

SIR THOMAS BROWNE AND HIS 'RELIGIO MEDICI

by Alexander Whyte

Alexander Whyte's appreciation of Sir Thomas Browne and his classic work Religio Medici, highlighting Browne's extraordinary depth of mind and rich English prose style.

2 Chapters

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The Project Gutenberg eBook, Sir Thomas Browne and his 'Religio Medici', by Alexander Whyte
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SIR THOMAS BROWNE AND HIS 'RELIGIO MEDICI': an Appreciation with some of the best passages of the Physician's Writings selected and arranged by Alexander Whyte D. D.

[Illustration from 1642 edition of Religio Medici: [ill.jpg](#)] Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier Saint Mary Street, Edinburgh, and 21 Paternoster Square, London 1898

DEDICATED TO SIR THOMAS GRAINGER STEWART PRESIDENT OF THE BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION AT WHOSE REQUEST THIS APPRECIATION WAS DELIVERED AS THE INAUGURAL DISCOURSE AT THE OPENING MEETING OF THE ASSOCIATION IN ST. GILES' CATHEDRAL ON THE 26TH JULY 1898 IN GREAT GOOD-WILL AND LOVE BY ALEXANDER WHYTE

00a Appreciation and Introduction

APPRECIATION AND INTRODUCTION The *Religio Medici* is a universally recognised English classic. And the *Urn-Burial*, the *Christian Morals*, and the *Letter to a Friend* are all quite worthy to take their stand beside the *Religio Medici*. Sir Thomas Browne made several other contributions to English literature besides these masterpieces; but it is on the *Religio Medici*, and on what Sir Thomas himself calls 'other pieces of affinity thereto,' that his sure fame as a writer of noble truth and stately English most securely rests. Sir Thomas Browne was a physician of high standing and large practice all his days; and he was an antiquarian and scientific writer of the foremost information and authority: but it is the extraordinary depth and riches and imaginative sweep of his mind, and his rare wisdom and wealth of heart, and his quite wonderful English style, that have all combined together to seal Sir Thomas Browne with his well-earned immortality.

Sir Thomas Browne's outward life can be told in a very few words. He was born at London in 1605. He lost his father very early, and it must have been a very great loss. For the old mercer was wont to creep up to his little son's cradle when he was asleep, and uncover and kiss the child's breast, and pray, 'as 'tis said of Origen's father, that the Holy Ghost would at once take possession there.' The old merchant was able to leave money enough to take his gifted son first to Winchester School, and then to Oxford, where he graduated in New Pembroke in 1626. On young Browne's graduation, old Anthony a Wood has this remark, that those who love Pembroke best can wish it nothing better than that it may long proceed as it has thus begun. As soon as he had taken his university degree young Browne entered on the study of medicine: and, in pursuit of that fast-rising science, he visited and studied in the most famous schools of France and Italy and Holland. After various changes of residence, through all of which it is somewhat difficult to trace the young physician's movements, we find him at last fairly settled in the city of Norwich, where he spent the remainder of his long, and busy, and prosperous, and honourable life.

Dr. Johnson laments that Sir Thomas Browne has left us no record of his travels and studies abroad, and all Sir Thomas's readers will join with his great biographer in that regret. At the same time, as we turn over the pile of letters that Sir Thomas sent to his student son Edward, and to his sailor son Thomas, when they were abroad at school and on ship, we can easily collect and picture to ourselves the life that the writer of those so wise and so beautiful letters led when he himself was still a student at Montpellier and Padua and Leyden. 'Honest Tom,--God bless thee, and protect thee, and mercifully lead thee through the ways of His providence. Be diligent in going to church. Be constant, and not negligent in your daily private prayers. Be a good husband. Cast up your accounts with all care. Be temperate in diet, and be wary not to overheat yourself. Be courteous and civil to all. Live with an apothecary, and observe his drugs and practice. Frequent civil company. Point your letters, and put periods at the ends of your sentences. Have the love and the fear of God ever before your eyes. And may God confirm your faith in Christ. Observe the manner of trade: how they make wine and vinegar, and keep a note of all that for me. Be courteous and humble in all your conversation, and of good manners: which he that learneth not in France travailleth in vain. When at sea read good books. Without good books time cannot be well

