

The Challenge of the Hieroglyph: Questions of Philosophical Untranslatability

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This paper focuses on a case study that concerns the question of untranslatability and its philosophical status. Before the 1822 decipherment of the Rosetta Stone, the notion of the hieroglyph as a limit-case of untranslatability played an important role in philosophical endeavors from the Neoplatonists to the Romantics. What can be learned from the exploration of this case study of untranslatability? The paper argues that there are two important strands within the pre-decipherment interpretation of Egyptian hieroglyphs: a strand of enigma/veiledness (starting with Plutarch) and a strand of transparency (drawing ultimately on Plotinus' notion of hieroglyphs as images offering a kind of non-discursive knowledge, a notion that was picked up by Ficino and others in the Italian Renaissance). I propose that this tradition of interpretation can be viewed not only as a limit case for theories of translation but also as an example of how broader cultural and philosophical issues are intimately linked to the putative task of translation.

Keywords: Hieroglyph, Symbol, Untranslatability, Neoplatonism, Romanticism.

1. Introduction

The hieroglyph plays an interesting but underexplored role in the history of Western philosophy. It is a topic which comes to the fore at crucial moments in late ancient philosophy, especially in Neoplatonism, in the Florentine Renaissance and in the development of German Idealism and Romanticism. This latter development will be of particular interest: Liselotte Dieckmann, who wrote a book on this development some fifty years ago, says in fact that the hieroglyph could be regarded as the «central metaphor» of German Romanticism¹. This paper will not make a claim quite that bold, but it will argue that the hieroglyph has a surprising presence within German Idealism and Romanticism and that thinking about this history seems to pose some particularly interesting questions for our purposes in terms of the study of philosophy and translation—

¹ Liselotte Dieckmann, *The Metaphor of Hieroglyphics in German Romanticism*, «Comparative Literature», 7 (1955) 4, pp. 306-12: p. 306; Ead., *Hieroglyphics: The History of a Literary Symbol*, Washington University Press, St. Louis 1970.