

GEORGE ELIOT AND LINDLEY MURRAY

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If Mary Anne Evans / George Eliot (1819-1880) ever met Lindley Murray (1745-1826), it would have been in the pages of his *English Grammar, adapted to the different classes of learners, with an Appendix, containing Rules and Observations, for assisting the more advanced students to write with perspicuity and accuracy* (York, 1795), probably in the form of a much later edition. (Murray revised his *Grammar*, even if in very small detail, for virtually every new edition or printing.) It is difficult to imagine that Mary Anne Evans would have been taught out of any other book. That Murray's *Grammar* belonged in the outfit of any respectable pupil or teacher of the day is evident from the existence of Charlotte Brontë's copy, now in the Brontë Society's Brontë Parsonage Museum Library, Haworth, West Yorkshire. George Eliot has Murray make his appearance in Chapters 23 and 24 of *Middlemarch*. (For full effect, both of these chapters must be read together.) In the first, he is mentioned briefly in the passage which characterizes the difference in social station between Mrs Vincy, who may be said to belong to what I have termed for ease of general reference the 'gentlemanly class', and Mrs Garth, whose hard-won respectability is stated succinctly in the following passage:

Mrs Vincy had never been at her ease with Mrs Garth, and frequently spoke of her as a woman who had had to work for her bread – meaning that Mrs Garth had been a teacher before her marriage; in which case an intimacy with Lindley Murray and Mangnall's 'Questions' was something like a draper's discrimination of calico trademarks, or a courier's acquaintance with foreign countries: no woman who was better off needed that sort of thing.

Lindley Murray (*ie*, the *Grammar* by this 'Compiler', as he termed himself) is linked with Richmal Mangnall's *Miscellaneous and Historical Questions* (first published in Stockport in 1800), as epitomizing the knowledge and culture that an educated person could be expected to have attained if he was to have any claim to respectability, an attainment that Mrs Vincy evidently has no need of, as her class naturally defines the norm of respectability and culture. Further contrasts appear later on in this passage, where Mr. Garth's practice of paying his debts in full is contrasted with that of the typical gentleman, who has no

compunction about not paying 20 shillings in the pound. The decisive role played by money in this social differentiation is well-analysed by David Daiches in his *George Eliot: Middlemarch*. London: Edward Arnold, 1963.

What is significant for an historian of linguistics (including the history of ‘practical’, or vernacular grammar, as opposed to ‘philosophical’, or scientific grammar), as also for any cultural or social historian, is how George Eliot could take for granted in her audience of the 1870’s knowledge of the significance of this allusion to Lindley Murray. If we can imagine that most of this audience would have received their education, say, before 1851 (the date of the Great Exhibition), then they too would have received their indoctrination into English Grammar via Lindley Murray. Once a subject becomes the common property of a community of like minds, it then also becomes a suitable subject or target for satire. This is confirmed by the existence of several parodies of Murray, of which the best is *The Comic English Grammar: a New and Facetious Introduction to the English Tongue. By the Author of the Comic Latin Grammar* (London 1840). Further, Charles Dickens makes Murray a figure of fun in the visit of Miss Monflathers’ young ladies boarding school to Mrs Jarley’s wax-works in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41):

... Mrs Jarly (had) alter(ed) the face and costume of Mr. Grimaldi as clown to represent Mr. Lindley Murray as he appeared when engaged in composition of his English Grammar ... (Chapter XXIX).

Just as English grammar was once, and, in Mary Anne Evans’ day, probably still was taught by question and answer (a form of catechism), a practice that goes back to the grammars based on Donatus and for centuries before, so Mrs Mangnall’s *Questions* are deliberately structured into (short) questions and (long) answers. This must have been considered an educational practice of considerable value in textbooks of all kinds, much as in the course of the history of education a constant changing kaleidoscope of methods and materials have been supposed to provide the key to educational salvation. That the educational ‘reformer’ Joseph Lancaster as well as Elizabeth Fry were members of the Religious Society of Friends, as was Lindley Murray, is no accident. [1]

Later, in a much longer passage in Chapter 24 (too long to quote here), Mrs Garth begins the futile task of instructing her young son Ben in the mysteries of English grammar. She (and George Eliot) select one of the most opaque Rules of Murray’s *Grammar*, Rule IV of Syntax:

Rule IV. A noun of multitude, or signifying many, may have a verb or pronoun agreeing with it, either of the singular or plural number; yet not without regard to the import of the word, as conveying unity or plurality of idea: as ... (here follow examples, analyses, and comment and discussion).