spent in those great ships. Learn the stars also: the particular coasts: the depth of the roadsteads: and the risings and fallings of the land. Enquire further about the mineral water: and take notice of such plants as you meet with. I am told that you are looked on in the Service as exceeding faithful, valiant, diligent, generous, vigilant, observing, very knowing, and a scholar. When you first took to this manner of life, you cannot but remember that I caused you to read all the sea-fights of note in Plutarch: and, withal, gave you the description of fortitude left by Aristotle. In places take notice of the government of them, and the eminent persons. The merciful providence of God ever go with you, and direct and bless you, and give you ever a grateful heart toward Him. I send you Lucretius: and with it Tully's Offices: 'tis as remarkable for its little size as for the good matter contained in it, and the authentic and classical Latin. I hope you do not forget to carry a Greek Testament always to church: a man learns two things together, and profiteth doubly, in the language and the subject. God send us to number our days, and to fit ourselves for a better world. Times look troublesome: but you have an honest and peaceable profession like myself, which may well employ you, and you have discretion to guide your words and actions. May God be reconciled to us, and give us grace to forsake our sins which set fire to all things. You shall never want my daily prayers, and also frequent letters.' And so on, through a delightful sheaf of letters to his two sons: and out of which a fine picture rises before us, both of Sir Thomas's own student life abroad, as well as of the footing on which the now famous physician and English author stood with his student and sailor sons.

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You might read every word of Sir Thomas Browne's writings and never discover that a sword had been unsheathed or a shot fired in England all the time he was living and writing there. It was the half-century of the terrible civil war for political and religious liberty: but Sir Thomas Browne would seem to have possessed all the political and religious liberty he needed. At any rate, he never took open part on either side in the great contest. Sir Thomas Browne was not made of the hot metal and the stern stuff of John Milton. All through those terrible years Browne lived securely in his laboratory, and in his library, and in his closet. Richard Baxter's Autobiography is as full of gunpowder as if it had been written in an army-chaplain's tent, as indeed it was. But both Bunyan's Grace Abounding and Browne's Religio Medici might have been written in the Bedford or Norwich of our own peaceful day. All men are not made to be soldiers and statesmen: and it is no man's duty to attempt to be what he was not made to be. Every man has his own talent, and his corresponding and consequent duty and obligation. And both Bunyan and Browne had their own talent, and their own consequent duty and obligation, just as Cromwell and Milton and Baxter had theirs. Enough, and more than enough, if it shall be said to them all on that day, Well done.

'My life,' says Sir Thomas, in opening one of the noblest chapters of his noblest book, 'is a miracle of thirty years, which to relate were not a history, but a piece of poetry; and it would sound to common ears like a fable.' Now, as all Sir Thomas's readers must know, the most extraordinary criticisms and comments have been made on those devout and thankful words of his concerning himself. Dr. Samuel Johnson's were not common ears, but even he comments on these beautiful words with a wooden-headedness almost past belief. For, surely the thirty years of schoolboy, and student, and opening professional life that resulted in the production of such a masterpiece as the Religio Medici was a miracle both of God's providence and God's grace, enough to justify him who had experienced all that in acknowledging it to God's glory and to the unburdening of his own

heart, so richly loaded with God's benefits. And, how a man of Samuel Johnson's insight, good sense, and pious feeling could have so missed the mark in this case, I cannot understand. All the more that both the chapter so complained about, and the whole book to which that chapter belongs, are full of the same thankful, devout, and adoring sentiment. 'The world that I regard,' Sir Thomas proceeds, 'is myself. Men that look upon my outside, and who peruse only my conditions and my fortunes, do err in my altitude. There is surely a piece of divinity in us all; something that was before the elements, and which owes no homage unto the sun.' And again, 'We carry with us the wonders we seek without us. There is all Africa and all its prodigies in us all. We are that bold and adventurous piece of nature, which he that studies wisely learns, in a compendium, what others labour at in a divided piece and endless volume.' And again, 'There is another way of God's providence full of meanders and labyrinths and obscure methods: that serpentine and crooked line: that cryptic and involved method of His providence which I have ever admired. Surely there are in every man's life certain rubs, and doublings, and wrenches, which, well examined, do prove the pure hand of God. And to be true, and to speak out my soul, when I survey the occurrences of my own life, and call into account the finger of God, I can perceive nothing but an abyss and a mass of mercies. And those which others term crosses, and afflictions, and judgments, and misfortunes, to me they both appear, and in event have ever proved, the secret and dissembled favours of His affection.' And in the *Christian Morals*: 'Annihilate not the mercies of God by the oblivion of ingratitude. Make not thy head a grave, but a repository of God's mercies. Register not only strange, but all merciful occurrences. Let thy diaries stand thick with dutiful mementoes and asterisks of acknowledgment. And to be complete and to forget nothing, date not His mercy from thy nativity: look beyond this world, and before the era of Adam. And mark well the winding ways of providence. For that hand writes often by abbreviations, hieroglyphics, and short characters, which, like the laconism on Belshazzar's wall, are not to be made out but by a key from that Spirit that indited them.' And yet again, 'To thoughtful observers the whole world is one phylactery, and everything we see an item of the wisdom, and power, and goodness of God.' How any man, not to speak of one of the wisest and best of men, such as Samuel Johnson was, could read all that, and still stagger at Sir Thomas Browne holding himself to be a living miracle of the power, and the love, and the grace of God, passes my understanding.

