Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682)

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‘There is no man more Paradoxical than myself’.

Four hundred years after his birth, Sir Thomas Browne (Figure 1) is remembered not for his metaphysical subtleties or scientific speculations but for his unfailing toleration in an age of sectarian strife. Thomas was the youngest of four children of a mercer, Thomas Browne, and his wife Anne Garraway. He was born in Cheapside, London, on 19 October 1605, the year of the Gunpowder Plot.¹ After the death of Thomas Browne senior in 1613 Anne married Sir Thomas Dutton, and this remarriage within six months of her bereavement led to intervention of the Court of Orphans of the City of London into the disposition of the will. Her dead husband’s elder brother Edward had been a fellow executor but Anne had proceeded to probate in his absence, and the Court questioned her declaration that Thomas Browne had died with negligible wealth. Eventually Anne was excluded from the executorship and Edward was appointed to act alone—to the lasting benefit of the young Thomas and his four sisters.²

Thomas at the age of 11 was sent to William of Wykeham’s foundation at Winchester, and in 1623 he entered Broadgates Hall, Oxford. When he graduated BA three years later the Hall had been incorporated into the newly founded Pembroke College. After he became MA in June 1629, with his stepfather he made a brief visit to Ireland about which we know little—not altogether surprisingly, for Dutton as Scoutmaster General was sure to cover his tracks.³ In 1630 Thomas set off for the medical schools of Montpellier, Padua and Leiden, where his MD was conferred in December 1633.⁴

Browne began practice in Shibden [also Shipden] Dale near Halifax, Yorkshire, in 1635, the year after Dutton’s death in a drunken brawl in London.⁵ He moved to settle in Norwich in 1637, the year his Leiden MD was incorporated at Oxford.⁴ In 1641 he married Dorothy Mileham of Burlington St Peter, who eventually bore him ten children, six of whom died before their parents. In December 1664 his literary endeavours earned him election

Figure 1 Portrait of Sir Thomas Browne, reproduced from Ref. 1

to Honorary Fellowship of the College of Physicians.⁶ Throughout the Civil War and the years of the Commonwealth and protectorate he remained a staunch Royalist; and Charles II, on a visit to Norwich in November 1671 rewarded him with the knighthood by which he is now remembered.⁷

BROWNE’S RELIGIO

Though isolated from books and libraries in Shibden Dale, his ‘life a miracle of thirty years’,⁸ Browne began there his most famous work, the *Religio Medici*, the confessions of a doctor (in this paper my quotations come from the version published in reference 8):

‘I cannot divide myselfe from any man upon the difference of an opinion, or be angry with his judgement for not agreeing with mee in that, from which perhaps within a few dayes I should dissent my selfe . . . In philosophy, where Truth seems double-fac’d, there is no man more Paradoxical than myself; but in Divinity I love to keep the Road . . . As for those wingy Mysteries in

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Divinity, and airy subtleties in Religion, which have unhinged the brains of better heads, they never stretched the Pia Mater of mine' (pp. 7–10).

He found the whole creation, particularly that of man, a mystery:

'Amongst all those rare discoveries and curious pieces I find in the Fabrick of Man, there is no Organ or Instrument for the rational Soul; for in the brain there is not anything of moment more than I can discover in the crany of a beast, and this is an argument of the inorganity of the Soul. Thus we are men, and we know not how; there is something in us that can be without us, and will be after us; though it is strange that it hath no history what it was before us, nor cannot tell how it entered in us' (p. 42).

There are those who fancy that the conflict between science and revealed religion sprang up in a fit of spontaneous generation in the middle of the nineteenth century. But it was not new or novel two centuries earlier:

'As Reason is a rebell unto Faith, so passion unto Reason: As the propositions of Faith seem absurd unto Reason, so the Theorems of Reason unto passion, and both unto Faith; yet a moderate and peaceable discretion may so state and order the matter, that they may bee all Kings, and yet make one Monarchy, every one exercising his Sovereignty and Prerogative in a due time and place, according to the restraint and limit of circumstance' (p. 23).

Thomas was and remained a confirmed member of the Church of England; in an epoch fraught with controversy and hatred he exemplified the true Christian spirit: 'I can dispense with my hat at the sight of a cross, but scarce with the thought or memory of my Saviour . . . I cannot hear the Ave Maria bell without an elevation'.

