The Name of the First

Thomas Young and the Decipherment of Egyptian Writing

JOHN RAY

Much have I travell’d in the realm of gold
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse have I been told
That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken,
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star’d at the Pacific, and all his men
Look’d at each other with a wide surmise -
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

John Keats (1816)

Last year the world celebrated the bicentenary of the overthrow of the Ancien Régime and the beginning of the French Revolution. Even Mrs. Thatcher was present. One of the most important features of these celebrations was a desire to set the French Revolution in the widest possible context; the events of 1789 were, after all, to affect not merely France itself, but all the other states of Europe in turn. England too was drawn into these events; indeed, in the political sense she was to become the main beneficiary of them. Nor was Europe the only continent involved in dramatic change. It is worth recalling that, thirteen years earlier, America had begun a revolution of its own, and in a remote corner of Africa controlled by the Ottoman Empire, the land of Egypt was destined to enter into a completely new period of its long history. Even India and Australia became part of these developments. Everywhere old worlds were disappearing, and new ones were swimming into view; Keat’s poem which is quoted at the beginning of this paper was inspired by reading a new translation of Homer’s Iliad, but it is more than this: I have chosen it because it is a microcosm of this period where all was change, and all was wonder.

Thomas Young was born in Milverton, Somerset on 16 June 1773, and he died on 10 May 1829, at the age of fifty-five. The mention of these dates is not, I hasten to say, due to pedantry, but because they remind us that Young was almost an exact contemporary of the composer Beethoven (1770-1827); and the composer Beethoven is in many ways the most important representative of this period of European revolution. Young, like Beethoven, is essentially a European figure; although he was born and died in England, he was educated in Edinburgh - the capital of a country whose cultural links have often been with France as much as with England - at Cambridge (Emmanuel College), and at Göttingen, a seat of learning which had strong links with Hanoverian Britain. The latter University in particular held a fond place in his memory, and Young’s European connections were greatly valued in his own country; indeed, in later life he became foreign secretary of the Royal Society, and it was in this capacity that he first corresponded with Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832).

When Young completed his medical degree at Cambridge, he earned his living - it has to be said, without particular success - as a doctor of medicine with a practice in Welbeck Street, London, but he was able to find the time for a series of scientific discoveries, any one of which would have been enough to make his reputation immortal. In mechanics, he went far towards producing an integrated system. He also introduced new experiments which proved the wave theory of light, a theory which lies at the root of modern optics and much else. In anatomy, his work on the human eye was revolutionary, and any one who suffers from astigmatism or several other defects of vision has reason to be grateful to him. He made notable contributions to navigation as Secretary of a Commission which

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awarded funds for research into the problems of determining latitude at sea. Young is the inventor of the term Indo-European, as applied to languages (four hundred of which he reviewed for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), and while Francis Bacon may claim to be the last man to possess universal knowledge, Thomas Young's *Lectures in Natural Philosophy* (1807) come astonishingly near to it. (I once gave a general talk on Young to a group of businessmen, and was asked at the end whether this was the Thomas Young who introduced a new method of computing actuarial tables for life-insurance. I said that I doubted it. I was of course wrong, and when you pay your next instalment on your family policy, it may comfort you to know that it was almost certainly calculated according to Young's principles.) In this ceaseless activity we may detect something of Young's upbringing as a Quaker, a sect which emphasises lack of ritual and simplicity of manners. Much of his work is characterised by a feeling that all truths, however complex, could be expressed in terms that were essentially simple, and by an unremitting belief in the importance of hard work. On his deathbed he continued to work on his remarkable Egyptian Dictionary, holding a pencil since he could no longer use a pen, and he is recorded as saying that he hoped to live to see the work finished; however, if not, then at least he would never have spent an idle day.

Young was interested in anything at the frontier of knowledge, and it was natural that he should turn to the question of ancient Egypt and its mysterious writing. The Rosetta Stone, as everyone who reads this will know, was discovered by the French expedition to Egypt in August 1799. By 1802 there was a translation of the Greek text of the Stone in circulation throughout Europe. Young himself seems to have been introduced to the subject in 1814, when he was shown a demotic papyrus newly acquired from Thebes, and this led him on to a study of the middle section of the Rosetta Stone, the one which contained the demotic text. At the same time he was aware of Silvestre de Sacy's judgement that the key to the ancient language should lie in Coptic, and he turned to learning this as well. The opinion which one occasionally encounters, that the distinction between Young and Champollion was that the latter understood the importance of Coptic, while the former did not, is without foundation. The differences, as we shall see, lay at a deeper level.

