

MEMOIR
OF
DR. THOMAS YOUNG.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY EDUCATION.

DR. THOMAS YOUNG, the subject of the following Memoir, was born at Milverton, in Somersetshire, on the 13th of June, 1773. He was the eldest of ten children of Thomas and Sarah Young; his mother—whose maiden name was Davis—was the niece of Dr. Richard Brocklesby, a physician of great eminence in London. His parents were both members of the Society of Friends, occupying a respectable station in the middle ranks of life. They were strict observers of the principles of their sect, in which their children were very carefully educated; and their eldest son appears to have adopted in his earlier years, all the characteristic observances and tenets of this society, though he afterwards abandoned it. Some of those principles which recognise the immediate influence of a supreme intelligence as a guide in the ordinary conduct of life, are not a little calculated, when not properly regulated, to encourage feelings of self-confidence and pride in the achievement of intellectual as well as moral triumphs; and it was to the operation of these early impressions that Dr. Young was accustomed in after-life, to attribute, in no slight

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degree, the formation of those habits of perseverance in labouring to conquer every difficulty, however formidable it might appear to be, by which he was so remarkably distinguished, and which enabled him, even from his boyhood, to work out his own education with little comparative assistance or direction from others.

The details of this education—which made him at an early period of life an accurate classical scholar; perfectly familiar with the principal European languages; well acquainted with mathematics, and with almost every department of natural philosophy and natural history; profoundly versed in medical and anatomical knowledge, and in possession of more than ordinary personal and ornamental accomplishments—must necessarily possess no common interest and value; not merely as explaining the formation of his own intellectual habits and character, but as illustrating the progress of the human mind in one of the most remarkable examples of its development; and it may be considered fortunate, that the materials for a very minute history of his early studies and occupations exist, in his very ample journals, in his letters to his relatives and others, and in the notes which he has left behind him, upon most of the books which he read for the first twenty years or more of his life.^a

* Amongst these are two thick volumes, entitled *Studia Quotidiana*, containing an account—in many cases with copious extracts—of every book which he read from the year 1789 to the summer of 1794; with notices of his botanical and entomological observations, the greatest part of which is written in Latin. There are also, in three smaller volumes, ample notes of all the medical and anatomical lectures which he attended in London in 1793 and 1794: to these may be added minute and very carefully written journals of his studies at Edinburgh and at Göttingen, and of his journeys in Scotland and Germany in 1795, 1796, and 1797: and also a nearly unbroken series of letters to his uncle Dr. Brocklesby during the greatest part of this period.

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The following fragment of an autobiography is nearly a literal translation from a short account written in Latin, as a record of his studies as far as the end of his fourteenth year, with the addition of a few explanatory particulars which have been derived from other sources :—

“ For the greatest part of the first seven years of my life, I was an inmate in the house of my maternal grandfather, Mr. Robert Davis, a merchant of great respectability, who lived at Minehead in Somersetshire. At two years of age I had learnt to read with considerable fluency, and I subsequently used to attend the school of a village schoolmistress, besides being taught at home by my aunt Mary Davis. Under their instructions I read the Bible twice through, and also Watts’s Hymns, before I was four years of age. Being naturally fond of reading, I was supplied with the usual run of children’s books, and I well recollect the effect produced on my mind by the first perusal of Gulliver’s Travels. From my earliest years I was in the habit of committing pieces of poetry to memory, such as Pope’s Messiah, his Universal Prayer, Parnell’s Hermit, Rack’s Lavinia, and many others. When six years old I learnt by heart the whole of Goldsmith’s Deserted Village, which was the work of six weeks during the hours of my absence from school.^a At a later period, I was taught to repeat some Latin verses, which I found no difficulty in remembering, though I did not, at the time, understand the meaning of the words. When not quite six years of age, I began to learn the rudiments of the Latin grammar, in Lilly’s Grammar, under the instruction of a dissenting clergyman of the name of Knyfton, who possessed, however, neither talents nor temper to teach anything well: at the same time I read with him Gay’s Fables and Goadby’s Weekly Miscellany, and he also began to teach me writing. I always look back with pleasure to this period of my life, and to the affectionate care and instructions of my aunt

^a In a quarto edition of this poem in possession of his family, his grandfather had inserted the following memorandum :—“ *This poem was repeated by Thomas Young to me, with the exception of a word or two, before the age of five.*”

Mary Davis, a most admirable woman, who is now no more, and also of one of her most intimate friends and relatives, an inmate of the same house, and who afterwards married a Mr. Thompson, at whose school I was subsequently placed. My grandfather—with whom I was a great favourite—was fond of classical learning, and encouraged my taste for study by every means in his power. I well recollect the distich which he used constantly to repeat to me,

“ A little learning is a dangerous thing,—
 Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.”