We have seen in his own noble words how Sir Thomas Browne's life appeared to himself. Let us now look at how he appeared to other observing men. The Rev. John Whitefoot, the close and lifelong friend of Sir Thomas, has left us this lifelike portrait of the author of *Religio Medici*. 'For a character of his person, his complexion and his hair were answerable to his name, his stature was moderate, and his habit of body neither fat nor lean, but [Greek text]. In his habit of clothing he had an aversion to all finery, and affected plainness. He ever wore a cloke, or boots, when few others did. He kept himself always very warm, and thought it most safe so to do. The horizon of his understanding was much larger than the hemisphere of the world: all that was visible in the heavens he comprehended so well, that few that are under them knew so much. And of the earth he had such a minute and exact geographical knowledge as if he had been by divine providence ordained surveyor-general of the whole terrestrial orb and its products, minerals, plants, and animals. His memory, though not so eminent as that of Seneca or Scaliger, was capacious and tenacious, insomuch that he remembered all that was remarkable in any book he ever read. He had no despotical power over his affections and passions, that was a privilege of original perfection, but as large a political power over them as any stoic or man of his time, whereof he

gave so great experiment that he hath very rarely been known to have been overpowered with any of them. His aspect and conversation were grave and sober; there was never to be seen in him anything trite or vulgar. Parsimonious in nothing but his time, whereof he made as much improvement, with as little loss as any man in it, when he had any to spare from his drudging practice, he was scarce patient of any diversion from his study: so impatient of sloth and idleness, that he would say, he could not do nothing. He attended the public service very constantly, when he was not withheld by his practice. Never missed the sacrament in his parish, if he were in town. Read the best English sermons he could hear of with liberal applause: and delighted not in controversies. His patience was founded upon the Christian philosophy, and sound faith of God's providence, and a meek and humble submission thereto. I visited him near his end, when he had not strength to hear or speak much: and the last words I heard from him were, besides some expressions of dearness, that he did freely submit to the will of God: being without fear. He had oft triumphed over the king of terrors in others, and given him many repulses in the defence of patients; but when his own time came, he submitted with a meek, rational, religious courage.'

Taking Sir Thomas Browne all in all, Tertullian, Sir Thomas's favourite Father, has supplied us, as it seems to me, with his whole life and character in these so expressive and so comprehensive words of his, *Anima naturaliter Christiana*. In these three words, when well weighed and fully opened up, we have the whole author of the *Religio Medici*, the *Christian Morals*, and the *Letter to a Friend*. *Anima naturaliter Christiana*._

* * * * * The *Religio Medici* was Sir Thomas Browne's first book, and it remains by far his best book. His other books acquire their value and take their rank just according to the degree of their 'affinity' to the *Religio Medici*. Sir Thomas Browne is at his best when he is most alone with himself. There is no subject that interests him so much as Sir Thomas Browne. And if you will forget yourself in Sir Thomas Browne, and in his conversations which he holds with himself, you will find a rare and an ever fresh delight in the *Religio Medici*. Sir Thomas is one of the greatest egotists of literature--to use a necessary but an unpopular and a misleading epithet. Hazlitt has it that there have only been but three perfect, absolute, and unapproached egotists in all literature--Cellini, Montaigne, and Wordsworth. But why that fine critic leaves out Sir Thomas Browne, I cannot understand or accept. I always turn to Sir Thomas Browne, far more than to either of Hazlitt's canonised three, when I want to read what a great man has to tell me about himself: and in this case both a great and a good and a Christian man. And thus, whatever modification and adaptation may have been made in this masterpiece of his, in view of its publication, and after it was first published, the original essence, most genuine substance, and unique style of the book were all intended for its author's peculiar heart and private eye alone. And thus it is that we have a work of a simplicity and a sincerity that would have been impossible had its author in any part of his book sat down to compose for the public. Sir Thomas Browne lived so much within himself, that he was both secret writer and sole reader to himself. His great book is 'a private exercise directed solely,' as he himself says, 'to himself: it is a memorial addressed to himself rather than an example or a rule directed to any other man.' And it is only he who opens the *Religio Medici* honestly and easily believing that, and glad to have such a secret and sincere and devout book in his hand,--it is only he who will truly enjoy the book, and who will gather the same gain out of it that its author enjoyed and gained out of it himself. In short, the properly prepared and absolutely ingenuous reader of the *Religio Medici* must be a second Thomas

Browne himself.

