AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LETTER 1808

[fo. 1] London, June 15th, 1808

The date of this letter announces to you that I have attained my twenty ninth year! – On the same day of June 1779 at one o'clock in the Morning, – I drew my first breath. The identical moment of my existence has been strongly impressed upon my memory by my relations. – and, as it is usual or ought to be so, to take a retrospective view of ones past life, – you must excuse me, – If I indulge my fancy for once to lay a few of the principal events of them before you, – tho' perhaps, there may not be one of them that will afford you any gratification.

My earliest recollection of confinement. – was with an old woman, of the Name of Hewlett, who kept a Childs School, – in St Ebbs.[403] – I was sent to her, when about 3 or 4 years of age. – Doubtless, – here it was, I first learnt the English Alphabet, – from the Horn book – of course.[404] – I cannot say what progress I made here. The faculties of an illiterate woman of 75 cannot be great, – consequently, – I must conclude that I was sent to her, like the rest of the youngsters of that age to keep me out of harm's way. – She has been long dead. – From this little repository of noisy children – I was removed to a Mrs. Madegon, – where I continued but a short time. – From single letters. – I might have proceeded to the important part of tacking the A.B.C. together, – & before I quitted her, – I could spell words of two syllables! – Afterwards, – I was sent to a Mr. Mitchell, in Penny farthing Street,[405] – my friends no doubt thinking, – I had been under the tuition of old women quite long enough, – and as my unruly temper had begun to show itself, – thought it high time that I should be under the chastising hand of a Master. – Therefore, – to this Mr. Mitchell, I was consigned. – A Man fully competent to the charge of his office. – A Learned man in every sense, – a severe one also, – but, – a Master, – who well knew the art of advancing a boy's improvement, – if he

[403] St Ebbes, a district then of packed medieval streets on the south-west of Oxford's centre.

[404] A children's primer consisting of a mounted sheet containing the letters of the alphabet, protected by a thin, transparent cover of horn, used from the sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth century.

[405] 4 No longer in existence.

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possessed any thing in the shape of a genius. – I can truly say, that mine was more rapid while under his care, – than it has ever been since. – He had a Mad Wife (Poor Man, – he was not the only one possessed of a Mad Wife,) – by whom he had two very clever daughters. – But the whole of this family. – I believe, – are on the other side of the Grave. – I have a Letter by me, – from him, – praising me in flattering terms. – & assuring those to whom it was addressed, – that one day or other I should become a considerable character! – I mention this circumstance, – to show that he was by no means gifted with the true[406] spirit of prophecy. – And if I did really possess a notion of acquiring knowledge in this early stage of my life, – I have long been out of the path that leads to it, – and it is a convincing proof that I have made a shameful use of my time ever since. – I was at this School, when the news arrived of your Mothers death, – & well remember with what a Bashaw sort of pride, I used to strutt about the School room in my suit of Mourning, divested of all thought, of future support, – and the serious consequences attending such a loss.[407]

I was now growing a big and ungovernable boy, – humoured at home in every shape, – and it was agreed to remove me away, – at least for a season, – and I was accordingly packed off to Witney, – to board and lodge with a Mr. Harbud – but to attend Mr. Seelys School, – this happened in 1788 and 1789.[408] – Here I was strictly attended to, as far as the Harbuds were concerned, – you know their character and can form some opinion of their treatment. – I suspect my "Scholarship" was not much advanced at this school. The Master, was old and infirm, – and the Usher – still more so. – Abt. the close of 1789. – I was removed to Bicester to a Mr. Jethro Inwood, – now Rector of Deptford in Kent. The cause of the removal I am ignorant of.

Here I made some little progress in Writing, – Arithmetic, & the Latin Language, – and met with good treatment, – particularly from Mrs. Inwood, – who proved herself a kind & indulgent woman. – In 1790 I was destined to another abode, – and fixed my head quarters with a Mr. Young, at Reading – a narrow minded Presbyterian, – and one who thought more, or at least pretended more, about heaven than filling the boys bellies. – This proved the very worst school I was ever at, – and the usage I as well as many of the rest, experienced, – would

[406] 'true' is an insertion in pencil. The letter is otherwise written in ink.

