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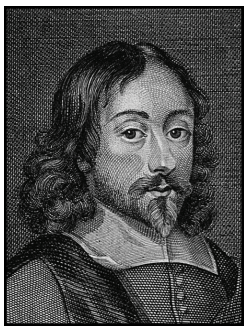
On the Cusp of Modernity
Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682)



The first extant letter of Sir Thomas Browne, the great mid-seventeenth century master of ornate prose, is his response to a report—perhaps one should say a rumour—that Sir Kenelm Digby is writing a refutation of his treatise *Religio Medici*. In long, winding sentences that contrast with Howell's, he asserts that Digby is being unjust:

> Worthy Sir, permit your servant to affirm there is contained therein nothing that can deserve the reason of your contradictions, much less the candour of your animadversions; and to certify the truth thereof, that book (whereof I do acknowledge myself the author) was penned many years past, and (what cannot escape your apprehension) with no intention for the press, or the least desire to oblige the faith of any man to its assertions.

About seventeen years later, in 1660, we find Browne writing the first of a series of letters to his second son, Thomas, who is in Bordeaux, in the more modern style of prose that is coming into widespread use:

> It were good you had a map of France that you might not be unacquainted with the several parts, and to resort unto upon occasion for your information; view and understand all notable buildings and places in Bordeaux or near it, and take a draught thereof, as also the ruined Amphitheatre, but these at your leisure.

Browne's movement to simpler language is also seen in his letters on scientific matters. In 1659 he writes to his fellow physician Dr. Henry Power:

> As for the higher original of seeds, before they come to sprout in or out of the ground, though it be not easy to demonstrate it from the first spermatizing of the plant, till a little time hath made some discovery and the seed be under some degree of germination, yet is it not improbable that the plant is delineated from the beginning; that a lineal draught beginneth upon the first separation, and that these unto the eye of nature are but so many young ones hanging upon the mother plant …

By 1668 he is sending information in a different style to Dr. Christopher Merrett, who is compiling a natural history of Great Britain:

> *Ophidion*, or, at least, *ophidion nostras*, commonly called a sting-fish, having a small prickly fin running all along the back, and another a good way on the belly, with little black spots at the bottom of the back fin. If the fishermen's hands be touched or scratched with this venomous fish, they grow painful and swell. The figure hereof I send you in colours.

The most interesting of Browne's surviving correspondences are those with his two sons. In both cases the style is modern. Thomas, the younger, born in 1647, is sent in his early teens to study in France. His father's letters give a picture of an easy relationship between a scholarly physician with antiquarian interests, who is a pious Protestant and staunch Royalist, and a sober-minded, trustworthy boy. The father counsels his son to see Roman antiquities, attend a Huguenot church, study French and Latin, and observe the practices of the apothecary with whom he lodges. On his part, he sends news of the return of traditional ways in religion, monarchy, and politics. When the boy decides on a naval career, he advises him to continue with Latin and ancient literature, but to extend his studies to great marine battles, practical mathematics, navigation, geography, and the parts of a ship. In a most moving letter, he warns his seagoing son against suicidal stubbornness:

> He that goes to war must patiently submit unto the various accidents thereof. To be made prisoner by an unequal and overruling power, after a due resistance, is no disparagement; but upon a careless surprisal or faint opposition; and you have so

> good a memory that you cannot forget many examples thereof, even of the worthiest commanders, in your beloved Plutarch.

Characteristically, Browne asks his son to observe the plants on the Spanish and African coasts. Young Thomas earns the praise of many acquainted with his prowess at sea and has every reason to expect advancement, but his life is cut short in 1667, and henceforward Browne's notable family correspondence is with his elder son, Edward. The latter becomes a prominent London doctor, a Fellow of the Royal Society, and a Lecturer at Chirurgeon's Hall. For the rest of his life, Browne sends Edward fatherly advice, urging him to preserve his health by temperate living, warning him to be economical, and discouraging him from imprudent ventures:

> I should be glad if you could escape a journey to Venice, but rather thither than any further eastward, either to Poland, Hungary, or Turkey; which both myself and all your friends do heartily wish you would not so much as think of.

Edward does visit Venice and Hungary, but stays away from Turkey. Being a learned physician, Browne helps his son with the composition of his lectures, as well as with the preparation of his writings—*A Brief Account of Some Travels* (1673) and translations from ancient literature—for publication. While the bulk of the letters to Edward is occupied by scientific observations and details of medical practice, a universal curiosity is visible in them. Browne asks Edward to note in his travels the proportions of Lutherans, Calvinists, Catholics and Jews in Germany and where the best High Dutch is spoken, and asks many questions about the properties and uses of minerals. Though Browne's religious preoccupation is most prominent in his published works, his Christian commitment appears now and again in his letters to Edward:

> I hope you do not forget to carry a Greek testament always to church, you have also the Greek or septuagint translation of the other parts of scripture; in reading those books, a man learns two good things together, and profiteth doubly, in the language and the subject.

The scientific element in Browne's thinking is evident in some of his counsel to Edward:

> Weigh the head of a man, brains, skull, and other parts, and the skull and brain distinctly; that you may know what proportion it

> I hath to the body, at least with some latitude, although you do not weigh the trunk.

Nevertheless, Browne, like Howell, believes in the reality of witchcraft and he is convinced that base metal can be transmuted into gold by alchemy. He wishes that Edward had taken the opportunity at Amsterdam to enquire "after Dr. Helvetius, who writ Vitulus aureus, and saw projection made, and had pieces of gold to show of it."

Although it illustrates an important step in the development of the modern world, the general reader is unlikely to be interested in the greater part of Browne's correspondence. Despite the fascinating power struggles in Britain after the return to monarchy in 1660, references to politics have a very subordinate place in the letters. They contain little in the way of character sketches, and such passages as the vivid description of a highway robbery, the tale of a lady's drinking ink in mistake for beer and being cured of her fever, and the account of the chairing by torchlight of victorious candidates in an election are as rare as they are welcome.