The principles which I imbibed, and the habits which I formed under the guidance of these dear and excellent relatives, have more or less determined my character in future life, whatever it may be,

“ Quo semel est imbuta recens, servabit odorem
 Testa diu.”

“ I now entered upon a totally new scene of life. In March 1780, when not quite seven years of age, I was placed by my father at a miserable boarding-school kept by a person of the name of King, first at Stapleton near Bristol, and afterwards at Downend near Kingswood. At this school I remained for a year and a half. I here was taught arithmetic, but even at this age I began to be my own teacher; for I had mastered the last rules of Walkinghame’s Tutor’s Assistant before I had reached the middle of it under my master’s inspection. He was a good writing-master, but quite ignorant of Greek and Latin, which were taught, however, by his step-son on two days of the week. During the first two months, I was very ill employed in learning Fisher’s English Grammar, and not much better in learning the Syntax of Lilly: I afterwards began to read, at the same time, Loggan’s Corderius, and Clarke’s Introduction; having finished Corderius, I read through two books of Phædrus’s Fables. I at last gladly quitted a master, who was extremely morose and severe, under whom I had made very little progress, and whose manners and character were little calculated to gain the confidence and affection of his scholars. His school was shortly afterwards broken up.

“ During this period, I had read Robinson Crusoe, Gesner’s Death of Abel, Stories on Shakspeare, the Seven Stages of Life,

Needham's *Select Lessons*, and Tom Telescope's *Newtonian Philosophy*.

"The next half-year, I spent almost entirely at home. My father had a neighbour of the name of Kingdon, a man of great ingenuity, who, though originally a tailor, had raised himself by his talents and good conduct to a respectable situation in life—being at that time a land-surveyor and also land-steward to several gentlemen in the neighbourhood. His daughters had always treated me, when a child, with great kindness, and I was in consequence very fond of going to his house, where I found many books relating to science, and particularly a *Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, in three volumes, folio, which I began to read with the most intense interest and delight; at his house I also found several mathematical and philosophical instruments, the use of many of which I learnt with the assistance of his daughters and his nephew.

"In March 1782, when nearly nine years of age, I was sent to the school of Mr. T. Thompson, at Compton in Dorsetshire, where I continued for nearly four years, having only left it for six months, during the year 1784. Mr. Thompson was a man of liberal and enlarged mind, who possessed a tolerable collection of English and classical books, which his pupils were allowed to make use of. It was his custom likewise to allow them a certain degree of discretion in the employment of their time:—the following is the list of books which I read with Mr. Thompson in the school.

"The remaining part of Phædrus's *Fables* and of Clarke's *Introduction*, Cornelius Nepos, *Selecta e Scriptoribus Romanis*, Virgil, Horace expurgated by Knox, the *Eton Selections* from Cicero, the *Westminster Greek Grammar* (the greater part of which I committed to memory), the whole of Beza's *Greek and Latin Testament*, the *Cyropædia* of Xenophon by Hutchinson; the *First Seven Books of the Iliad*, which I began in 1786.

"I also translated into Latin the whole of Garretson's and Ellis's *Exercises*. In *Mathematics* I read *Walkinghame's Tutor's Assistant*, *Ewing's Mathematics*, omitting gunnery, and *Dilworth's Book-keeping*.—The usher of the school was a very ingenious young man of the name of Josiah Jeffrey, who was in the habit of lending me books, and amongst them Benjamin Martin's *Lectures on Natural Philosophy*, and Ryland's *Intro-*

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duction to the Newtonian Philosophy. I was particularly delighted with the optical part of Martin's book, which contains many detailed rules for the practical construction of optical instruments; I also learnt the first elements of Algebra from Vyse and Ward.