[407] Upcott refers to the death of their mother, Delly Wickens. Bashaw (or Pasha) is a high-ranking Turkish official, used here to satirize his own self-importance.

[408] In the 1820 Memoir, Upcott identifies this as Witney Grammar School. See above, **p. 3**.

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fill many sheets to narrate, – suffice it to say that I continued with him but half a year thoroughly disgusted with the sorry fare spread before us daily, – and cherishing a determination to run away from the School, – had not my friends thought fit to look out for some other, – which arose from a letter of mine being slyly put into the Post office, – full of bitter invectives against the School, and dreadful complaints of a craving appetite, with but little to allay it. – My last remove was to Mr. Beasley at Uxbridge, – in 1791,[409] – where after being there about a year & [a] half, – my health grew so bad, – that my life was despaired of, – and I was doomed to figure away once more in the paltry Town of Oxford. – The last piece of instruction I received was from a Mr. Carter in Holywell,[410] – and this finished my routine of education. – And perhaps I quitted the jurisdiction of the Tutor, – the horror of the Cane, – and the pains from the Ferula – with little more A.B.C. knowledge than I set out with,[411] – but the 3 years I remained at home afterwards, – and the little opportunities I had, – (not to say the want of inclination,) of keeping together what little I had acquired, – from the ignorance of all those around me, – who, as far as simple Reading & Writing goes, – knew much less than myself, threw me back most woefully, – and I found, when it was agreed that I was to be Settled in London for the time to come, – that I stood in need of – beginning the work over again, – for my knowledge amounted to "less than nothing".

I am now got to London – I arrived here March 1st 1797, – wonderfully struck, – like the rest of the Country folks, – with the different appearance of a place I had not been accustomed to behold. – but gradually growing partial to it, – I now give it the preference to every other. – You partly know my movements while in town. – I was destined to become a Bookseller – and in June in the same year was bound apprentice to a Mr. Wright, in Piccadilly, – of opposite Bond St.[412] – Here I continued 3 years & [a] quarter – as my Indentures were dated so that I might become liberated when I had attained the age of 21.[413] – He proved a Close & uncommunicative Man, – and whatever I acquired, was from my own industry. – Being now transplanted

[409] Thomas Ebenezer Beasley (b.1762), married Phebe Cox, 1790, and had a son in 1804. He founded Uxbridge School, first on the premises of his home, and subsequently, with the backing of the Old Meeting Chapel, it moved to a building at 126 High Street, Uxbridge. After his death the school was continued by Dr Thomas Beasley, his son.

[410] A street in Oxford running from Longwall St to Broad Street.

[411] Ferula is an archaic term for ferule, or a ruler with a widened end, used for beating children, in contrast to the cane, which was a slender rod also for beating children.

[412] Upcott was apprenticed to John Wright (1770–1844) of 169 Piccadilly.

[413] 'Indentures' are articles of apprenticeship.

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from a scene where but little was to be learnt but what was low, & vulgar, – I now felt the want of what I had lost during the three last years, – and set too, both early & late, – to gather up some of the scattered seeds of learning, – and can with truth say, that I picked up more from this method, than I had ever acquired before. – Nay, from this determination of mine, – not to be deemed a thorough Clown, – I may date – whatever improvement I have made in every shape. – And to my own perseverance alone, (for Mr. Wright would but very seldom tell me any thing, – he had handled the Money, – 50£,[414] – and thought nothing further of the engagement he was to fulfil.) Am I indebted to my further advancement in life. – When my time expired with Mr. Wright, – as I plainly perceived I could be adding nothing to my knowledge of Books by remaining in his house, – I procured a Situation at Mr. Evans's in Pall Mall,[415] – which certainty, upon the whole answered my purpose very well. – My ideas extended, – & my knowledge of trade increased. but, – the family was by no means agreeable. – However I contrived to remain there Six Years, – & from thence removed to the situation I now hold. – The rest you are well acquainted with. – I have given you this short sketch of my life, & the manner in which it has been employed to amuse you in some idle hour when you are so disposed to look at it. – Being my Birth day put me in mind of it. – It ought to be a moment of reflection. – Well, I have looked back and what is the result of these reflections? – Another year is past, – and but few, nay very few of my actions will bear the test of examination. – If I look at my studies for the last year, there is but little acquired. My reading has been various, but not extensive, – a momentary pleasure at the time, – but it has been that sort of reading which leaves but little impression behind it.

