

**An Address to Students on the Subject of Reading,
notes in shorthand, c.1789, by Thomas Belsham, transcribed and edited by
Tony Rail and Beryl Thomas**

An address to students on the subject of reading, notes in shorthand, by Thomas Belsham. Written on a used postal cover addressed to Daventry, the residue of a letter from Samuel Whitbread MP (1720-1796). It is unclear whether the Address was delivered at Daventry, or to students at New College, Hackney, soon after Belsham became the College's resident divinity tutor in 1789. In a reference to the students' Reading Society, Belsham complains that, 'from a prudent, useful and commendable institution, [it] is grown up to be an evil of the first magnitude which calls for immediate redress'. Single sheet.¹

Introductory note²

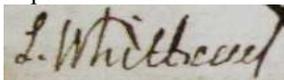
The document is a reused postal 'cover', half of a letter-sheet, detached from the half-sheet containing Whitbread's letter, which is not located. The 'cover' is addressed to 'The Rev'd Mr Belsham, Daventry.' The address pane bears a 'FREE' stamp, authorized by the signature 'S. Whitbread' in the bottom left corner;³ postmarked 'BRIGHT HELMSTONE' (Brighton); with the 'Bishop-mark' date stamp '19 OC.' The year is not indicated, though it was presumably during Belsham's tenure as tutor at Daventry Academy, 1781-89.⁴ The shorthand text was written later, by Thomas Belsham. It may be that when the 'cover' was detached, it was stored with other paper scraps, and not reused until much later. The writing respects the folds of the letter, and areas where paper was torn away when the seal was opened. There is no valediction or subscription. Although the shorthand was written hastily and untidily, with an overloaded quill or steel pen,

¹ Transcribed by Tony Rail and Beryl Thomas, from the original document in Harris Manchester College Oxford, Thomas Belsham Papers: MSS Belsham 39 addendum.

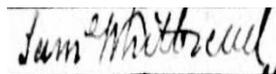
² We express our gratitude to Isabel Rivers for her suggestions and advice.

³ Samuel Whitbread MP (1720-1796) was a notable brewer, born to Henry Whitbread (1665-1727), a wealthy farmer of Cardington, Beds. At the age of sixteen he went to London as apprentice to the brewer John Wightman.

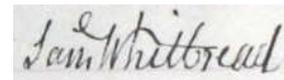
Regarding his signature, the linear S, angular W with flourish that arches through the H, and the over-reaching down-stroke on lower case D are indicative. The lower-case A, written with two straight upstrokes, terminating in distinct loops, is recognized in both the signature and the postal address.



Authorisation signature on the postal cover.



Signature in register for Whitbread's second marriage, to Mary Cornwallis, Lambeth Palace, 13 Aug 1769.



Signature, as witness in the marriage register for his daughter Harriet to James Gordon, Holborn, 10 Jul 1789.

Whitbread's son Samuel Whitbread Jr (1764-1815), who became a close friend and correspondent of Belsham, was not elected an MP until 1790, after Belsham removed to Hackney.

⁴ Thomas Belsham (1750-1829) also held an assistant tutorship at Daventry, 1770-78. He was not ordained until 9 October 1778, after moving to Angel Street Independent Chapel, Worcester.

with some phonic segments curtailed or drawn at an incorrect angle, the shorthand is configurationally identical to Thomas Belsham's writing, with many definitive similarities.⁵

As well as several collinear amendments, some words are clearly missing, suggestive of a hurried composition. Together with the use of paper scrap when better quality paper was to hand, this suggests that the purpose of the address, if not unimportant, was both immediate, and intended to be used once only. The clause: 'I only wish you to act that part of which you will yourselves wish that you had done seven years hence,' may indicate that the intended audience included young students, fourteen or fifteen years of age, perhaps, just commencing their studies.

Whilst the approach of Belsham's Address is instructional and recommendatory, the tone is both exhortative and admonitory. It is rather the tone of a newly arrived tutor seeking to remediate deficiencies in a student body, than that of a tutor who has been in daily converse with his students for a considerable time. Indeed, Belsham must have been somewhat negligent if at Daventry he had allowed the college's Reading Society, if it had one, to deteriorate into such a state of 'evil' as to require 'immediate redress.' Furthermore, were Belsham addressing students at Daventry, it is hard to imagine him using the phrase '*your* Reading Society,' without reminding them that he himself had been a student there. Thomas Belsham had been tutor at Daventry Academy until its closure in 1789, when he moved to the greatly extended Homerton Hall, as divinity tutor of New College, Hackney.⁶ It may be that he delivered this address shortly after his arrival at New College.