'I am a medical man,' says Sir Thomas, in introducing himself to us, 'and this is my religion. I am a physician, and this is my faith, and my morals, and my whole true and proper life. The scandal of my profession, the natural course of my studies, and the indifference of my behaviour and discourse in matters of religion, might persuade the world that I had no religion at all. And yet, in despite of all that, I dare, without usurpation, assume the honourable style of a Christian.' And if ever any man was a truly catholic Christian, it was surely Sir Thomas Browne. He does not unchurch or ostracise any other man. He does not stand at diameter and sword's point with any other man; no, not even with his enemy. He has never been able to alienate or exasperate himself from any man whatsoever because of a difference of an opinion. He has never been angry with any man because his judgment in matters of religion did not agree with his. In short he has no genius for disputes about religion; and he has often felt it to be his best wisdom to decline all such disputes. When his head was greener than it now is, he had a tendency to two or three errors in religion, of which he proceeds to set down the spiritual history. But at no time did he ever maintain his own opinions with pertinacity: far less to inveigle or entangle any other man's faith; and thus they soon died out, since they were only bare errors and single lapses of his understanding, without a joint depravity of his will. The truth to Sir Thomas Browne about all revealed religion is this, which he sets forth in a deservedly famous passage:--'Methinks there be not impossibilities enough in revealed religion for an active faith. I love to lose myself in a mystery, and to pursue my reason to an O altitudo! 'Tis my solitary recreation to pose my apprehension with those involved enigmas and riddles of the Trinity, with incarnation and resurrection. I can answer all the objections of Satan and my rebellious reason with that odd resolution I learned of Tertullian, *Certum est quia impossibile est*. I desire to exercise my faith in the difficultest point; for anything else is not faith but persuasion. I bless myself, and am thankful that I never saw Christ nor His disciples. For then had my faith been thrust upon me; nor should I have enjoyed that greater blessing pronounced to all that believe and saw not. They only had the advantage of a noble and a bold faith who lived before the coming of Christ; and who, upon obscure prophecies and mystical types, could raise a belief and expect apparent impossibilities. And since I was of understanding enough to know that we know nothing, my reason hath been more pliable to the will of faith. I am now content to understand a mystery in an easy and Platonic way, and without a demonstration and a rigid definition; and thus I teach my haggard and unreclaimed reason to stoop unto the lure of faith.' The unreclaimed reader who is not already allured by these specimens need go no further in Sir Thomas Browne's autobiographic book. But he who feels the grace and the truth, the power and the sweetness and the beauty of such writing, will be glad to know that the whole Religio is full of such things, and that all this author's religious and moral writings partake of the same truly Apostolic and truly Platonic character. In this noble temper, with the richest mind, and clothed in a style that entrances and captivates us, Sir Thomas proceeds to set forth his doctrine and experience of God; of God's providence; of Holy Scripture; of nature and man; of miracles and oracles; of the Holy Ghost and holy angels; of death; and of heaven and hell. And, especially, and with great fulness, and victoriousness, and conclusiveness, he deals with death. We sometimes amuse ourselves by making a selection of the two or three books that we would take with us to prison or to a desert island. And one dying man here and another there has already selected and set aside the proper and most suitable books for his own special deathbed. 'Read where I first cast my anchor,' said John Knox to his wife, sitting weeping at his bedside. At which she opened and