Here, as elsewhere, Murray is using a rule of (later editions) of Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (London 1762); Lowth's *Grammar* was, before Murray's, one of the most respected analyses of the rules of grammar governing the construction (*ie*, the construing) of the ideal form of English. Rule IV of Murray's *Syntax* is one of the paragraphs (Second Edition, 1763, pp 111-112) in Lowth's *Grammar* setting out the principles governing the concord of noun and verb (also pronoun), as Mrs Garth observes. (Murray here as elsewhere edits Lowth's phrasing somewhat.)

There seems to have been some element of fun in George Eliot's selection of this rule. Lowth was of course merely pointing to the practice of the educated literary use of English of his day, and setting up rules for explicit guidance in this norm. His audience would have been the educated gentlemanly class, with a knowledge of classical languages, or at least of Latin grammar and its application to the parsing of Latin texts. If George Eliot was looking for something she remembered from her school days, it could well have been (as it was) this rule, which must appeal to anyone's sense of the ridiculous (although in fact it is carefully if clumsily formulated, and descriptively adequate as far as it goes). The possibility that the rule could make any kind of sense to a child of Ben's age is practically nil, but this does not stop Mrs Garth making the attempt; and this then gives rise to a general family discussion of language and good (*ie*, polite) norms of linguistic behaviour, with Letty chiming in. (Mary Garth wishes to become a teacher – like her mother – and there is mention elsewhere of a school in York – which could this be?) The whole passage must be read carefully and in context to see how, through the medium of the grammar lesson, Mrs Garth brings home to us the further meaning of the earlier allusion to Lindley Murray (George Eliot does not evidently use the inverted commas often supplied in some of the common editions), and we are painted a warm picture of cosy family life at the Garths.

Is George Eliot quoting from memory? The following passage from Cross' *Life* (III, p 420) is of interest.

Her memory held securely her great stores of reading. Even of light books her recollections were always crisp, definite, and vivid. On our way home from Venice, after my illness, we were reading French novels of Cherbuliez, Alphonse Daudet, Gustave Droz, George Sand. Most of these books she had read years before, and I was astonished to find what clear-cut, accurate impressions had been retained, not only of all the principal characters, but also of all the subsidiary personages – even their names were generally remembered. But, on the other hand, her verbal memory was not always to be depended on. She never could trust herself to write a quotation without verifying it.

It seems to me unlikely that George Eliot could have quoted from this rule with such accuracy without consulting some copy of Murray's *Grammar* – unless of course she had had to memorize it during the school days of Mary Anne Evans, and something of the rule's innate opaqueness (at least to young minds) had given it a salience that made it stick in her memory. There seems to be no mention of Lindley Murray or his *Grammar* in any of George Eliot's notebooks etc that have so far appeared in published (or unpublished) form, and indeed there seems no reason to expect that a mid-Victorian intellectual, typical in every regard, but distinguished by her deep learning, humanity (especially as the author of *Middlemarch*), and genius, would have felt it necessary to make entries into her notebooks etc from a school grammar. [2]

Notes

[1] For Lindley Murray we are very fortunate to have the very valuable, detailed, and informative, if somewhat partisan, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Lindley Murray: In a Series of Letters, written by himself*. With a Preface, and a Continuation of the Memoirs, by Elizabeth Frank (York, 1826). Elizabeth Frank was Murray's amanuensis, and, as we would call her today, his research assistant. Further information about the York community of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), and Lindley Murray and his milieu, can be found in *Friends of York*, by Stephen Allott (York: William Sessions Limited, 1978), and *The Tukes of York*, by William K. & E. Margaret Sessions (York: William Sessions Limited, 1971).