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Whitbread 'cover'					
	heart	subject	observation	object	fact
Belsham's Lectures					
	heart	subject	observation	objects	exact

Belsham's Lectures: Harris Manchester College Oxford, Thomas Belsham papers: MSS Belsham 30/1/Lecture 12: Concerning personal identity, §§ vj and vjjj.

⁶ Some of Belsham's students moved with him to New College, Hackney, notably Samuel Whitbread's great nephew, Arthur Aikin (1773-1854). Aikin was the son of John Aikin MD (1747-1822) and Martha Jennings (c.1746-1830), and grandson of Revd John Aikin DD (1713-1780) and Jane Jennings (c.1714-1785).

Samuel Whitbread's sister, Elizabeth Whitbread, married Jane Jennings's brother, Arthur Jennings (1712-1780), as his second wife, making Elizabeth and Samuel great-aunt and great-uncle respectively of Arthur Aikin.

Arthur Aikin's great-grandfather, Revd John Jennings of Kibworth (1687-1723) had married Anna Laetitia Wingate (1686-1770), daughter of Sir Francis Wingate (1650-1691), making Arthur Aikin a two-fold-great-grandson of Sir Francis Wingate, of whom Thomas Belsham was a great-grandson.

No other evidence has come to hand of the existence of a reading society or book society at either Daventry Academy or New College, Hackney.⁷ However, Belsham made a passing reference to reading societies in general, in his Leaving Address to students at Daventry, at the end of the session, about 30 May 1789. Extracts of that address, noted down by a student, were published in Belsham's biography.⁸

I would advise you to be cautious in reading many books that have not an immediate reference to the subject of your lectures, and to your business here. My chief objection against book societies has always been, that they furnish you with a variety of amusing books, which divert your attention too much from far more important, but less entertaining subjects.

New College had been established three years before Belsham's arrival.⁹ It may not be insignificant that the address is written in full, despite Belsham having been perfectly capable of expanding from a list of headings. If attempting to stamp his authority upon the student body, Belsham might have been anxious to maintain a confident and unhesitant image. Students at New College, Hackney seem to have had independent minds and inquisitive natures, which, whilst exhilarating to a talented young tutor, might appear somewhat intimidating to a newly arrived senior tutor.

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⁷ That students purchased extraneous books, is illustrated by the example of Robert Lewin (1771-1851), son of the minister of Benn's Garden Chapel, Liverpool, who subscribed to George Adams's *Lectures on Natural and Experimental Philosophy* (London, 1794), giving his address as 'New College, Hackney.' Lewin became a physician in Liverpool.

⁸ John Williams, *Memoirs of the late Reverend Thomas Belsham* (London, 1833), 387-399. In his Leaving Address, Belsham mentioned his recent conversion to Unitarianism, and defended the action of the Coward Trustees in accepting his resignation: whilst Coward had been very liberal in the terms of his bequest, his own staunch Calvinism could not be disregarded.

⁹ See *New College, Hackney (1786-96): A Selection of Printed and Archival Sources* (2011), ed. Stephen Burley <http://www.qmulreligionandliterature.co.uk/online-publications/new-college-hackney>.

Text

The great object {before you}¹⁰ is the improvement of your mind. Thereof the most important means for attaining this end is reading. And it is for this reason that [I think] it advisable to address a few observations, cautions, and directions to you upon this subject. And permit me to add that these are so much the more necessary, as reading to valuable purpose is a task of much greater difficulty, and such as requires more prudence and resolution of mind than most young persons are aware.

I first address you from this hint of Paul. To all young men, this Apostle gives advice. He was Evangelist whose gifts might be improved by use of means; wherefore more than we who have no pretences to these gifts. St Paul now mentions persons thrusting themselves into the ministry without study &c.¹¹

The words I have read,¹² are the advice of Paul to Timothy, a young man, his pupil, and his friend, and his son in the Christian Church, for ~~whose~~ whom this venerable Apostle entertained the most particular ambition, and for whose improvement and usefulness he felt the most benign concern. Timothy was an evangelist; he was instructed in the gospel by the inspired Apostle himself, and was endued with various supernatural gifts, and yet ~~the Apostle~~ his furniture¹³ was capable of considerable improvement by the use of proper means, particularly reading. How much more indispensable then is it in us to make use of proper means to enrich our minds who have no pretence to this extraordinary furniture: gifts. And here, by the way, it may be observed that the Apostle's advice to Timothy is an excellent encouragement to ~~the~~ rebuke the conduct of those who thrust themselves into the Christian ministry without prior call or proper furniture, and who under pretence of honouring God by depending upon the immediate influences of His Spirit, in fact insult Him, by presuming to explain His Word without using proper means to inform themselves of its true impression¹⁴ and design; and who justly fall into the company of those fiendish, of those horrible men who prate with untempered posture.