read in the Gospel of John. Sir Thomas Browne is neither more nor less than the very prose-laureate of death. He writes as no other man has ever written about death. Death is everywhere in all Sir Thomas Browne's books. And yet it may be said of them all, that, like heaven itself, there is no death there. Death is swallowed up in Sir Thomas Browne's defiant faith that cannot, even in death, get difficulties and impossibilities enough to exercise itself upon. O death, where is thy sting to Rutherford, and Bunyan, and Baxter, and Browne; and to those who diet their imaginations and their hearts day and night at such heavenly tables! But, if only to see how great and good men differ, Spinoza has this proposition and demonstration that a 'free man thinks of nothing less than of death.' Browne was a free man, but he thought of nothing more than of death. He was of Dante's mind-- The arrow seen beforehand slacks its flight. The Religio Medici was Sir Thomas Browne's first book, and the Christian Morals was his last; but the two books are of such affinity to one another that they will always be thought of together. Only, the style that was already almost too rich for our modern taste in the Religio absolutely cloys and clogs us in the Morals. The opening and the closing sentences of this posthumous treatise will better convey a taste of its strength and sweetness than any estimate or eulogium of mine. 'Tread softly and circumspectly in this funambulatory track, and narrow path of goodness; pursue virtue virtuously: leaven not good actions, nor render virtue disputable. Stain not fair acts with foul intentions; maim not uprightness by halting concomitances, nor circumstantially deprave substantial goodness. Consider whereabouts thou art in Cebes' table, or that old philosophical pinax of the life of man: whether thou art yet in the road of uncertainties; whether thou hast yet entered the narrow gate, got up the hill and asperous way which leadeth unto the house of sanity; or taken that purifying potion from the hand of sincere erudition, which may send thee clear and pure away unto a virtuous and happy life.' And having taken his reader up through a virtuous life, Sir Thomas thus parts with him at its close: 'Lastly, if length of days be thy portion, make it not thy expectation. Reckon not upon long life; think every day thy last. And since there is something in us that will still live on, join both lives together, and live in one but for the other. And if any hath been so happy as personally to understand Christian annihilation, ecstasy, exaltation, transformation, the kiss of the spouse, and ingression into the divine shadow, according to mystical theology, they have already had an handsome anticipation of heaven: the world is in a manner over, and the earth in ashes unto them.' 'Prose,' says Friswell, 'that with very little transposition, might make verse quite worthy of Shakespeare himself.'

* * * * * The Letter to a Friend is an account of the swift and inevitable deathbed of one of Sir Thomas's patients: a young man who died of a deceitful but a galloping consumption. There is enough of old medical observation and opening science in the Letter, as well as of sweet old literature, and still sweeter old religion, to make it a classic to every well-read doctor in the language. 'To be dissolved and to be with Christ was his dying ditty. He esteemed it enough to approach the years of his Saviour, who so ordered His own human state, as not to be old upon earth. He that early arriveth into the parts and prudence of age is happily old without the uncomfortable attendants of it. And 'tis superfluous to live unto grey hairs, when in a precocious temper we anticipate the virtues of them. In brief, he cannot be accounted young who outliveth the old man.' Let all young medical students have by heart Sir Thomas Browne's incomparable English, and wisdom, and piety in his Letter to a Friend upon the occasion of the death of his intimate Friend. 'This unique morsel of literature' as Walter Pater calls it. The Vulgar Errors, it must be confessed, is neither very inviting, nor very rewarding to ordinary readers nowadays. And that