Sectarianism was not the only irrational division repugnant to him; he was as far from racial as from religious bigotry:

'I feel not in myself those common antipathies That I can discover in others, those national repugnances do not touch me, nor do I behold with prejudice the French, Italian, Spaniard, or Dutch; but when I find their actions in balance with my countrymen's I know, love, and embrace them in the same degree' (p. 65).

For him the great 'virtue was charity, without which Faith is a mere notion'; his doctrine was simple: '*He that giveth to the poor, lendeth to the Lord*: There is more Rhetoric

in that one sentence than in a Library of Sermons'.⁹ The Second Part of the *Religio Medici* is devoted to charity and recommendations of its application in the most unexpected places.

'I cannot fall out or contemme a man for errour, or conceive why a difference in opinion should divide an affection: for controversies, disputes, and argumentations, both in Philosophy and Divinity, if they meete with discreet and peaceable natures, doe not infringe the Lawes of Charity. In all disputes, so much as there is of passion, so much there is of nothing to the purpose; for then reason, like a bad hound, spends upon a false scent, and forsakes the question first started. And this is one reason why controversies are never determined; for, though they be amply proposed, they are scarce at all handled, they doe so swell with unnecessary Digressions, and the Parenthesis on the party is often as large as the maine discourse upon the Subject' (p. 70).

Before Lord Chief Justice Hale at St Edmundsbury in 1664 Dr Browne gave his opinion in the trial of Amy Duny and Rose Cullender, charged with witchcraft, '*that the fits were natural, but heightened by the Devil's co-operating with the malice of the witches, at whose instance he did the villanies*'.¹ Before we judge him harshly on this, it is imperative to recall that the physician was giving an opinion—an honest opinion as is clear from the *Religio*:

'Again I believe that all that use sorceries, incantations, and spells, are not Witches, or, as we terme them, Magicians; I conceive there is a traditionall Magicke, not learned immediately from the Devil, but at second hand from his Schollers; . . . Thus I think a great part of Philosophy was at first Witchcraft, which, having afterwards derived to one another, proved but Philosophy, but was indeed no more than the honest affects of Nature; what, invented by us, is Philosophy, learned from him Magick' (p. 35).

Small wonder that, like many of his famous contemporaries, he refused to walk in the novel circles drawn by Copernicus and Harvey.

REFLECTIONS

Browne would take inordinate pains over disproving the most absurd fables and silly errors.¹ Amongst those he demolished in *Pseudoxia Epidemica*, or *Vulgar and Common Errors*, in 1646 were the calculation that 63, the 'great climacterical year', must carry the most considerable fatality because it is the product of the two magical numbers 7 and 9, and the physicians' entitlement to

holidays in the Dog Days of July and August, when 'all medication or use of physic is to be declined and the cure committed to nature'.¹ However, it would be wrong to assume that he spent his time in the shallows, as his subsequent publications demonstrate time and again.

His two books published in 1658 share the unusual distinction for literary gems of being mistitled. *Hydriotaphia* or *Urne Burial* and *The Garden of Cyrus* contain little archaeology or horticulture; one is a meditation on mortality, on time and eternity, and the other an obsession with the geometrical quincunx (arrangement of five objects, four at the corners and one at the centre).⁸ The final chapter of *Urne Burial*, eloquent with sombre dignity, is rated among the finest in English literature: 'Time which antiquates Antiquities, hath an art to make dust of all things . . . , the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity'. Fortunately we have recompense in our imagination: 'Life is a pure flame, and we live by an invisible Sun within us. A small fire sufficeth for life' (pp. 131, 135, 137). But we insist in making our own miseries:

'If the nearnesse of our last necessity, brought a nearer conformity into it, there were a happiness in hoary hairs, and no calamity in half senses. But the long habit of living indisposeth us for dying; when avarice makes us the sport of death; When even *David* grew politickally cruell; and *Solomon* could hardly be said to be the wisest of men. But many are too early old, and before the date of age. Adversity stretcheth our dayes, misery makes *Alcmene's* nights, and time hath no wings to it' (p. 132).

Not all his works were published during his life. He died in 1682 on his birthday—a curious irony in view of his *Letter to a Friend upon the occasion of the death of an intimate friend*:

'But in Persons who out-live many Years, and when there are no less than three hundred and sixty-five days to determine their Lives in every year; that the first day an Advantage of their should make the last, that the Tail of the Snake should return into its Mouth, precisely at that time, and they should wind up upon the day of their Nativity, is indeed a remarkable Coincidence, which tho *Astrology* had taken witty pains to salve, yet hath it been very wary in making Prediction of it' (pp. 153–154).