In the prosecution of my design, I propose first to ~~suggest a few~~ point out the end which you should keep in view in reading, and then to suggest some necessary cautions, and to conclude with some brief directions ~~to assist you~~ which may be of use to assist you to read in that manner which shall turn to the most valuable account. Also, to point out the end you should keep in view in this business.

Now, the ends you should keep in view are principally these, the enlargement of your understanding; the strengthening of the powers and faculty of your mind; the improvement of your heart, the amusement of your imaginations and the formation of your style.

¹⁰ Uncertain transcriptions are shown within braces {}; transcribers' insertions within brackets []; authorial deletions are shown by strikethrough, and insertions within angle brackets <>.

¹¹ There has been no attempt in the MS to delete this paragraph, though it is clear that its subject matter is repeated more fully in the paragraph that follows.

¹² No biblical text is included in the document, so it must be assumed that Belsham turned here to his Bible, and a passage such as 1 Tim. 4:12-16, which includes the advice: 'Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.'

¹³ I.e. *furniture of the mind*. 'These simple ideas, the materials of all our knowledge, are suggested and *furnished* to the mind only by those two ways above mentioned, viz. sensation and reflection.' Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk.II, ch.II, §.2.

¹⁴ *Impression* in the sense of *significance* or *purport*.

One principal end you should keep in view is the increase of your stock of ideas: ideas are the materials of all knowledge. Observation, conversation, and reading are the means by which they are acquired; the last is perhaps the source from whence we derive the most numerous and important set [of ideas]. It is by this we become acquainted with {circumstances} and subjects which take place in distant countries and ages of the world; by this we are offered discovery of those; by this we hold converse with the wise and learned dead, and in some degree enjoy the benefits of their society. The mind of man is originally a *tabula rasa*, and reading is one of those means by which those characters are inscribed, and those pictures drawn upon it, which exercise the faculties and embellish and improve the mind. The increase of the stock of our ideas upon the subjects on which we read is one great end of this exercise and should always be kept in view, over the rejecting of the ideas we [already] have.—The rejecting of errors; the acquisition of truth.

Another object, which should be kept in view in reading, is the exercise and invigorating of the mental faculties and powers: apprehension, reflection, memory, discernment, and judgement, all in their turns are or should be exercised upon the subjects concerning which we read, and all by exercise will acquire strength and advance to maturity and perfection.

Again, another subject, which should be principally kept in view in this exercise, is the improvement of the heart. Reading, directed into a proper channel, and conducted in a proper manner, has a happy tendency to inspire the mind with the most excellent apprehensions of God and his perfections, the most honourable and reasonable conceptions of virtue and religion, and to suggest the most noble and persuasive motives to the consciences of Christians, to form the soul to the most excellent sentiments of devotion; and to inspire the heart with the warmest feelings, emotions of benevolence, and universal goodness.

Again, reading is often a source for very innocent amusement to the imagination. A variety of works have been composed with this express design; nor can it be deemed an ~~employment~~ object unworthy for a reasonable mind to beguile the cares of life with amusing and entertaining [compositions]; though it must be acknowledged that a man of sense will seldom make even innocent amusement the chief object ~~of his study~~ of his pursuit in the works which he esteems it worth his while to peruse.

Another important object to be attained by reading is the formation and improvement of the style, by reading the best authors, and making them familiar, we naturally imitate their style and manner and insensibly acquire a habit of expressing ourselves with ease, freedom, propriety, and politeness upon the subjects on which we may compose.

Thus, we see that very important ends are to be answered and very considerable advantage to be acquired by reading, when directed in a proper channel and conducted in a proper manner. It is proper to add as a necessary and important truth that when improperly conducted, its tendency is in the highest degree detrimental. It may fill the mind with diverse speculations, with painful doubts on the most important subjects, with fractious ideas; it may excite the vainest and most criminal passions, and [has been a] powerful incentive to the most atrocious vices, unless you will preserve propriety. ~~Hence the necessity of.~~

Secondly I suggest some necessary cautions upon this subject, and

1. In respect to the choice of books. I earnestly recommend and throw it upon you to avoid all loose and devious composure,¹⁵ nothing whatever tends [so much] to pollute the imagination and inflame the passions. Fly from such works as you would from the plague. Do not trust yourselves. Do not imagine that your virtue is sufficient to preserve you from danger. Keep out of the way of temptation. He that parleys with the tempter is almost sure to be overcome, and there is no safety but in flight. Abstain from the very thought of sin and from whatever would introduce sinful thoughts and criminal¹⁶ conceptions into the heart.