big book will only be persevered in to the end by those readers to whom everything that Sir Thomas Browne has written is of a rare interest and profit. The full title of this now completely antiquated and wholly forgotten treatise is this, 'Pseudodoxia Epidemica, or Enquiries into very many received Tenets and commonly presumed Truths, which examined prove but Vulgar and Common Errors.' The First Book of the Pseudodoxia is general and philosophical; the Second Book treats of popular and received tenets concerning mineral and vegetable bodies; the Third, of popular and received tenets concerning animals; the Fourth, of man; the Fifth, of many things questionable as they are commonly described in pictures, etc.; and the Sixth, of popular and received tenets, cosmo-graphical, geographical, and historical; and the Seventh, of popular and received truth, some historical, and some deduced from Holy Scripture. The Introductory Book contains the best analysis and exposition of the famous Baconian Idols that has ever been written. That Book of the Pseudodoxia is full of the profoundest philosophical principles set forth in the stateliest English. The students of Whately and Mill, as well as of Bacon, will greatly enjoy this part of the Pseudodoxia. The Grammar of Assent, also, would seem to have had some of its deepest roots in the same powerful, original, and suggestive Book. For its day the Pseudodoxia is a perfect encyclopaedia of scientific, and historical, and literary, and even Biblical criticism: the Pseudodoxia and the Miscellany Tracts taken together. Some of the most powerful passages that ever fell from Sir Thomas Browne's pen are to be come upon in the Introduction to the Pseudodoxia. And, with all our immense advances in method and in discipline: in observation and in discovery: no true student of nature and of man can afford to neglect the extraordinary catalogue of things which are so characteristically treated of in Sir Thomas Browne's great, if, nowadays, out-grown book. For one thing, and that surely not a small thing, we see on every page of the Pseudodoxia the labour, as Dr. Johnson so truly says, that its author was always willing to pay for the truth. And, as Sir Thomas says himself, a work of this nature is not to be performed upon one leg, or without the smell of oil, if it is to be duly and deservedly handled. It must be left to men of learning and of science to say how far Sir Thomas has duly and deservedly handled the immense task he undertook in this book. But I, for one, have read this great treatise with a true pride, in seeing so much hard work so liberally laid out according to the best light allowed its author in that day. As Dr. Johnson has said of it, 'The mistakes that the author committed in the Pseudodoxia were not committed by idleness or negligence, but only for want of the philosophy of Boyle and Newton.' Who, then, will gird up his loins in our enlightened day to give us a new Pseudodoxia after the philosophy of Bacon and Boyle and Newton and Ewald and Darwin? And after Sir Thomas's own philosophy, which he thus sets forth before himself in this and in all his other studies: 'We are not magisterial in opinions, nor have we dictator-like obtruded our conceptions: but, in the humility of inquiries or disquisitions, have only proposed them to more ocular discerners. And we shall so far encourage contradiction as to promise no disturbance, or re- oppose any pen, that shall fallaciously or captiously refute us. And shall only take notice of such whose experimental and judicious knowledge shall be employed, not to traduce or extenuate, but to explain and dilucidate, to add and ampliate, according to the laudable custom of the ancients in their sober promotions of learning. Unto whom, notwithstanding, we shall not contentiously rejoin, or only to justify our own, but to applaud or confirm his maturer assertions; and shall confer what is in us unto his name and honour; ready, for our part, to be swallowed up in any worthy enlarger: as having our aid, if any way, or under any name, we may obtain a work, so much desired, and yet desiderated, of truth.' Shall this Association, I wonder, raise up from among its members, such a worthy successor and

enlarger of Sir Thomas Browne? The title, at least, of the *Urn-Burial* is more familiar to the most of us than that of the *Pseudodoxia*. It was the chance discovery of some ancient urns in Norfolk that furnished Sir Thomas with the occasion to write his *Hydriotaphia*. And that classical book is only another illustration of his enormous reading, ready memory, and intense interest in everything that touches on the nature of man, and on his beliefs, habits, and hopes in all ages of his existence on this earth. And the eloquence and splendour of this wonderful piece is as arresting to the student of style as its immense information is to the scholar and the antiquarian. 'The conclusion of the essay on *Urn-Burial*,' says Carlyle, 'is absolutely beautiful: a still elegiac mood, so soft, so deep, so solemn and tender, like the song of some departed saint--an echo of deepest meaning from the great and mighty Nations of the Dead. Sir Thomas Browne must have been a good man.' The *Garden of Cyrus* is past all description of mine. 'The *Garden of Cyrus* must be read. It is an extravagant sport of a scholar of the first rank and a genius of the first water. 'We write no herbal,' he begins, and neither he does. And after the most fantastical prose-poem surely that ever was written, he as fantastically winds up at midnight with this: 'To keep our eyes longer open were but to act our antipodes. The huntsmen are up in America, and they are already past their first sleep in Persia.' At which Coleridge must incontinently whip out his pencil till we have this note of his on the margin: 'What life! what fancy! what whimsicality! Was ever such a reason given for leaving one's book and going to bed as this, that they are already past their first sleep in Persia, and that the huntsmen are up in America?'

