, 23 September 1820.

²⁶¹ See, for two rich examples of this attitude, the bound volumes of newspaper cuttings, satirical prints and handwritten notes on the Queen Caroline affair, collected by Minto Wilson and Lord Holland and held in Cambridge University Library. ‘Minutes of Evidence on the Queen’s Trial’ (2 vols, bookplate of Minto Wilson), Syn. 3.82.6-7; ‘The Trial of Queen Caroline’ (2 vols, Holland House bookplates), Syn. 3.82.3-4.

²⁶² ‘To the Reformers’, *Political Register*, 10 June 1820.

²⁶³ ‘To the Weaver Boys of Lancashire. Things to Laugh At and Things to Remember’, *Political Register*, 23 September 1820.

Cobbett's chivalric defence of Queen Caroline ran counter to the bawdy tone of much of the commentary on the affair, and it is difficult to measure how successful it was. The Queen's letter to the King certainly had a wide impact – if not the circulation of two million which Cobbett claimed.²⁶⁴ Further evidence can be found in visual satire, which provides some evidence that Cobbett, together with other pro-Caroline writers, helped to effect a gradual shift in representations of the Queen. Most recent studies of visual satire during the affair have concentrated on the many prints ridiculing either King or Queen, relishing a wit, bawdiness and irreverence that would disappear from visual satire in the 1820s and not return for a hundred and fifty years.²⁶⁵ However, the ridiculing of King and Queen did not serve Cobbett's project: satires which continued in the rich radical vein of mocking the Prince Regent invited equally scurrilous

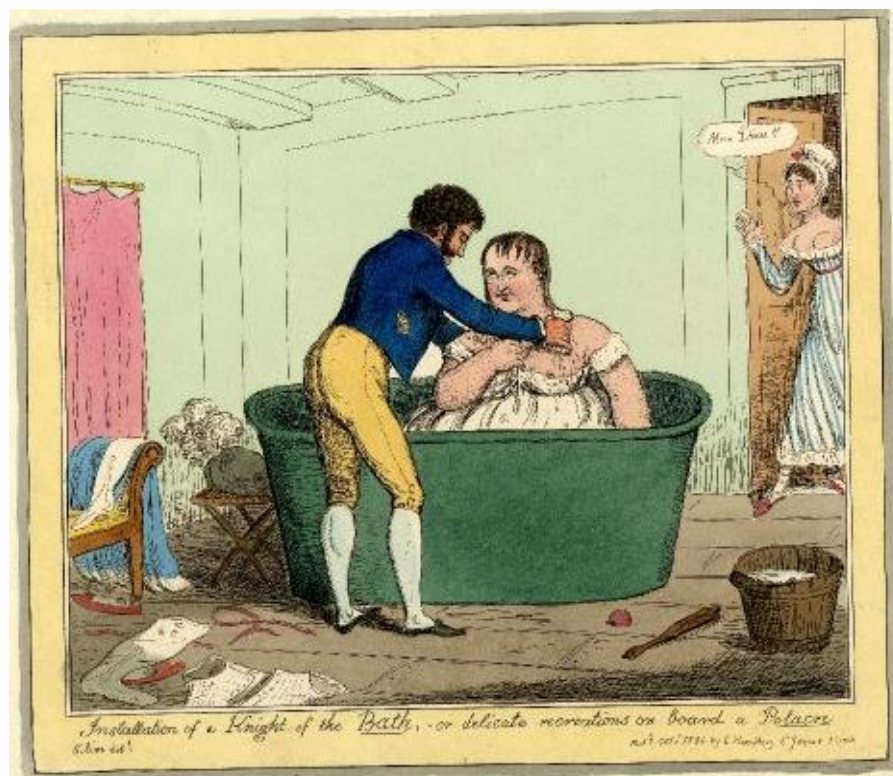


Figure 2: 'Installation of a Knight of the Bath, or delicate recreations on board a Polacre' (George Humphrey, St James's Street, October 1820).

²⁶⁴ Ingrams, *Life and Adventures of William Cobbett*, p. 184.

²⁶⁵ See, Gatrell, *City of Laughter*, *passim*.

portrayals of his wife. Prints elaborating on her alleged affair with Pergami matched anything published against her husband, and portrayals such as the uniquely unflattering ‘Installation of a Knight of the Bath, or delicate recreations on board a Polacre’ (see Figure 2) evidently did not help Cobbett’s project of transforming Caroline into a Burkean object of chivalry. Instead, they suggested an equally cynical attitude to King and Queen and a scurrilous enjoyment of the whole episode, which Cobbett hoped his audience would not share.



Figure 3: ‘Queen Caroline. Britain's best hope!! England's sheet-anchor!!!’ (John Fairburn, Broadway, Ludgate Hill, 19 October 1820).

However, over the course of 1820, a different set of representations of the Queen started to emerge, which suggest that Cobbett’s approach was having some impact. In these prints – which have proved less interesting to historians of early nineteenth-century satire – Caroline is shown instead as a symbol of patriotic femininity. In ‘Queen Caroline. Britain's best hope!! England's sheet-anchor!!!’ (see Figure 3) she is represented as Britannia, standing with her lion and holding an anchor symbolising Magna Carta, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the People. She is supported by the army and

navy, a group of women wave handkerchiefs and call out ‘God bless her!!!’, while a flag-bearing supporter raises his hat, crying out ‘The Queen and Old England for

Ever!!', an echo of Cobbett's own approach to the affair. In 'An Appeal to Britons' (see Figure 4), Caroline, dressed in black, is defended by Britannia and her lions against her parliamentary enemies and plaintively cries out to Princess Charlotte, who angelically hovers between Caroline and her enemies. Elsewhere, she is 'Boadicea, Queen of Britain, overthrowing her enemies' (see Figure 5), the King and his ministers trampled beneath the horses of her chariot, and, in 'John Bull's Trump' (see Figure 6), becomes the Queen of hearts, anticipating a much later Princess of Wales.



Figure 4: 'An Appeal to Britons' (S.W. Fores, 41 Piccadilly, 23 August 1820).

These prints, ranging from a sentimental presentation of Caroline as a bereaved and injured woman to a more aggressive, martial femininity, are consistent in stressing her patriotism and command of ordinary people's support. They all date from the few months after the Queen's letter to the King was published and may well have been influenced by Cobbett's chivalric defence of Caroline. They only dominated the print

shops for the latter part of 1820, and early in 1821 George Humphrey's St James's Street, which had supported Caroline, turned against her and issued a series of derogatory prints by Theodore Lane. The notes by Mary Dorothy George to one of these prints, 'John Bull's Little Darling', gives some idea of their tone: 'Queen Caroline, stout and raddled, with black ringlets, stands full-face and four-square, bending forward as if bowing, with a fixed stare from black beady eyes'.²⁶⁶ However, Cobbett had nonetheless, for a few crucial months, succeeded in influencing public opinion and print shop caricature, demonstrating that Burkean chivalry need not be inconsistent with a radical politics.



Figure 6: 'John Bull's Trump' (George Humphrey, St James's Street, August 1820).



Figure 5: 'Boadicea, Queen of Britain, overthrowing her enemies, humbly dedicated to Caroline Queen of Great Britain and Ireland' (John Fairburn, Broadway, Ludgate Hill, November 1820).

²⁶⁶ Mary Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the British Museum*, 7 vols (London: British Museum, 1935-54), vol. 6, p. 185.

Addresses to the Queen

The letters Cobbett wrote to the Queen and on her behalf continue a version of the royal marriage as epistolary novel that the public had been reading for the twenty-five years that the saga had already lasted. The first installment even preceded the marriage: in May 1796, Lady Jersey intercepted a letter from Caroline to her family in Brunswick which included disparaging remarks on her future in-laws. For the first of many times, the newspapers took Caroline's side, *The Times* and the *True Briton* protesting at the opening of private correspondence. Princess Charlotte's separation from her mother later became a particularly affecting chapter, and, in 1820, Cobbett quickly re-printed Caroline's 1813 letter to the then Prince Regent, protesting at the unnatural separation of mother and daughter. Such expressions now carried extra poignancy, Princess Charlotte always having been 'portrayed in the press and prints as the perfect result of a disastrous union'.²⁶⁷ Her love match to the relatively impoverished Prince Leopold and their domestic happiness and seclusion at Claremont House in Surrey, overlooking a Capability Brown landscape, ensured that she 'remained an icon of domesticity'.²⁶⁸ Even the aloof Henry Brougham looked back at the public sense of loss on her death in child labour at the end of 1817 and concluded that, 'it is difficult for persons not living at the time to believe how universal and how genuine those feelings were. It really was as if every household throughout Great Britain had lost a favourite child'.²⁶⁹ These sentimental histories, so often enacted for the public through exchanges of letters, allowed readers to feel a novelistic sense of involvement in the divorce drama.

²⁶⁷ Robins, *Rebel Queen*, p. 53.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

²⁶⁹ Quoted in Robins, *Rebel Queen*, p. 53. Brougham's language here is very similar to that of Caroline's reply to an address from Ilchester, where she announces that on Princess Charlotte's death, 'if I wept as a parent, the whole nation mourned like an individual. The grief was one and the same in all. Every man felt as if he had lost a friend; and that friend his solace in the passing day and his hope in the time that was to come.' *Political Register*, 5 August 1820.

This sense of proximity and readerly involvement was increased by another of Cobbett's epistolary strategies during the summer of 1820. Addresses to Parliament and King had become an increasingly important part of an unreformed politics, a tactical alternative to enfranchisement. Politicised addresses to Queen Caroline had been begun by Alderman Wood in 1813, when he suggested the Common Council of the Corporation of London present her with their support. Following Caroline's return, addresses and replies had been drafted by Brougham and Wood, but Henry Hobhouse recorded in early July that she had rejected two of Brougham's drafts of a reply to the City of London and soon after gave the responsibility to Cobbett. He would draft the address of a group who wished to pledge their support, Caroline would receive the delegation at Brandenburgh House, where she had taken up residence from the beginning of August, hear Cobbett's address read out and give her reply – which, too, was often drafted by Cobbett. This piece of political theatre was then reproduced in the *Political Register*, which on 8 July carried its first section of 'Documents Relating to Her Majesty, the Queen', containing addresses and replies to York, Southwark, the City of London, Preston, Nottingham and Westminster. Cobbett's authorship can be confirmed by the recycling in the reply to the City of London address of a passage included in his proposed answer to the House of Commons, sent to her on 20 June and never used.²⁷⁰ In this case, Cobbett's draft of the original address from the City of London also survives in the Nuffield archive, proving that he sometimes drafted both the address and the Queen's reply.

²⁷⁰ '... in the many and deep sorrows and afflictions with which it has pleased Providence to visit me, I have derived unspeakable consolation from the zealous and constant attachment of this warm-hearted, just and generous people, to live at home with, and to cherish whom, will be the chief happiness of the remainder of my days' appears both in the draft of the 23 June letter in the Nuffield archive (XXX/93/1-3) and in the answer to the City of London address, printed in *Political Register* 8 July, with minor variation and the phrase 'of whom you are the faithful Representatives' included in the draft answer to the Commons.

Cobbett's involvement radicalised this exchange of letters, yet at the same time continued to invoke the sentimental, domestic aspects of Caroline's case. His addresses generally began by expressing their condolences at Princess Charlotte's death, moving on to a history of Caroline's persecution and then identifying with her struggles, which had involved the same unjust trials and sealed green bags of evidence used against radical reformers. For example, both the address from 'the Artisans, Mechanics and Labouring Classes of the town of Manchester' and the Queen's reply move from Princess Charlotte's death to the Peterloo massacre, where the brutal treatment of women was already an important part of the radical history of 16 August 1819. The address tells the Queen that,

Your Majesty cannot be unacquainted with the severe privations and deep sufferings of this immense population; and doubtless your Majesty's benevolent heart has been wrung at the dreadful events of the fatal 16th of August. The same power which scourged us is now oppressing you.

Caroline's reply – which, based on its rhythms and phrasing, seems likely to have been written by Cobbett – includes an account of how,

my mind has indeed been often agonized by the recollection of that dreadful day, to which the industrious classes of Manchester particularly allude; but, while we cannot but know that the same hand has been our common oppressor, let us, as far as we are able, bury the past in oblivion; and trust that, though these things have been, they will be no more! Let us endeavour to calm the perturbed passions and to heal the bleeding wounds of our distracted and lacerated country; and, for myself, though my afflictions have been many in number and long in continuance, I shall think them all amply compensated if they should, at last, prove the means of contributing towards the harmony, the prosperity, and the happiness of the kingdom.²⁷¹

²⁷¹ *Political Register*, 30 September 1820.

The groups addressing the Queen identified themselves through geography, trade and, in some cases, gender. The ‘female inhabitants of Nottingham’ continued the Burkean theme (‘All in whom the spirit of the days of chivalry are not utterly extinct, all who would not immolate the best impulses of our nature on the altar of modern policy, will rally round their Queen’) and ‘the married ladies’, ‘in and near the metropolis’ announce that,

We are unaccustomed to public acts, and uninfluenced by party feelings; yet we cannot be excluded from offering to your Majesty’s notice our sympathy and devotion. Grateful to the Constitution under which it is our happiness to live—saved also by our rank in the middle classes of society, from the dangers attendant on high rank or poverty, and protected by our husbands, we may hardly be supposed judges of all the value of your Majesty’s conduct; but, Madam, we admire your magnanimity, and we adore that womanly feeling which has made your Majesty treat with contempt every offer, the tendency of which was to compromise your honour, and we thank your for it in the name of our sex.

The power of this address is in its coming from a group who proclaim themselves as being disinterestedly remote from ordinary politics.²⁷² However, the treatment Caroline has received ‘bursts every barrier between us’, and in reply she explains how ‘the virtues of the great become the property of the people’.²⁷³ Through such addresses and replies, groups of ordinary people could become part of the epistolary novel they had been reading for so many years, either by drafting their own petitions or performing a part carefully scripted by Cobbett or one of the Queen’s other advisers.

²⁷² See Linda Colley’s canonical discussion of women in the period acting as ‘the nation’s conscience [...] a sort of sentimental priesthood’. *Britons*, p. 280 and chapter six *passim*.

²⁷³ *Political Register*, 5 August 1820; *Political Register*, 19 August 1820.

Meanwhile, Caroline was also allowing Cobbett to script her response, in lines which provoked criticism for their radicalism. Replying to such attacks, Cobbett writes to Lord Liverpool,

Let it be observed, too, that what her Majesty says upon the subject is actually drawn from her by strong invitations from the people. These Addresses [...] come spontaneously from the people [...] Her Majesty has no toad-eaters to send about the country [...] She has *the people*; the unbiased people. And it would be hard indeed if she had not a right to echo the sentiments of those who feel an interest for her, and a detestation for her enemies.²⁷⁴

He is, of course, being highly disingenuous, invoking the fiction of the epistolary novel that readers have access to authentic correspondence. Six weeks later he gives a more honest account to criticism in the *Courier*: ‘For my part, I look upon the answers to the Addresses, not, indeed, as being *wholly written* by the Queen; but, as containing *her own thoughts and sentiments*; and, indeed, as emanating from her particular instructions, and passing from under her eye.’²⁷⁵ A reply to ‘the letter-press printers of London and its environs’ pays tribute to the power of the press:

It is public opinion which has supported me in the otherwise unequal conflict with numerous adversaries [...] This public opinion is the concentrated force of many enlightened minds, operating through the medium of the Press [...] The Press is at this moment the only strong hold that liberty has left. If we lose this, we lose all. We have no other rampart against an implacable foe. The Press is not only the best security against the inroads of despotism, but it is itself a power that is perpetually checking the progress of tyranny, and diminishing the number of its adherents.²⁷⁶

Newspapers were the medium which sustained the correspondence between the Queen and her people, checking the power of her enemies in parliament. In total, over 800 addresses were received with almost a million signatures.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴ ‘To the Earl of Liverpool’, *Political Register*, 5 August 1820.

²⁷⁵ *Political Register*, 30 September 1820.

²⁷⁶ *Political Register*, 21 October 1820.

²⁷⁷ Robins, *Rebel Queen*, p. 237.

As well as carrying this correspondence, Cobbett used the *Political Register* to maintain a sustained commentary on the evidence heard in the House of Lords as the Bill of Pains and Penalties was debated. Brougham's speech on 16 August opened a trial that lasted, including a three week recess, for almost three months. Brougham and Denman's speeches were followed on the third day by the opening of the prosecution case by the Attorney General Sir Robert Gifford, who had made his name in sedition trials and in 1817 secured the convictions of the Nottinghamshire rioters, whose slogan, 'Roast-beef and ale, and a fresh government', might have been taken from Cobbett. Witnesses were examined in the following weeks, Signor Majocchi, the prosecution's star witness, famously repeating '*Non mi Ricordo*' more than two hundred times to Brougham, and inspiring a sixpenny pamphlet from Hone with the same title. A leading article in *The Times* apologised for the nature of the evidence, telling its readers, 'we regret to be obliged to insert filth of this kind, and send it forth before the world. The nation has His Majesty's ministers to thank for the inundation of obscenity with which they are overflowing it.'²⁷⁸ Reporting on the evidence compromised Cobbett's more elevated tone, but his idiosyncratic prudishness also contributed to some of his most brilliantly comic responses to the case, as when he discusses allegations that Caroline had committed adultery with Pergami while sailing around the Mediterranean:

then, a thing never to be lost sight of, the preposterous idea of the Queen going to sea at all for the purpose of indulging in amorous delights; when every one that has been at sea knows, that the very situation, besides its necessary exposures, destroys, for the time, every propensity of the kind; that it unsettles the stomach; produces a general loathing of all that was pleasant on shore; causes a disrelish for all the ordinary indulgences; creates a temporary debility; and, in short, suspends the functions as well as the desires. *Sea-sick*

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 197.

*and amorous! oh! the filthy; oh! the beastly idea! But, to continue in this fit for forty days and forty nights! To continue in this fit for as long a time as Noah was in the ark!*²⁷⁹

A lot of the comedy here seems to be unintentional, the result of Cobbett's very Burkean compulsion to draw attention to the indignity of the Biblical parallel through his outraged and chivalrous response, produced by his distinctive kind of prudishness. The 'tent scene' on board the polacre became one of the key *tableaux vivants* of the case, endlessly discussed in parliament and the press. Cobbett responds to the hermeneutic challenges with great conviction: the tent on board the polacre was really more of an awning, the Queen could not be expected to sleep below given the stench of the animals and required the chivalric protection of a man such as Pergami. The next week, increasingly exasperated by the Queen's lawyers, he tells his readers that in Brougham's position he would have presented a model of the polacre in the Lords and put the matter beyond doubt.

As the trial continued, Cobbett observed the increasing disjunction between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics: Brougham and Denman, while conducting Caroline's case, still wished to keep her 'aloof from all popular communication and support'.²⁸⁰ He tells Brougham that the language of his speech in the Lords fails to match what is taking place outside parliament – 'you might have alluded to, and even mentioned, the glorious spectacle, which, even while you were speaking, was exhibited on the Thames', the 'two thousand boats and barges', the 'two hundred flags [...] waving upon her lawn', in place of 'that ridiculous rhodamontade, with which you concluded your inappropriate and spiritless

²⁷⁹ 'A Letter to Lord Lauderdale', *Political Register*, 21 October 1820.

²⁸⁰ 'To the Radicals', *Political Register*, 28 October 1820.

harangue'.²⁸¹ Two weeks later, he tells Lord Lauderdale that, 'the wonder is how *men* could sit and listen to a detail of her sufferings, her perils and her heroism, and contemplate her cruel persecutions, and still restrain the tears from gushing from their eyes.'²⁸² The exhaustive examination of witnesses in the House of Lords, by peers who knew it would be expedient to pass the Bill, was now heading towards collision with the popular and sentimental support for the Queen outside Parliament.

This collision between two opposing political discourses, one remote, legalistic and pragmatic, the other affective and truly popular, is conveyed in a print of December 1820, 'Steward's Court of the Manor of Torre Devon' (see Figure 7). Published by George Humphrey and attributed to Theodore Lane, it depicts Caroline riding into the House of Lords on the back of a black ram with the face of Pergami, alluding to a custom by which wives guilty of adultery could reclaim some of their rights through coming to court on a ram. The Queen is followed by a procession of her supporters, carrying placards. One reads, 'May our Wives be like Her', referring to the story of Lord Wellington being stopped by the crowd on his way to the Lords and ordered to support the Queen, to which he answered, 'well, gentlemen, since you will have it so, God save the Queen', adding, 'and may all your wives be like her.' The other placards show the notorious scenes from Caroline's reputed European adventures, some, like that of Pergami bathing the Queen, referring to other prints. The procession heads towards the Lords, assembled on the right hand side of the print, Lord Eldon seated on the woolsack. However, the most threatening detail of the print is not Caroline's motley procession of black ram, lawyers, Alderman Wood and plebian supporters, but a figure, recognisably Cobbett, crouched in the bottom right hand corner, beneath the peers. He is shown holding a torch to a pile of papers, labelled 'Gunpowder treason',

²⁸¹ 'A Letter to Mr. Brougham', *Political Register*, 7 October 1820.

²⁸² 'A Letter to Lord Lauderdale', *Political Register*, 21 October 1820.



Figure 7: ‘Steward's Court of the Manor of Torre Devon’ (George Humphrey, December 1820, attributed to Theodore Lane).

‘London address’, ‘Leeds address’ and ‘Manchester address’, preparing to ignite them and burn down the House of Lords.²⁸³ According to this print, it is not the theatrical pro-Caroline pageantry that is most subversive but the addresses sent from around the country. This letter-writing campaign, orchestrated by Cobbett, hints at a politics of representation that is dangerously at odds with unreformed parliamentary politics. These letters to the Queen constitute the really combustible matter of 1820 and Cobbett, a latter-day Guido Fawkes, is dangerously close to bringing down Parliament.

²⁸³ George, *Political and Personal Satires*, vol. 6, pp. 143-5.

After the Trial

‘Steward's Court of the Manor of Torre Devon’ suggests the tension felt as two opposing political discourses collided during the long weeks of Caroline’s trial in the Lords. As a good press secretary, Cobbett massaged expectations downwards as the trial entered November, predicting to his readers that Caroline would be found guilty. Then, ‘writing to the moment’ in the best traditions of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel, a dispirited *Register* contemplating Caroline’s forced return to the Continent finished with a sudden change of tack:

VICTORY! I have just a moment to say, and I can hardly write the words, I so tremble with joy: I have only a moment to say, that THE BILL IS THROWN OUT! Thus are the Queen’s and People’s enemies defeated! That innocence, which was before acknowledged by all honest men, is now proclaimed to the world *by the House of Lords itself!* Where are now the *base conspirators?* Shall they go unpunished?—This is a glorious day for *the people*, who have, at last, begun to lay the axe to the root of Corruption. This victory has been achieved by *the people* with the Queen at their head. God Almighty, I repeat it, sent her here, expressly for our good; and, I hope, that we shall profit from the blessing. *Illuminations* will begin on Monday, I hear.—All cities, towns and villages ought to illuminate.—I wonder how Castlereagh, Wellington, Scott and Jenkinson now feel!—All congregations will, doubtless, pray for the Queen on Sunday!²⁸⁴

The Bill of Pains and Penalties was voted on for the first time on 6 November, with 123 for to 95 against, but when read again four days later the margin was reduced to a mere nine votes (108 to 99). It was clear that it would not pass the Commons and Lord Liverpool was forced to announce that the government would not proceed. When Liverpool and Sidmouth carried the news to George, it was the King’s turn to contemplate Continental exile, admitting to Sidmouth that he had ‘serious thoughts’ of retiring to Hanover.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ *Political Register*, 11 November 1820.

²⁸⁵ Quoted in Robins, *Rebel Queen*, p. 287.

Anne wrote to James in America only five days later, describing the illuminations and repeating her father's assertion that it was the people's triumph, though with an extra emphasis – tactfully absent from Cobbett's public writings – that their own role had been vital.

Even in an Aristocratic country, a people under even a Kingly government, may sometimes command and have their will; the greatest triumph has been gained by the People of England, that ever was gained in this world [...] [the] Govr. says he is satisfied, for his own part. Everybody gives him the credit for it, solely and undividedly [...] At present the whole country is mad with rejoicing. It was the threat in the concluding part of the Queen's letter which frightened them, and her triumph is ours, you know [...] Papa got a coach and took us all through the Town two nights since, to see the illuminations, and the spectacle was fine beyond any thing you can imagine. All the ships in the river lighted to the mast heads, processions marching with bands of music carrying busts of the Queen with the crown on her head, covered with laurels, playing God save the Queen and bearing torches; altogether the sight was such as to overcome one, at the same time that it was most particularly gratifying to us.²⁸⁶

Celebrations continued until the end of the month, with a service of thanksgiving at St. Paul's. What happened next, however, is far less clear. The aftermath of the Queen Caroline affair becomes part of the far broader question of the dissipation of metropolitan radicalism after 1820, much debated by historians.²⁸⁷ Keeping the focus on the Queen Caroline affair, it seems likely that her victory eventually served the King and his ministers very well by appeasing her supporters. If the trial had continued the consequences might have been far more serious: Brougham claims in his memoirs that he was prepared to carry through on the threat of 'recrimination' hinted at so often during the trial, presenting evidence of George IV's prior marriage to the Catholic Maria Fitzherbert in order to impeach him. Caroline's most recent

²⁸⁶ Anne Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, Brompton, 15 November 1820, Nuffield, XXX/107/1-2.