The sound judgments in *Christian Morals*, which did not appear until 1716, plainly show that he had not rested on his laurels after *Religio Medici* but stocked his mind by

lifelong learning: 'Value the Judicious, and let not mere acquests in minor parts of Learning gain thy pre-existimation . . . They do most by Books, who could do much without them, and he that chiefly owes himself unto himself, is the substantial Man' (pp. 254, 255).

COMMENTARIES

Samuel Johnson's 'Life', written for the 1756 edition of *Christian Morals*, fortunately reprinted 'Some Minutes for the Life of Sir Thomas Browne' by John Whitefoot, MA, late Rector of Higham in Norfolk, who had known Sir Thomas:

'He was never seen to be transported with mirth or dejected with sadness; always cheerful but rarely merry, at any sensible rate; seldom heard to break a jest, and when he did he would be apt to blush at the levity of it. His gravity was natural, without affectation.'¹

The physician knew himself, as is clear from a passage in the *Religio Medici*:

'I have a touch of the Leaden Planet in me. I am no way facetious, nor disposed for the mirth and galliardize of company; yet in one dream I can compose a whole Comedy, behold the action, apprehend the jests, and laugh my self awake at the conceits thereof' (p. 84).

Johnson added his own *bons mots*: 'What is much read will be much criticised',¹ and he went on to retell the tale of Sir Kenelm Digby who judged the *Religio Medici* not in a letter but in a book composed in twenty-four hours, part of which time was spent in procuring the book; the good knight seems to have invented the 48-hour day. Johnson added the memorable sentence: 'The reciprocal civility of authors is one of the most risible scenes in the farce of life', and asked the rhetorical question: 'Who would not have thought, that these two luminaries of their age had ceased to endeavour to grow bright by the obscuration of the other?' In praise, he wrote:

'[Browne's] style is, indeed, a tissue of many languages; a mixture of heterogeneous words, brought together from distant regions, with terms originally appropriated to one art, and drawn by violence into the service of another. He must, however, be confessed to have augmented our philosophical diction; and in defence of his uncommon words and expressions we must consider, that he had uncommon sentiments, and was not content to express in many words that idea for which any language could supply a single term. But the innovations are sometimes

pleasing, and his temerities happy; he has many “*verba ardentia*”, forcible expressions, which he would never have found, but by venturing to the utmost verge of propriety; and flights which would never have been reached, but by one who had very little fear of the shame of failing.’¹

The seldom other than acerbic Lytton Strachey failed to find a bitter word for Sir Thomas,⁹ and was much taken by ‘the peculiarities of his style—the studied pomp of its sentences, its wealth of allusions, its tendency towards vigorous antitheses’. He even allowed his whimsy free rein:

‘It is interesting—or at least amusing—to consider what are the most appropriate places in which different authors should be read. Pope is doubtless at his best in the midst of a formal garden, Herrick in an orchard, and Shelley in a boat at sea, Sir Thomas Browne demands, perhaps, a more exotic atmosphere. One could read him floating down the Euphrates, or past the shores of Arabia; and it would be pleasant to open *Vulgar Errors* in Constantinople, or to get by heart a chapter of the *Christian Morals* between the paws of a Sphinx. In England, the most fitting background for his strange ornament must surely be some habitation consecrated to learning, some university which still smells of antiquity, and has learned the habit of repose’⁹

Quaint conceits, as entertaining as the occasional internal contradictions, enliven Johnson’s biographical notice:

‘Though he were no prophet or son of a prophet, yet, in that faculty which comes nearest it, he excelled, i.e. the stochastick, wherein he was seldom mistaken as to future events, as well as publick as private; but not apt to discover any presage or superstition.’

Johnson refers to Browne’s prophecy, echoing that of Bishop Berkeley, ‘that America will be the seat of the fifth

empire’.¹ At Browne’s fourth centennial we can see the justice of this remark.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Browne’s miscellaneous writings range from observations in natural science to the most recondite subtleties of metaphysical speculation. The simplicity of his character contrasts with the abstruse notions in which he indulged at every turn, and the analogies he uses to illustrate these quaint eccentricities delight the reader with mingled amusement and surprise. He astonishes with the variety of his vocabulary and the beauty of his chosen words, so that an intimate companionship is quietly established and ensnares the reader.

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