Sir Thomas Browne has had many admirers, and his greatest admirers are to be found among our foremost men. He has had Samuel Johnson among his greatest admirers, and Coleridge, and Carlyle, and Hazlitt, and Lytton, and Walter Pater, and Leslie Stephen, and Professor Saintsbury; than whom no one of them all has written better on Browne. And he has had princely editors and annotators in Simon Wilkin, and Dr. Greenhill, and Dr. Lloyd Roberts. I must leave it to those eminent men to speak to you with all their authority about Sir Thomas Browne's ten talents: his unique natural endowments, his universal scholarship, his philosophical depth, 'his melancholy yet affable irony,' his professional and scientific attainments, and his absolutely classical English style. And I shall give myself up, in ending this discourse, to what is of much more importance to him and to us all, than all these things taken together,--for Sir Thomas Browne was a believing man, and a man of unfainting and unrelaxing prayer. At the same time, and assuming, as he does, and that without usurpation, as he says, the style of a Christian, he is in reality a Theist rather than a Christian: he is a moral and a religious writer rather than an evangelical and an experimental writer. And in saying this, I do not forget his confession of his faith. 'But to difference myself nearer,' he says, and 'to draw into a lesser circle, there is no Church whose every part so squares unto my conscience: whose Articles, Constitutions, and Customs seem so consonant unto reason, and as it were framed to my particular Devotion, as this whereof I hold my Belief, the Church of England: to whose faith I am a sworn subject, and therefore in a double Obligation subscribe unto her Articles, and endeavour to observe her Constitutions.' The author of the *Religio Medici* never writes a line out of joint, or out of tone or temper, with that subscription. At the same time, his very best writings fall far short of the best writings of the Church of England. Pater, in his fine paper, says that 'Sir Thomas Browne is occupied with religion first and last in all he writes, scarcely less so than Hooker himself,' and that is the simple truth. Still, if the whole truth is to be told to those who will not make an unfair use of it, Richard Hooker's religion is the whole Christian religion, in all its height and depth, and grace and truth, and doctrinal and evangelical fulness: all of which can

never be said of Sir Thomas Browne. I can well imagine Sir Thomas Browne recreating himself, and that with an immense delectation, over Hooker's superb First Book. How I wish that I could say as much about the central six chapters of Hooker's masterly Fifth Book: as also about his evangelical and immortal Discourse of Justification! A well-read friend of mine suddenly said to me in a conversation we were holding the other day about Sir Thomas Browne's religion, 'The truth is,' he said, 'Browne was nothing short of a Pelagian, and that largely accounts for his popularity on the Continent of his day.' That was a stroke of true criticism. And Sir Thomas's own Tertullian has the same thing in that most comprehensive and conclusive phrase of his: *anima naturaliter Christiana*. But, that being admitted and accepted, which must be admitted and accepted in the interests of the truth; this also must still more be proclaimed, admitted, and accepted, that when he comes to God, and to Holy Scripture, and to prayer, and to immortality, Sir Thomas Browne is a very prince of believers. In all these great regions of things Sir Thomas Browne's faith has a height and a depth, a strength and a sweep, that all combine together to place him in the very foremost rank of our most classical writers on natural and revealed religion. Hooker himself in some respects gives place to Sir Thomas Browne.

'I had rather believe all the fables in the Legend, and the Talmud, and the Alcoran, than that this universal frame is without a mind: and therefore, God never wrought miracles to convince atheism, because His ordinary works convince it. It is true, that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion.' The old proverb, *Ubi tres medici, duo athei*, cast an opprobrium on the medical profession that can never have been just. At the same time, that proverb may be taken as proving how little true philosophy there must have been at one time among the medical men of Europe. Whereas, in Sir Thomas Browne at any rate, his philosophy was of such a depth that to him, as he repeatedly tells us, atheism, or anything like atheism, had always been absolutely impossible. 'Mine is that mystical philosophy, from whence no true scholar becomes an atheist, but from the visible effects of nature, grows up a real divine, and beholds, not in a dream, as Ezekiel, but in an ocular and visible object, the types of his resurrection.' Nor can he dedicate his *Urn-Burial* to his worthy and honoured friend without counselling him to 'run up his thoughts upon the Ancient of Days, the antiquary's truest object'; so continually does Browne's imagination in all his books pierce into and terminate upon Divine Persons and upon unseen and eternal things. In his rare imagination, Sir Thomas Browne had the original root of a truly refining, ennobling, and sanctifying faith planted in his heart by the hand of Nature herself. No man, indeed, in the nature of things, can be a believing Christian man without imagination. A believing and a heavenly-minded man may have a fine imagination without knowing that he has it. He may have it without knowing or admitting the name of it. He may have it, and may be constantly employing it, without being taught, and without discovering, how most nobly and most fruitfully to employ it. Not Shakespeare; not Milton; not Scott: scarcely Tennyson or Browning themselves, knew how best to employ their imagination. Only Dante and Behmen of all the foremost sons of men. Only they two turned all their splendid and unapproached imagination to the true, and full, and final Objects of Christian faith. Only to them two was their magnificent imagination the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen. And though the Religio does not at all rank with the *Commedia* and the *Aurora*, at the same time, it springs up from, and it is strengthened and sweetened by the same intellectual and spiritual root. Up through all 'the weeds and tares of his brain,' as Sir Thomas himself calls them, his imagination and his faith shot, and sprang, and spread, till they covered with their finest fruits his whole mind, and

heart, and life.