²⁸⁷ See, for example, J Ann Hone, *For the Cause of Truth: Radicalism in London, 1796-1821* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), endorsing Iain McCalman's view of Queen Caroline's funeral as the funeral of post-War radicalism (p. 331). See also Clive Emsley and James Walvin, *Artisans, Peasants & Proletarians, 1760-1860* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), chapter 8.

biographer concludes that had she ‘not triumphed in 1820, it is quite possible that George IV would have lost the throne’.²⁸⁸ Instead, by the end of 1820, Sidmouth was able to write with relief that, ‘the disaffected will never succeed in exciting rebellion, or in effecting a revolution [...] Thank God Great Britain is a good sea boat and there never yet was a storm which she was unable to weather’.²⁸⁹ In 1821, Caroline lost much of her popular support by going against Cobbett’s advice and trying to rehabilitate herself within polite society. At the beginning of March, she accepted an annual pension of fifty thousand pounds, thereby relinquishing her claims as a radical symbol of opposition: ‘tainted with compromise, the political movement she headed began to disintegrate under the rivalries of the metropolitan radicals’.²⁹⁰ Cobbett blamed her other advisers for her ‘ominous *recoiling*’ from popular support.²⁹¹ An attempt in Parliament to restore her name to the liturgy failed and her infamous attempt to gain admittance to the coronation in July, jeered by the crowd as she was repeatedly turned away from the Abbey, suggests how much she had relied on an instinctive, but very fickle form of popular empathy. She was taken ill the night of the coronation and died on 6 August. Her support only returned after her death, when her funeral procession was forced through the City, in opposition to the orders of the authorities and following a struggle with the Life Guards in which two of her supporters were killed. The four *Registers* following her death were all published with a black border and the funeral cortege was held up for two hours outside Cobbett’s new home in Kensington, where ‘I had covered my whole house with black cloth from the roof to the pavement’. He told his readers that, ‘the truth is, I have been more unhinged during the last forty-eight hours than I ever was in all my life before. I have

²⁸⁸ Robins, *Rebel Queen*, p. 324

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 305.

²⁹⁰ Stevenson, ‘The Queen Caroline Affair’, p. 144.

²⁹¹ ‘To the Queen’, *Political Register*, 28 July 1821.

no spirit to write. One half of my hopes of doing good as a public writer, or in any other public capacity, pointed towards her Majesty.'²⁹² Cobbett's confessional tone here becomes fused in the reader's mind with the image of the cortege halted outside his house, his private grief with the admission of public failure and inadequacy.

Caroline's direct effect on the reform movement was short-lived, lasting only six months from her return in June 1820. However, over these few months, Cobbett's writings in support of her represent a brilliant demonstration of how the sexual politics of monarchy could be re-cast. Caroline could threaten by subverting gender roles and wearing men's clothes, and this 'manliness' could be opposed to the effeminacy of her aristocratic enemies. In a single passage, Cobbett could move from an account of her courageous travels abroad to a vision of revolution breaking around her, but leaving her safe:

Your Majesty has seen the world, has travelled in inhospitable countries, has been rocked by the waves of the sea, and slept under the thunders of the east.—Your Majesty has experience, that great teacher of knowledge; your natural courage, has been confirmed by a familiarity with dangers; you are capable of great exertion, great application, are blessed with great aptitude of mind and are capable of arduous application, and with all these endowments joined with a happy constitution, and those manners which are at once a subject of admiration and of dread with your enemies, commotions, convulsions, revolutions, may come, if your enemies will have it so; but, even in the midst of these, your Majesty would have nothing to fear.²⁹³

At the same time, she could be the epitome of femininity, and Cobbett's writings on the affair provide various formulations of femininity: women 'have, *in all ailments, a hundred times more courage than men*' and Caroline is 'the bravest and most gallant woman in the world':

²⁹² 'Funeral of Her Majesty, the Beloved Queen Caroline', *Political Register*, 18 August 1821.

²⁹³ 'To the Queen', *Political Register*, 12 August 1820.

All her conduct has, upon this great occasion, been marked by that *decision*, *promptitude*, and *sharp-sightedness* for which strong-minded woman are always more remarkable than men. They see *quicker* than men of equal comparative mind; and they are more *rapid* in following their thoughts by acts. In cases where great *suspicion* is necessary, they far surpass men. They penetrate more quickly and more deeply into all machinations against them. A bungling hypocrite may deceive a man; but it must be a clever scoundrel indeed that dupes a woman of any mind.²⁹⁴

She could also inspire a more manly and chivalrous response from men, subversively re-routing Burke's loyalist lament towards an icon of opposition. Perhaps more significantly, however, she inspired similar support from women. This could arise from a straightforward identification, as in Jane Austen's comment on the episode: 'I shall support her as long as I can, because she is a woman, & because I hate her husband.'²⁹⁵

Linda Colley has written of how 'sentimental female attachment to the British monarchy, an attachment that first became prominent in George III's reign, would from now on supply an increasingly important part of its popular base.'²⁹⁶ This attachment is subverted and radicalised in the Queen Caroline affair, which, on Anna Clark's reading, 'stimulated widespread, organized political mobilization by women of both the working and middle classes', with working-class women 'especially prone to identify Caroline with their own woes not only of poverty and taxes but also of their problems in marriage.'²⁹⁷ In total, twenty-seven addresses were presented to

²⁹⁴ 'A Letter to Mr. Canning', *Political Register*, 8 July 1820; 'A Letter to Parson Cunningham', *Political Register*, 30 September 1820; 'To the Reformers', *Political Register*, 10 June 1820.

²⁹⁵ Quoted in Gatrell, *City of Laughter*, p. 440.

²⁹⁶ Colley, *Britons*, p. 219.

²⁹⁷ Anna Clark, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 199.

Caroline from groups of women with over seventy thousand signatures.²⁹⁸ Cobbett linked her sufferings as a woman, persecuted by her husband and grieving for her only child, to a much wider system of oppression. At the same time, he tried to capitalise on her female support by arguing that the political involvement of women was different in kind to that of men. Women are ‘a *sisterhood*. They resent every affront offered to them as a sex. Men are so many detached individuals. But women are a body corporate.’²⁹⁹ Their support could also, as Linda Colley has demonstrated throughout the period, be presented as truly disinterested: Cobbett describes how, ‘their decision, on great public questions, is always the right decision. They are less liable to be led astray by the vanity of argumentation; by party prejudices; by pledged opinions.’³⁰⁰

Some of these arguments may now seem reductive or contradictory, yet the excitement of at least one female reader of the affair is conveyed well by Anne’s letters.

She is in person just what one could fancy a Queen ought to be. It is not a little to the credit of our sex that all the reformers, radicals, jacobins &. have ever been able to perform in the work of years to shake the present system has almost failed, but [^ been] completed by a woman! at last. An Old Woman will not now be thought so foolish a thing. Papa says that for the future Husbands must be content to be henpecked, &. he has given Mama notice that she may begin to exert her Sovereign authority forthwith.³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ Linda Colley describes a ‘nationwide campaign on Caroline’s behalf in which middle-class and working women were remarkably prominent: 14,000 Bristol women, more than 9,000 women from Edinburgh, 11,000 women from Sheffield, 17,600 married women from London, 3,700 ‘ladies’ from Halifax, 7,800 from Nottingham, 9,000 from Exeter and tens of thousands more signed addresses in support of the queen.’ *Britons*, p. 265. See also Clark, *Scandal*, p. 200.

²⁹⁹ ‘A Letter to his Majesty’, *Political Register*, 29 July 1820.

³⁰⁰ ‘A Letter to Mr. Wilberforce’, *Political Register*, 1 July 1820.

³⁰¹ Anne Cobbett to Miss Boxall, Lambeth Road, London, 14 August 1820, Nuffield, XXX/99/1-2.

Anne's response combines an interest in the sentimental drama of the affair and identification with Caroline's sufferings as woman with the conviction that the episode could legitimise greater female involvement in politics, including her own. In a single letter she is able to move from Caroline's political opinions, to Princess Charlotte's death and finally to the likelihood of revolution:

You must read all the Queen's answers, which you will find in the registers, and that will give you an insight into her notions of things as they are, and what she thinks ought to be. Papa says, you know, that whenever she sets about it in right good earnest, a woman is sure to beat her husband, in the end. In this instance it is so, at any rate, for the gentleman does not dare to shew himself in London [...] it is rather a melancholy thing to see a King playing at hide and seek in this way, not daring to stop in any Town to change his post horses, but to have them brought out on some Common to meet him; really I could feel for him if it were not for the melancholy death of the Princess Charlotte. It is quite impossible to describe to you the state of this country at present. Nobody seems to think of any thing but the Queen, nobody seems to expect any thing but a revolution.³⁰²

A few months later, however, she was able to present a more balanced portrait of the Queen and her political activities.

Pray is it suspected in America who wrote the letter? But I suppose the poor simpletons think it to be her own production. When, alas! She did nothing but put her fist to the bottom of it. If it depended upon her writing, the country need not expect much assistance from her. She likes a game of blind man's buff much better. Don't let this out, I pray you, for it will out [illeg]. She is a real good woman, kind, charitable, feeling and condescending towards every creature, she possesses wonderful courage, presence of mind, fortitude and promptness in action; but Papa declares she does not write better than Mrs. Churcher, and we know that she will not read to please any body. She is very industrious, for when sitting still, she is always at work, and if any thing ails any of her servants [^ she] waits upon them and sees them properly taken care of, and such like. But study she never did, and never will. She loves fun to her heart, and I think the Govr. is the man of all men to be her Prime Minister.³⁰³

³⁰² Anne Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, London, 7 October 1820, Nuffield, XXX/102/1-2.

³⁰³ Anne Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, Brompton, 17 January 1821, Nuffield, XXX/136/1-3.

However, while Caroline's own radicalism might have been limited, she could still validate the wider involvement of women in politics. During 1820, Anne became fully involved in Cobbett's work for the first time, not just transcribing letters but helping him to prepare *A Peep at the Peers* and *The Links of the Lower House*, exposures of nepotism and other forms of parliamentary exposure that were designed to support the Queen's case.³⁰⁴ Her letters to her brother contain exhaustive account of the affair, including an ironic description of their father's personal affection for Caroline, after he had finally met her on 26 October:

Papa has been to Court and kissed the Queen's hand, and a very pretty little hand he says it is. We made the gentleman dress himself very smart, and powder his head, and I assure you he cut a very different appearance to what he used to do on Long Island with the straw hat slouched over his eyes. He carried two addresses, one from the town of Warwick, and the other from Bury St. Edmunds (Baker's Town). The Queen made him a little speech, in which she thanked him for the great services he had rendered her, and conveyed to him some handsome compliments about his talents and so forth [...] when Papa left [^ the] room, she turned round and said in her lively manner, "well now, if that is Mr. C. no wonder such fine writing comes from him, he is the finest man I have seen since I came to England, aye, aye, if there be only a few such men as that to stand by me, I shall not care for the Lords." All of which the Govr. says is nothing more than bare justice, for he says he saw no man there anything to compare to himself; you know the gentleman has by no means a contemptible notion of his person.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁴ There has been some confusion over the authorship of these pamphlets, with Iain McCalman and Anna Clark, for example, attributing them to William Benbow, while Spater attributes authorship to Cobbett and Anne Cobbett (*Radical Underworld*, pp. 172-3; *Scandal*, p. 202; *The Poor Man's Friend*, p. 407). Co-authorship by Cobbett and Anne Cobbett is confirmed by Anne's letter, 'In my last packet I sent you some of the Peep at the Peers, but I forgot to tell you who were the authors. Papa and I were just a month at it, and you would scarcely believe that it was the hardest job of work Govr. ever undertook, and every body says it has done more for the Queen than any other thing, because it has thrown such odium upon the Lords and her Judges, by showing how they are bound to the Government. We are now doing *The Links of the Lower House*, which will show how they are related to the others' (Anne Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, London, 7 October 1820, Nuffield, XXX/102/1-2). She also claims authorship, together with her father, in the *Account of the Family*, 'We worked hard to get the "Peep at the Peers" done and out before the trial, and did it. Sold enormously.' (pp. 51-2). However, due to its controversial content, Cobbett never admitted to authorship in the *Political Register*, instead printing letters sent to him by the 'anonymous' authors (see, for example, *Political Register*, 5 August 1820, 9 September 1820 and 23 September 1820)

³⁰⁵ Anne Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, Brompton, 26 October 1820, Nuffield, XXX/104/1.

Her feelings on the Queen's death are indicated by an August 1821 letter written by Cobbett to his friend Samuel Clarke in Norfolk, announcing,

I will, if alive and well, be with you the first of September, or on the next day, which is Sunday. I propose to take a son and a daughter with me; and to stay about a week; for, when I stop it must be for a week. I have never before known what depression of spirits was; but I really feel it now. I am just going into Sussex for a week to take my eldest daughter, who is ill, downright ill, on account of the death of this injured lady.³⁰⁶

Here, Cobbett's tone suggests the way he had identified with Caroline through Anne, echoing Burke's fatherly defence of Marie Antoinette. Anne's own account of this trip to Norfolk, written at the end of 1821, presents a regretful, yet optimistic evaluation of the effect the Queen Caroline affair had on Cobbett's own reception:

And in Norfolk we found what we owe and shall always owe to the poor Queen, for many places where Papa was received with unbounded admiration he would not have dared to shew his nose before the Queen's cause turned so many many hundreds of hearts from the side of the government. All we have to lament is that the cause of so much and lasting good, should have suffered so melancholy an end.³⁰⁷

Their enthusiastic reception in Norfolk was to become the germ of Cobbett's *Rural Rides*.

³⁰⁶ Cobbett to Samuel Clarke, Kensington, 17 August 1821, Nuffield, XXX/148/1-2.

³⁰⁷ Anne Cobbett to James Paul Cobbett, Kensington, 27 December 1821, Nuffield, XXX/161/1-2.

Chapter Four

Radical Maps and Histories

In the decade after Queen Caroline's death, the epistolary form that had become the main vehicle of Cobbett's arguments in the 1810s was displaced into the generic hybrid of *Rural Rides*, at once agricultural survey, political allegory and autobiographical narrative.³⁰⁸ As John Whale argues, it is both 'picaresque autobiography and, supposedly, no text at all, only a quasi-Lockean travelogue giving direct access to empirical data'.³⁰⁹ Eclipsing the stubborn distance inherent in epistolary writing, *Rural Rides* presents a long series of interviews between writer and audience, taking place across southern England. Cobbett insists that 'those that travel on turnpike roads know nothing of England', and that 'real knowledge' can only be gleaned travelling 'across fields, or commons, or along narrow lanes'.³¹⁰ This method produces an unrivalled map of the post-War countryside, but is also particularly hard work to follow. Cobbett usually refused to take a map, and he complained that 'if you talk to ostlers, or landlords, or post-boys; or, indeed, to almost any body else, they mean by a *road* a *Turnpike road*: and they positively will not talk to you about any other' (338). He kept getting lost, asking for directions and occasionally borrowing maps, writing at Folkestone that,

³⁰⁸ First published in the *Political Register* between 1822 and 1826, reissued in book form 1830.

³⁰⁹ Whale, *Imagination Under Pressure*, p. 147.

³¹⁰ *Rural Rides In the Southern, Western and Eastern Counties of England, Together with Tours in Scotland and in the Northern and Midland Counties of England, and Letters from Ireland by William Cobbett*, edited by G.D.H. and Margaret Cole, 3 vols (London: Peter Davies, 1930), p. 288. For ease of reference, subsequent references will be given as bracketed page numbers within the text, although this does have the unfortunate effect of presenting them without their date and abstracting them from their immediate context. The Cole centenary edition is the most comprehensive collection, including many rides not in the 1830 or most later editions. I am grateful to John Barnard for suggesting to me how a bibliographic study could be made to analyse Cobbett's different readerships by looking at different editions of *Rural Rides*. For example, the Cole edition itself is 'a very curious and paradoxical mixture of scholarly and fine press publication', edited by a husband-and-wife team of guild socialists, illustrated by John Nash and published by Peter Davies, the Old Etonian who inspired J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. More recently, the Ride 'From Dover to the Wen' was taken out of its context and published by Penguin as part of its *English Journeys* series (2009), alongside works by writers including Thomas Gray, Gilbert White, Dorothy Wordsworth and Edward Thomas.

I had not looked at a map of Kent for years, and, perhaps, never. I had got a list of places from a friend in Sussex, whom I asked to give me *a route to Dover*, and to send me through those parts of Kent which he thought would be most interesting to me. Never was I so much surprised as when I saw *a sail*. (222)

In his account of the Avon valley, he inserts a crude map of the river and manor houses, after a friend ‘lent me a *very old* map of Wiltshire’ and ‘I laid a piece of very thin paper upon the map, and thus traced the river upon my paper’ (360). He then sets out to compare this tracing with the present day reality – a suggestive image for Cobbett’s practice throughout *Rural Rides*, which aims to produce a map that the reader will also be able to see through, enabling them to compare the present state of things to the countryside of the mid-eighteenth century, or even to that of pre-Reformation England.

James C. McKusick has described how Cobbett and John Clare were both ‘conditioned by their personal experience’ to be,

aware of the ways that the past remains latent in the rural landscape, deeply buried in folk memory, yet still visible to those who know how to ‘read’ traces of the almost-forgotten past within the present-day world. For both writers, an essential mode of historical understanding arose from the *archaeology of landscape*: a way of ascribing meaning to landscape by reading traces of the past in its present appearance.³¹¹

However, Cobbett combines this awareness of oral historical traditions with a determination to generate new meanings and uncover hidden histories. The data he gathered on his tours provided the fieldwork for *A History of the Protestant “Reformation”*, a best-selling account of the origins of the post-War depression in the

³¹¹ James C. McKusick, ‘William Cobbett, John Clare and the Agrarian Politics of the English Revolution’, Timothy Morton and Nigel Smith eds., *Radicalism in British Literary Culture, 1650-1830: From Revolution to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 173, 167.

dismantling of medieval Catholicism and an answer to the political economists, presented in the form of sixteen letters ‘to all sensible and just Englishmen’.³¹² This was Cobbett’s first sustained analysis of ‘the System’ since *Paper Against Gold* and, just as the earlier work was the product of his time in Newgate, the appearance of the *Protestant “Reformation”* at this particular point in his career is partly explained by the relative stability of the 1820s – often considered a ‘problem decade’ in our own radical histories.³¹³ Cobbett’s writings emphasize that the 1820s were far from quiescent, but the ebbing of the radical movement – and his own avoidance of prison or exile – allowed him more time for travel, research and generic exploration, leading him to frame his project in ever more ambitious terms. However, in their breadth, detail and boldness, his writings of the 1820s also reveal the continuing tensions embedded within his vision of a radical society, his conflicting impulses towards advocating independence and assuming a position of paternal leadership, and his changing ideas of where and when his audience might be situated.

Rural Rides

Rural Rides produces an exhaustively empirical survey of the counties of southern England, cataloguing the types of soil, progress of the crops and condition of the labourers. The fraudulent systems of paper money, political economy and ‘Old Corruption’ are undermined by the level of detail in his descriptions, which aim to prove his authentic knowledge of the land, asserting his epistemological authority against the false economies of ‘the Thing’. After a day of crossing the turnpike roads and riding through the fields and lanes, he concludes that ‘here we see the people

³¹² First published in sixteen monthly parts between 1824 and 1826, reissued in book form 1829.

³¹³ See, for example, Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, pp. 357-8 and Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism During the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), pp. 131-2.

without any disguise or affectation. Against a *great road* things are made for *show*. Here we see them *without any show*' (288). This weight of empirical evidence is combined with an allegorical reading of the landscape to uncover the hidden workings of 'Corruption': as Kevin Gilmartin writes, 'the "marks" and "signs" scattered through the allegorical world of the *Rides* registered the nearly unbearable significance of a world in crisis'.³¹⁴ At the same time, his frequently apocalyptic tone is combined with a determination to show how an allegorical reading of the landscape can suggest means of resistance. Seeing some "'*radical Swedes*," as they call them in Norfolk", leads him to insist that 'this is really the *radical* system of husbandry', sown in 'fair and straightforward' lines, producing vegetables of equal size. This is at once a comic, self-ironizing analogy, and a declaration of his continued determination to pursue the 'weeds' of 'tax-eaters' and combat the inequality created by the 'broadcast system of Corruption'. '*Radical* means, *belonging to the root; going to the root*' (24) and if this etymology suggests both digging below the surface and stripping away false layers of corruption, Cobbett's method is demonstrated again by his description, only a few miles earlier, of a woman 'riding in a little sort of chaise-cart, drawn by *an ass*, which she was driving in reins'. By dispensing with the unnecessary 'chariot and pair', she displays a puritanism Cobbett values in itself and for its avoidance of additional taxes, warmly endorsing her as 'a real *practical radical*. Others of us resort to radical coffee and tea; and she has a radical carriage. This is a very effectual way of assailing the THING' (22). Relishing the rhyme of '*practical radical*', Cobbett stresses how particular modes of behaviour, no less than systems of agriculture, become part of his working map.

³¹⁴ Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, p. 188.

Gilmartin suggestively describes *Rural Rides* as ‘the negation or demonic parody of a religious pilgrimage, with Cobbett the “Plaintive Pilgrim”’.³¹⁵ The section from summer 1825 entitled ‘Progress of a Plaintive Pilgrim to pray for Justice at the Shrine of the Great Unpaid’ involves a very prosaic quest to investigate why a particular toll-collector on one of the turnpike-roads had not been making the proscribed exemption for carts of manure. If this suggests an extraordinarily parodic treatment of Bunyan, in keeping with Cobbett’s opposition to the historical traditions of English Protestantism – to be displayed most spectacularly in *The History of the Protestant “Reformation”* – *Rural Rides* also draws on many aspects of dissenting literary traditions and, in particular, the unique place of *Grace Abounding* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in popular culture. Within the characteristic dissenting model of the travelogue as a mode of life-writing, *Rural Rides* shows Cobbett to be at home in the agricultural communities of southern England, yet also suggests his displacement from any settled place within this world. The ‘compulsive itinerary’ described by Gilmartin, of ‘an eccentric and endlessly repetitive series of tours’, chronicles his strenuous opposition to ‘the System’ and the lifelong displacement he has suffered as a result: ‘deeply suspicious of geographical mobility, he treated his own lifelong movements as a necessary but regrettable response to the effects of system’.³¹⁶ The digressions and difficulty of his route demonstrate his resistance to smooth systems of loyalist circulation (near Reading, he describes ‘a road as smooth as a die, a real stock-jobber’s road’, 117) and received narratives of historical progress. Instead, his digressive progress along country lanes is placed in pointed opposition to the ceaseless pull of money, goods and people towards London, the gravitational tug exerted by the ‘great Wen’. This convergence of life-writing through travelling and

³¹⁵ Ibid., p. 169.

³¹⁶ Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, pp. 174, 169 and 193.

pedagogy through allegory again places Cobbett's relationship with his audience at the centre of his work.

Rural Rides is addressed on another level to his political opponents, dramatizing the contamination of the landscape by 'Old Corruption'. Passages of apparently pure pastoral only serve to underscore the intrusion of politics, and Cobbett's opponents seem to rise out of the landscape as he twists their own words back on them:

In a new enclosure, near Westbourne, I saw the only really blighted wheat that I have yet seen this year. "Oh!" exclaimed I, "that my Lord Liverpool; that my much respected stern-path-of-duty-man could but see that wheat [...] Then would my much valued Lord say, indeed, that the 'difficulties' of agriculture are about to receive the '*greatest abatement!*'" (170)

Fragments from parliamentary speeches, loyalist newspapers and the writings of political economists are wrenched out of their context, embedded in the landscape and turned into common currency – for example, it is not members of parliament, but the people sitting in an inn, 'whom I saw through the window sitting round a good fire with pipes in their mouths', that constitute 'a real *Collective Wisdom*' (134). The creation of this angry, parodic vernacular is, Cobbett emphasizes, a collective project: at Sedlescomb, he relates the political gossip he had with a group in the village, quoting the specific, satirical language they used about Canning, Wellington and Peel (534), while he approvingly notes that 'the country people, who seldom want for sarcastic shrewdness', have given the name '*Rag Hall*' to the house attached to the mill outside Whitchurch that produces the paper used to make bank notes (35).

However, this bitter, knowing and highly strategic reading of the post-War countryside operates alongside the sense of wonder with which Cobbett responds to

the landscape. John Whale has argued that while Cobbett usually equates beauty with polite culture, in *Rural Rides* his ‘own brand of literalism and utility needs the aesthetic and the beautiful as an integral component in his idea of representation’.³¹⁷ This need is created by the invisible workings of political economy, a ‘loss of openness’ which ‘generates the need for the mediation of representation in the form of critique’.³¹⁸ As Whale’s description of Cobbett’s ‘fiction of England as a beautiful imagined paradise’ suggests, this has a spiritual, as well as aesthetic dimension, involving ‘a much less prosaic act of construction and idealisation than one might expect’.³¹⁹ At points on his journeys, Cobbett’s response to his surroundings is conveyed through almost visionary descriptions, which display his willingness to suspend his search for knowledge when confronted with the wonderful variety of nature. At Churt, ‘three hills out upon the common, called the *Devil’s Jumps*’ lead him to ask how they were formed, and then to stop asking questions:

How could waters rolling about have formed such hills? How could such hills have bubbled up from beneath? But, in short, it is all wonderful alike: the stripes of loam running down through the chalk-hills; the circular parcels of loam in the midst of chalk-hills; the lines of flint running parallel with each other horizontally along the chalk-hills; the flints placed in circles as true as a hair in the chalk-hills; the layers of stone at the bottom of hills of loam; the chalk first soft, then some miles farther on, becoming chalk-stone; then, after some distance, becoming burr-stone, as they call it; and at last, becoming hard, white stone, fit for any buildings; the sand-stone at Hindhead becoming harder and harder till it becomes very nearly iron in Herefordshire, and quite iron in Wales; but, indeed, they once dug iron out of this very Hindhead. The clouds, coming and settling upon the hills, sinking down and creeping along, at last coming out again in springs, and those becoming rivers. Why, it is all equally wonderful [...] For my part, I think the “Devil’s jumps,” as the people here call them, full as wonderful and no more wonderful than hundreds and hundreds of other wonderful things. (191-2)³²⁰

³¹⁷ Whale, *Imagination Under Pressure*, p. 165.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

³²⁰ Cobbett goes on to list other instances of the ‘strange taste which our ancestors had, to ascribe no inconsiderable part of these wonders of nature to the Devil. Not far from the Devil’s jumps, is that singular place, which resembles a sugar-loaf inverted, hollowed out and an outside rim only left. This is called the “*Devil’s Punch Bowl*,” and it is very well known in Wiltshire, that the forming, or, perhaps,

His intimate knowledge of the geology of the country, the lines of mineral running beneath the surface, allows his vision to pan across the country, while his sense of wonder at the natural landscape aligns *Rural Rides* with more canonically Romantic landscapes. At the same time that Cobbett's prose takes visionary flight, it is also at its most literal, combining a meticulous description of different kinds of stone and water with a record of habitation and use: 'as they call it', 'they once dug iron out of this very Hindhead', 'as the people here call them'.