If I ask myself, "am I wiser than the past year?" – a Negative is the reply. – Am I better? – At this question, I shrink with a certain consciousness of guilt from such an enquiry. – Knowing that I am quite otherwise. – For the truth is, – that this June 15th has found me no better than the last June left me. – For, doubtless – when that arrived, – I made solemn promises of amendment, – which has amounted to nothing. – Thus it is with me, – "Reason with thyself O Man! and commune with thine own heart",[416] is what I feel no disposition to do. – My heart is corrupt, – my actions testify it, – my Mind is estranged from that which ought to be the primary object. – My ideas are worldly minded, – I know my own demerits, – I know

[414] The price of his 'indentures'.

[415] Robert Harding Evans, Bookseller, 26 Pall Mall, London.

[416] Psalm 4:4: 'Stand in awe and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.'

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I am as opposite as possible to a Christian, but, nevertheless, I am so led away, – so taken up with the follies of this life, that I cannot venture to shake off "the Devil & his Works".[417] – And in this way I trifle with my life year after year. – The "inaudible, and noiseless foot of time" creeps on,[418] – one year succeeds another with incredible dispatch, – but to what purpose? – One would suppose, to keep pace with my follies. – A time, however, will come, perhaps, not far distant, when all these follies must terminate. – And, a time will come, when I must terminate with them. – What a pity it is that I cannot be made acquainted with their heinous tendency! – Was I to be hurried, like hundreds of my fellow creatures, into Eternity, – what an account should I have to give! – but enough, – It harrows up one's soul; – In a word it will not bear a thought.

Having the opportunity of forwarding these few Notices free of expence, – I am the less anxious about sending them, than I might otherwise be. – An old friend of mine called on me today, to whom I communicated a wish of troubling him with a letter, – he readily acquiesced, – and this is the result. – I am quite surprised that you should have not received the Parcel from Uxbridge.[419] – Tis gross negligence in them to omit the sending of it. – I saw your last letter to John, – which mentioned our apparent omission.[420] – but my last Letter to you by the Coach, – must have exonerated us entirely from this charge. – I am quite angry with Sarah W.[421] for suffering the Parcel to lie so long at their house unattended to, –'tis unpardonable in her. – The want of your Parasol, must have incommoded you greatly. – poor girl, – to have your face burnt up, – in this way, – is shameful – I dare say, If I knew your heart at that moment, – it was full of rancour against me & John for keeping you so long without the necessaries you stood in need of but by this time, I trust all is well; the Parasol received – and your dear sweet person is screened from the horrors of a Mid-day sun! – I must cut short, my letter. The person to whom it is to be entrusted is waiting for it. – You must excuse this abrupt conclusion but why dont you write? – I shall be out of heart writing more till I hear from you. – but with this expectation, I shall conclude, begging you as usual to accept of my kindest remembrances, – and allow me to remain as ever Most sincerely yours

W.U.

Preserve this for particular reasons:

[417] 1 John 3:8.
[418] *All's Well That Ends Well*, Act V, Scene 3, l.42.
[419] Upcott's parcel sent via his uncle James Wickens and his wife Hannah.
[420] Probably a reference to 'her brother', John Peck.
[421] Sarah Wickens (b.1787), daughter of Upcott's Uxbridge Uncle James.

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