Sir Thomas Browne was a noble illustration of Bacon's noble law. For Sir Thomas carried all his studies, experiments, and operations to such a depth in his own mind, and heart, and imagination, that he was able to testify to all his fellow-physicians that he who studies man and medicine deeply enough will meet with as many intellectual, and scientific, and religious adventures every day as any traveller will meet with in Africa itself. As a living man of genius in the medical profession, Dr. George Gould, has it in that wonderful Behmenite and Darwinian book of his, *The Meaning and the Method of Life*, 'A healing and a knitting wound,' he argues, 'is quite as good a proof of God as a sensible mind would desire.' This was Sir Thomas Browne's wise, and deep, and devout mind in all parts of his professional and personal life. And he was man enough, and a man of true science and of true religion enough, to warn his brethren against those 'academical reservations' to which their strong intellectual and professional pride, and their too weak faith and courage, continually tempted them. Nor has he, for his part, any clinical reservations in religion either, as so many of his brethren have. 'I cannot go to cure the body of my patient,' he protests, 'but I forget my profession and call unto God for his soul.' To call Sir Thomas Browne sceptical, as has been a caprice and a fashion among his merely literary admirers: and to say it, till it is taken for granted, that he is an English Montaigne: all that is an abuse of language. It is, to all but a small and select circle of writers and readers, utterly misleading and essentially untrue. And, besides, it is right in the teeth of Sir Thomas's own emphatic, and repeated, and indignant denial and repudiation of Montaigne. Montaigne, with all his fascinations for literary men, and they are great; and with all his services to them, and they are not small; is both an immoral and an unbelieving writer. Whereas, Sir Thomas Browne never wrote a single line, even in his greenest studies, that on his deathbed he desired to blot out. A purer, a humbler, a more devout and detached hand never put English pen to paper than was the hand of Sir Thomas Browne. And, if ever in his greener days he had a doubt about any truth of natural or of revealed religion, he tells us that he had fought down every such doubt in his closet and on his knees.

I will not profanely paraphrase, or in any way water down the strong words in which Sir Thomas Browne writes to himself in his secret papers about prayer. All that has been said about this very remarkable man only makes what we are now to read all the more remarkable and memorable. All Sir Thomas Browne's readers owe an immense debt to Simon Wilkin; and for nothing more than for rescuing for us these golden words of this man of God. 'They were not,' says Wilkin, 'intended by Browne for the perusal of his son, as so many of his private papers were, or of any one else.' And hence their priceless value.

'To be sure that no day pass without calling upon God in a solemn, fervent prayer, seven times within the compass thereof. That is, in the morning, and at night, and five times between. Taken up long ago from the example of David and Daniel, and a compunction and shame that I had omitted it so long, when I heedfully read of the custom of the Mahometans to pray five times in the day.

'To pray and magnify God in the night, and in my dark bed, when I cannot sleep; to have short ejaculations whenever I awake, and when the four o'clock bell awakens me; or on my first discovery of the light, to say this collect of our liturgy, Eternal God, who hast safely brought me to the beginning of this day. . . .

'To pray in all places where privacy inviteth: in any house, highway, or street: and to know no street or passage in this city which may not witness that I have not forgot God and my Saviour in it; and that no parish or town where I have been may not say the like.

'To take occasion of praying upon the sight of any church which I see or pass by as I ride about.

'Since the necessities of the sick, and unavoidable diversions of my profession, keep me often from church; yet to take all possible care that I might never miss sacraments upon their accustomed days.

'To pray daily and particularly for sick patients, and in general for others, wheresoever, howsoever, under whose care soever; and at the entrance into the house of the sick, to say, The peace and mercy of God be in this place.

'After a sermon, to make a thanksgiving, and desire a blessing, and to pray for the minister.

'In tempestuous weather, lightning, and thunder, either night or day, to pray for God's merciful protection upon all men, and His mercy upon their souls, bodies, and goods.

'Upon sight of beautiful persons, to bless God for His creatures: to pray for the beauty of their souls, and that He would enrich them with inward grace to be answerable to the outward. Upon sight of deformed persons, to pray Him to send them inward graces, and to enrich their souls, and give them the beauty of the resurrection.'

* * * * *

'But the greatest of these is charity.' Charity is greater than great talents. Charity is greater than great industry. Charity is greater than great learning and great literature. Charity is greater than great faith. Charity is greater than great prayer. For charity is nothing less than the Divine Nature Itself in the heart of man. In all English literature two books stand out beside one another and are alone in this supreme respect of charity: William Law's Spirit of Love, and Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici.

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