This prosaic, yet wondrous landscape is the appropriate setting for Cobbett's scenes of allegorical instruction, which reveal hard, political realities through an almost Biblical sense of revelation. On the road from Chilworth to Lea, a farmer who had met him at a country meeting the previous year recognises him and so 'I had a part of my main business to perform, namely, to talk politics'. Cobbett's talk immediately lifts the scales from his eyes: 'his wonder ceased; his eyes were opened; and "*his heart seemed to burn within him as I talked to him on the way,*"' alluding to the meeting on the road to Emmaus: 'And they said to one another, did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?' (90).³²¹ Another apparently ordinary exchange – 'I met a man going home from work. I asked how he *got on*. He said, very badly. I asked him what was the cause of it. He said the *hard times*' – turns into something both mundane and extraordinary: 'I gave him the price of a pot of beer, and on I went, leaving the poor dejected assemblage of skin and

it is the breaking up of Stonehenge is ascribed to the Devil, and that the mark of one of his feet is now said to be seen in one of the stones.' This passage is echoed by a modern example of radical pastoral, Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009), which, like *Rural Rides*, denounces urban life and modern cant by finding a site of resistance in a mythic, Romantic and visionary English countryside. In one of the play's set-pieces, Johnny 'Rooster' Byron – the local lord of misrule who is being evicted by the council on St George's Day – convinces the teenagers who gather at his caravan in the woods that he once met the ninety-foot giant who built Stonehenge: 'just off the A14 outside Upavon. About half a mile from the Little Chef'. Byron, played in the original production by Mark Rylance, perhaps owes more to Cobbett than Lord Byron in his angry, everyday and visionary pastoral.

³²¹ Luke 24:32, King James Bible.

bone to wonder at my words' (379-80). 'Wonder' is again emphasized, a key term both in Cobbett's experience of the landscape and the response of those he meets to his revelations. The carefully controlled, almost Biblical, pedagogical framework holds together the apparently loose generic mix of *Rural Rides* and is central to understanding Cobbett's relationship with his audience in the 1820s. Clues to how the rides were written and presented, comparison with manuscript letters about them and the published account of Cobbett's later lecture tours all help to enable a fuller understanding of how this dynamic works.

Just as Christian is accompanied by his family in the second part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Cobbett was often accompanied on his rides by one or more of his children, who acted as surrogate readers within the text, underlining the pedagogical significance of the journeys. On his 1826 rides, he was also accompanied by the son of his friend William Palmer, and his manuscript letters to Palmer describe the kind of education his rides were designed to provide:

George is to be of the party, if you will let him. I will make them both write as well as ride; and, I shall bring them back complete fellows, you may depend: they will both be men, fit for any thing that men ought to do. Now, if you give consent, pray, with my love to dear George, who likes me very much, tell him to learn to read news-papers before I come; for he will have to read to me: let him bear that in mind. We shall get away from this by the tenth of May, unless we have much wet weather before that. I intend to have a dinner, as I go along the country, as often as I choose. Who has a better right? The boys will see some curious things before we come back. It will do them both a great deal of good; and, I hope you will let George go.³²²

This letter proves that the convergence of writing and riding is not just a modern critical preoccupation and shows that Cobbett saw both as central to his pedagogical

³²² Cobbett to William Palmer, Kensington, 3 April 1826, Nuffield, XX/14/1-2.

project, which is presented as a robust and character-forming experience.³²³ Richard Cobbett (12 years old) and George Palmer will be required to assist him by, for example, reading newspapers to him, but are also guaranteed to ‘see some curious things before we come back.’ Subsequent letters report George’s progress, writing in September that, ‘George goes on exceedingly well, and seems to be delighted with this our way of life; which, to say the truth, is not much amiss.’³²⁴ While staying at Weston, near the Solent, Cobbett relates to Palmer how, ‘George goes down to the sea to speculate on the manners of muscles [sic] and oysters. He is very well, very much pleased, and talks to them a great deal. I have not got him to bow yet; but, I have got him to open his mouth and to look people in the face.’³²⁵ In November, as the end of the year’s Rides approaches, Cobbett explains that ‘George is very well, and is quite changed for the better; that is to say, he has got rid of his awkwardness and of that bashfulness, that averting of the head, and of that very bad habit of speaking indistinctly, and he can now, and he does, say yes as plainly as anybody.’³²⁶ The letters show how the collective activities of riding, reading and writing were intertwined within their journeys, related parts of a liberating but carefully controlled educational experiment.

The letters draw attention to the method Cobbett pursued on his tours, which necessitated assimilating news and writing articles for the *Register* on the road. His descriptions of his journeys are, as James Mulvihill observes, ‘scrupulously dated and

³²³ See for example, James Mulvihill’s account, which argues ‘that riding and writing are closely related functions in the Rides, each representing a way of knowing or making known, and each interacting with the landscape in different but related ways.’ Mulvihill admits that he runs ‘the risk of oversophisticating’ Cobbett’s method and perhaps goes too far in his claim that through rewriting the landscape, ‘Cobbett reclaims for his readers a kind of discursive common, a public space, in an increasingly privatized landscape’. James Mulvihill, ‘The Medium of Landscape in Cobbett’s Rural Rides’, *Studies in English Literature*, 33.4 (Autumn 1993), 825-40, pp. 827, 838.

³²⁴ Cobbett to William Palmer, Shanford, 28 September 1826, Nuffield, XX/22/1.

³²⁵ Cobbett to William Palmer, Weston, near Southampton, 19 October 1826, Nuffield, XX/23/1-2.

³²⁶ Cobbett to William Palmer, Kensington, 13 November 1826, Nuffield, XX/24/1-2.

situated', a day or few days of travelling written up, with date and place of writing, and sent back to London to be inserted at the back of the *Register* as the editor's journal.³²⁷ His continued dialogue with his audience is demonstrated at Selborne, which he first mentions in November 1822, adding that Gilbert White's book 'was once recommended to me [...] as work of great curiosity and interest. But, at that time, the THING was biting *so very sharply* that one had no attention to bestow on antiquarian researches [...] I shall now certainly read this book if I can get it' (134). By the time he returns nine months later, a reader has sent him a copy of the book and he finds the village 'precisely what it is described by Mr. White', describing its 'dells and hillocks and hangers' and, in a moment of fastidious domesticity, sits 'writing my notes', while the landlady 'is getting me a rasher of bacon, and has already covered the table with a nice clean cloth' (188). He usually writes at a friend's house or inn, which become, as Lucy Newlyn writes in relation to Hazlitt's essays, 'symbols of sociable conviviality: places for serendipitous meetings between travellers, but also gathering points for the mulling of thoughts; nodes where associations cluster'.³²⁸ At Lyndhurst, he describes breakfasting on 'a loin of small, fat, wether mutton, which I saw cut out of the sheep and cut into chops' at the butcher's, which he ate in the inn, 'while I was writing a letter, and making up my packet, to be ready to send from Southampton' (485-6). Another entry reads, in its entirety,

³²⁷ Mulvihill, 'The Medium of Landscape in Cobbett's Rural Rides', p. 826.

³²⁸ Lucy Newlyn, 'Hazlitt and Edward Thomas on Walking', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 56, no. 2 (2006), 163-87, p. 173. Newlyn gives an account of how Edward Thomas begins *The Icknield Way* by paying homage to Hazlitt's discussion of 'winding roads' in 'On Going a Journey', showing 'the importance of nonconformist travel, for the book's potent symbolism. The discussion then loops back into Bunyan and the Puritan tradition; into Cervantes and the picaresque; into Malory and medieval chivalry, and finally, stepping westwards, into the Mabinogion and Wales. A 'winding road' is the book's literal subject, its organising metaphor, a self-reflexive analogue for its procedures, and an expression of the writer's Dissenting allegiances. In all of this, Thomas is following in his master's footsteps: 'On Going a Journey' shows Hazlitt's mastery of digressive style, alongside a conscious use of the Puritan tradition of walking as pilgrimage, walking as self-discovery.' Cobbett's use of digression is equally allusive, self-conscious and rhetorical and, as Newlyn argues, *Rural Rides* belongs to the same tradition as Hazlitt and Thomas's journeys.

Amesbury, Tuesday, 29th August I set off from FIFIELD this morning, and got here (25 on the map) about one o'clock, with my *clothes wet*. While they are drying, and while a mutton chop is getting ready, I sit down to make some notes of what I have seen since I left ENFORD but, here comes my dinner: and I must put off my notes till I have dined. (363)³²⁹

However, when he visits Castlereagh's house, he refuses to wait before writing up his account and finds a bridge just outside the entrance to the estate:

I sat down upon one end of this bridge, under the shade of the alders, with my feet hanging down nearly into the water, and, on the crown of my hat, wrote the first part of this account of my pilgrimage [...] Richard made a *glass*, by twisting paper, as grocers do to put sugar-plums in, and dipped up water out of CASTLEREAGH'S river, of which we drank a good parcel. (258)

Cobbett describes how, 'the sight of the house crowded my mind with subjects of recollection', prompting a summary of Castlereagh's career. The urgency of this act of recollection, intruding on the apparent pastoral tranquillity, is captured by the image of Cobbett beginning to write a *Register* 'on the crown of my hat'.

Above all, *Rural Rides* aimed to eclipse the stubborn distance of epistolary writing and produce an unfolding map of the southern countryside through a series of direct encounters with his audience, which would be written down and prepared for publication on the road. The vivid series of micro-histories he presents show his journalistic ability to elicit a personal history in a few minutes: at Worth, for example,

³²⁹ Hazlitt uses food in very similar ways: Cobbett sitting down to write in Amesbury 'while a mutton chop is getting ready' echoes Hazlitt writing 'On Living to One's Self' (1821) at Winterslow Hut – less than eight miles away from Amesbury – with 'a partridge getting ready for my supper'. Hazlitt published 'On Living to One's Self' in the first volume of *Table-Talk*, which also contains 'Character of Cobbett' and 'On Going A Journey', where he describes the pleasure of arriving at an inn after a day's journey, 'to sit considering what we shall have for supper – eggs and a rasher, a rabbit smothered in onions, or an excellent veal-cutlet!' (*Complete Works*, ed. Howe, vol. 8, p. 184). For both writers, food can be used to establish an intimate connection with the reader, highlighting the vivid present tense of their prose.

he meets a demobbed soldier forced to beg and draws out his history and the list of battles he had fought in, including Talavera:

This poor fellow did not seem to be at all aware, that, in the last case, he partook in *a victory*! He had never before heard of its being a *victory*. He, poor fool, thought that it was a *defeat*. ‘Why,’ said he. ‘we *ran away*, Sir.’ Oh yes! said I, and so you did afterwards, perhaps, in Portugal, when Massena was at your heels; but it is only in *certain cases* that running away is a mark of being defeated; or, rather, it is only with certain commanders. (155)

A few miles on he finds a turnip-hoer sitting under a hedge, breakfasting on ‘a good lump of household *bread* and not a very small piece of *bacon*’. “‘You do get some *bacon* then?’” Cobbett calls out, “‘Oh, yes! Sir,” said he, and with an emphasis and a swag of the head which seemed to say, “We *must* and *will* have *that*.”” Here, ‘I saw, and with great delight, a pig at almost every labourer’s house’ (167). At Tangley he asks directions from a woman sitting outside her house, but discovers that she is unable to help him.

“Pray, were you born in this house?” – “Yes.” – “And, how far have you ever been from this house?” – “Oh! I have been *up in the parish*, and over to *Chute*.” That is to say, the utmost extent of her voyages had been about *two and a half miles*! Let no one laugh at her, and, above all others, let not me, who am convinced, that the *facilities*, which now exist of *moving human bodies from place to place*, are amongst the *curses* of the country, the destroyers of industry, of morals, and, of course, of happiness. It is a great error to suppose, that people are rendered stupid by remaining always in the same place. This was a very acute woman. (355)

Cobbett approves of her resistance to the ‘facilities, which now exist of *moving human bodies from place to place*’, the displacement from the countryside to towns and cities. However, her life also stands in contrast to Cobbett’s own restless movement, which can only be justified by its political purpose.

He travels by horseback and avoids turnpike roads to maximise his meetings with farmers and labourers along the way, meetings which have the effect of making him seem and feel more at home. His encounters take place in the space Bakhtin identifies with the novel:

Encounters in a novel usually take place ‘on the road’. The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. On the road (‘the high road’), the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect at one spatial and temporal point. People who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, the most varied fates may collide and interweave with one another.³³⁰

Franco Moretti identifies such meetings on the road more specifically with the picaresque, ‘the great symbolic achievement’ of which is ‘defining the modern nation as that space where strangers are never entirely strangers’, creating a ‘new space of ‘familiarity’’.³³¹ David Simpson goes further, defining, ‘picaresque or charitable interaction’ as one ‘in which some bond is established between strangers that models or presages the initiation of a social contract.’³³² The people Cobbett meets are, in Moretti’s suggestive phrase, ‘never entirely strangers’, and the scenes of recognition and familiarity model the intimate relationship with a mass audience that Cobbett constructs throughout his epistolary journalism.

The meetings in *Rural Rides* can also resemble those episodes in the picaresque tradition when the hero is recognised in unfamiliar environments, with one of the most mysterious features of Cobbett’s account being the ability of people he encounters on the road to immediately recognise him:

³³⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 243.

³³¹ Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), p. 51.

³³² David Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 25.

I was going, to-day, by the side of a plat of ground, where there was a very fine flock of *turkeys*. I stopped to admire them, and observed to the owner how fine they were, when he answered, “We owe them entirely *to you*, Sir; for, we never raised one till we read your COTTAGE ECONOMY.” I then told him, that we had, this year, raised two broods at Kensington, one black and one white, one of *nine* and one of *eight*. (279)³³³

It is difficult to see how people could recognise him so easily in a period before widespread visual transmission of celebrity: despite all the prints and caricatures, even many readers of his works would have had no way of knowing what Cobbett actually looked like. His routes are repetitive, and so he may have passed through the village on a previous tour, or alternatively he may have introduced himself before the exchange reproduced in the text. If so, the rhetorical value of the encounter is in showing Cobbett as an already familiar figure in the countryside, instantly recognisable on his tours and embedded in agricultural practice through works such as *Cottage Economy*.

Even where he is not recognised, he frequently sees tangible evidence that his works are being read, finding them, in James Mulvihill’s suggestive phrase, ‘cited in the countryside itself’.³³⁴ In a roadside cottage in Kent, he finds a man who is unable to work in the fields and instead makes straw plat for hats, according to the instructions of ‘*a little book that had been made by Mr. Cobbett*.’ On further inquiry, he discovers how ‘some ladies in the neighbourhood had got him the book, and his family had got him the grass’, the twin repetition of verbs suggesting the reciprocity and equivalence of the various activities: the book, like the straw plat, was made, not written, the ladies

³³³ Compare, for example, such moments in *Tom Jones* as when a layer from Somerset at once ‘recollected the face of Jones’ at an inn in Gloucester, ‘which he had seen at Mr. Allworthy’s; for he had often visited in that gentleman’s kitchen’. The explanation tries to restore credibility to the narrative, yet the effect is to show how the picaresque hero is always at home on the road, his reputation preceding him. Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (1749, London: Folio Society, 1959), p. 285.

³³⁴ Mulvihill, ‘The Medium of Landscape in Cobbett’s Rural Rides’, p. 830.

got the book, the family got the grass and the different activities become one shared, communal activity that Cobbett is an integral part of (215). This shared activity binds them together within the rural economy, although Cobbett is at once boastful and suspicious of the workings of print culture: the unsettling ability to teach straw plat to people he has never met ('it is I, who, without knowing them, without ever having seen them, without even now knowing their names, have given the means of good living to a family who were before half-starved', 176) is inseparable from the larger circulation of loyalist tracts, paper money and all the more pernicious effects of a modern economy. At other points, he exploits the comic potential of passing unrecognised: in Avening, 'I asked the landlord some questions, which began a series of *joking* and *bantering* that I had with the people, from one end of the village to the other. I set them all a laughing; and, though they could not know my name, they will remember me for a long while' (424). When his horse casts a shoe and hobbles slowly along in the dark, Cobbett 'should have gone crazy with impatience', had the lane he was riding down not transpired to be a lovers' meeting place, 'to every pair of whom I said something or other [...] I had some famous sport with them, saying to them more than I should have said by day-light' (459-60). In these places he subverts the potent folk myth of the king passing disguised amongst his people – Henry V on the eve of Agincourt, or, more recently, George III cementing his image as a modest and domestic man, a benevolent father to his people. As in these folk myths, going unrecognised only serves to bring disparate parts of the nation closer together, helping the king or radical leader know and identify with ordinary people. The map of southern England that Cobbett constructs through *Rural Rides* emphasizes both his knowledge and understanding of the countryside and his own place within it.

A History of the Protestant “Reformation”

From 1823, Cobbett began to obsessively document the size of the churches he came across on his Rides and the number of people they served, convincing himself more than ever that Malthusian population theory was a lie. Instead, he insisted that medieval England had comfortably accommodated a much larger population, which had been shrinking and becoming increasingly impoverished since the end of monastic poor relief and the beginnings of the national debt. This theory was expounded most fully in the *History of the Protestant “Reformation”* which, while it is rarely discussed alongside *Rural Rides*, is contemporaneous with it and forms part of the same vision. There are many reasons for suggesting that the *Protestant “Reformation”* was viewed by Cobbett as the more important of the two works. Its initial form of publication gave it more prominence than *Rural Rides*: it was issued as sixteen separate, well-publicised threepenny numbers between 1824 and 1826 whereas the *Rides* first appeared at the back of the *Political Register*. The *Protestant “Reformation”* was collected in one volume in 1829, a year before *Rural Rides*, and two years later had sold seven hundred thousand copies, with Cobbett boasting that it had become, ‘unquestionably the book of greatest circulation in the whole world, the Bible only excepted’.³³⁵

The *Protestant “Reformation”* was also felt by Cobbett to be a much more important act of political intervention than *Rural Rides*, and one that his readers were less capable of making on their own, presenting historical evidence that was otherwise inaccessible to them. This invests Cobbett’s critical practice with greater urgency while, as Peter J. Manning observes, departing from the ‘reflection and polish usual in the

³³⁵ *Advice to Young Men and (Incidentally) to Young Women in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life* (London, 1829), para. 4.

elevated genre of history’ to offer ‘a vernacular immediacy honed by years of political journalism and oratory’.³³⁶ Manning notes that,

scholars unattuned to Cobbett's political aims and target audiences, and to his oral style and inheritance of the popular narrative traditions of ballad and chapbook, have been dismissive of the rhetoric of the History: James Sambrook calls it “unremittingly shrill” [...] and John W Osborne finds the History “one of [his] least edifying books”.³³⁷

Recent re-evaluations of Cobbett’s style by Manning, Leonora Nattrass, Ian Dyck and James Mulvihill have sought to rehabilitate the *Protestant “Reformation”*, paying attention to its command of a popular, colloquial idiom and application of this language to the cause of Catholic Emancipation.³³⁸ While such accounts have relished its ‘gleeful ferocity’, it needs to be stressed that much of the *Protestant “Reformation”* is Cobbett at his worst, crude and anti-Semitic in ways that cannot be dismissed by gesturing at the traditions of popular literature.³³⁹ His revisionism often leads to a dark dualism, for example, comparing Elizabeth I, ‘a gross, libidinous, nasty, shameless old woman’, to ‘the honest, the virtuous, the patriotic and most calumniated Mary!’³⁴⁰ However, its central argument is indispensable to any reading of Cobbett in the 1820s.

In Cobbett’s hands, the history of the Reformation becomes ‘the pre-history of his own oppositional politics’. He argues that the Protestant Reformation destroyed the

³³⁶ Peter J. Manning, ‘The History of Cobbett’s *A History of the Protestant “Reformation”*’, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 64, no. 3-4 (2001) 429-43, p. 432.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 433, n. 8.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*; Nattrass, *The Politics of Style*, chapter 6; Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, chapter 6; Mulvihill, *Upstart Talents: Rhetoric and the Career of Reason in English Romantic Discourse, 1790-1820* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), chapter 4.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

³⁴⁰ *A History of the Protestant “Reformation”* (1824-26), re-printed in *Selected Writings*, ed. Nattrass, vol. 5, pp. 199, 191. Subsequent references to this edition will be given as bracketed page numbers in the main body of the text.

social fabric of medieval England and, in particular, the system of local charity provided by the monasteries for the poorest in their communities.³⁴¹ It insists that:

The “REFORMATION,” as it is called, was engendered in beastly lust, brought forth in hypocrisy and perfidy, and cherished and fed by plunder, devastation, and by rivers of innocent English and Irish blood; and that, as to its more remote consequences, they are, some of them, now before us in that misery, that beggary, that nakedness, that hunger, that everlasting wrangling and spite, which now stare us in the face and stun our ears at every turn, and which the “Reformation” has given us in exchange for the ease and happiness and harmony and Christian charity, enjoyed so abundantly, and for so many ages, by our Catholic forefathers. (11)

Cobbett criticises most histories as ‘little better than romances [...] they contain the gossip and scandal of former times, and very little else’, and instead concentrates on the effects of the Reformation on the ‘main body of the people’, who were made,

poor and miserable, compared with what they were before [...] it impoverished and degraded them [...] it banished, at once, that “Old English Hospitality,” of which we have since known nothing but the name; and [...] in lieu of that hospitality, it gave us pauperism, a thing, the very name of which was never before known in England. (26-8)

Cobbett traces the ramifications of the Reformation through the Elizabethan Poor Laws and subsequent ‘Reformations’: the Commonwealth (‘Reformation the second’), the Glorious Revolution (‘the third’), the American Revolution (‘fourth’) and the French Revolution (‘fifth’). Arguing that in each instance the government compounded the original mistakes of the sixteenth century, he produces a list of the inheritance bequeathed by the successive ‘Reformations’:

the capacious jails and penitentiaries; stock-exchange; the hot and ancle and knee-swelling, and lung-destroying cotton-factories; the whiskered standing army and its splendid barracks; the parson-captains, parson-lieutenants, parson-ensigns and parson-justices; the poor rates and the pauper houses; and, by no means forgetting, that blessing which is peculiarly and doubly and

³⁴¹ Manning, ‘The History of Cobbett’s *A History of the Protestant “Reformation”*’, p. 438.

“gloriously” protestant, the NATIONAL DEBT. Ah! people of England, how have you been deceived! (57)

In Cobbett’s analysis, a process that began with the destruction of the monasteries leads inexorably to the national debt, a parodic inversion of the history of the Reformation as the birth of modernity.

Cobbett’s history is underpinned by a characteristically local and agrarian logic:

From the land all the good things come. Somebody must own the land. Those who own it must have the distribution of its revenues. If these revenues be chiefly distributed amongst the people, from whose labour they arise, and in such a way as to afford to them a good maintenance on easy terms, the community must be happy. If the revenues be alienated in very great part; if they be carried away to a great distance, and expended amongst those, from whose labour no part of them arise, the main body of the community must be miserable: poor houses, jails, and barracks must arise. (96)

Before the Reformation, monasteries ‘retained the produce of labour in the proper places, and distributed it in a way naturally tending to make the lives of the people easy and happy’ (93). Through the successive Reformations, revenues from the land have been ‘alienated [...] carried away to a great distance’. The poor, previously provided for by the monasteries, have only the humiliation of the Elizabethan Poor Laws, ‘pauperism established by law’, ‘doing, in a hard and odious way, a part of that which had been done, in the most gentle and amiable way by the Church of our fathers [...] feeding the poor like dogs, instead of like one’s own children’ (223-4). At the same time, each part of the country is forced to pay taxes to fund the interest on the national debt. For Cobbett, the sixteenth century represents the beginning of a shift in power, away from local communities based around religious houses and towards a central government continually laying new taxes on its people to fund the debt. If his readers still need to be convinced, he suggests that they go and inspect the evidence of

‘old English hospitality’ in any ruined abbey, priory or convent and compare it to the modern equivalent, following his practice in *Rural Rides* and visiting,

the nearest inn, and there, in room half-warmed and half-lighted, and with reception precisely proportioned to the presumed length of your purse, sit down and listen to an account of the hypocritical pretences, the base motives, the tyrannical and bloody means, under which, from which, and by which, that devastation was effected, and that hospitality banished for ever from the land. (101)

Here, Cobbett imagines a specific scene for his own reception, asking his reader to contrast his intimate prose with the far from intimate environment of a ‘half-warmed and half-lighted’ inn – in which the innkeeper is following the ruthless economic logic of modern England – and learn the reasons for the end of medieval ‘hospitality’.