"Mr. Jeffrey was a good mechanic, and it was from him that I acquired my fondness for turning and for making telescopes. He had made also an electrical machine, which I very frequently used. I was in the habit of grinding and preparing various kinds of colours for him, which he used to sell to the boys and to others; from him likewise I learnt the first principles of drawing, and copied under his directions several specimens from the copper-plates of a book entitled *The Principles of Design*. He was also a bookbinder, an occupation in which I assisted him. After he left the school, I succeeded to some of his employments and perquisites, and I used to sell paper, copper-plates, copy-books, and colours to my schoolfellows, by which means I contrived to collect in 1786, as much as 5*s.*, which, added to 10*s.* 6*d.* given me by my parents, enabled me to buy some Greek and Latin books, which were sold to me by Mr. Thompson at extremely low prices, and likewise Montanus's Hebrew Bible, for which I gave 5*s.*; for I was at that time enamoured of Oriental literature, and I had already read through Buxtorf's *Compendium*, and Taylor's *Tract* at the end of his *Concordance*; and before I left Compton School, I had succeeded in getting through six chapters of the Hebrew Bible.^a

"In the intervals of my residence at this school, during my occasional visits to my grandfather at Minehead, I became acquainted with a saddler of the name of Atkins, a person of considerable mechanical skill and ingenuity, whose journal of

^a Some of his letters, written in very rude Latin, and addressed to a young friend at Milverton, have been preserved, in which he gives an account of his occupations, very similar to that in the text. In answer to some observations against studying Hebrew, he says:—"Ne puta linguam Hebraicam inutilem fore mihi vel iniquam alio. Nonne eâ linguâ oracula edita sunt divina? Nonne est mater omnium prope linguarum? Nonnulli dicunt esse linguam 'quâ locutus est Deus,' sed hoc audaciam existimo. Biblia emi Hebraica cum Montani versione pro 5*s.*" This is sufficiently remarkable for a very young schoolboy nearly self-taught.

the heights of the barometer and thermometer, of the state of the weather, and direction of the wind for three times a day during the whole of the year 1782, is published in the Philosophical Transactions for 1784. Amongst many other instruments which he possessed was a quadrant, which became the constant companion of my walks, and with which I attempted to measure the heights of the principal eminences in the neighbourhood. I had imbibed also a wish to study botany, from a conversation with Morris Birkbeck; and in order to enable me to examine the minute organs of plants, I was anxious to construct a microscope from the description of Benjamin Martin. For this purpose I procured a lathe, and I succeeded in getting the requisite materials by the assistance of my grandfather and one of my father's clerks. My zeal for botany during these operations was replaced by my fondness for optics, and subsequently by that for turning. I well recollect likewise, that, having seen a demonstration in Martin which exhibited, though unnecessarily, some fluxional symbols, I never felt satisfied until I had read, a year or two afterwards, a Short Introduction to the Method of Fluxions.

“My father had purchased at an auction, a volume of Priestley on Air, the reading of which delighted me greatly, and first turned my attention to making chemical experiments.

“I was in the habit of rising an hour sooner than my schoolfellows in summer, and of going to bed an hour or two later in winter, for the purpose of mastering my lesson for the day; my school business was thus soon finished. I was at that time however perfectly ignorant of prosody, as well as my master, and I possessed no very accurate grammatical knowledge of the Greek and Latin languages.

“One of my schoolfellows, of the name of Fox, had made himself master of the Italian language: with his assistance and that of Veneroni's Italian and French Grammar, I was enabled to read *Lettere d' una Peruviana*, and some other works. I had before acquired some slight knowledge of French.

“I read through Penn's Reflections and Maxims.

“Upon my return home, after finally leaving Compton School, I devoted myself almost entirely to the study of Hebrew and to the practice of turning and telescope-making. I read through thirty chapters of the Book of Genesis without points.

That most excellent man, Mr. Toulmin, who had heard of the nature of my studies, though perfectly unknown to me, lent me Masclef's Hebrew, Chaldee, Syriac, and Samaritan grammars, and also some works of Gregory Sharp^a and Mr. Bayley,^b which I studied with great diligence. Mr. John Fry lent me Robertson on Reading Hebrew without Points. Mr. Toulmin also lent me The Lord's Prayer in more than 100 Languages, the examination of which gave me extraordinary pleasure. I had also read through the greatest part of Sir William Jones's Persian Grammar."