It is important here to remember the view about Egyptian civilisation which prevailed before Napoleon's expedition. Since the days of the Roman Empire it was accepted that Egyptian writing - hieroglyphic in particular - contained the secrets of a highly esoteric priestly class, obsessed with theological speculation and the mysteries of a divinely-ordained cosmos. In this sense, it was scarcely a system of writing at all, if by this term is meant something with phonetic sounds, predictable grammar, and the ability to convey such weighty matters as the price of donkeys or the size of Cleopatra's nose. The strength of this belief can be seen by the fact that Champollion himself remained convinced that hieroglyphs were purely symbolic right up to 1821, barely a year before his *Lettre à M. Dacier*. This is a point to which we must return. However, as Louis Pasteur well remarked, success in science comes only to the mind which is prepared; and Young was such a mind. He proceeded with considerable speed to identify words and phrases in the demotic version with similar expressions in the Greek equivalent, and while this method certainly allowed mistakes, it was essentially the correct approach, and one which cumulatively was bound to lead to promising results. Young's attraction to demotic rather than to the hieroglyphs is explained, partly by the fact that the demotic version is essentially complete, but also by the likelihood that the demotic script contained a natural language and a rational script with which to write it. It is also possible that his Quaker training, which we have already mentioned, prejudiced him in its favour; there were less likely to be arcane and Jesuitical
messages in demotic. In effect, this meant that he chose to tackle Egyptian from the more difficult end, since the demotic script is far more abstract than its hieroglyphic parent. Whatever the reason for his choice, it seems to me that Young’s work on the demotic script has not been fully appreciated, even in the present day. In 1819 he published in the Encyclopaedia Britannica an article which nowadays would be called state-of-the-art, in which he offered equivalents for 218 demotic words, as well as 200 hieroglyphic groups. This seminal article was later described by François Chabas as follows: ‘Cette idée fut, dans la réalité, le Fiat Lux de (notre) Science’ [Inscription de Rosette, Chaon-sur-Seine 1867, p. 5]. Even more remarkable was Young’s posthumous work, Rudiments of an Egyptian Dictionary in the Ancient Enchorial Character (1831), which contains his translation of an entire demotic contract as well as large portions of the Rosetta text. It also contains a transcription of several words and phrases into Coptic. Young was the first person since the end of the Roman Empire to read a demotic text, and he surely deserves to be recognised as the decipherer of demotic. (A promising start had been made earlier by the Swedish scholar Åkerblad, but was not followed up.) It is no disservice to Champollion to allow him this distinction.

Young’s work on hieroglyphs is more patchy, and it also brings us face-to-face with the complicated relations between the English polymath and his younger French colleague. It has to be said that much of the comment surrounding this overworked question is tediously nationalistic, and most of it is unhelpful in the extreme. It is thus essential to see the matter in a wider context. Champollion had been working intermittently on hieroglyphs since 1805, without, it has to be said, much success, although he had already made a number of important contributions to our knowledge of ancient Egypt in general. Young and Champollion met for the first time in Paris in 1822, after Young had already been warned in the now-notorious letter from Silvestre de Sacy that Champollion was capable of appropriating any idea that he was given. Since Champollion was this warning was probably justified, and should not be dismissed merely as academic jealousy on the part of a former teacher. Four years earlier the famous Bankes obelisk had arrived in England from the island of Philae, and the importance of it was not lost on Young.

There is no doubt that it was Bankes’ and Young’s identification of the name of Cleopatra on this obelisk which found its way to Champollion, in a marked copy sent to Denon at the Institut de France; and it is this identification which lies at the heart of the Lettre à M. Dacier. The idea itself - as opposed to the use made of it - was not Champollion’s, and it would have cost him little to acknowledge this, but to accuse him of dishonesty would be like accusing a vat of Cognac of lack of originality for bursting into flames when a lighted match is placed next to it.
Champollion, whose instincts were bent up by years of frustration, must have realised in an instant where the true line of progress lay; indeed, all of his preparation in Egyptology must have been leading him to the point where he could see the truth of this. Young’s attitude to Champollion, while mixed with some of the detachment common to most Britons who visited post-Napoleonic France, appears reasonably generous and encouraging, and he specifically acquitted Champollion of any charge of plagiarism, although he expressed some regret that his own contribution had not been more freely acknowledged. Young, after all, had a secure place in the history of science, and any work that he achieved in Egyptology was merely a bonus to this. In his dealings with scientific colleagues, he could be as malicious as any academic; but with Champollion he could afford to be generous.