It is less clear, however, where the implications of this argument leave his own writings and, read more closely, the *Protestant “Reformation”* starts to seem much more ambivalent about local independence. The medieval Catholic Church is praised for guaranteeing ‘freedom, charity and hospitality’ and Cobbett signed a presentation copy of the work to Pope Pius VIII : ‘the present head of that Holy Church under the influence of which England enjoyed so many ages of Plenty, Freedom, Happiness, and Renown’ (228).³⁴² However, freedom is also carefully circumscribed:

‘FREEDOM is not an empty sound; it is not an abstract idea; it is not a thing that nobody can feel. It means, and it means nothing else, the full and quiet enjoyment of your own property’ (319). Cobbett’s definition of freedom is at once a brilliant instance of his political rhetoric and a significant narrowing of the concept. The context of these sentences is a discussion of how the freedom bought by the Reformation – the ability to choose any one of forty different (Protestant) creeds – is

³⁴² Manning, ‘The History of Cobbett’s *A History of the Protestant “Reformation”*’, p. 434.

worthless. Any freedom beyond the material is regarded with suspicion as Cobbett goes on to discuss the lives of ‘our Catholic forefathers’:

They did not read newspapers, they did not talk about debates, they had no taste for “mental enjoyment”; but they thought hunger and thirst great evils, and they never suffered any body to put them to board on cold potatoes and water. They looked upon bare bones and rags as indisputable marks of slavery, and they never failed to resist any attempt to affix these marks upon them. You may twist the word freedom as long as you please; but, at last, it comes to quiet enjoyment of your property, or it comes to nothing. (319)

This is amongst the most powerful sections of the work, the sonorous assertion that freedom ‘is not a thing that nobody can feel’ followed by the ‘resist’/‘twist’ rhyme in the second passage, enacting on the level of prose style a people grappling with a government which would abolish their rights through semantic obfuscation. Material security is placed far above freedom of opinion and these final pages reveal the extent to which Cobbett’s *Protestant “Reformation”*, far from being a polemic for religious toleration, is fixated on the vision of a medieval society not yet riven by sectarianism. Cobbett even implies that the religious conformity of the medieval period guaranteed a degree of material equality. As a result, his paean to a society united by a single faith qualifies his expressed commitment to local independence and instead imagines a country composed of near-identical communities.

The *Protestant “Reformation”* was hugely successful and its recovery of an idealised English Catholicism helped to influence popular opinion towards Catholic Emancipation.³⁴³ However, despite its contribution towards this progressive

³⁴³ Peter Manning has examined the ‘strange afterlife of Cobbett’s *History*’ in editions following the 1896 one-volume version prepared by Francis Aidan Gasquet, D.D., superior of an English Benedictine monastery. Gasquet changed the form from letters to chapters and expunged enough of the coarser language and personal tirades for it to be read without any sense of its context. ‘The History of Cobbett’s *A History of the Protestant “Reformation”*’, pp. 439-41. Much more broadly, Raymond Williams observes Cobbett’s ‘surprising share of responsibility for that idealization of the Middle Ages

achievement, it gives a very different narrative from many of the histories written by other nineteenth-century radicals. Hazlitt, for example, believed that the Reformation had given ‘a mighty impulse and increased activity to thought and inquiry, and agitated the inert mass of accumulated prejudices throughout Europe [...] Liberty was held out to all to think and speak the truth’.³⁴⁴ In contrast to Cobbett’s view of the Reformation leading to the national debt, Hazlitt’s radical, progressive, history saw the Reformation, the invention of printing and the vernacular Bible as the root causes of the French Revolution. To take another, less well-known, example, William Godwin – who visited Cobbett in Newgate and shared his antipathy to Malthusian political economy – also revealed his roots in Rational Dissent by insisting that the sixteenth century was the dawn of intellectual liberty. Godwin’s ‘Prospectus of a History of the Protestant Reformation in England’ was written in direct response to Cobbett: his diary shows that he first read Cobbett’s history in 1829, re-read it in 1832 and the day after he had finished it began working on the ‘Prospectus’.³⁴⁵ The actual history was never written, but his eight page plan shows how different it would have been to Cobbett’s. The manuscript begins with the assertion that,

The grand characteristic of the Protestant Reformation is that it was the dawn of intellectual liberty to man. The human mind had been lethargised for ages. Not that it had been wholly without activity: it was ingenious, persevering & indefatigable within certain limits; but its faculties were in fetters; a mighty &

which is so characteristic of nineteenth-century social criticism [...] Its most important aspect, for Cobbett, was its use of the monasteries as a standard for social institutions: the image of the working of a communal society as a welcome alternative to the claims of individualism’. *Culture and Society*, p. 19.

³⁴⁴ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth*, in *Complete Works*, ed. Howe, vol. 6, p. 182.

³⁴⁵ *The Diary of William Godwin*, (eds) Victoria Myers, David O’Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010). <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>. The diary shows that Godwin first read Cobbett’s *History of the Protestant “Reformation”* between 28 February and 21 March 1829, and re-read it between 13 and 16 September 1832. The next day, he entered ‘Protestant Reformation, Plan’, which he worked on each day until 22 September, ‘Reformation, p. 8, fin’. His plan is in the Bodleian Library at MS. Abinger c. 29, fols 86-9, ‘Prospectus of a History of the Protestant Reformation in England. Sep. 22, 1832’. No dated watermarks. 4 leaves (paginated 1-8).

powerful circle was drawn round them, & beyond that circle they were not permitted to expatriate.

Godwin goes on to argue that ‘we are unquestionably indebted’ to the Protestant Reformation for freedom of thought, speech and printing. On the destruction of the monasteries, his comments suggests a much more sceptical estimation of their role than the one given by Cobbett:

in the unsparing & violent way in which this was effected, infinite injustice was committed, & incalculable misery inflicted on multitudes. But it will also be incumbent on the philosophical historian to ~~se~~ make a sound estimate of the wisdom or folly, the benefits or injury that accrued to society at large from these institutions.

Overall, Godwin is critical of previous histories of the Reformation and, given that he had been reading the *History* a few days before, Cobbett must have been at the front of his mind when he wrote of how,

the history of the Protestant Reformation has hitherto been written ~~for the most part~~ altogether in a spirit of party: the authors who have treated of it have looked only on one side of the picture, & have seen every event that occurred, & every person concerned in the events, through a false medium, & ~~it~~ in exact agreement with the distorted preconceptions with which they sat down to write.

In a document likely to have been drawn up to gauge the interest of publishers in the project, Godwin describes the ideal historian of the period, stressing disinterestedness while betraying his own allegiances. The historian of the Reformation ‘should be enlisted in no party’, but ‘at the same time’ should be ‘not unimpressed with a sense of the inestimable ~~good~~ [^{benefit}] that was ~~effected~~ [^{obtained}] (for, if he were, he would be ~~unworthy of~~ [^{incompetent to}] the task devolved on him)’. These awkward qualifications, hesitations and crossings fail to cover his tracks and hide his prejudices. Having been provoked to a reaction by reading Cobbett’s *Protestant*

“Reformation”, Godwin was preparing to write an account which would have been just as one-sided, subsuming the Protestant Reformation within a Whiggish narrative of the birth of liberty. Godwin identified the beginnings of religious, political and press freedoms in the same period that Cobbett found material impoverishment and the end of a harmonious society.

The distance between Cobbett’s view of the Reformation and those of Hazlitt and Godwin illustrates opposed views of historical change and of the meaning of liberty. Cobbett’s materialist logic becomes especially stark in the last years of his career, in October 1832 writing from Morpeth, during one of his lecture tours, that,

I never could gather from one single working man, during the whole course of my communication with them, that he wished for anything beyond; that he wished for any change other than that which would leave him the enjoyment of the fair fruit of his earnings. (727)

If this seems to define liberty as freedom from interference, it can also become a thorough denial of the role of new ideas and freethinking in historical change: writing in Worcester, in May 1830 he dismisses another cherished theory of liberal dissenters:

It has been the fashion to ascribe the *French Revolution* to the writings of Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, and others. These writings has *nothing at all* to do with the matter: no, *nothing at all*. The *Revolution* was produced by *taxes*, which at last became unbearable; by debts of the State; but, in fact, by the despair of the people, produced by the weight of the taxes. (666)

Cobbett’s history of the Reformation defends individual freedoms and the independence of communities from the state, but values even more highly the imagined absence of dissent, newspapers and debate, a unified world of shared beliefs and experiences. Paradoxically, he celebrates and even hopes to restore this world through an oppositional journalism, which depends on a very different set of

freedoms. His portrait of medieval England wants to praise both the independence of individual communities and their essential sameness, while his interventions in contemporary politics echo these contradictions. *Rural Rides* draws attention to what Gilmartin has described as its ‘tactical gestures of self-effacement’ in order to emphasize that Cobbett’s role will not be necessary in an ideal, reformed society.³⁴⁶ However, in the interim Cobbett is split between advocating the increased independence of separate communities and wishing to draw each community within the orbit of his own writings.³⁴⁷

Lecture Tours

Rural Rides and the *Protestant “Reformation”* demonstrate the conflicts in Cobbett’s position in the years following his American exile and the Queen Caroline affair, when he returned to his rural constituency. These years become a key part of Craig Calhoun’s account of nineteenth-century radicalism, in which the 1820s are represented as the hinge between the ‘reactionary radicalism’ of the 1810s and the Chartism of the 1830s.³⁴⁸ Studying the earlier generation of radicals, followers of Cobbett and Henry Hunt, Calhoun argues that they were ‘reactionary-radicals’ acting primarily to try and preserve their communities and ways of life. As a consequence,

³⁴⁶ Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, p. 188.

³⁴⁷ These contradictions can be also seen at work within another journey, written a century later ‘to see how my fellow-countrymen live and work and play’: J.B. Priestley’s *English Journey* (1934, republished Ilkley: Great Northern Books, 2009), p. 207. Both Cobbett and Priestley champion local difference and independence, yet at the same set out a homogenous, conservative and in many ways deeply paternalist vision of a reformed society. Ironically, the features of the idealised society they describe are about asserting independence and difference – for example, in Cobbett, resistance to state-sponsored education, taxed goods and Owenism; in Priestley, suspicion of ‘paternal employment’ at Bournville (p. 113), preference for amateur theatricals (‘of immense social importance [...] a genuine popular movement [...] a genuine spontaneous movement’, p. 181) over cinema. Priestley is instinctively opposed to the post-War world of Woolworths and the wireless, where even the amusements at Blackpool are ‘becoming too mechanized and Americanized’, no longer the product ‘of a vulgar but alert and virile democracy’ (p. 231), but he is also aware that this monotonous, imitative and flattened-out culture is materially richer (he observes that towns with mixed industry might have less character than those dominated by a single industry, but are also better placed to come through the Depression) and ‘essentially democratic [...] as near to a classless society as we have got yet’ (p. 338).

³⁴⁸ Calhoun, *Question of Class Struggle*, *passim*.

‘the first great phase of popular radicalism in England (1810s)’ was ‘in many ways conservative and populist in ideology and localist in orientation.’³⁴⁹ Calhoun criticises E.P. Thompson for subsuming this period within ‘the rational, historically progressive creation of the modern working class’, arguing instead that a national concept of class only emerged with the Chartists.³⁵⁰ ‘Such concerted action as there was took place primarily in and for the particular interests of local communities’, Calhoun writes, ‘and was crucially based on those local and craft communities even when its ideology extended beyond them.’³⁵¹

Calhoun frequently mentions Cobbett, but never analyses his writings, instead taking his name as synonymous with ‘reactionary radicalism’ and concentrating on the groups who followed his lead. However, Cobbett’s writings of the 1820s allow for a fuller examination of the contradictions of this movement, which help to explain both the tensions within his own work and the decline of ‘reactionary radicalism’ during these years. Observing that community ‘characterized a valued moral dimension’ in nineteenth-century political discussion, Calhoun suggestively describes how ‘community, as a pattern of social organization and as a culturally defined way of life, depends on a fairly high degree of stability. The bonds of community are indeed bonds: they tie social actors to each other and to their own pasts.’³⁵² This could be a description of Cobbett’s political vision: for example, within his idealised view of medieval England, the monasteries produced ‘that fixedness which is so much the friend of rectitude in morals, and which so powerfully conduces to prosperity, private and public’ (98). Cobbett attempts to re-create this ‘fixedness’ through his own

³⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 131.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

³⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 130-1.

³⁵² Ibid., pp. 152, 156.

writings, which try to bind together his audience within his vision of a restored society. However, Calhoun identifies this decade with failed attempts to bridge local communities as part of an extended ‘reactionary radicalism’. A radicalism predicated on its conservatism, populism and localism, ‘collapsed at the beginning of the 1820s as it extended beyond this basis and attempted to rest itself on links between communities and relationships with national leaders which were not strong enough to sustain it’.³⁵³

Cobbett’s representation of these relationships in *Rural Rides* is, of course, highly selective and carefully crafted, retaining the ability to re-write or perhaps even invent conversations on the road. He questions the people he meets from an authoritative position on horseback and retains the ability to control their representation and their position within the overall structure of the text. There is also, however, a much larger fiction at work, complicating any reading of the relationship with his audience as it is presented within the text. On his tours, Cobbett appears to bridge the distance that stubbornly remained when addressing his readers through open letters, yet *Rural Rides* can also be read as an idealised construction of a rural and agrarian audience. He draws attention to places where his writings are read – at a paper-mill in the Forest of Dean, ‘that set of workmen do, I am told, *take the Register*, and have taken it for years’ (27) and ‘at Cawston we stopped at a public house, the keeper of which had taken and read the Register for years’ (47). Samuel Bamford famously placed the expansion of Cobbett’s after 1816 in ‘the manufacturing districts of South Lancashire, in those of Leicester, Derby, and Nottingham; also in many of the Scottish manufacturing towns’ but, if Cobbett’s readers were predominantly urban and

³⁵³ Ibid., p. 131.

industrial, they are strenuously denied by *Rural Rides*.³⁵⁴ Instead, Cobbett emphasizes his readers in rural communities of the south, constructing a myth both of southern England and the place he and his works held within it. If the reception of *Rural Rides* has been dominated by its creation of a rural paradise that has always just been lost, yet can be recovered through Cobbett's descriptions, then this reading is made possible by tensions within the text. By mourning what has been lost, Cobbett gives an elegiac portrait a vanished rural idyll, the eighteenth-century world at the edge of his memory. However, this world is recovered through his insistence that his audience were still working the land, denying the fact that most of his readers were now in the towns and cities of industrialized England.

This complex dynamic of belatedness, repression and imagined recovery is exemplified by the 'curious spectacle' he finds between Warminster and Westbury of unemployed weavers and spinners digging up a field. This single piece of evidence is seized upon to show that the direction of historical change has been reversed: while political economists keep telling '*the farm labourers to become manufacturers*', the factories are now '*throwing the people back again upon the land!*' (405). G.D.H. Cole saw Cobbett's wished-for restoration in terms of a larger cultural nostalgia, explaining the contradiction between his predominantly rural subjects and urban readers by arguing that industrial workers of the period may have 'been torn from the land, and flung into the factory' – echoing Cobbett's own violent metaphors – but 'kept, for a generation at least, the hearts and feelings of peasants, and responded more readily to a peasant's appeal than to programmes based on the acceptance of the new industrial

³⁵⁴ Samuel Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, 2 vols (London, 1844), vol. 1, p. 7.

conditions.³⁵⁵ As Clare Griffiths shows, Cole seems to have resorted to this rationalization of Cobbett and his audience partly out of his own inability to imagine a radical, rural politics.³⁵⁶ However, such an explanation ignores Cobbett's late, half-acceptance of industrialization, evident in the lecture tours he made of the north, east, midlands and Scotland. These were included in the Coles' expanded centenary edition of *Rural Rides*, but stand in uneasy relationship to the earlier journeys: their focus is not primarily rural, but on the towns and cities of the Industrial Revolution that Cobbett had been invited to lecture at, and he travelled by stage-coach instead of on horseback. Despite, or even because of, these differences, they are useful not just for showing his late accommodation of industrialization, but for what they show about the questions of place, history and audience opened up by the earlier journeys.

He made the first of his later tours at the end of 1829, accompanied by Anne and two of his sons. He initially shows his resistance to the whole idea, as in this revealing description of their approach through the snow to Birmingham at the beginning of the tour:

As we advanced on the way, the snow became deeper on the fields; and I really longed to be out in it, and thought much more, for the time, about the tracking of hares than about the making of speeches; and I could not help reflecting, and mentioning to my daughter, who was sitting with me, how strangely I had been, by degrees, pulled along, during my whole life, away from those pursuits and those scenes which were most congenial to my mind. (568)

Cobbett is, of course, always ambivalent about travel, but as he travels north his suspicions are intensified, this autobiographical moment linking the ominous deepening of the snow and 'the tracking of hares' with his lifelong displacement from

³⁵⁵ Cole, *Life of William Cobbett*, pp. 11-12.

³⁵⁶ See Clare Griffiths, 'G.D.H. Cole and William Cobbett', *Rural History* (1999) 10.1, 91-104.

the ‘scenes’ he most values, which he is particularly conscious of while being ‘pulled along’ by the coach towards the towns and cities of the midlands and north. His later tour of Scotland is styled as a military advance on Edinburgh, as the bastion of the political economists and *Edinburgh Review*, and at other times he reverts to agricultural – and Biblical – metaphors for his lecture tours: ‘This is sowing the seeds of truth in a very sure manner: it is not scattering broad-cast; it is really *drilling the country*’ (642).

However, he was highly gratified by the enthusiastic reception he received from people he had never considered his true constituency: in contrast to the picaresque roadside conversations of *Rural Rides*, he was surrounded by crowds of admirers and spoke to packed theatres and lecture halls. He may have known for years that many of his readers lived in the towns and cities of the midlands and north, occasionally addressing them in the *Register*, visiting them on his way back from America and standing for parliament in Coventry in 1820, but he had instinctively resisted this fact and mythologized a southern, agrarian readership. He only began to accept it when he could witness it for himself, and describes ‘great numbers assembled’ (607) just to see him change horses at Wakefield and Barnsley. At Ripley Castle, ‘I found myself at the most northerly point that I had ever been in my whole life’, but he was still surrounded by his audience: in Leeds, he reported, ‘I have filled, and over-filled, the whole house, pit, boxes and galleries’ (604). Cobbett’s writing always combines an expansive confidence in the possibilities of publishing with what Gilmartin has described as a ‘distinct pressure against print culture’, a tension that can also be seen in John Clare’s 1825 distinction between the fleeting popularity of literary fashion and the ‘common fame’ of oral transmission, penny ballads and the bills of strolling-

players.³⁵⁷ This tension is often reconciled through the intimacy of correspondence, but here it is played out through a constant focus on his effect on those who come to meet him, which both draws attention to the strangeness of modern celebrity and tries to familiarize it. In one of the accounts of his lectures, this draws together the impact of his own performance, the decline of provincial drama and a surprising autobiographical revelation:

One of the great signs of the poverty of people in the middle rank of life, is the falling off of the audience at the playhouses [...] My appearance on the boards seemed to give new life to the drama. I was, until the birth of my third son, a constant haunter of the playhouse, in which I took great delight; but when *he* came into the world, I said, "Now, Nancy, it is time for us to leave off going to the play." It is really melancholy to look at things now, and to think of things then.³⁵⁸ (653)

In ways that anticipate Dickens's *American Notes* a little over a decade later, Cobbett's later tours give a first-hand account of modern celebrity, through the unsettling experience of meeting an audience that seemed remote from him but thought they already knew him.

The first-hand experience of his northern tours also diminished his belief in the possibility of a universal model of cottage economy. He visited a power-loom factory near Rochdale, emphasizing that, 'I never was induced to go into a factory, in England

³⁵⁷ Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, p. 191; John Clare, 'Popularity and Authorship', written after watching Byron's funeral procession and published anonymously in the November 1825 number of the *European Magazine*, www.johnclare.info/birtwhistle.html. See David Higgins's discussion of this essay, 'Celebrity, Politics and the Rhetoric of Genius', in Tom Mole ed., *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture, 1750-1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 41-59.

³⁵⁸ He gives another version of this story in 'Aristocracy, Parsons, and Money-Mongers', *Political Register*, 6 June 1835, describing how a performance of his anti-Malthusian comedy *Surplus Population* had been thwarted: 'I have not been at a play since the month of June, 1803, when I recollect, that I saw poor Mrs. JORDAN [...] They made me stand up and pull my hat off while "God save the King" was sung, and I deemed that to be such an infamy on me, that I never went to the play afterwards, though I had a free admission ticket to the theatres till I would absolutely keep them no longer. I wanted to go and see my own play acted, and to hear the chopsticks and the country girls laugh at the doctrines of PETER THIMBLE and old GRIPE; but these alarmists defeated my laudable intention.'

before', but admits that 'owing to the goodness of the masters' the workers looked 'healthy and well-dressed' (598). In Scotland, three years later, he was still insisting that 'I do not like to see manufactories of any sort', though once again qualifying his resistance: 'but that of Mr. MONTEITH, for the dyeing and printing of calicoes and shawls and handkerchiefs, and upon a scale of prodigious magnitude, I did go to see, and I saw it with wonder that I cannot describe' (796). Wherever he goes, he is reluctantly impressed: arriving in Sheffield at night, he sees 'the iron furnaces in all the horrible splendour of their everlasting blaze. Nothing can be conceived more grand or more terrific than the yellow waves of fire that incessantly issue from the top of these furnaces' (607-8). He often emphasizes the lack of good agricultural land, but concedes – an almost incredible admission for Cobbett – that 'this is all very proper: these coal-diggers, and iron-melters, and knife-makers, compel us to send the food to them, which, indeed, we do very chearfully, in exchange for the produce of their rocks, and the wondrous works of their hands' (608). 'Wonder' is again a key term here, as in the earlier *Rides*, and a new political vision entered his writing, which extended beyond mere pragmatism. Before the first election after the Reform Bill, he wrote to the electors of Manchester that 'our principal reliance must be upon the *great towns in the north*, beginning at Birmingham, and ending at Paisley and Glasgow' – the first person plural now referring to a national class solidarity – and he was returned as the MP for Oldham (691).

On a later tour, he lectured at Newcastle and was particularly gratified to be asked to give another lecture, specifically on paper money. This request produced an extraordinary retort to his southern audience:

There, you chopsticks of the Isle of Wight and of Sussex and Kent! that's the way we do things i'the North! There, you Surrey chaps, that creep about amongst the sand-hills! that's the way that we go on in the country where the stuff comes from that warms your fingers in the winter. Faith! when I get back again, with all the additional "*antalluct*" that I am collecting here, I will not take things as I have done; I will rule you with a stiffer hand. (724)

The pronouns now place Cobbett alongside his northern audience, but the rhetorical extravagance only draws attention to the fact that no amount of acclaim in the northern cities will compensate for any perceived neglect in what he regards as his true constituency, in the villages of southern England. His later tours are very different in form and subject to the canonical *Rural Rides*, yet they offer an invaluable perspective on the earlier journeys. While the *Protestant "Reformation"* suggests the contradictions in Cobbett's advocacy of independent communities which would all look the same, then his later, northern tours begin to suggest that the focus of *Rural Rides* on meeting his readers as they worked the land in the south was an attempt to deny his increasing reliance on an audience in the towns and cities of the north.

In 1824, the anonymous *Periodical Press of Great Britain and Ireland: Or An Inquiry into the State of the Public Journals, Chiefly as Regards Their Moral and Political Influence* described Cobbett in the past tense, suggesting the sense of loss embodied in his own writings by the 1820s:

we had nearly forgotten the old father of invective, Mr. William Cobbett. This nondescript in literature has had his day; his star is set, his artillery are spiked; and after proving himself one of the cleverest declaimers in England, one of the most effective corporals that ever led a forlorn hope to the cannon's mouth, or a ragged mob to the doors of a grannery, he lives at Kensington, a fallen *brutum fulmen* of the Press!

However, it goes on to remember 'a time when this extraordinary man was, amongst the lower classes of society, the most popular writer in England. He spoke their

sentiments, and in some measure formed them, to his own taste and their entire satisfaction.³⁵⁹ Modern critics have similarly described the reciprocity between Cobbett and his readers in terms of voice and echo. E. P. Thompson, whose *The Making of the English Working Class* includes more index entries to Cobbett than anyone else, writes that ‘few writers can be found who were so much the “voice” of their own audience’ and David Bromwich describes Cobbett as ‘a voice so trusted’ by his audience ‘that when he spoke out they seemed to be hearing themselves.’³⁶⁰ Bromwich identifies Swift as,

the only writer with whom he can be even remotely compared. Like Swift, in all of his prose Cobbett *connects*: this profession with that practice; this expensive and useless achievement, with that forgotten reason for attempting it; what this man suffered, with the escape that man could have contrived in his place.³⁶¹

Discussing Cobbett’s use of the first person plural, Bromwich writes that ‘it is the most generous and yet the most self-conscious *we* that a political writer has ever used, and its effect is to create community’.³⁶²

Reading *Rural Rides* alongside the *Protestant “Reformation”* shows that Cobbett’s idea of community is a more conflicted place than it first seems, bristling with the contradictions of wanting to liberate his readers and create the ties which will bind writer and audience together as a single public. Read alongside his later lecture tours of the north, *Rural Rides* also suggests an attempt to deny not only historical change

³⁵⁹ *The Periodical Press of Great Britain and Ireland: Or An Inquiry into the State of the Public Journals, Chiefly as Regards Their Moral and Political Influence* (London, 1824), pp. 124-25.

³⁶⁰ Remarkd on by Michael Rustin, ‘The Making of Political Identity: Edward Thompson and William Cobbett’, *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* 24 (Autumn 2003), 131-52, p. 133; Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 758; David Bromwich, *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 80.

³⁶¹ Bromwich, *Choice of Inheritance*, p. 88.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

but the increasing concentration of his audience in the towns and cities of the Industrial Revolution. However, if his writings of the 1820s reveal his uncertainties about the location of his audience and the nature of his leadership, the Swing riots of 1830 brought the agrarian population of the south to the forefront of British politics, while the aftermath of the rebellion subjected the influence of Cobbett's writings to greater political and legal scrutiny than ever before.