It must have been William Tuke (1732-1822) who encouraged and possibly even aided Murray to settle in York from Pennsylvania in 1784, ostensibly for reasons of health (Murray had suffered a debilitating and incapacitating illness); here he (was) set to work immediately on a

second career as a writer of a series of educational works, some religious and devotional in character, some, like his *Grammar*, school books. All sought to inculcate, whatever else, the twin attributes of Piety and Virtue, *ie*, sacred and secular precepts of proper behaviour, toward the Almighty, on the one hand, and toward one's fellow men, on the other. Thus the high regard paid to Murray's *Grammar* as the embodiment of linguistic propriety was fully consonant with other moral precepts of the day.

For an account of how Murray actually came to write his *Grammar* for the school(s) started by the Tukes, see *The Mount School York – 1751-1814 – 1831-1931*, by H. Winifred Sturge and Theodora Clark (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1931), 'Part I. The School in Trinity Lane founded by Esther Tuke 1785-1814', by H. Winifred Sturge, pp 1-31.

A detailed analysis of Murray's life and work including especially the *Grammar*, can be found in the study, *Lindley Murray – Grammarian*, by C. E. West (Leeds University M. A. Thesis, 1953), which Mr. West and I have prepared for publication (now published as a volume in *Lindley Murray: The Educational Works*, London 1996). Murray had every reason to be convinced by the success of his various publications (mainly compilations) that they not only met an important need, but were superior improvements to the sources from which he had taken 'his materials', as Murray terms them.

[2] I have not been able to locate even the name Lindley Murray in any notebook etc of George Eliot's, and in a letter to me of 4 April 1979, Gordon Haight says:

Except for the reference in *Middlemarch* I can recall no other references to Lindley Murray or his *Grammar*. But it would be very surprising if the book was not used in Mrs Wallington's School in Nuneaton and by Miss Franklin in Coventry. The quotation of Rule IV is undoubtedly from a memory carefully engraved in childhood.

There are no references to Murray in any letters of George Eliot I have seen. In his *George Eliot, A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p 11, Gordon Haight says:

One of the first things Mary Anne learnt was a new pronunciation of the English language. The broad Midland dialect that she had spoken all her life with many north Staffordshire phrases used by her father had been softened somewhat by Miss Lewis. Now it

was banished quickly in favour of Miss Rebecca's precise, cultivated speech. Unfortunately, Mary Anne's 'chameleon-like nature,' as Cross calls it, led her also to imitate the pompous Johnsonian diction, which was probably less vigorous than her own homely country talk. One of the things modelled on Miss Rebecca's example was entirely good: the low, well-modulated, musical voice, which impressed every one who knew George Eliot in later years.

With great respect to Gordon Haight's great learning and knowledge of George Eliot's life and work, the first three sentences seem to me a speculative elaboration or extrapolation of the statements in previous biographies, including that of Cross, that merely document George Eliot's school record, etc. That she must have come into contact with notions of linguistic propriety belongs in fact to the general trend of early 19thC educational and social movements, including the striving towards a linguistic norm defined by such authorities as Murray, Blair, Walker, and others; and when it comes to actual observations of her own about the language and thought of the lower orders, George Eliot emerges as no more democratic than any of her contemporaries. (See her 'Servants' Logic', *Pall Mall Gazette*, I (17 March 1865), 310-311.)

The idea that it was sufficient to say that someone was a human being in order for him to possess all human intellectual faculties had to wait for example for Edward Burnett Tylor's *Anthropology* (1881) of the second half of the 19th century. For George Eliot, as for her contemporaries, it made little difference whether the thought and speech processes of the lower orders (let alone of savage tribes) were of a different (lower) order to that of the ideal set up by the manners and speech of the gentlemanly classes because they simply represented an earlier, less-developed (more primitive) stage of the next or higher order of development; or whether, as in extreme cases, the differences were due to innate racial differences, with the primitive races being so in race as well as in culture and language. The humanity that George Eliot displays in her works reveals her as the humane person that she was, but it would be mistaken to suppose that in other respects, with regard to language and culture, she could be in advance of her time.

The historical dimension introduced into 19thC science, especially linguistic science, had the effect of strengthening and providing a rationalization for the common beliefs about the nature of the social order; only later, under the influence of anthropological (social anthropological) thinking could a non-racist concept of a universal humanity emerge.