But there is almost certainly a deeper explanation than this. Young was a genius - perhaps even now an underrated one - but he was not an Egyptologist. Champollion, who fortunately for us was born with tunnel-vision, was both, but both together; it was precisely his commitment to Egyptology which gave scope to his genius. The English scholar doubtless realised this. Young was essentially a solver of problems, who would tackle a problem because it was a problem, until he achieved the decisive breakthrough. Thereafter, he would move on to another mystery, perhaps in an entirely different field. It was noted by contemporaries that he would never repeat an experiment if he could avoid it. This is not to say that he was superficial; on the contrary, his work is characterised by an almost unparalleled series of insights. Such restlessness was both his strength and his weakness; Champollion, on the other hand was one of those who are born knowing their true homeland, and who would never leave it. In reality, Young’s attitude to Egyptology seems to have palled quite rapidly: in a letter to his friend Gurney early in 1816 he remarks:

All the inscriptions on temples, and the generality of the manuscripts found with the mummies, appear to relate to their ridiculous rites and ceremonies [this is the Quaker speaking!]: I see nothing that looks like history.

I am afraid that Young made other comments about Egyptology which I must spare my colleagues, since I know that they are sensitive about such things. In this context, Young’s attachment to demotic, which spanned the last fifteen years of his life, is all the more remarkable. It seems almost out of character.

Champollion is rightly credited with the title ‘Father of Egyptology’, but even fathers need to be created, and this is where Young comes in; in a sense, he is the spiritual father of Champollion. What Young did, and perhaps no-one else could have done, was to clear away the accumulated misunderstandings which prevented the birth of science. He was the mind prepared. The best tribute to his work is contained in a presidential address by the optician Tscherning quoted in the Transactions of the Optical Society (23, 1921-2,2):

If you take Young as the first man in the question of the theory of light, the name of the second man is Fresnel; in the question of the anomalies of refraction of the human eye, the name of the second man is Donders; in the question of colour senses, you can call the second man Clerk Maxwell, or Helmholtz; in the question of hieroglyphics the name of the second man is Champollion; in the question of terrestrial radiant heat the name of the second man is Wells, and I have not yet finished the list. For his own reputation it would certainly have been better if Young had completely developed but one of his ideas. But for the advancement of science it was better that he did as he did.

If Young had been born in any other European
country there would probably be statues of him in public places, but such, unfortunately, is not our way of doing things. However, we are in danger of creating a false contrast; the suspicion may easily arise that any eulogy of Thomas Young is intended as a denigration of Champollion. This would be particularly disgraceful from an Egyptologist. Let me assure you that this is not so. Young, as has been said, was a genius, but one of a particular scientific kind. Champollion was a genius too, but, more important to us, he was also an Egyptologist. His commitment and love for his chosen profession are unique in our discipline; indeed, there are times when one is tempted to say that the discipline chose him, in order to be born. As we have seen, Young’s discoveries follow a regular pattern: once he had achieved them, it was essential for him to move on, leaving the subject that he had sketched in outline to be painted in full by others. This was the role played brilliantly by Champollion. It is scarcely possible to imagine L’Égypte sous les Pharaons or Monuments de l’Égypte et de la Nubie written by Young; even less so, to envisage Thomas Young setting off with Rosellini on that survey of the monuments which marks the beginning of our science in the field. Nor could Young’s essentially practical imagination have produced that sensitive and rich correspondence which has been so charmingly edited under the title Lettres à Zelmire. In essence, Young’s imagination was scientific and abstract; human society and human affairs held comparatively little interest for him, possibly because they could not easily be reduced to rules. Champollion, on the other hand, possessed precisely this sort of curiosity: the desire to make a dead world live again. Earlier in this article I mentioned in passing the composer Beethoven. Any musicologist will agree that the music of the young Beethoven was influenced by that of his teacher, Joseph Haydn. This is no way lessens our opinion of Beethoven. It may certainly increase our interest in Haydn, but Beethoven’s originality is such that no amount of influences can define him. If there had not been Haydn, he would have found someone else to learn from; but we are fortunate that things happened as they did. Similarly, Young’s insights might possibly have occurred to Champollion sooner or later, given his talent, but it is none the less right for us to recognize what really occurred. Let us do this, in a spirit of generosity towards both these remarkable men.