Chapter Five

Cobbett, Captain Swing and the July Revolution

Cobbett received news of the July Revolution in time to add a paragraph to the *Political Register* of 31 July 1830 as it was going to the press, under the heading ‘French Revolution, No. II’. He admitted to his readers that, ‘how, *exactly*, this will terminate, and especially, *when*, it is impossible to say’. However, he was immediately convinced that after all the post-Waterloo triumphalism, ‘victories on the Serpentine River [...] a Waterloo Bridge and triumphal arches [...] here we are just as forward as we were in the year 1792; with this difference, that we have sixty millions of taxes a year to pay instead of fifteen and a half’.³⁶³ On 7 August he published an open letter to William IV, describing *les trois glorieuses* as the ‘most noble exploit ever performed by a people’ and placing the moment in its autobiographical context: ‘to live to see this day is well worth a whole life of suffering’. It also ensured that ‘*reform in England is inevitable*’ and he continued this theme when addressing the readers of the *Register* the following week:

Kensington, 10th August, 1830. MY FRIENDS [...] the TRI-COLOURED FLAG again salutes the air; that symbol of the “RIGHTS OF MAN” [...] The subject has in it so many points of great and deep interest, it comes home to us directly in so many different ways, that I hardly know at what point to begin [...] how will this affair AFFECT US? No *tongue*, no *pen*, can describe how it will affect us. Our *feelings* are our instructors here. Does not every man of you *feel differently* from what you did twenty days back? Do you not all *feel* that this event changes the whole face of things [...] You, without any reasoning, *feel* [...] that there must be, and will be, A TOTAL CHANGE IN THE SYSTEM.³⁶⁴

³⁶³ ‘French Revolution, No. II’, *Political Register*, 31 July 1830.

³⁶⁴ ‘Letter II. To the King of England. On the Events in France’, *Political Register*, 7 August 1830; ‘To the Readers of the Register; On the glorious transactions in France, and on the state of the English Boroughmongers’, *Political Register*, 14 August 1830.

Cobbett's excitement derives from a confidence that the July Revolution is an event that, in a spontaneous rush of feelings, 'comes home to us' to guarantee political change. To capitalise on these feelings, he established a subscription for the wounded of Paris and the widows and children of those who had died on the barricades and chaired a dinner at the London Tavern, Bishopgate Street on the anniversary of Peterloo, tickets 10s. 6d. including a bottle of wine.³⁶⁵ On the following day his Norfolk friend Sir Thomas Beevor 'who left at home a harvest spread over a thousand acres of land', set out for Paris 'as Ambassador of the Reformers of England', carrying an 'Address from the Radical Reformers of England to the Brave People of France', with James Cobbett as his 'Secretary of Legation'.³⁶⁶

Cobbett is not alone in stressing the links between France and England at this time. Fifteen years after a twenty-five year war, the July Revolution represented the beginning of a French experiment in constitutional monarchy, led by a strongly Anglophile king who wanted Britain to be the closest ally of France. Between 1830 and 1848, 'France's political system drew closer to that of Britain than at any moment before or since', a *rapprochement* that eventually led to Queen Victoria's visit to Normandy in 1843 – becoming the first English monarch to visit France since Henry VIII met François I at the Field of the Cloth of Gold – and Louis-Philippe's return visit to Windsor the following year, the first (and last) French king in England since Jean II was brought back as a prisoner in 1356 after the battle of Poitiers.³⁶⁷ The Orléans family were keen to cement the July monarchy through the construction of a narrative that mirrored the Whig history of Britain, with Louis XVI cast as Charles I,

³⁶⁵ *Political Register*, 7 August 1830.

³⁶⁶ 'To the Reformers Who dined at the London Tavern, on the 16th of August', *Political Register*, 4 September 1830; 'To the Readers of the Register. On the Dinner at the London Tavern', *Political Register*, 21 August 1830; *Political Register*, 7 August 1830.

³⁶⁷ Munro Price, *The Perilous Crown: France Between Revolutions* (London: Macmillan, 2007), p. 1.

the Revolution as the Civil War, Napoleon as Cromwell, Charles X as James II, 1830 as 1688 and Louis-Philippe as William III. Cobbett, however, had rejected the Whig version of British history in the *History of the Protestant "Reformation"* and resisted any claims that France had arrived at something resembling the 1688 Revolution. Instead, he wanted to see the July Revolution as instituting an essentially republican form of government in France, which recognised the sovereignty of the people and would provide the final push towards radical reform in Britain.

However, he soon had to acknowledge that the Revolution was not all it first seemed to be, a suspicion given further credence by the closeness between Louis-Philippe's government and politicians in Britain. He initially aligned Charles X's overthrown regime with the British government, arguing that politicians in London urged the French king first to appoint Polignac as Prime Minister and then – a theory based on an article that had appeared in the *Quarterly Review* in May – to introduce the measures set out in the Four Ordinances: 'it appears evident, not only that the plot was *known in London beforehand*; but that it was *hatched in London*'.³⁶⁸ It soon became clear, though, that the new regime in France was to be even closer to the British government than Charles X's had been. Guizot, one of the new ministers, had, Cobbett noted with incredulity, 'written a pamphlet in *praise of the English Revolution of 1688*', and on 3 September France's new ambassador to London was announced as the 76-year old Talleyrand: 'an appointment which has filled all men with astonishment, and all the friends of freedom with disappointment and disgust not to be described.'³⁶⁹ Munro Price has recently argued that Talleyrand's actions in 1830

³⁶⁸ 'No. V. Tableau de l'Angleterre en 1830. To the Duke of Wellington. Letter II.', *Political Register*, 4 September 1830.

³⁶⁹ 'No. VII. Tableau de l'Angleterre en 1830. To the Brave People of Paris. On the appointment of Talleyrand', *Political Register*, 18 September 1830.

should be viewed as those not of ‘an unprincipled opportunist’ but ‘a genuine constitutional monarchist’.³⁷⁰ However, Cobbett had no such revisionist view, concluding that ‘foul play of some sort is intended towards the people of France’ and, in a brilliantly colloquial phrase, suggested that Louis-Philippe might merely be intended to ‘*keep the place warm*’ for the eventual return of the elder branch of the Bourbons.³⁷¹

In October, Cobbett published two open letters to Talleyrand, rounding on him with the directness he usually reserved for the most hypocritical, canting English politicians. The first letter begins, ‘TALLEYRAND, FOR I know not how to address you, whether as priest, bishop, layman, citizen, or prince, and therefore I take the one and only name of which you have never divested yourself’. His tone became even more threatening the following week: ‘I know well how safe you are from my *immediate* grasp; I have no power physically to touch you [...] but still I shall reach you by degrees: it is, to be sure, the water dropping upon the marble; but at last it makes an impression’.³⁷² The familiar tone is, in this case, not only a rhetorical device but hints at an obscure, transatlantic personal history dating back to the 1790s – ‘it is now about thirty-four years since I saw you at the house of Mr. Moreau de St. Mery, at Philadelphia. The “*Citizen King*” and his two brothers were in that city about the same time’ – before telling Talleyrand that it is his appointment that has exposed the real intentions of the new government:

the moment we heard of YOUR APPOINTMENT the dimness was removed, and we saw all as clearly as the sun at noon-day! I leave you now, Talleyrand, ’till next week, to enjoy yourself [...] and in the meanwhile, I remain, with

³⁷⁰ Price, *The Perilous Crown*, p. 148.

³⁷¹ ‘No. VII. Tableau de l’Angleterre en 1830’.

³⁷² ‘Letter I. To Talleyrand Perigord’, *Political Register*, 2 October 1830; ‘Letter II. To Talleyrand Perigord’, *Political Register*, 9 October 1830.

sentiments such as a man like me ought to entertain towards a man like you,
Wm. COBBETT.³⁷³

The phrase ‘clearly as the sun at noon-day’ alludes to the notorious 1809 admission in Parliament that the sale of seats was ‘as notorious as the sun at noon-day’, a nonchalant, colloquial naturalization of boroughmongering that had become a favourite part of Cobbett’s lexicon of ‘Corruption’.³⁷⁴ The phrase is used here, a week after Talleyrand’s arrival at Dover, to tell the new ambassador that it is his appointment that has revealed the entire pan-European legitimist conspiracy. Over the next few months, Cobbett’s writings on the relation between events in France and England regard the July revolution not just as a beacon of liberty but as an example of how politicians would keep trying to withhold genuine reform and placate the public with the mere appearance of change.

Letters from Paris

For the last few months of 1830, Cobbett did not have to rely on the reports in other newspapers but had the advantage of having his own correspondents in Paris, first in James Cobbett (27 years old) and in then James’s elder brother William (32). Their letters from Paris are different in form: the letters from James were never published but survive in manuscript in the Nuffield archive, whereas William’s letters were published in the *Political Register* and the original copies then lost. However, the two sequences of letters show a striking continuity in their style and treatment of events, so that it is not possible to make a distinction between their correspondence in

³⁷³ ‘Letter I. To Talleyrand Perigord’.

³⁷⁴ See *Hansard*, 11 May 1809, which records Ponsonby replying to Madocks’s charges of corruption against Perceval and Castlereagh by urging the Commons ‘not to proceed against individuals because that had been proved to exist which had long been notorious; which was not more strange to us than the sun at noon day; which was as well known as the streets of the metropolis.’
<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1809/may/11/mr-madockss-charge-against-mr-perceval>

terms of ‘private’ and ‘public’. When writing, they had no way of knowing how their letters would be used, whether Cobbett would draw on them as sources for his commentary or insert them wholesale into the *Register*, and, having internalised their father’s style, they write in a way that makes it easy for him to use them in either way. However, in addition to providing eyewitness accounts of events in Paris, James and William’s letters also had a significant influence on the direction the *Register* took in these months, suggesting the epistolary tactics which Cobbett would use to capitalise on the July Revolution at home.

James Paul Cobbett travelled to Dover with Thomas Beevor the day after the London Tavern dinner and three days after their arrival in Paris he presented the Radical Reformers’ address at the Hotel de Ville, in front of Lafayette, the Prefect of the Seine and a deputation from the National Guard. Beevor returned to England the following week, leaving James in Paris, where he moved into the Prince Regent hotel and wrote twenty detailed letters home over the next six weeks, the first dated 21 August and the final one 28 September.³⁷⁵ His tone is that of any young English visitor to Paris at a time of revolution, conveying a heady mix of excitement, political hope and vicarious danger. Wordsworth had described visiting ‘each spot of old and recent fame’ in Paris in 1792:

Where silent zephyrs sported with the dust
Of the Bastille I sate in the open sun,
And from the rubbish gathered up a stone
And pocketed the relick in the guise
Of an Enthusiast³⁷⁶

³⁷⁵ ‘To the Reformers Who dined at the London Tavern, on the 16th of August’, *Political Register*, 4 September 1830.

³⁷⁶ *The Prelude*, Book IX, ll. 42, 63-67, in *Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Gill, p. 510.

Almost forty years later, James Cobbett complains of how ‘you must search for cannon and bullet-holes’ yet manages to assemble an impressive ‘collection of curiosities’:

1. Twelve portraits of Genl. Lafayette, with his autograph, and 29th July 1830 written by him on the paper of the print itself, which I have had prepared to receive the ink.
2. Two Cannon balls, fired by the artillery of Charles X from the Hotel de Ville, and which went through the walls of 2 houses out of which I brought them this morning. (A 9 pounder and a 7 pounder) [...]
3. A handful of bullets [...]
4. A handsome Edition of the Marsailaise, of which I shall be the Editor: having a history of the song by way of heading, and the autograph of the author at the bottom.³⁷⁷

Three days later, having brazenly asked Lafayette to add the date of the revolution to the signed portraits, he has to report that, ‘the General will not write “29th July” on his portrait: he says it would be too great a piece of vanity for him to do so.’³⁷⁸

The first letter tells his father, ‘You would have been delighted, last night to see bands of young fellows, from 15 to 25, parading the streets arm in arm, with 3 Coloured flags, all singing together the Marsaillais’, they are ‘the mere youth or boyhood of the citizens: but such enthusiasm!’³⁷⁹ He relates stories of the heroism shown on the barricades and describes the revolution being re-acted in the theatres:

At the Vaudeville, they have a thing called Les trois jours, in which the scenes of the Kick-up are well acted over again. It begins by a scene in which a Frenchman is reading a newspaper containing the Ordinances. An Englishman is introduced, who takes part in the fight on the people’s side.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁷ James Paul Cobbett to Cobbett, Paris, 21 August 1830, Nuffield, XXX/222/1-2; James Paul Cobbett to John Morgan Cobbett, Paris, 17 September 1830, Nuffield, XXX/235/1-2.

³⁷⁸ James Paul Cobbett to Cobbett, Paris, 20 September 1830, Nuffield, XXX/237/1-2.

³⁷⁹ James Paul Cobbett to Cobbett, Paris, 21 August 1830, Nuffield, XXX/221/1-2, XXX/222/1-2 (two letters of the same date).

³⁸⁰ James Paul Cobbett to John Morgan Cobbett, Paris, 2 September 1830, Nuffield, XXX/231/1-2.

The two details of the play he relates are telling: the first, for his father's benefit, illustrates the power of the press, while both father and son would have identified with the Englishman joining the struggle 'on the people's side.' A fortnight later James writes at midnight having 'just returned from the play', where 'the King, with the Queen, and their 5 sons and 3 daughters were about four yards from me':

There was a new tragedy, produced since the revolution, called Junius Brutus. It is very popular, and full of passages that apply well to the present [...] [these passages] were most violently applauded, the audience all turning round to look at Philip when they were pronounced, as if to see how he took it. I wish you could all have been there: you would have been delighted.³⁸¹

One letter hints at an unspecified moment of danger, trying to reassure his family and refusing to change lodgings: 'why, then, should I suffer a sort of voluntary banishment from society, poke myself into a hole as if I were a mere Radical conspirator, and study to be like Polignac or Peyronnet, eating my potage in a prison?'³⁸² This is perhaps best read as a display of bravado for his father and James seems to have relished his time in Paris, only complaining that his money was quickly running out.

As well as attending dinners and plays and collecting mementoes of the Revolution, the letters show the value James held for Cobbett as a correspondent, reporting what was happening in Paris and analysing the situation to work out how they could turn it to their advantage. He offers the kind of colloquial analysis characteristic of his father's journalism: in leaving the country, Charles X 'was as difficult to shove along as a calf in Smithfield: to his very stepping on board the ship he retained some hope of being brought back', 'there is delay in every thing that is done here; and there ever

³⁸¹ James Paul Cobbett to John Morgan Cobbett, Paris, 16 September 1830, Nuffield, XXX/234/1-2.

³⁸² James Paul Cobbett to Cobbett, Paris, 13 September 1830, Nuffield, XXX/230/1-2.

will be, excepting in the making of omlets and revolutions’ and ‘the principal complaint with the people now is, that their deputies and ministers seem to be too milk-and-water; and, as a [^ man] of importance said to me the other day, that they are too much like the Whigs of England.’³⁸³ He had several meetings with Lafayette, who told him, ‘it was the common people that did it – the sovereign power of the people’, yet his praise of the general is also an implicit encouragement to his father: if Lafayette, 72 years old, can be brought out of retirement to lead a revolution, what still remains for Cobbett, six years his junior?³⁸⁴ The general ‘told me to send his best respects to Papa. I wish you were here to see the family of this fine old man’, suggesting that their domestic life matches the Cobbetts’ as that of an exemplary radical family.³⁸⁵ By the end of James’s stay in Paris, the fate of Polignac and the other ministers who issued the Four Ordinances had become the main topic of debate, with public opinion set on their execution and the new government trying to find a way to avoid the death penalty. James relates the events and was flattered to be asked to dinner by Polignac’s lawyer: ‘Only think of my being gravely consulted upon the law of England as to ministerial treason by the lawyer of Polignac!’ James relates the arguments that were circulating on both sides and is also able to tell Cobbett that ‘the avocat is a very agreeable man to talk to: he is a reader (of the Reformation) of yours’.³⁸⁶

James knew that the news that Polignac’s lawyer had read the *History of the Protestant “Reformation”* would delight his father, who had become almost obsessed

³⁸³ James Paul Cobbett to Cobbett, Paris, 25 August 1830, Nuffield, XXX/225/1-11; James Paul Cobbett to John Morgan Cobbett, Paris, 16 September 1830, Nuffield, XXX/234/1-2; James Paul Cobbett to Cobbett, Paris, 28 August 1830, Nuffield, XXX/227/1-2.

³⁸⁴ James Paul Cobbett to Cobbett, Paris, 22 August 1830, Nuffield, XXX/223/1-2.

³⁸⁵ James Paul Cobbett to John Morgan Cobbett, Paris, 18 September 1830, Nuffield, XXX/236/1-2.

³⁸⁶ James Paul Cobbett to Cobbett, Paris, 27 September 1830, Nuffield, XXX/239/1-2.

with being read in France. Before the end of August, James had written that ‘the name of Cobbett is very high here’ and suggested ways that they might build on this.³⁸⁷ His brother John should be given his letters and asked ‘to pick out materials from this for an article’, while,

the Register should be sent here now, and sent regularly, as early as possible after it comes out [...] I know somebody, several indeed, who want to have it. The journals here are all very small, as you know, and it has never been their habit to make large extracts from any thing that came under their notice. They will, however, now, begin to assume a very different character in all respects [...] I hope the Register will come over regularly; for I shall take care to give it into the hands of those who will make the best and the most of it.³⁸⁸

However, he later became more sceptical about both parts of his proposal, writing in his final letter that ‘your letter to the Journalists of Paris has had no effect: it could not have. There is not that demand for your writings among the common people which is necessary’.³⁸⁹ Increasingly short of money, and with his requests for further funds being ignored, he was ready to go home, telling Cobbett that ‘nobody, I think, will be wanted here: All that need be done can be done as well without our presence as with it’.³⁹⁰ By this point, however, Cobbett was determined to keep open a correspondence with France.

In line with James’s advice on the demand for the *Register* in Paris, he had begun to insert articles addressed to French readers on the ‘State of England, in 1830’, with pithy summaries of the arguments put forward in *Paper Against Gold* and the *History of the Protestant “Reformation”* and a constant emphasis on the interconnectedness of

³⁸⁷ James Paul Cobbett to John Morgan Cobbett, Paris, 30 August 1830, Nuffield, XXX/228/1-2.

³⁸⁸ James Paul Cobbett to Cobbett, Paris, 25 August 1830 and 28 August 1830, Nuffield, XXX/225/1-11 and XXX/227/1-2.

³⁸⁹ James Paul Cobbett to Cobbett, Paris, 28 September 1830, Nuffield, XXX/240/1-2.

³⁹⁰ James Paul Cobbett to John Morgan Cobbett, 18 September 1830, Nuffield, XXX/236/1-2.

political change in England and France. For example, the third number of this series places press liberty in a deliberately international context, telling his French readers

I have, in my farm-house, for my labourers to see, a picture sent to me from New York. It represents a ragged, half-starved man, who has a padlock on his mouth; who has his hands tied, who has heavy irons on his legs; and who has written over his head, “*The freeborn Englishman,*” or “*L’Anglois né Libre.*” In that picture you behold the English press.³⁹¹

George Cruikshank’s ‘A Free Born Englishman! The Admiration of the World!!! and the Envy of Surrounding Nations!!!!!’ (Fores, 1819, see Figure 8) offers an ironic

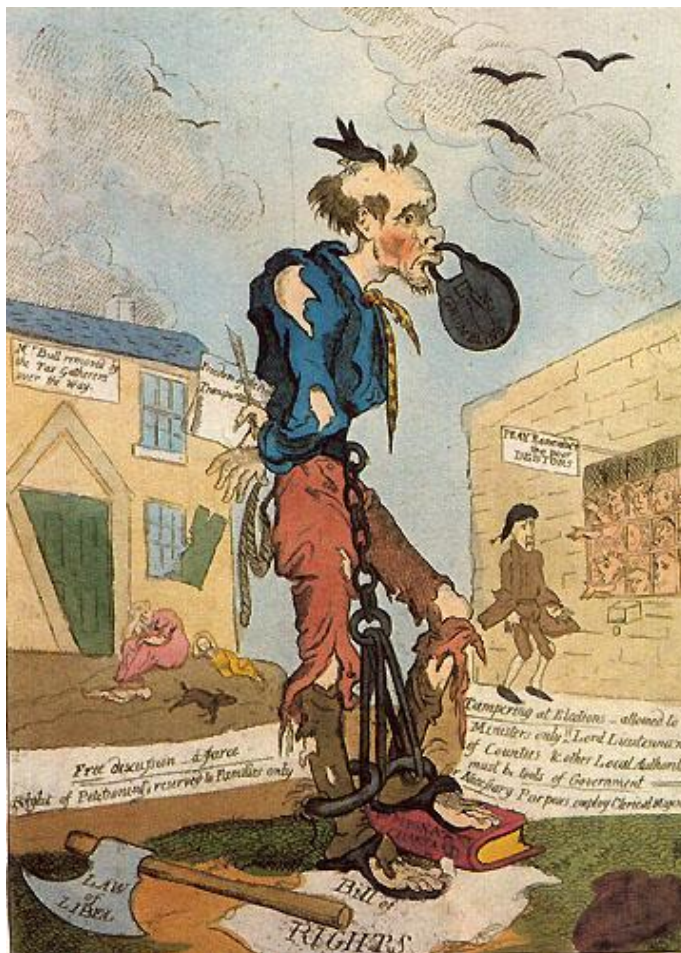


Figure 8: George Cruikshank, ‘A Free Born Englishman! The Admiration of the World!!! and the Envy of Surrounding Nations!!!!!’ (Fores, 1819).

comment on a very English myth of liberty. As Vic Gatrell has shown, the padlock motif was first seen in a print of 1742 before being revived first at the Gagging Acts of 1795, when Fox, Sheridan and John Bull were among those shown with their jaws padlocked, and then at the Six Acts of 1819.³⁹² When Cobbett invokes the motif in 1830, through reference to

Cruikshank’s print, he does

³⁹¹ ‘No. III. Tableau de l’Angleterre en 1830. To the People of France’, *Political Register*, 21 August 1830.

³⁹² Gatrell, *City of Laughter*, pp. 489-91.

something new by placing what might be read as an inherently chauvinistic myth, however ironically deployed, in a pointedly cosmopolitan framework. The print he displays to his farm labourers had not reached him directly from the print shop of Samuel Fores in Piccadilly, but more circuitously via a friend in America, and it is now invoked for the specific purpose of telling his French readers about the state of the press in Britain, translating the title of the print as ‘*L’Anglois né Libre*’. In a continued display of internationalism, his letters on the state of England (‘*tableau de l’Angleterre*’) were often published bilingually, one column in English and a parallel column in French. Over successive weeks, he also translated key parts of his political lexicon within the English columns: ‘fundholders’ is translated as ‘rentiers’, ‘paper money’ as ‘billets de banque’, ‘hired writer’ as ‘cet homme à gages’ and ‘boroughmongering’ becomes ‘le brocantage des votes’, a polemical illustration of how his radical analysis was equally valid in English and French.³⁹³

William Cobbett junior, the eldest of Cobbett’s sons, succeeded James as the Paris correspondent of the *Political Register* and they overlapped in Paris for a few days at the end of September or start of October.³⁹⁴ The exact dates of his stay in Paris are not known and an affectionate letter from his younger brother John suggests that at least part of his reason for going to France was to escape financial difficulties at home.³⁹⁵

³⁹³ ‘No. II. Tableau de l’Angleterre en 1830. To the People of France’, *Political Register*, 14 August 1830; ‘No. IV. Tableau de l’Angleterre en 1830. To the Duke of Wellington. Letter I.’, *Political Register*, 28 August 1830; ‘No. V. Tableau de l’Angleterre en 1830. To the Duke of Wellington. Letter II.’, *Political Register*, 4 September 1830.

³⁹⁴ See Jos. Nancrede to Mrs Cobbett, Batignolles, 4 October 1830: ‘your James [...] is off – But he brought me William before going away’. Nuffield, XXX/241/1

³⁹⁵ John Morgan Cobbett to William Cobbett junior, Kensington, 8 November 1830. ‘Of course, I heard, some time ago, of your embarrassments here; and I also heard subsequently of your quitting England to avoid the humiliating results. But, do not, for God’s sake suffer yourself to sink under this to the extent of giving up your home! [...] Now, you cannot say that nature has not given you a peculiar talent. How often I do now regret that we were not, early in life, put to some trade, some handicraft, something, however low, by which we might now be earning our own bread! You have a gift, nevertheless, which places you above the rest of us at once, a gift at your finger’s ends, which

Eight of William's letters, dated between 18 October 1830 and 15 February 1831, were published in the *Register* under the heading 'Foreign Affairs', with all except the final one appearing during 1830. The original manuscripts of these letters do not survive so it is impossible to know how far they were edited before inclusion in the newspaper. However, the experience of reading them in the *Register* carries the uncanny effect of reading them over Cobbett's shoulder or hearing him read them aloud, the added italicization and capitalization layering Cobbett's emphasis and cadences over his son's writing. William, like James, developed a style that mimics his father's in its rhythm and diction, and the preparation of his letters for publication, as well as the experience of reading them in the *Political Register*, brings them even closer to Cobbett's. This proximity between William's letters from Paris and his father's letters on political events at home carries the effect of binding the two countries even more tightly together. His main role, however, is to report events in Paris, the first letter describing the trial of Charles X's ministers as 'all-engrossing in the minds of the people at this moment', with subsequent letters closely following this first major test of the July monarchy.³⁹⁶ In contrast to James's dinner with Polignac's lawyer and dispassionate presentation of the arguments for and against execution, William Cobbett junior and senior now take a more sanguinary line. Louis-Philippe's refusal to allow the execution of the ex-ministers had become a political impasse that could yet inspire the people to rise up, complete their revolution and establish a republic. Having become disillusioned with the new government, this is a possibility that both father and son welcome, writing approvingly of the public's insistence that Polignac and the other ministers responsible for the Four Ordinances face execution.

nothing can destroy but loss of eyes or fingers, I mean your drawing.' John goes on to advise William to take the opportunity of studying art in Paris but also to stick to 'that in which you first showed your taste – animal drawing'. Nuffield, XXX/243/1-2.