Again, do not spend much of your time in reading novels. I do not mean absolutely to discourage all reading of this sort. I thereby observed that innocent amusement is one end of reading. And there are a few, though very few, of these works that deserve perusal. It would perhaps be advisable to read some of the most innocent and most celebrated Richardson's {compositions}, which are at once calculated to amuse the imagination and improve the heart. After having read these, few others will deserve notice. They in general contain nothing but a nauseous repetition of the same dull uninteresting tale, and answer very little end, but to murder time, and to fill the imagination with a multitude of trifling and insipid ideas, which occupy the place of subjects of real importance.

I add as another caution under this head: Let not political subjects engross any very consequential proportion of the time which you devote to reading. These are indeed of great importance to you as members of a community, but they are not of immediate consequence, and they will engage your attention more than properly in some future period. At present, if your time is much occupied in these subjects, they will necessarily exclude others which are of more immediate and more essential importance.

Excuse me if under this head I drop a hint or two upon the subject of your Reading Society which from a prudent, useful and commendable institution is grown up to be an evil of the first magnitude which calls for immediate redress. The number of books you introduced is an expense both unnecessary and highly imprudent, and if they are read I am sure they must take up the time that ought to be allowed to reading of much greater importance. I wish, Gentlemen, to gain a little accord with you upon this subject. I have no interest in view but yours in the hints I now drop; and I only wish you to act that part of which you will yourselves wish that you had done seven years hence.

2. Do not employ your attention on too great a variety of subjects. The human {intellect} is limited in its capacity and cannot attend to many things at once. Let me advise you therefore not to read many books at the same time. Finish one before you

¹⁵ *Composure* was a rare synonym for *composition*: 'In the *composures* of men, remember you are a man as well as they; and it is not *their* reason, but your own, that is given to guide you when you arrive at years of discretion.' Isaac Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind* (London, 1741), ch.IV, §.V. Belsham's advice may have been informed by, and seems to rehearse specific elements in, chapters II and IV of Watts's *Improvement*.

¹⁶ In contemporary usage, *criminal* meant *wicked* or *carnal*, 'criminal conversation' being 'unlawful sexual intercourse with a married person, adultery'. *OED*.

begin another, or your ideas will be confounded and you will not derive any valuable instruction from any. For the same reason, do not read upon a great variety of subjects. No person is capable of comprehending the whole {circle} of science. Fix upon some determinate object and let the general train of your reading and your studies be directed to your improvement and perfection in it. They who annotate everything, commonly attain nothing.

3. Do not read too fast. This is a fault which young men are very apt to fall into. Many hurry along, from page to page and from book to book without allowing themselves time to reflect upon the sense of their author, to digest his meaning, to reach any judgement of his reasonings, or to fix any valuable sentiment upon their minds. The consequence is that though forever reading they learn nothing, for the subjects they read about make no more lasting impressions upon their minds than characters drawn upon the sand, or the images upon a mirror. There is no fault against which you ought be more upon your guard than this.
4. Be not hasty in forming judgements of what you read. Do not reach your judgement or give your opinion of an author or his works until [giving] it a fair examination. Take nothing upon trust; judge you nothing by prejudice; above all things {be followers} of that which is good.
5. I add as another caution, which, though to some of you it is unnecessary, to others it may be useful. Do not spend too much of your time in this employment. Reading is but one means among many others for attaining a most valuable end. Time must be left for the use of the other equally essential means to attaining the same end. There must be time allowed for reflexion, for meditation, for self-application, for refreshing and entrenching the memory, and for conversation; without this, reading will be of little use. And hence it is that men of great reading are men of little judgment, and whose opinions we can little depend upon, and of no other use than a sort of dictionary which we consult in order to learn the opinions which there be entertained, and the arguments advanced on any subject in question.

But there is another view [by] which I mean to caution you against too close attention to reading. Health is a blessing of the ~~most useful~~ <first> importance, and regular exercise is absolutely essential to the preservation of it. Nothing therefore should influence you to apply so closely to reading as to neglect that daily exercise which is essential to the preservation of your health. In this view, I wish you particularly to observe that there is peculiar impropriety in your spending much time in reading books of mere amusement. Your business is study, and therefore your amusement ought to be exercise. The whole office therefore of your reading should be principally directed to the improvement of your mind, and to the great object you have in view in life, with proper intermission for the use of that exercise which the health of the body requires after much study: weariness of the flesh.