Keats, in the poem quoted at the beginning of this lecture, likened his reading of Homer to the discovery of a new planet. This is a particularly apt analogy. Before the decipherment of the Rosetta Stone, the only intellectual planets in the firmament of western man were Greece, Rome, and the Bible. Ancient Egypt swam into view at the beginning of the romantic era (this is the subject’s strength, and the source of much of its attraction, but it is also the cause of some of its problems). The ancients had known five physical planets in their own heavens, and it was not until 1781 that Uranus was discovered by Herschel, a German resident in England. Young would have

The copper engraving of the demotic section of the Rosetta Stone, made by Napoleon’s artists following the French expedition to Egypt in 1798. [After La Description de l’Égypte (Paris, 1809), V, pl. 53]

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been a child of seven at the time. As it happens, there is an interesting parallel between the decipherment of hieroglyphs and the discovery of the next planet, Neptune. The position of this planet was calculated in England by John Adams, then an undergraduate student at Cambridge. His discovery was sent to the Astronomer Royal in London but not followed up, in a combination of brilliant insight and poor application which seems peculiarly British. Meanwhile, Urbain Leverrier in Paris had made a similar calculation, and sent his results to Berlin. This was successful, and Neptune was duly discovered in 1846, within what should have been the lifetime of Champollion. Nowadays both astronomers are given credit for the achievement. In the case of hieroglyphs, the position of Young nowhere equals that of his French colleague, but it is surely wrong to exclude his name completely from Egyptology’s roll of honour.

There is an amusing postscript to this. When Galileo first looked at the heavens through his small telescope, he found, much to the annoyance of the Church, the moons of Jupiter. Night after night he drew them against the background of the stars, to show that they were rotating. One of the stars in the background seemed to move a little, but Galileo ascribed this to a fault in his telescope, or in himself; stars do not move. We are now able to calculate that he was looking at the planet Neptune, but it was not given to him to realise this. At the time, there was no conceptual framework for the idea that there existed other worlds, and not even Galileo was able to transcend this. The truth is that, in scientific discovery, the conceptual framework is the all-important first step. In Egyptology, that framework was the achievement of Thomas Young. Without it, there might have been no Champollion, no Lettre à M. Dacier, and no study of ancient Egypt.

A French version of this paper was given before the Collège de France in October 1990. It will be published in the Bulletin de la Société française d’Égyptologie. An English version was given before the Egypt Exploration Society in London in February 1991, and is reproduced here with a few alterations and additions.

Egyptians and Foreigners
A Floating Conference on the River Nile

The ISIS Director and the Board of Trustees are delighted to inform members that the Institute is organising an international conference on the subject of ‘Egyptians and Foreigners’, to be held in Egypt from the 4th to 20th of September 1992. This is a very special event because it is being combined with a Nile Cruise arranged by our co-sponsors, Thomas Cook Faraway Holidays and the Nile Exploration Corporation. Following a four-night stay at the 5-star Semiramis Hotel in Cairo, we will be joining the luxurious ms ‘Royal Orchid’ for our leisurely 11-day cruise from Aswan to Cairo.

The provisional itinerary has been carefully arranged to compliment the subject of the floating conference and might legitimately be dubbed ‘the alternative Nile cruise’. Highlights will include: the temples of Kalabsha and Beit el-Wali; Sehel Island and the tombs of the nomarchs at Aswan; the quarries of Gebel Silsila; el-Kab; the workmen’s village at Deir el-Medina; the tombs of the nobles at Sleik Abd el Gurna containing the scenes of tribute bearers from Kefiu; the secret tomb of Senenmut (with its famous astronomical ceiling) and the temple of Nebhepetre Montuhotep at Deir el-Bahri; the temple of Medinet Habu; an ‘alternative’ series of tombs in the Valley of the Kings; the battle of Kadesh reliefs at the Abydos temple of Ramesses II; the central city and southern tombs at Tell el-Amarna; the fortress town of el-Hiba, the city of Heracleopolis Magna at Ilnasya el-Medina in the Faiyum; the pyramid of Meydum; the tombs of Haremheb and Maya and the interior of the step pyramid of Zoser at Sakara; and finally a full-day excursion into the eastern Delta to visit Professor Manfred Bietak’s excavations at Tell ed-Daba/Avaris (including a viewing of the Minoan frescoes) before going on to Tanis to inspect the royal necropolis (including the tomb interiors).

Speakers for the conference are currently being approached and a programme of lectures will be sent to all potential delegates. It is intended that papers will be presented on all the major groups of foreigners who visited the Nile Valley, including the Hyksos, Israelites, Minoans, Mycenaeans, Kushites, Libyans, Assyrians, and Persians. There will also be a special lecture meeting at the American University in Cairo where Professor Kent Weeks will deliver a talk on ‘The Theban Mapping Project’.

This spectacular event is restricted to just 54 participants due to the size of the boat. As a result, tickets will be allocated on a ‘first come first served’ basis. The all-in ticket price is expected to be under £1350 per person.

To register your interest in the conference/cruise please write to: The Organisers of the 1992 ISIS International Conference, c/o Mrs. Nesta Caiger, ‘Three Ways’, 43A Barnehurst Avenue, Barnehurst, Bexley Heath, Kent, DA7 6QA.