³⁹⁶ 'Foreign Affairs. Letters from Mr. Wm. Cobbett. Letter I', *Political Register*, 30 October 1830.

The ministers were only saved when Louis-Philippe smuggled them out of the Luxembourg palace and into a closed carriage to the fortress of Vincennes before the verdicts of life imprisonment were read out in court. Lafayette seems at best to have been ambivalent about this plan, perhaps, as Cobbett, hoping for their execution or lynching, which could have precipitated a republican revolution. Having averted this, Louis-Philippe relieved Lafayette of his duties as commander of the National Guard at the end of December, securing the July Monarchy until the uprising of June 1832.³⁹⁷ Reflecting this increased stability, the *Political Register* stopped carrying the correspondence between father and son.

Writing to France had been, as Cobbett acknowledged, a rhetorical vehicle which suited his style: at the end of October, for example, he uses a letter to William in Paris to discuss the fires in the south of England, explaining, 'I shall, in this way better than in any other, give my *readers a summary* on these affairs; because I shall be constantly proceeding upon the supposition, that I am addressing one who can have his information only through this channel'.³⁹⁸ A few weeks later he continues his commentary in letters to the editor of a Parisian newspaper, writing, 'I have often used this manner of speaking to my own countrymen; and it is a very good one, because it renders proper a *fullness of explanation*'.³⁹⁹ Having to summarise events for a specific correspondent is a discipline that Cobbett finds conducive to his writing, encouraging a clear, idiomatic approach to complex events and allowing a fresh perspective on arguments he had set out hundreds of times before. As with many of his other epistolary techniques, the public correspondence with his son and translation of parts of the *Register* into French can be read as a primarily performative strategy,

³⁹⁷ Price, *The Perilous Crown*, pp. 208-14

³⁹⁸ 'Domestic Affairs. To Mr. Wm. Cobbett in France', *Political Register*, 30 October 1830.

³⁹⁹ 'Rural War', *Political Register*, 4 December 1830.

displaying to his English readers the interconnectedness of British and French reform and carrying the powerful suggestion that his writings have an international reach.

However, while it is worth remaining sceptical about the extent to which the *Political Register* was ever read in France, it seems that Cobbett did have some success in fulfilling this ambition. Writing to the journalists of Paris in September, he casts himself as a victim of both British and Bourbon censorship, so that ‘in my whole life I have never, till now, been able to cause my voice to be heard in France’.⁴⁰⁰ In the same number, he tells James to arrange translations of parts of the *Register* and organise their distribution amongst French politicians and journalists. By October, he is able to offer proof of the *Register* being read in France, translating an article from the Paris press in which he his writings have been cited and again invoking one of his favourite quotations:

*This revolution has lifted the veil; it has LET THE REGISTER INTO FRANCE: the dawn has broken in upon the French: and the light of noon-day is at hand [...] read my translation, and see the effects of the Register getting into France; see the effects of the cat getting out of the bag!*⁴⁰¹

Cobbett is at once utterly serious, hungry for new audiences, unable to think of any reasons his journalism might not translate well and convinced that, if only they had the opportunity, the French public would want to read him. However, alongside the dramatic irony that this implies, there is a self-aware, self-ironising comedy at work, a deliberate puncturing of the run of sublime metaphors – ‘the veil [...] the dawn [...] the light of noon-day’ – with the final bathos of ‘the *cat getting out of the bag*’. The relish with which he produces this phrase, its half-rhyme and the description of

⁴⁰⁰ ‘To the Conductors of the Journals of Paris’, *Political Register*, 4 September 1830.

⁴⁰¹ ‘Cat Out of the Bag’, *Political Register*, 2 October 1830.

himself as the cat who has got out of the bag, shows how he can be completely serious while simultaneously setting himself up for a rhetorical fall. The following week, as a postscript to the second letter to Talleyrand, he gives a more detailed account of how he is planning to meet this French audience:

The reader will see, that the thing for us to do is to get the *French* of the Letters to Talleyrand *to be read in France*. The Register will get to coffee-houses in *Calais, Boulogne, and Dieppe*; but that is little. To send the Register to Paris, Lyons, Bourdeaux, Rouen, &c. is next to impossible [...] The *post* and *private hand* are the only ways [...] many men *have parcels to send to France, some are going to France*. Now I will immediately cause this letter to Talleyrand to be printed neatly *in French only*, and sell the pamphlet for 2d., and by the twenty-five, or upwards, *for 3s. the twenty-five*; and, if any one take *a hundred*, for 10s. So that any one might for 10s. *sow the road all the way along from Calais to Paris*. Then, again, the paper shall be *light*, so that any one who has a mind to send to a friend *by post*, may do it at *little expense*. In a short time, numerous persons in France will be eager to see matter so *piquante*. They will be delighted with *home-truths in plain language* [...] the grand object is to get these LETTERS TO TALLEYRAND to be READ IN FRANCE.⁴⁰²

Cobbett's strategy relies on the readers of the *Register* becoming involved in its distribution, confidently calling on the pro-French sympathies of his audience. A combination of '*post and private hand*' will, in a striking image which alludes both to his agricultural projects and the spatial analysis of texts such as *Paper Against Gold* and *Rural Rides*, '*sow the road all the way along from Calais to Paris*.' The advance along the road to Paris echoes the campaigns of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, yet here the relationship is re-cast as one of common defiance to repressive governments on both sides of the Channel. Cobbett's guerrilla press operation will move from the Normandy coast to eventually liberate Paris – a city which is, his son tells him, 'if possible, still more a *wen* than London'.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰² Postscript to 'Letter II. To Talleyrand Perigord', *Political Register*, 9 October 1830.

⁴⁰³ 'Foreign Affairs. From Mr. William Cobbett. To the Editor of the Register. Letter II', *Political Register*, 6 November 1830.

William's letters keep Cobbett informed about the reception of his writings in Paris and at the end of October he is able to write that the *Revolution* newspaper had republished the first letter to Talleyrand and 'No. VII. Tableau de l'Angleterre en 1830. To the Brave People of Paris. On the appointment of Talleyrand', editing out some of Cobbett's Bourbon conspiracy theories, but significantly leaving in his assertion that Louis-Philippe was only 'keeping the place warm' for the eventual return of Charles X. William gives a vivid description of the scene on the streets, where,

about a hundred of this journal are placarded every day, each number remaining exposed in this way in the great thoroughfares, about twenty-four hours; and I have never gone by a newspaper posted, without seeing nearly as many people reading it as could see over one another's heads. The *Tableau*, No. 7, was posted in this way on Tuesday, when the walls were covered also with placards issued by the different authorities, imploring the people to keep the peace, and pacifying them on the subject of the ex-ministers [...] I am surprised to see so many people of the lowest or poorest order read. They stop as they are going along, saddled with loads of all sorts, and in the worst sort of clothing, read a bit, and move on again. I dare say twenty thousand of the common people have read *something*, at least, of what you wanted them to know, by your address to them. On Thursday, I was looking at the "*Revolution*" on the Pont-Neuf, containing the letter [...] and two or three men appeared to me to be reading that part of it; presently one of them said to the other, "*Les anglais sont des maligns*"! (The English are deep fellows!)⁴⁰⁴

Translated, extracted and placarded, the *Political Register* has become absorbed within Parisian political discourse. However, in describing to his father the reception of the *Register* in Paris, William also provides a more ironic and detached account than any Cobbett himself would have given. The image of the *Register* placarded on the walls of the 'great thoroughfares' of Paris conveys solidarity between the English and French people, yet the overheard line of dialogue also retains a sense of difference: the tone resists translation, so the reader is left unsure if '*Les anglais sont des maligns*' has been said with admiration or sardonic amusement.

⁴⁰⁴ 'Foreign Affairs. From Mr. William Cobbett. To the Editor of the Register. Letter II', *Political Register*, 6 November 1830.

Swing Letters

Cobbett was equally determined that his arguments for the interconnectedness of British and French reform should reach as wide an audience as possible at home. The *Political Register* was still prohibitively expensive for many of its potential readers and its price actually doubled during the Swing riots, in the space of little more than two months: increasing first from 7d. to 1s. on 30 October 1830 and then to 1s. 2d. on 8 January 1831. On the second occasion Cobbett published a letter to his readers, justifying the price rise as part of a plan which would see him close the paper at the end of 1832, after serialising his history of George IV's reign and his autobiography, and then,

go into Hampshire, there to cultivate a garden and a few fields to the end of my life, the close of which I hoped to pass amongst that class of society that I have always most loved and cherished, the people employed in the cultivation of the land.

The new price was, he explained,

absolutely necessary, in order to prevent me from *throwing away* two years of such enormous labour, which even I have not resolved upon until after long consideration [...] Such a thing, such labour, never was encountered before by any man; and I desire that it should be hereafter said of me, that the most laborious man that ever lived, was WM. COBBETT.⁴⁰⁵

The plan to serialise an autobiography and then close the *Register* was never carried out and it is a possibility that the price rises were primarily a ploy to cover his own back. The first price rise comes as the fires began to spread and Cobbett would have been aware that one of the strongest defences against the charge of sedition was to point to the price of the publication and argue that it was beyond the reach of those

⁴⁰⁵ 'To My Readers, On the new Plan for publishing the REGISTER, and on the reasons for raising the Price to 1s. 2d.', *Political Register*, 8 January 1831.

starting the fires.⁴⁰⁶ Whether or not this was the reason for such steep price rises, it was certainly a useful argument and one that he had recourse to several times before the riots were over. However, while covering himself through the rise of the cover price, he continued to broaden his audience in other ways.

The *Political Register* was not confined to those who could afford to buy a copy, but could be shared, hired out or read communally. And, at the same time that the cover price of the *Register* increased, Cobbett revived the 1816-19 strategy of publishing a shorter *Twopenny Trash*, published once a month to exploit a loophole in the laws on cheap publications. This ran from the summer of 1830 until the passing of the Reform Act, often consisted of an article re-printed from the *Register* and was, according to one Gloucestershire magistrate, ‘read in every Country pothouse’.⁴⁰⁷ He also continued the lectures he had begun in the 1820s, beginning in London at the Rotunda on Blackfriars Bridge, which Richard Carlile hired in 1830 and made available to other radicals. Cobbett announced his ‘great desire to address the working classes on the subject of the recent events in France’ and to offer advice on how ‘they themselves’ could ‘assist in obtaining a just reform in the Commons’ House of

⁴⁰⁶ See, for example, the story that Godwin was not prosecuted by the Privy Council for *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) because its price of one pound sixteen shillings precluded a wide readership (the same amount would have bought seventy copies of Paine’s *Rights of Man* or, without taking inflation into account, sixty copies of the *Political Register* in the summer of 1830). Godwin entered ‘Prosecution of Political Justice debated this week’ in his diary on 25 May 1793 and liked to tell people that Pitt had told the Council ‘a three guinea book could never do much harm among those who had not three shillings to spare’. The story has never been corroborated, but contains an essential truth about how the authorities’ attitude to radical publications depending on the price they were sold at. See William St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 85. Sections of *Political Justice* attacking monarchy and aristocracy were published and sold in much cheaper formats, on which see Mark Philp, ‘Thompson, Godwin and the French Revolution’ in *History Workshop Journal* 39 (1993), 89-101, p. 94. However, Godwin’s overall model of political change spreading gradually from an intellectual elite would have been more reassuring to the authorities than Cobbett’s strategy in 1830-31, which involved publishing articles which might be seditious and which were addressed directly to the labourers, but then protesting that the price of the newspaper prevented it from reaching its signalled audience.

⁴⁰⁷ The Poor Law Report (1834), quoted in Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, p. 169.

Parliament', charging twopence for admission.⁴⁰⁸ Then, in early October, he set out on a tour of Kent, East Sussex, West Sussex and Hampshire, declaring that 'the price of admission will, *every-where, be three-pence*, that the WORKING PEOPLE may not be shut out [...] I want to speak to rich as well as poor; but particularly to those who live by their labour.' Publishing his itinerary in the *Register*, he instructed his friends in each place he would visit to prepare a venue in advance of his arrival: 'any *rough* place will do, if it be *big enough* and will *keep off rain*: nothing better than a barn, the doors of which can be closed, and that is watertight, without holes near the ground. Very few lights will be sufficient: men *hear* very well without gas.'⁴⁰⁹ Through communal reading of the *Register*, the cheaper *Twopenny Trash* and the lecture tour, Cobbett's analysis of political events in 1830-31 reached a much wider audience than the price of the *Register* suggests and, despite his later denials, was specifically designed to reach 'the working classes'.

To assess Cobbett's writings on the Swing riots it is necessary to place them in the context of the uprising, the classic account of which is still that of Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé.⁴¹⁰ They emphasize the wretched conditions of the rural population – especially in the south and east, where cereal farming was combined with low wages – and claim that 'the labourer in the 1820s was desperately poor, unemployed,

⁴⁰⁸ 'Lecture', *Political Register*, 28 August 1830. See *Eleven Lectures on the French and Belgian Revolutions and English Boroughmongering* (London, 1830).

⁴⁰⁹ 'Lecturing Tour', *Political Register*, 9 October 1830.

⁴¹⁰ Adrian Randall usefully summarizes the reception of Hobsbawm and Rudé's work in a recent retrospect: 'In 1969, the publishing firm Lawrence and Wishart published a 380-page monograph on the extensive riots of English agricultural labourers in 1830. *Captain Swing* [...] received immediate critical acclaim. Unusually for such a study, it was taken up a year later by a book club, the Readers' Union, and a new edition published. Together with Edward Thompson's monumental *The Making of the English Working Class*, published six years earlier, likewise to critical and commercial success, *Captain Swing* firmly placed the new 'history from below', pioneered by Rudé, Thompson, and an associated group of Marxist historians, before an eager and widening audience. Indeed, it may reasonably be argued that these two volumes, with their radical reinterpretation of the study of social history, popular protest and popular culture, had a seismic impact, an impact which continues to have remarkable reverberations today.' Adrian Randall, 'Captain Swing: A Retrospect', *International Review of Social History* 54 (2009), 419-27, p. 419.

oppressed, helpless and hopeless. Nothing was more natural than that he should rebel'.⁴¹¹ The introduction of threshing machines, taking away the manual threshing which was the mainstay of agricultural labour from November to January, combined with the disastrous harvest of 1829, and a revolt which spread gradually across East Kent over the summer 'acquired a greatly increased momentum' as it moved west in the autumn, described in terms of one large conflagration:

In Kent, the country of its birth, it had lingered for more than two months before spreading into the Sussex Weald. In the Weald and East Sussex it had continued for another fortnight before passing into West Sussex. And this it had crossed in a bare three days.⁴¹²

By the 'last ten days of November virtually all of Southern England seemed in flames', along with East Anglia and parts of the Midlands.⁴¹³ The nature of the uprising also began to change, from groups of incendiaries and machine-breakers carrying out their work at night to 'public performances' which boldly took place in daylight and 'at times assumed a festive air'.⁴¹⁴ The 'distinctive hall-mark' of the riots was machine-breaking, with 387 machines broken in 22 counties, the highest number in Wiltshire (97), Berkshire (78), Hampshire (52), Kent (37) and Norfolk (29).⁴¹⁵

Some farmers were happy to allow the labourers to break their threshing machines, realising that machines increased the poor rates by putting labourers onto the parish and viewing them as an unnatural, even immoral, innovation. However, while machine-breaking may have been the dominant form the riots took, 'to many contemporary observers the most notable and memorable of "Swing" activities were

⁴¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), p. 81.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

the dispatch of threatening letters and incendiary attacks on farms, stacks and barns', with the counties most affected by incendiarism being Kent (61 fires), Lincolnshire (29), East Sussex (23), Surrey (23) and Norfolk (19).⁴¹⁶ Hobsbawm and Rudé acknowledge the context of the uprising, the reform debate at home and revolution in France, but argue that the riots were largely unconnected to the broader political situation. 'The object of these movements was not revolutionary. Their immediate purpose was economic', and this claim is repeated throughout: 'this was essentially a labourers' movement with essentially economic ends.'⁴¹⁷ They argue that the riots should be distinguished from modern ideas of class conflict and trade unionism, and viewed instead as the last eruption of an older form of protest, related purely to economic distress and taking place as 'local agitations and in local terms': 'the organisation of the Swing movement was entirely traditional. It rested on the informal consensus of the lower classes in the village [...] the village bounded their horizon.'⁴¹⁸ E.P. Thompson shares their view of the riots as the final manifestation of an older form of radicalism, describing 'the last labourers' revolt' – the name given to it in the Hammonds' pioneering account – as 'a true outburst of machine-breaking, with little indication of ulterior political motive.'⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., p. 198. While Hobsbawm and Rudé's study is still the classic account, a recent project by the Family and Community Historical Research Society argues that their figures greatly underestimate the scale of the riots. A large team of volunteers examining local archives documented 3,283 incidents of protest, against Hobsbawm and Rudé's 1,475. They record 1,292 instances of incendiarism, 586 of machine-breaking, 284 of wage riot, 272 of anonymous threatening letters and 252 of robbery. See Michael Holland ed., *Swing Unmasked: The Agricultural Riots of 1830 to 1832 and their Wider Implications* (Milton Keynes: Family & Community Historical Research Society Publications, 2005), p. 5. Commenting on the FACHRS project, Adrian Randall observes that 'the quantifying approach of *Captain Swing* remains ascendant. Indeed, we can see this model clearly informing the work of Charles Tilly and his followers.' Randall, 'Captain Swing: A Retrospect', p. 426.

⁴¹⁷ Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, pp. 16 and 220.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 90 and 294.

⁴¹⁹ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 228 and index, p. 846.

This is not, however, the view that Cobbett took in the winter of 1830-31. The *Political Register* of 23 October 1830 illustrates his very different approach, containing three open letters which show how he wove together what was happening in the English countryside, London and France. Events were moving fast and the first letter, dated from London on 21 October and addressed ‘To friends at Chichester, Portsmouth, Isle of Wight, &c.’, is an apology for breaking off his lecture tour after reading news of a fresh crisis at the Bank of England, or, ‘the very *dangerous illness* of my *old mother* of Threadneedle Street!’:

I, flinging down the papers, hollowed out “*Bring me my boots*”! [...] In vain did my Sussex friends get about me; in vain did they endeavour to allay my anxiety by telling me that I “could *do her no good*” [...] “Stand off,” said I, pulling myself away from them. “DEBT, in your teeth! What is she, merely because she *owes a trifle*, to be left to die without a single child, and especially her favourite and *favoured* son, to close her eyes”! And then, taking a couple of old Liverpool’s (Jenkinson’s) pennies out of my pocket, “Shall she,” said I, “expire without my laying these upon her lids!”

Ian Dyck describes how ‘at the start of the rising Cobbett resumed his place among village workers’ and this letter contrasts his warm relationship with his ‘Sussex friends’ with a grotesque parody of kinship with the Bank of England.⁴²⁰ It was time, he explains, ‘to tear myself from the downs and the fields’ and return to the Wen to meet both the financial crisis and the trial of the ministers in Paris, having ‘made up my mind that the putting of these tyrants to death’ was what the French people, justifiably, wanted. Accordingly, he published ‘an *address to the working people* of Paris [...] a copy of which will be *in the hand of Lafayette* by Sunday or Monday’ and relates William’s reports from Paris.⁴²¹ In the same number, he includes an account of his lecture tour, dated from Eastbourne on 17 October, and framed as a letter ‘To the

⁴²⁰ Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, p. 160.

⁴²¹ ‘To Friends at Chichester, Portsmouth, Isle of Wight, &c.’, ‘To the Brave Working People of Paris’, *Political Register*, 23 October 1830.

Boroughmongers'. At the centre of it is an invaluable report of the meeting at Battle that had taken place the previous night and which would soon become fiercely contested. Cobbett had arrived in the town to delightedly discover 'a large *booth*, made of poles and sails, the latter brought from Hastings', which held an audience of five hundred and had been constructed specifically for his lecture, making him feel 'really at home here'. That night he spoke for two hours:

In coming through *Kent*, I had, of course, learned all about the *burnings*, and I am not a man to flinch from my duty, though the house burn about my ears. It was my duty to speak *out* upon *this subject* in particular; and I have done it in every place where I have been. I began by observing, that the events in France ought to make us reflect on our own situation.

His discussion moves from France to Britain and suggests that Wellington, 'a man of plain sense', is more likely to concede to demands for universal suffrage and voting by ballot than the Whigs, who will always 'cling to *householder suffrage*.' He describes the way in which the poor are treated, 'not only the *injustice*, but the *insolence*' of not allowing men fighting for their country to vote, and, turning to the Swing revolt, predicts that 'as winter approaches it will spread, and violence and terror will prevail throughout the greater part of England'. The 'ONLY REMEDY, *menaces* and *force* and *punishment* being now wholly unavailing' is, as he has long argued, for the farmers to make common cause with the labourers and petition for reform. He concludes by comparing the English countryside to the Great Fear which stalked the French countryside in 1789, arguing that the first revolution,

began not amongst the "*rabble*" (as the bloody old Times calls the working people) of Paris, but amongst the quiet and dispersed labourers in the fields and vineyards; and, boroughmongers, hear it and reflect in time, their motto or signal was, "*Guerre aux chateaux, paix aux chaumières*"; "*War to the houses of*

the rich, peace to the cottage.” Think of this, look at Kent, see winter coming.⁴²²

This single number of the *Register* shows the vivid reportage, dark humour and ruthless political logic which Cobbett would employ to bring apparently disparate events into correspondence during the Swing riots, shuttling between England and France to place current events within a long narrative of oppression.

Since Hobsbawm and Rudé, historians have become more willing to recognise the broader political dimension of Swing.⁴²³ Andrew Charlesworth was among the first to challenge their view, linking the distribution of the riots to ‘national lines of communication.’⁴²⁴ By paying close attention to the timing of the riots, Charlesworth argues that the importance of the London highways was not in carrying travelling incendiaries or as ‘mere channels of news’ which sparked off riots.⁴²⁵ Instead, villages close to the major roads possessed a ‘pre-existing cadre of grass-root politicians and radicals’, who had access to ‘link men’ such as carriers and formed part of a ‘radical culture’. Charlesworth argues that, ‘the protests were not the desperate acts of desperate and ignorant men’, but the actions of this radical culture at a moment of political and economic crisis.⁴²⁶ More recently, Ian Dyck, in his study of Cobbett and rural popular culture, observes that Cobbett predicted the riots and expected them to

⁴²² ‘To the Boroughmongers, On the Political State and Prospects of England’, *Political Register*, 23 October 1830.

⁴²³ Although this trend in the historiography is not without exceptions. Peter Jones, ‘Finding Captain Swing: Protest, Parish Relations, and the State of the Public Mind in 1830’, *International Review of Social History* 54 (2009), 429-58, argues against viewing the Swing riots as a movement, insisting they can only be better understood ‘through more local studies at the level of the parish and the township’ (p. 457). Detailed local studies such as Jones’s research into an area of Berkshire can of course reveal valuable information, yet what is most striking about the riots is the unity of protest across much of southern and eastern England within the space of a few months.

⁴²⁴ Andrew Charlesworth, *Social Protest in a Rural Society: The Spatial Diffusion of the Captain Swing Disturbances of 1830-31* (Norwich: Historical Geography Research Group, 1979), p. 1.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 37-9.

be more widespread than outbreaks of Luddism in 1816 or 1822 because of the ‘heightened political consciousness’ of the rural population by 1830.⁴²⁷ He argues that Cobbett,

refused to separate the food, wage and parish cart question from the so-called modern protests of high ideology, but this is far from saying that he ignored politics [...] Cobbett personified Swing’s stand on behalf of traditional culture and high politics.⁴²⁸

In another revision of Hobsbawm and Rudé, Roger Wells has written of how ‘the injections of politics were critical, and Cobbett’s crusading on stage and in print was the very visible tip of an iceberg.’⁴²⁹ These accounts have, however, neglected the ways Cobbett repeatedly linked Swing to events in France and his strategic use of correspondence during an uprising that was defined in the collective imagination by threatening letters.

The uprising was, and is, defined by the common signature at the bottom of threatening letters to farmers, parsons and landlords, and while Hobsbawm and Rudé primly observe that ‘there is no evidence that any labourers except perhaps in some small parts of Kent ever believed themselves to be following any “Captain Swing”’, this does not tell the whole story.⁴³⁰ Incendiaries throughout England colluded in the fiction that there was a single, folkloric figure behind the burnings, a successor to Ned Ludd, and farmers were convinced that fires in places far apart were linked together. Cobbett used the name more prosaically, referring to ‘poor Swing (the labourers of the East the South and the West)’, investing Swing with a communal and class

⁴²⁷ Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, p. 152.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁴²⁹ Roger Wells, ‘Mr William Cobbett, Captain Swing and King William IV’, *Agricultural History Review*, 45, I (1997) 34-48, p. 47.

⁴³⁰ Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 12.

identity, as well as making him almost ubiquitous.⁴³¹ Swing letters were the most distinctive feature of the riots and recent research has revised Hobsbawm and Rudé's total of 99 anonymous letters upwards to 272. This compares to a total of 1,292 instances of incendiarism and there are only 45 recorded cases where letters preceded fires.⁴³² However, while most letters did not lead to fires and the overwhelming majority of fires were not preceded by letters, the letters became as terrifying and widely reported as arson attacks. They seemed to be everywhere and at the same time strangely elusive – newspapers were afraid of publishing them in case they excited further unrest and one Home Office correspondent complained that, 'all persons talk of them, yet I cannot obtain or see any. When first received they are shown; afterwards they pass from hand to hand and cannot be found'.⁴³³ Their potency came from the suggestion that behind the mythic 'Captain Swing' there was a united movement, with common tactics and shared grievances.

This suggestion was strengthened by newspaper reports of English and French gentlemen travelling through the countryside in gigs, curricles, landaus and post chaises to start the fires – a theory that seems almost tailor made to fit Cobbett as Rural Rider. *The Times* reported 'a man, dressed in shabby genteel, but of manners apparently above the ordinary class' close to the fires at Battle.⁴³⁴ A correspondent in Bishop's Stortford informed the Home Secretary that a person had been seen 'who openly urged to the people the great advantage they would get from the fires and commotions', passing on the rumour that 'a respectable individual who saw him

⁴³¹ 'To the Landowners of England', *Political Register*, 19 February 1831.