Amongst the many accounts which have been published of the premature acquirements of extraordinary boys, it might be very possible to find some which are even more remarkable than that which is given in the preceding narrative. In most cases, however, the vigour of the plant seems to have been somewhat exhausted by the unnatural excitement of its early growth, and the instances are very rare where the mature fruits have fully corresponded to the expectations which had been formed. In the subsequent history of Young's education, we shall discover no symptoms of decay, either in the desire or power of acquiring knowledge; and the firmness of purpose with which he persevered in mastering the most difficult and repulsive studies, seems to have advanced with his increase of years. It was, perhaps, a fortunate circumstance for him that the modest station in life of his parents and connexions, and the severe habits of the sect to which they belonged, saved him in some degree at least from the misfortune of being paraded as a prodigy; a fate to

^a Upon the original powers of letters, wherein it is proved, from the analogy of alphabets and the proportion of letters, that the Hebrew ought to be used without points.—1750.

^b An Entrance into the Sacred Language, containing the necessary Rules of Hebrew Grammar in English, by the Rev. C. Bayley. Trinity College, 1782.

which wonderful boys have been more or less commonly exposed, in order to gratify the impatient vanity and ostentation of their friends. As it was, however, his acquirements and his talents had already begun to excite considerable attention, not merely amongst his relatives, but also amongst other persons to whom they were made known; and his parents had already begun to think seriously of the line of life which might be most advantageously taken by a youth of such uncommon promise.

It was about this time that a young lady, Priscilla Gurney, a niece of Mr. David Barclay, of Youngsbury, near Ware, in Hertfordshire, was ordered by her medical attendants to spend a few years in a quiet part of the country, for the benefit of her health, and she went to reside with a sister of Mrs. Young, who had long been her intimate friend. The acquirements and industry of her friend's nephew, at that time absorbed in the study of the Oriental languages, were noticed by this lady, and she joined Sir William Watson, who had married her mother, and to whom also Young's family were well known, in strongly recommending him to Mr. Barclay, who was then making arrangements for the domestic education of his grandson, Hudson Gurney, and looking out for a proper companion of his studies, under a private tutor who was to be engaged for that purpose. It so happened that the private tutor first engaged found a situation of a more permanent nature, and never came; so that the two boys being left together, whose ages differed only by a year and a half, Young, who was then little more than fourteen, took upon himself provisionally the office of preceptor. They were afterwards joined by Mr. Hodgkin, who has since become known to the

public as the author of the *Calligraphia Græca*, and of some other extremely useful publications connected with the business of classical education. To this gentleman, though himself young, and engaged in the completion of his own education, Mr. Barclay entrusted, in connexion with other duties, the general superintendence of the studies and conduct of his grandson, though Young continued to retain the direction of his classical studies during the whole period of his residence at Youngsbury.^a

* Mr. Hodgkin has communicated to me the following statement of his relation to the two students at Youngsbury, with a view of correcting a somewhat erroneous impression which might be conveyed by a short printed Memoir of Dr. Young, published in 1832, which is founded upon an autobiographical sketch which was found amongst his papers :—"From Dr. Young's narrative it might be inferred that John Hodgkin had undertaken the office of tutor to both Dr. Young and Hudson Gurney, but ultimately relinquished the classical department to Dr. Young, from whom he was glad to receive instruction ; whereas Mr. Hodgkin never undertook to be Dr. Young's tutor,—but the person who, previously to Mr. Hodgkin's being applied to, had been engaged to fill the post of tutor to both, having afterwards declined it, Dr. Young undertook, provisionally, the instruction of his young friend in Latin and Greek, in which he acquitted himself so much to David Barclay's satisfaction that he did not consider it necessary to look for further aid in that respect, though he did not think it desirable to subject him to the sole direction of a youth of little more than his own age—the one being about thirteen and the other about fourteen : he therefore invited Mr. Hodgkin (whom he knew to be at that time intending to place himself under the instruction of Dr. Knox) to relinquish his plan of going to Tunbridge, and to undertake in part the office of tutor to Hudson Gurney, a situation which would afford Mr. Hodgkin an opportunity of pursuing his own classical studies, and of deriving some advice and assistance in them, from the extraordinary youth, whose stability of conduct and intensity of application seemed to place every desirable object of literary or scientific pursuit within the reach of his astonishing mental powers. Mr. Hodgkin's wish to have the error, which he has mentioned, obviated, does not proceed from any desire to underrate his obligations to Dr. Young : he has always been sensible of them, and would have rejoiced in having an opportunity of repaying the Doctor in a similar way ; but his just reliance upon his own resources rendered him independent of the aid of others. An example will illustrate this :—Soon after Mr. Hodgkin went to Youngsbury, Dr. Young once asked him how to solve an algebraical problem ; but he had scarcely proposed it before he