⁴³² Michael Holland, 'The Captain Swing Project' in Holland ed., *Swing Unmasked*, pp. 5, 12.

⁴³³ Quoted in Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 141.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

asserts that he knows him to be Cobbett's son'.⁴³⁵ The remarkably persistent belief in 'men travelling about for the very purpose of destroying the property of the Farmers by fire' – which never had any credible evidence to substantiate it – no doubt owed something to the general atmosphere of panic and the determination of landowners to believe that fires could not be the work of local labourers and must have been started by outsiders.⁴³⁶ However, it also suggests the reluctance to recognise a common political mood suddenly appearing across dispersed rural communities, which could only be understood by resorting to the story of an itinerant incendiary behind the letters and fires. Attempts to implicate Cobbett as an instigator of the riots reached as high as William IV, who assiduously read the popular newspapers and at some point between December 1830 and February 1831 sent his new Prime Minister a number of the *Political Register* that he thought might warrant persecution: proof that the King was among Cobbett's most diligent (and malicious) readers.⁴³⁷

Cobbett answered the attempts of the authorities to link him to the fires by using a letter 'To the King's Ministers' to ridicule their conspiracy theories:

how is a man of sense to believe that from Dover to Penzance, from Pevensey to Carlisle, the fires have been produced by instigation from my speeches and writings. Yet I have been told, and I believe the fact, that the POST-OFFICES, particularly in Sussex, Hampshire, and Wiltshire, have been narrowly watched, in order to discover some correspondence between me and the rioters and burners. If these watchers will but stick to their several posts, till they find a letter *written by me*, or by any one by my authority, not only about rioting and burning, but *about any-thing else*, they will be amply punished for their

⁴³⁵ Frederick Chaplin to Lord Melbourne, Bishop's Stortford, 20 December 1830, The National Archives, HO 52/7, ff. 475-8.

⁴³⁶ The National Archives, HO 52/6/127.

⁴³⁷ Earl Grey to Sir H. Taylor, Downing Street, 21 February 1831: 'You will have seen that an indictment has been preferred against Cobbett by the Attorney-General, and a bill found by the Grand Jury. It is for a very infamous excitement to burning, which was anterior to the number of the Register sent to me by the King.' *The Correspondence of the late Charles Earl Grey with his Majesty King William IV*, ed. by Henry Earl Grey, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1867), vol. 1, p. 133.

curiosity. No, no, I have too much to write for the printers, to amuse myself in this sort of way.

Cobbett contrasts his own openness and sense of public responsibility with the furtive, frivolous activity of the government, whose ‘curiosity’ demands a conspiracy. At the same time, he never entirely contradicts the idea that fires ‘from Dover to Penzance, from Pevensey to Carlisle’ may have some link to ‘my speeches and writings’, only the theory that there is a secret correspondence at work. At a historical moment when letters were increasingly being read as objects of suspicion, Cobbett insists that he only writes public letters, ‘for the printers’. However, he then switches the focus to invite the reader, and the authorities, watch him opening his own mail:

To be sure, I cannot help what people write to me; but if the Secretary of State will send a clerk to read all my letters over for me, they will stand a great deal better chance than they now stand. All that come with the postage not paid I send back unopened, for the amusement of the Duke of Richmond; and if he read them all with attention, he will have quite enough to do. About one half of them are threatening letters; some threatening to burn my house; some my barn; some to shoot me; some to take me off by other means. These frequently come postage paid, and then they immediately go into a basket for the maid to light the fire with.

This domestic description introduces a vulnerability which underscores his commitment to political reform, continuing to write despite the threats he is sent:

Threatening letters, indeed! I have received a hundred that I could have traced home to the parties with no very extraordinary pains; and I never made the attempt in my life. The post-office may be watched long enough before any letter is met with from me; and, whenever there be one, it is as likely to be found without a seal as with it; and I hereby authorise and legally empower the post-office people to open all letters going from me to any-body.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁸ ‘To the King’s Ministers’, *Political Register*, 22 January 1831. This letter also appeared as the February 1831 number of *Two-Penny Trash*.

As he makes explicit elsewhere, his own barns are protected by the fact that he has treated his labourers well.⁴³⁹ The real danger he faces is from the Government's craving for a conspiracy, and he negotiates this threat through drawing on public awareness of its notorious record of using spies and *agents provocateurs* to target radicals.

Cobbett also refutes the accusations of his political enemies through what Kevin Gilmartin describes as his 'tactical gestures of self-effacement.'⁴⁴⁰ There are points during the riots when he characteristically draws attention to his power: after Wellington's resignation he publishes a letter to William IV '(sent to the King *early this morning*)' offering to be the next Prime Minister and promising 'such measures as would, in a very short space of time, put an end to the burnings'. However, at the same time he disavows agency, arguing that his interventions are unnecessary. Wellington's resignation 'may gratify coffee-house politicians and *talking* societies and unions; it may satisfy these, who may deem it *a triumph*. But what do the labourers care about it?'⁴⁴¹ Unlike metropolitan 'coffee-house politicians', agricultural labourers had already achieved a political awareness which ensures that they can see through a change of ministry and will only be satisfied with real reform. While Cobbett's letters continue to trace the links between events, he insists that his readers do not rely on him and by January 1831 he is able to turn from commenting on events for his readers to communicating the public's analysis of politicians and newspapers back to the Government, continuing the preoccupation of *Rural Rides* with relating how the political discourse of the 'great Wen' was read in the country. When 'the

⁴³⁹ The previous month he had insisted that 'we should never have heard of "SWING"' if all farmers had treated their labourers as well as he had. 'Trevor and Potatoes', *Political Register*, 25 December 1830.

⁴⁴⁰ Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics*, p. 188.

⁴⁴¹ 'Change of Ministry', *Political Register*, 20 November 1830.

speech came out' in which Wellington moved on from the Swing riots to declare that 'the system of representation possessed the full and entire confidence of the country [...] and the discussions in the Legislature had a very great influence over the opinions of the country', Cobbett writes that 'the expressions of the people were such as I wish Lord Grey could have heard.' And 'when the bloody *Times* newspaper communicated the intelligence of the hanging of COOPER and of COOK', who were both executed for their part in the riots, 'never shall I forget the exclamations of the people'.⁴⁴² The power of the rural labourers relies not on their violence – no farmer, parson, landowner, soldier or special constable was killed during the riots – but on their political intelligence and determination.

Reprisals

As Lord Grey's government took office in November, Lord Melbourne succeeded Robert Peel at the Home Office. The new Home Secretary 'did not care even to hear about the living and working conditions of the poor, believing them to be part of the natural order of things and certainly irremediable by legislation'.⁴⁴³ He did, however, believe severe action was necessary against the rioters and sat up all of his first night in office to read the terrified reports coming in from around the country and co-ordinate the response.⁴⁴⁴ Not trusting local magistrates to take sufficiently severe action, he ordered a series of Special Commissions, the first of which opened at Winchester on 18 December, before moving on to Reading, Abingdon, Salisbury,

⁴⁴² 'The Cause of Reform', *Political Register*, 29 January 1831 and Answer to the King's Speech, *Hansard*, 2 November 1830, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1830/nov/02/address-is-answer-to-the-speech>.

⁴⁴³ Peter Mandler, 'Lamb, William, second Viscount Melbourne (1779–1848)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, January 2008) [http://ezproxy.ouls.ox.ac.uk:2117/view/article/15920, accessed 9 January 2011] DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/15920>.

⁴⁴⁴ Wells, 'Cobbett, Swing and William IV', p. 37.

Dorchester and Aylesbury during December and January. Cobbett wondered aloud in the *Register* how the rioters would be treated and asked ‘will these ministers SHED BLOOD?’ Examining Grey’s cabinet he concluded,

I hope, and I not only hope but *believe*, that *they will not*. They are not a fierce crew of hard lawyers, such as we have seen in before. The *chief* is a mild and kind man, very fond of his own family, and who is likely to make the case of the labourers his own.

He pointed out that the crimes had universally been against property and not people and alluded again to Lord Grey’s own domestic affections, which he hoped might mitigate the sentences:

transportation is little, if anything, short of *death*. And before even this be put in execution against these men, I am sure that Lord GREY will think well on what *his* sufferings would be at being separated for ever from wife and children; and that, too, for not being able to endure the sight of seeing them perish for want.⁴⁴⁵

Cobbett’s hopes were not borne out. The Special Commissioners tried 992 cases, sending 252 rioters to prison and passing sentences of death on 227, all but three of whom eventually had their sentences of execution commuted to other punishments, most frequently transportation. When combined with proceedings in other courts, a total of 1,976 prisoners were tried after the riots, with 644 sent to prison, 481 transported and 19 executed, 16 of the executions for crimes of arson. As E.P. Thompson points out, the Swing letter writers were fortunate that the maximum punishment for writing a threatening letter had been set at transportation for life: between 1754 and 1823 it had been a capital offence.⁴⁴⁶ However, Hobsbawm and

⁴⁴⁵ ‘Rural War. Special Commissions. To the People of Hampshire and Wiltshire’, *Political Register*, 11 December 1830.

⁴⁴⁶ E.P. Thompson, ‘The Crime of Anonymity’ in *Albion’s Fatal Tree*, ed. Hay, Linebaugh and Thompson (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 283.

Rudé draw attention to the frequency with which sentences of transportation were used, passed on a full quarter of those brought before courts after Swing, with the 481 sentenced to transportation constituting the highest number ever transported from England for a common crime. Those bound for New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land were transferred to the hulks at Portsmouth or Sheerness in the Thames to await their twelve thousand mile voyage. On average, they were slightly older, much more likely to be married and less likely to have previous convictions than other convicts sent to the colonies. As John Stevenson writes, 'these were not the rootless young, or the desperate poor, still less outside agitators, but a representative sample of the village community.'⁴⁴⁷ They were repeatedly praised by those who encountered them:

The superintendent of convicts in London, who visited them in the docks before they sailed, said "he never saw a finer set of men"; and Governor Arthur of Van Diemen's Land [...] bore repeated witness to their "exemplary" conduct and good behaviour.⁴⁴⁸

The majority of them received pardons within a few years and so were in theory free to return to England, yet only a very few were ever able to afford the passage home.⁴⁴⁹

On 16 December, Arthur Trevor, Tory MP for the rotten borough of New Romney in Kent, spoke in the House of Commons about a,

well-known periodical publication, which contained some paragraphs of a very dangerous character, alluding to the disgraceful scenes now going forward in some parts of the country, and calculated to aggravate the present lawless state of some counties [...] the circulation of that diabolical publication [...] was dangerously extensive.

⁴⁴⁷ John Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1832* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 268.

⁴⁴⁸ George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981, first published 1964), pp. 155-6.

⁴⁴⁹ George Rudé's research in the Australian convict records only found two such cases. See George Rudé, *Protest and Punishment: The Story of the Social and Political Prisoners Transported to Australia, 1788-1868* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 208.

He wanted to know whether the Attorney General had noticed it ‘and whether he intended to do anything relative to it [cries of “name.”] The publication was Cobbett’s Register’.⁴⁵⁰ A week later, Trevor read out a passage from the *Political Register* of 11 December, including Cobbett’s assertion that ‘without entering at present into the motives of the working people, it is unquestionable that their acts have produced good, and great good too’: removing threshing machines, raising wages and lowering tithes, which, in many cases, the riots did. Trevor went on to cite Burke and Grenville’s view forty years earlier that ‘to the dissemination of opinions like these, in language such as he had read, the Revolution of France, with all its concomitant horrors, was mainly to be attributed’. He told the Commons that ‘a storm was gathering in the country’ but William Bulwer rose to warn of the danger of libel proceedings: ‘prosecutions made proselytes’, they were likely to fail – he cited the three trials of William Hone in 1817 – and ‘it was by the press, and not by the pillory or the prison, that a libeller could be reduced to his natural insignificance’. In any case, Lord Althorp added, a parliamentary vote condemning the *Register* as libellous implied a lack of confidence in the government’s ability to bring prosecutions where they were necessary and Trevor was persuaded to withdraw his motion.⁴⁵¹

The very next day *The Times* reported that eighteen-year old hoop-maker Thomas Goodman, sentenced to death for setting fires in Battle, ‘has made a full confession of his guilt, and attributes his untimely end to that notorious demagogue William Cobbett’:

⁴⁵⁰ Hansard, 16 December 1830, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1830/dec/16/cobbetts-register>.

⁴⁵¹ Hansard, 23 December 1830, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1830/dec/23/cobbetts-register-inflammatory>.

I, Thomas Goodman, never should af thought of douing aney sutch thing if Mr. Cobbet Cobet had never given aney lactures i believe that their never would bean any fires or mob in Battle nor maney other places if he never had given aney lactures at all.⁴⁵²

Goodman's statement ensured that his life was spared, but its authenticity was contested, with successive, more elaborate statements being added, and conflicting accounts emerging of the meeting in Battle. *The Times* claimed that the first fire destroyed a stack owned by the landlord of the George Inn at Battle after he had refused Cobbett a room for his lecture. Cobbett denied ever asking for a room there, pointed out that the fires had begun in East Kent, 'where I have not been for years', and observed that Goodman's statement had been taken down by a parson who had travelled twenty miles from Crowhurst to Lewes to elicit it.⁴⁵³ When a second confession introduced the claim that Cobbett had told his audience to keep a gun in his house, 'that they migh Prepare them selves i readdyness to go with him When he called on them', he pointed out that this must be a twisting of his argument that every man able to bear arms should have the vote.⁴⁵⁴ He later informed his readers 'that the prisoners in jail on account of the late riots have been carefully canvassed for the purpose of ascertaining *whether they read my writings!*'⁴⁵⁵

The thick file of correspondence on the Goodman case in the Home Office archive of criminal petitions – some letters retaining a bored clerk's inscription, 'another letter respecting Goodman' – suggests once again how readily contemporaries made connections between events in England and France during the winter of 1830-31. A correspondent in Stoke Newington tells Lord Melbourne that,

⁴⁵² *The Times*, 24 December 1830.

⁴⁵³ 'Bloody-minded', *Political Register*, 1 January 1831.

⁴⁵⁴ *The Times*, 7 January 1831.

⁴⁵⁵ 'My Triumph', *Political Register*, 5 March 1831.

public feeling is strongly excited on behalf of the lad – so fattaly deluded by that vile miscreant Cobbet – and permit me to say – the commutation of the punishment to transportation for life – will tend to strengthen that cause which we all wish to promote in a neighbouring kingdom.⁴⁵⁶

While the ‘cause [...] in a neighbouring kingdom’ is not named, the date of the letter, 29 December, makes it clear that it is the trial of Polignac and the other ex-ministers of Charles X that the writer is referring to. Their sentences had just been passed and on 30 December they were taken from Vincennes to the fortress of Ham in Picardy, with bloodthirsty crowds along the route threatening to turn the journey into a lynching. The suggestion that Goodman’s sentence could affect their fate is incredible, but the letter is evidence of how during these febrile months events in the English countryside were viewed by contemporaries as closely tied to those in Paris, with a wrong step by the government in one country leading to violence in the other. Witness statements in the Home Office files from those who were at Cobbett’s lecture at Battle remember how he made constant comparisons between England and France: Thomas Hood, cooper, recollects that he ‘began his Lecture by bringing forward what he called the Glorious Revolution of Paris’ and went on to speak,

much on the restrictions of the French Press and then he spoke largely of the restrictions of the British Press then said that the people of France wold not bear one Month what the People of England had borne for years and very often said what sort of persons it was that accomplished the Glorious Revolution he spoke much of a Reform in the British Parliament.

Edward Wren, master shoemaker, remembers first that ‘he spoke of the French Revolution and exhibited colours which he said he wore and would wear in commemoration of that glorious Revolution’. Frustratingly for the authorities, these

⁴⁵⁶ William Allen to Lord Melbourne, Stoke Newington, 29 December 1830, The National Archives, HO 17/50.

witness statements, obtained in the hope of corroborating Goodman's confession, also recall that Cobbett said that 'there had been Fires in Kent which he considered very bad' and that he 'hoped that the Conflagration would not spread.'⁴⁵⁷

However, the authorities were determined to incriminate Cobbett and letters in the Goodman file suggest the methods they may have employed: an undated letter from Horsham Gaol begins, 'I have just procured from Goodman the accompanying declaration', concluding 'as you mentioned you wish that your communication should be perfectly secret I have not thought it proper to have the paper attested by any other name than my own.'⁴⁵⁸ An even more suggestive letter advises Melbourne that in order to corroborate Goodman's confession,

one of your principal Police men, should be sent down to Battle, to apply to Mr. Bellingham, the Clerk to the Magistrates of the Battle Bench, & I think by that means, such evidence may be elicited, as would prove useful;—the method of the police men is so much superior to that of our clerks.⁴⁵⁹

William IV, spending Christmas nearby at Brighton, was contacted by Tory magistrates in Sussex about the case and appears to have granted Goodman's pardon as a way of targeting Cobbett: a brief, undated letter in the Home Office archive states that 'his Majesty saw the High Sheriff for a long time yesterday & seems very anxious to lay hold of Cobbett'. By 6 January, William IV's involvement was common knowledge, with the Tory *Brighton Gazette* reporting that 'we believe that we may without impropriety, here add that the paternal mind of the King has been actively occupied, from the first, in a careful consideration of this matter.' William IV found

⁴⁵⁷ The National Archives, HO 17/50. The covering note accompanying these statements, which are dated 10 January 1831, reads, 'These are the Papers sent to the King last night respecting the Goodman case – [illeg] whether Cobbett really did use the expressions at Battle that are attributed to him'.

⁴⁵⁸ To Thomas Sanctuary Esq., Horsham Gaol, n.d., signature illeg. The National Archives, HO 17/50.

⁴⁵⁹ To Lord Melbourne, Lewes, 5 January 1831, signature illeg. The National Archives, HO 17/50.

out soon afterwards ‘that Goodman is not acquainted with Cobbett’s Person and [...] he may have mistaken a Disciple of C’s who lectured after he left Battle.’⁴⁶⁰ This disciple was Charles Inskipp, a former metropolitan policeman who had decided to ‘throw off his Coat’ and ‘join the Mob’ after the cancellation of the king’s visit to the Lord Mayor’s dinner at the Guildhall the previous autumn.⁴⁶¹ He returned to Battle, where he went ‘round to the neighbouring village Beer Shops lecturing the paupers after Cobetts fashion’, wearing a cape decorated with tricoloured ribbons.⁴⁶² Unsurprisingly, the authorities were reluctant to publicise their mistake, although the king privately told Wellington that ‘he took great blame for himself for having been led to propose the pardoning of Goodman. Some Sussex gentlemen had got round him & there was a hope he would have given some evidence against Cobbett.’⁴⁶³ Roger Wells’s account is the most convincing attempt to untangle this episode, arguing that ‘Goodman deliberately juxtaposed Inskipp and Cobbett in a cynical attempt to incriminate the latter’ and emphasizing the extent of William IV’s personal involvement in the case.⁴⁶⁴ Indisputably cynical, Goodman’s performance is also impressive: facing execution, the 18-year old Goodman managed a courtroom display that enlisted much local sympathy and then capitalised on this by concocting a story that he knew the authorities would want to hear. Realising their mistake and not wanting it exposed, Goodman was transported to Australia as quickly as possible.

On 17 February an indictment appeared charging Cobbett with seditious libel, citing the article ‘Rural War’, published on 11 December 1830, which Trevor had read out

⁴⁶⁰ Quoted in Wells, ‘Cobbett, Swing and William IV’, p. 45.

⁴⁶¹ Bellingham and Barton to Lord Melbourne, Battle, 26 November 1830, The National Archives, HO 52/10, f. 431.

⁴⁶² To Freeling, Post Office, Battle, 27 November 1830, The National Archives, HO 52/10, f. 435.

⁴⁶³ Quoted in Wells, ‘Cobbett, Swing and William IV’, p. 45.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

in the Commons. The tone of the *Register* over the next few months is mixed: anger at the Swing sentences being passed and apprehension about his own trial (repeatedly delayed, as in 1810, to ‘keep their *menace* hanging over my head’) is combined with genuine enthusiasm for ‘the REFORM BILL; the *Bill of Bills*; the thing that we have been labouring for, for so many years.’⁴⁶⁵ He sardonically refers to his own case under the heading, ‘Liberal Whig Prosecution’, and describes the notice of the trial arriving as the Reform Bill he had helped bring about was being celebrated in the streets outside,

during the general blaze of illuminations of last night [...] while I was sitting in a room behind the curtains drawn to weaken the blaze of the illumination of my own windows. It was at this moment, and while I heard the rejoicings in the street, that this proof of Ministerial malignity was put into my hand.⁴⁶⁶

This vivid moment of reportage is followed the next week by a letter to newspaper editors in Paris that expands on the irony of his trial:

GENTLEMEN,

WHEN you first heard of the above prosecution you were *surprised*, and one or more of you observed, that you should *narrowly watch the progress of it*; for that it appeared to be a “very *curious* thing, that a REFORMING Ministry should endeavour to crush *the most able supporter of the cause of Reform.*” [...] According to our laws and usages, a man by whom a woman is *in the family way (enceinte)* is, in certain cases, *compelled to marry her*, and then he is said *to be led to the church in a halter*. Yet he, when in the church, promises and vows that he will *love and cherish the bride* to the end of their days! Just such a marriage is now taking place between the Whig-Ministry and Reform; *I have very kindly furnished the halter* for the happy occasion: and they are showing their *gratitude* by this prosecution, which will now no longer appear to you so very *surprising!*⁴⁶⁷

The irony of his persecution by a reforming ministry is here joined to his insistence on the interdependence of the English and French press and, at the same time, a

⁴⁶⁵ ‘To the Readers of the Register. The Prosecution’, *Political Register*, 14 May 1831 and ‘To the Readers of the Register’, *Political Register*, 19 March 1831.

⁴⁶⁶ ‘Liberal Whig Prosecution’, *Political Register*, 30 April 1831.

⁴⁶⁷ ‘To the Conductors of the Paris Journals’, *Political Register*, 7 May 1831.

confidence that politics is best understood in terms of ordinary life and popular idioms.

The Cobbett papers at Nuffield and the Home Office archives at Kew show the preparations that were made for the trial by both Cobbett and his prosecutors. Home Office correspondents had been urging prosecution since the Rotunda lectures in September: one letter describes a ‘dangerous Monster’ using ‘seditious & inflammatory language’, while a more nuanced one suggests that prosecution should be combined with an end to regressive taxation: ‘a reduction of taxes on necessities (soap & candle included) & [...] a graduated property tax & the country will be relieved, peace restored, and the property of the great saved.’⁴⁶⁸ By November, Peel was sending the Government law officers reports from his spies at the Rotunda lectures, ‘at which meetings Mr Hunt, Mr Carlisle, Mr Cobbett and Mr Taylor are in the practice of addressing the people assembled on political questions’, demanding to know whether there were grounds for prosecution – a letter three days later describes him as ‘very anxious’ to know their opinion.⁴⁶⁹ Under Melbourne, the Home Office continued to study Cobbett’s writings and speeches and the Treasury Solicitor’s file on the 1831 trial contains, alongside the Crown brief, the indictment and Denman’s notes on the trial, copies of the *Two-Penny Trash* for November 1830, December 1830 and January 1831.⁴⁷⁰ All three are hand-dated ‘24 January 1831’ – three weeks before the indictment was returned – suggesting that they were purchased at this date and combed for evidence against Cobbett. Sections that might be read as seditious are

⁴⁶⁸ Myers to Peel, Portsea, 22.9.1830, HO 44/21, ff. 255-6 and to Peel, 10.1830, sig. illeg., The National Archives, HO 44/21, ff. 408-9.

⁴⁶⁹ Peel to the Attorney and Solicitor General, Whitehall, 10.11.1830, Law Officers’ letter book, The National Archives, HO 49/7, p. 406, and Home Office official to the Attorney General, 13.11.1830, Treasury Solicitor’s letter book, The National Archives, TS 2/23, p. 13.

⁴⁷⁰ The National Archives, TS 11/73/237.

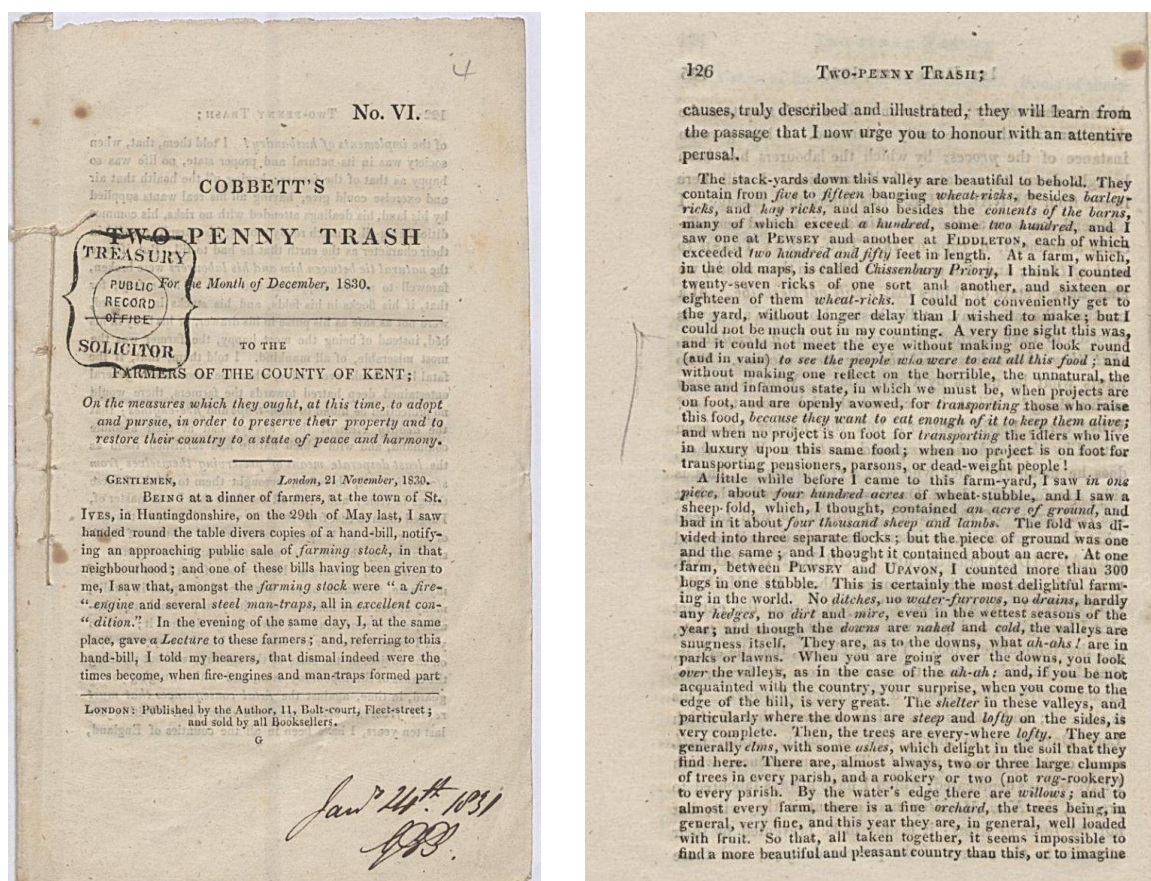


Figure 9: The December 1830 number of *Two-Penny Trash* in the Treasury Solicitor's archives, which was acquired in January 1831 and combed for further libels. The right hand page shows one of several passages from *Rural Rides* that were marked in pencil for their possibly seditious content (The National Archives, TS 11/73/237).

marked in pencil, including two sections of an extract from *Rural Rides* that Cobbett had re-printed in December's *Two-Penny Trash* (see Figure 9). These marked passages from *Rural Rides* are perhaps the only canonical English literary journey or classic work of Romantic period landscape writing that lies marked up in the Home Office archives as evidence which the Government law officers hoped to use as evidence in a prosecution for seditious libel.

Cobbett's defence was prepared by his solicitor, Edward Faithfull, together with John and James Cobbett, who were both barristers. Their papers on the trial include notes

on potential lines of defence and the difference between tendency and intention, subpoenas for witnesses, research on the members of the special jury and a draft letter from Faithfull to Cobbett advising him not to listen to anyone,

who may hint that the prosecution will not proceed on the ground of your Registers ~~now~~ being [[^] more] in aid [[^] favour] of the Ministers on the Reform question; because he knows (he says) it is the ~~intention~~ determination of your prosecutors to proceed, and it is his opinion that rather than you should not be tried [[^] and convicted] your opponents would add a million to the national debt!!

He goes on to tell him to ‘be extremely cautious not to allude to the fires’ in the *Register* ‘or in any manner give the Prosecutors any assistance in their case’ – advice Cobbett characteristically ignored.⁴⁷¹ There is also a copy of the indictment which describes him as ‘William Cobbett [...] labourer’ and accuses him of inciting the ‘labourers and working people’ to arson and riot. The annotations that have been made to this copy of the indictment note, ‘the good resulting to the labourers in getting higher Wages’ and the fact that the alleged libel, ‘was published after the fires had taken place’, but also insist that, ‘the Register is addressed to the People of Hampshire and Wiltshire – not to the labourers and working people of England’ (see Figure 10). Three instances of the phrase ‘Labourers and working people’ are underlined in the indictment, and a handwritten note adds that, ‘It no where alludes to these people as an address to them’. The article in the *Register* that Cobbett was being prosecuted for publishing had indeed been addressed to the people of Hampshire and Wiltshire, not to the labourers and working people more generally, and this copy of the indictment shows that Cobbett sensed an opportunity to make specificity of epistolary address a central part of his defence: while the government wanted to read him as a demagogue inciting the working people to riot, he would insist that he was a

⁴⁷¹ Faithfull to Cobbett, 18 April 1831, Nuffield, XXI/9/11/1-2.

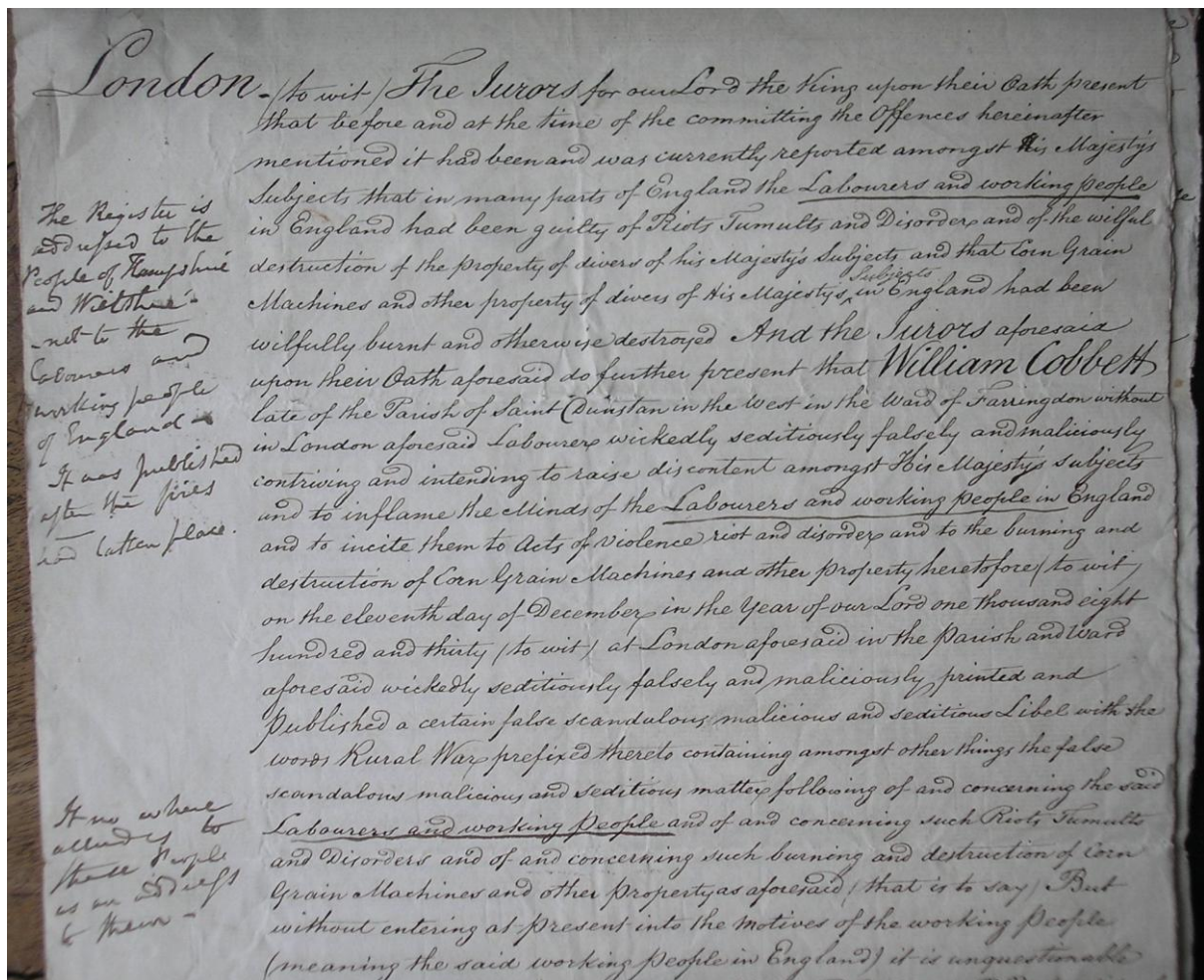


Figure 10: Annotated copy of Cobbett's indictment (Nuffield, XI/4/1-3).

labourer writing to the people of two specific counties.

Early on in the trial Cobbett interrupted the Attorney General, Thomas Denman (who had been Queen Caroline's solicitor in 1820), to draw attention to his designation as 'Labourer' in the indictment:

Mr. COBBETT. I beg that the indictment may be read.

Lord TENTERDEN. It will be read at the proper time.

C. Will it be read before I go into my defence?

C. When is the proper season?

T. This is not it.

C. I beg to be excused. The Attorney General has, in the indictment, denominated me a "labourer;" being a labourer, I am entitled to indulgence.

T. This is not the time for you to address the Jury. I cannot hear you now.
 C. Being a “labourer,” and ignorant of the law, I did not know.
 The ATTORNEY-GENERAL resumed. You will see the propriety of a remark with which I took the liberty of making a few minutes ago. You will see, from what has now passed, the spirit in which this defence is to be carried on by the gentleman.
 C. A labourer if you please.
 T. If you will not sit down, sir, I must try the case in your absence.
 C. Unless the Attorney-General call me a “labourer,” I must protest every time.

Frustrated by Cobbett’s insistence on being referred to as a labourer, Denman is riled into describing him as ‘one of the greatest masters of the English language who has ever composed in it.’⁴⁷² Cobbett, ‘in return for this compliment’, tells the court that, ‘in the whole course of my life, I never met with any thing so insufferably stupid as the document I have now got hold of, drawn up by a Whig Attorney-General’.⁴⁷³ He goes on to declare ‘that I am the watchman, the man on the tower, who can be neither coaxed nor wheedled nor bullied’, a statement which must have had an electric effect in the courtroom and left Denman complaining ‘that he is a very difficult person to deal with: for it is somewhat hard to speak of his writings so as to meet his feelings on the subject’.⁴⁷⁴ Cobbett’s defence included the assertion that the passage in the indictment had been taken out of context and made reference to the successive increases in the price of the *Register*. He also invoked the precedents of other libel trials, including the cases of Horne Tooke and John and Leigh Hunt, and encompassed other parts of the Swing uprising, producing a declaration signed by 103 people in Battle that Goodman’s statement was false. He went on to tell the court that Goodman ‘was hurried out of the country’ when the authorities discovered his statement was false and produces ‘a letter written on board the transport ship at Portsmouth, and

⁴⁷² *A Full and Accurate Report of the Trial of William Cobbett, Esq.*, re-printed in *Selected Writings*, ed. Nattrass, vol. 6, pp. 92-3.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 142 and 151.

addressed to his brother-in-law'. Goodman's letter blames 'his own bad *courses*, and his own *bad conduct*' for his crimes, and the handwriting and perfect spelling of this letter leads Cobbett to claim that the badly spelt confessions were 'fabrications of the Whigs.'⁴⁷⁵

Cobbett had subpoenaed the Cabinet as witnesses so that the trial became one of the government as much as of Cobbett.⁴⁷⁶ His question to Melbourne as to why Goodman had been pardoned was not allowed, but Lord Brougham was forced to confirm that the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge – which included Thomas Denman on its committee – had applied to re-publish Cobbett's 1816 *Letter to the Luddites* as a means to stop the riots. Denman complained of the 'theatrical effect' Cobbett used in his defence, yet it succeeded: the audience in the court laughed when Lord Brougham was called as a witness in Cobbett's defence, and they relished the attack on the Whigs, which Lord Grey and his ministers had to sit and listen to:

The Whigs were always a most tyrannical faction [...] the most severe, the most grasping, the most greedy, the most tyrannical faction whose proceedings are recorded in history [...] the Tories ruled us with rods, but the Whigs scourge us with scorpions!⁴⁷⁷

His defence was made in the idiomatic style of his writings: 'the Whig ministry' had 'played what the country people call *cat and pan*' with him, the alleged libel is re-phrased in terms of 'the old saying, that "it is an ill will that blows good to nobody"' and he repeats his claim that the Whigs 'look upon it as I do, that they are married to Reform, and that I am the man who has furnished the halter in which they are led to

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 128.

⁴⁷⁶ Lords Grey, Brougham, Melbourne, Durham, Goderich and Palmerston were present in the court. 'Liberal Whig Persecution. To the Cobbettites.' *Political Register*, 16 July 1831.

⁴⁷⁷ *The Trial of William Cobbett*, pp. 162, 145 and 143.

the church.⁴⁷⁸ Lord Tenterden told the jury to dismiss everything irrelevant and focus on the alleged libel, suggesting that ‘its effect upon those to whom it was addressed was, perhaps, rather to promote than to prevent mischief’.⁴⁷⁹ The jury retired to consider their verdict and Cobbett later described in the *Register* how two hundred of the two to three thousand in court during the day remained there all night, some ‘slept upon the benches. My attorney slept in the jury-box, and one gentleman *slept in the Judge’s chair*’.⁴⁸⁰ At nine o’clock the following morning the jury announced they were equally divided, Lord Tenterden discharged them and Cobbett was free.

He had been vindicated in a spectacular way, but his euphoria was dampened by the suffering inflicted on the countryside by the Special Commissions. Hobsbawm and Rudé describe how, ‘in the south of England, there were whole communities that, for a generation, were stricken by the blow’. Cobbett had made a similar point as early as January 1831, writing of the agricultural labourers that

above all things they are affectionate [...] the constant participation in each other’s hardships and toils tends to bind them more firmly to one another [...] Even the villages themselves are connected with one another [...] Is any man so stupid as to imagine that there is a single soul in all Pewsey, man, woman

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 116, 132 and 144.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 166. The unscrupulous way in which judges directed juries in early nineteenth-century libel trials is noted by Hazlitt in his commentary on William Hone’s trials – another politically motivated prosecution in which the defendant’s brilliant handling of his own defence led to an acquittal. Hazlitt observes how Ellenborough and Abbott tried to influence the jury, ‘first, On the law of libel in general—then on the tendency of the publication; and lastly, that the tendency was so manifest, that without considering the circumstances of the writer or of the times, they could pronounce that the intentions of the writer were criminal. Certainly quickness of decision is an excellent quality in a Judge, but this was marvellously quick [...] Why did they undertake to argue the case with the Jury? perhaps from deficiency of the prosecutor, in comparison of the defendant?’ However, the jury ‘judged for themselves on facts on which they were competent to judge [...] and they acquitted him almost with as little hesitation as that with which the Judge had condemned him.’ In a follow-up piece on the libel laws, Hazlitt argues that ‘if the tendency be taken as evidence of the intention of the writer, as we admit if often may be, and if the intention be taken as conclusive proof of the *malice*, all free political writing, that is of any use to the world, is libellous, and the liberty of the press is consequently but a name’. ‘Case of Mr. Hone’, *The Yellow Dwarf*, 3 January 1818 and 24 January 1818, in Duncan Wu ed., *New Writings of William Hazlitt*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), vol. 1, pp. 300-02 and 315.

⁴⁸⁰ ‘Liberal Whig Prosecution: To the Cobbettites’, *Political Register*, 16 July 1831.

or child, who will not remember the transportation of eleven men of that village?⁴⁸¹

The wretched conditions that provoked the riots are also the cause of stronger ties within the communities, which in turn ensure that the transportations are an especially terrible form of punishment (see Figure 11). After the trial, Cobbett thanked the people of Battle who ‘heard of the result of the trial with a degree of satisfaction, surpassed, if surpassed at all, only by that of the people of the ten little hard parishes lying between Winchester and Whitchurch.’⁴⁸² He had published a letter ‘To the Labourers of England’ in April, opening,

I ADDRESS myself to the labourers of the whole kingdom; but I am particularly desirous that this paper should be read by those of you who live in the beautiful valleys of the south of Wiltshire, and in the little *hard* parishes, as I call them, in the north of Hampshire, beginning at the lower den of Surrey, and sweeping along over the little dips in the high lands, till you come to Stockbridge southward, and to Weyhill and Coohill northward [...] consisting of East Stratton, West Stratton, Micheldever, Weston, Wonston, Sutton Scotney, Bullington, Barton Stacey, Hunton, and Stoke-Charity.

298 parishes. - houses 49,516 - Ag. Pop. 116,078. - 16/1
2 killed.
135 Trans.
73 Widows.
294 Tradeless Children.
504
Nearly 2 victims to every parish.
1 Victim to every 98 houses.
1 Victim to every 220 souls in Agriculture.
1 Able labourer killed or transported out of every 211 in the county.

Figure 11: A calculation by Cobbett of the cost of the Swing rising, labelled on the reverse, ‘Hampshire Slaughter’ (Nuffield, XI/6/1).

⁴⁸¹ Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 263 and ‘To the King’s Ministers’, *Political Register*, 22 January 1831.

⁴⁸² ‘Liberal Whig Prosecution. To the Cobbettites’, *Political Register*, 16 July 1831.

These ‘little flinty parishes’ had been ‘the most hardly treated’, with their victims including Henry Cook of Micheldever, 19 years old, who was executed for knocking down, but not injuring, a local landowner, and Joseph and Robert Mason of Bullington, 32 and 24 years old.⁴⁸³ Cobbett’s attention to their case is underpinned not just by sympathy but also by a sense of responsibility, having learnt that the Mason brothers were members of a club that met in cottages and inns around Bullington to drink, sing and read the *Register*. At a meeting in the Swan Inn at Sutton Scotney they decided to follow Cobbett’s advice and petition William IV for reform, which they did by re-writing Cobbett’s ‘Letter to the King’. Joseph Mason carried the petition, with 176 signatures, to Brighton, where he was not allowed to present it to the king. On 19 November they were part of a crowd that went round neighbouring parishes extorting money from farmers and demanding higher wages. At the Winchester Special Commission, they were convicted of robbery and demanding money and sentenced to transportation for life.⁴⁸⁴ Twenty years later, one of the men from Barton Stacey involved in the riots described how Joseph Mason ‘was a great friend of Mr Cobbett. He used to write to Mr Cobbett’, and recalled how he was himself visited ‘times and times after I was in Winchester gaol, to get me to speak against the two Masons’, once again proving that the authorities were most determined to secure convictions where there was evidence of political motivation.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸³ ‘To the Labourers of England’, *Political Register*, 2 April 1831. This letter also appeared as the April 1831 number of *Two-Penny Trash*.

⁴⁸⁴ See The National Archives, HO 52/7, ff. 233-8 for a fragment of a letter by Robert Mason on petitions for reform that fell into the hands of a Royal Navy captain and was sent to Lord Melbourne – justifying E.P. Thompson’s comment that ‘in the state papers we seem to meet a society of creeps and informers’ (E.P. Thompson, ‘The Crime of Anonymity’ in *Albion’s Fatal Tree*, p. 272).

⁴⁸⁵ Quoted in Alexander Somerville, *The Whistler at the Plough*, 3 vols (Manchester, 1852-53), vol. 1, p. 263.

Cobbett visited the Masons' mother in March and again in August, sent her 'Cobbett's corn' and reported in the *Register* on how she was coping. He felt a personal sense of responsibility towards the hard parishes and any suspicion that this was calculated can be disproved by the repeated references to Mrs Mason and Henry Cook in private, family letters: 'Mrs Mason's corn is very good [...] Much about as forward as ours', he tells John from Sutton Scotney, to Sapsford, 'the corn in the "hard parishes" is beautiful', and in a letter to Anne,

I saw Mrs. Mason the mother and her little field and meadow and her cow and bees; saw Mr. Dedams the Shoemaker; learned all about poor Cook, whose blood will never be forgotten there; Denman told an infamous lie about him; 6 young girls in white and 6 young men in their white smock-frocks met the corpse a mile from the village, and the whole of the working people of all the parishes round about assemble and followed the corpse to the grave! It is a story enough to rouse the blood of a stone [...] Part of the crime of the Masons was telling the parson that they had read the Protestant Reformation, and that it had taught them all about tythes!⁴⁸⁶

The Mason family and the hard parishes become central to his account of

Parliamentary reform:

My friends, the working people of England [...] to the whole of you I now announce with feelings of great joy, that we are now about to have THAT reform of Parliament for which JOSEPH MASON carried a petition to the King, from Bullington to Brighton, signed by about two hundred of the labourers of those little hard parishes.⁴⁸⁷

When the Reform Act was finally passed, Cobbett organised a festival on 7 July 1832 at Sutton Scotney, with the one hundred and fifty villagers who had signed Joseph Mason's petition and were still at liberty seated at the head table. The day after the festival, he travelled on to Micheldever to lay a wreath on Henry Cook's grave. In the

⁴⁸⁶ Cobbett to John Morgan Cobbett, Sutton Scotney, 14 August 1831, Nuffield, XXX/253/1-2; Cobbett to Sapsford, Kensington, 18 August 1831, Nuffield, IV/64/1-2 and Cobbett to Anne Cobbett, Alton, n.d., Nuffield, XXX/314/1.

⁴⁸⁷ 'To the Labourers of England', *Political Register*, 2 April 1831.

aftermath of Swing, the hard parishes carry the full weight of Cobbett's analysis, which had previously identified reform at home with revolution abroad to give a wide angle view of the political crisis of 1830-31. He never lost his conviction that the events of these years were closely linked together, and yet, during the reprisals which followed the riots, his writings concentrate on a much narrower selection of subjects and places, using specificity of address as the most effective way of defending his writing and audience.

Afterword

In the aftermath of the Swing riots, Cobbett's correspondence comes full circle from his imprisonment in Newgate and the analysis of paper money he had presented in letters to 'the tradesmen and farmers in and near Salisbury'. Two decades later, he addresses the reprisals that followed Swing through identifying a specific audience less than twenty miles away from Salisbury: the inhabitants of the 'ten little hard parishes lying between Winchester and Whitchurch', who had been 'the most hardly treated' by the Special Commissions. This might seem to imply that Cobbett had not progressed very far in the years covered by this study, or even, as many of his admirers and critics have believed, that his true constituency always lay in a tightly circumscribed area of southern England. However, this study has attempted to demonstrate that his ability to home in on specific places and communities is matched by his ambition to make connections between distant places and pull disparate audiences together. Correspondence allows him to move in both of these contradictory directions, investing his writing with a situatedness unmatched in radical writing of the period, while broadening the reach of his political platform through addressing a diverse range of audiences. If letters and diaries of the period often seem to suggest that everyone was reading Cobbett, they were doing so because everyone could feel as if he was personally addressing (or assailing) them.

Cobbett's letter writing was transformed after 1810 for many of the same reasons that his political views had undergone a complete revolution in the first decade of the century. Just as he had begun to root his politics in experience and observation, he started to move away from a world of second-hand journalistic commentary and an artificial, derivative epistolary style – evident in the letters to William Windham

discussed in the introduction – and towards a more direct and personal form of journalism, based on the open letter. However, the grounding of Cobbett's letters in empirical reality is not the only, or even the primary, reason why they are so compelling. They are equally remarkable for the imaginative journeys they chart, which are made possible by the strong affinities between letter writing and place – a connection which appears especially vividly through Cobbett's highly spatial imagination. The maps that his letters try to construct – of the circulation of paper money and loyalist economics, the historical transformation of the English countryside or the political changes taking place across Europe and America – are very far from being direct reportage. Instead, they respond to a form of political corruption so deeply embedded that radical interventions must be built around radically new ways of seeing things.

However, the expansive, even visionary, perspective offered by Cobbett's letters is pulled back from abstraction or escapism by an unswerving focus on his own life and those of his family and readers. The displacement he had experienced, the product of his lifelong exile from the idealized rural world of his earliest memories, drives the restless movement of his writings, which mediate between contemporary, eighteenth-century and pre-Reformation England, between America, Britain and France, and between a wide array of social groups. Epistolary form leads him relentlessly back to the relation between himself and the subject in hand, until his life becomes almost archetypal. The two trials that act as bookends to this study suggest that the narrative from imprisonment in 1810 to acquittal in 1831 is in many ways a heroic one, characterized by Cobbett's refusal to be silenced by continual attempts to censor and persecute him. However, as his writings in the aftermath of the later trial show – and

despite Cobbett's formidable powers of self-publicity – the story is not simply one of personal victory. Indeed, his later writings show an increasing sense of detachment, as if the editor of the *Political Register* was entirely the creation of political controversy. As the title of his projected autobiography suggests – 'The Progress of a Ploughboy to a Seat in Parliament' – he saw the significance of his life as a demonstration of possibilities, showing what any of his readers could aspire to.

Indeed, throughout his correspondence there is little evidence of a private self kept separate from his published persona. This lack of separation, combined with the experience of years of political persecution, may have contributed to the paranoia that eventually became directed towards his own family. While this suggests the very real personal cost of having lived all of their lives so completely in print, the family correspondence also shows the centrality of his children, and his daughter Anne above all, to Cobbett's success. This took the form both of their practical support for his publishing enterprise, helping to maintain the *Political Register* in circumstances which were often intensely difficult, and in the creation of a radicalism uniquely centred around domestic life. In a period when the conservative vision of Burke's 'little platoon' is often thought to have been the last word in politics and the domestic, the importance of the self-presentation of Cobbett and his family is hard to overstate, creating an ideal model of radical domesticity.

In the final analysis, for all of his apparent egotism, and the claims of individual agency made throughout his writings, Cobbett saw his own success in terms of his family and background, and was in any case more occupied by how he could divest himself of the power he had wrested from a corrupt political system. Constantly aware

of the readers he was addressing, his correspondence represents the hope that their voices will take over from him. This belief is evident in his broad range of pedagogical projects – covering everything from grammar to history, and from national to cottage economics – and his encouragement of popular reforming discourse, from co-ordinating petitions in support of Queen Caroline to following the careers of Joseph and Robert Mason, after they had re-written his open letters as part of their own petition for parliamentary reform. In historical terms, Cobbett's theories were often proved wrong, or, at the least, he now seems to have been fighting unwinnable battles on subjects such as the national debt, political economy and industrialization. However, that does not diminish the possibilities created by his writings, developed in large part through a model of correspondence that spoke to every reader, whether lord or labourer, as an equal. The excitement of his prose lies in this intimate, humane and surprisingly optimistic form of address.

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