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Joan Bennett

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

THE LIFE OF SIR THOMAS BROWNE

SIR THOMAS BROWNE was born on 19 October 1605 and died in 1682, on the seventy-seventh anniversary of his birth. He was twenty when Charles I came to the throne, thirty-four when the King was executed, and Charles II had reigned for twenty-two years when Sir Thomas Browne died. Yet there is nothing in his published writings to remind us of the Civil War. He seems to have pursued his studies, followed his profession and brought up his large family undisturbed. It would, however, be a mistake to conclude that he was a recluse who took little interest in public affairs. Letters to his sons after the Restoration clearly show both that he expected the boys (from the age of fourteen) to be interested in current events, and that he deeply welcomed the restoration of the monarchy and, still more, the restoration of the doctrine and ritual of the Church of England. During the Interregnum he followed his calling as a doctor of medicine and, doubtless, avoided disputes in accordance with his temperament and his belief. He had written in *Religio Medici* (in 1635): 'I have no Genius to disputes in Religion, and have often thought it wisdom to decline them, especially upon a disadvantage, or when the cause of truth might suffer in the weaknesse of my patronage.' But his own position is in the same work clearly set out: 'I am of that reformed new-cast Religion, wherein I mislike nothing but the name'—the name, he characteristically means, of Protestant. The same outlook is evident when he writes to his sons; he then uses the name, but lays stress on the relative unimportance of ritual differences. He writes to the fourteen-year-old Tom, then in France: 'Hold firm to the Protestant Religion and be diligent in goeing to Church when you have any Little Knowledge of the Language. God will accept of yr desires to serve him in his

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Publick worship, tho' you cannot make it out to yr desires';¹ and, a few months later, 22 April 1661:

Honest Tom, [that is how he always begins]

I hope by this time thou art got some what beyond *plaist il*, and *ouy Monsieur*, and durst ask a question and give an Answer in French, and therefore now I hope you goe to the Protestant Church, to which you must not be backward, for tho there Church order and discipline be different from ours, yet they agree with us in doctrine and the main of Religion.²

In the same letter he tells Tom that 'Lent was observed this Year wch made Yarmouth and fishermen rejoice'. The letters to the boy of fourteen, as well as to his elder brother, recount items of news concerning Church and State, 'that you may not be totally ignorant of how affairs goe at home'. It is a fair conjecture that, albeit peaceably, Sir Thomas had himself followed the development of affairs with interest and that his sympathies had been with Church and King throughout the Civil War. But for his opinions and feelings in youth we have only conjecture to guide us. After 1635 we can deduce some things from his published works, and for his later years the correspondence is an illuminating guide; but the intimacy it affords begins only when his family is growing up and he himself is fifty-five years old. Concerning his own childhood we know nothing, except a few facts.

Thomas was the third child and first son of a silk merchant. He lost his father when he was eight years old and, in the following year, his mother married again. His stepfather was Sir Thomas Dutton, described by Sir Thomas Browne's daughter Elizabeth as 'a worthie person who had great places'; the adjective was either merely conventional or derived from her father's account of his stepfather, since Elizabeth was born fourteen years after Sir Thomas Dutton's death; Simon Wilkin, the admirable

¹ G. Keynes, *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne* (1931), vol. vi, Letter 2, p. 4. [Henceforward quoted as Keynes.]

² Keynes, vol. vi, Letter 6, p. 8.

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nineteenth-century editor of Sir Thomas Browne's works, doubts whether it was deserved. His doubt is based on a letter reproduced in Thomas Birch's *Life of Prince Henry*, written to the Prince by Sir Edward Cecil and complaining of Sir Thomas Dutton's insubordination:

I am only unhappy in one thing, that the mutinous and unworthy carriage of Sir Thomas Dutton, whom your highness was pleased to favour beyond his merit, hath from time to time disturbed the course of the service; having even, at his first arrival here, braved me at the head of the troops, daring to tell me, to my face, that it seemed his majesty had given me a commission to abuse men, when there was nothing in question but the doing of the duty of a captain, which he ought not to dispute among us, seeing it was the first time that even [ever] he or his company came into the field among us: and ever since, in all meetings, he hath disputed my commission and authority so far, and with so much scorn, that, though hitherto, in respect to your highness, I have contained myself; yet seeing that now again, in a public assembly, he hath contemptibly spoken of my commission, and, upon base advantage, hurt Sir Hatton Cheke, his colonel, who took upon him the defence of it, I most humbly beseech your highness will be rather pleased to allow of that which justice here shall allot him; presuming that your highness's princely judgment will find it expedient that I be discharged of such a bad member, which, in the heat of his majesty's service, dare contest with me, and be content, upon any terms, to murder his commander.¹

Birch adds that soon after the battle was won Sir Thomas Dutton, whom he elsewhere identifies as Sir Thomas Browne's stepfather, killed Sir Hatton Cheke in a duel and with this Simon Wilkin associates Sir Thomas Browne's verses:

Diseases are the armes whereby
wee naturally do fall & dye;
what furie ist to take deaths part
& rather then by nature, dye by Art.
Men for mee agayne shall clime
to Jared or Methusala's time.

¹ Simon Wilkin, *Sir Thomas Browne's Works* (1835-6), vol. I, p. lviii, n. 3. [Henceforward quoted as Wilkin.]

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That thred of life the fates do twyne
 their gentle hand shall clip, not myne.
 O let mee never know the cruell
 & heedlesse villany of duell,
 or if I must that fate sustayne
 Let mee be Abel & not Cain.¹

The sentiment expressed in the verses is characteristic of Sir Thomas Browne; his stepfather's duel might well have suggested to him this line of thought. But the duel took place after the siege of Juliers in 1610, four years before Sir Thomas Dutton became his stepfather, when Thomas Browne was only five years old. It seems more likely that, if the verses refer to it, they reflect the stepfather's remorse rather than Thomas's impression of that time. The rash young man of the siege of Juliers may, after all, have become a worthy stepfather.

John Whitefoot, Browne's friend and earliest biographer, stated that 'he was defrauded by one of his guardians'. The facts relevant to this charge have recently been carefully collected by Dr N. J. Endicott, and assembled in an article in the *University of Toronto Quarterly Review* (January 1961). They show that in 1614 Anne Browne (now Lady Anne Dutton) relinquished the executorship willed to her and her brother-in-law Edward jointly. A court, whose business it was to protect the orphans, thought it safer to leave Edward as sole executor. There had been controversy between him and Sir Thomas Dutton, whom Dr Endicott shows to have been habitually in debt. Anne and Sir Thomas bargained with the court and settled for a payment out of the estate of £1542. 10s. 1d., so that as Dr Endicott says 'they certainly got their share as stated in the will'. There were also unrecovered debts to the estate and its final value was uncertain. Eight years later, on 30 April 1622, Edward, now sole executor, owed £500 to the orphans. In 1624 and again in 1626, committees were set up to consider these affairs. No findings

¹ Keynes, vol. v, p. 191.

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are known, but whatever they may have been, Thomas Browne had by this time received an excellent education. He was awarded a scholarship at Winchester College and remained there for seven years. In 1623 he became a fellow commoner of Broadgates Hall, later Pembroke College, Oxford. The Master of the College was Dr Thomas Clayton, Regius Professor of Physic in 1611 and Praelector in Anatomy in 1624. Browne's tutor was Thomas Lushington, 'a subtle divine and an eminent philosopher, an independant mind, with fits of unorthodoxy and irreverent speech'.¹ At the University, Browne was trained in the traditional disciplines of Logic and Rhetoric, Divinity and Aristotelian philosophy. Besides this, the University 'had recently added courses in Anatomy and Botany to the antiquated reading of Hippocrates and Galen, and clinical cases could also be studied in Ewelme Hospital, for which Dr Clayton was also responsible'.² In addition to all this, he acquired at the University or later, as he himself tells us, 'no less than six languages';³ presumably Latin and Greek at the University and the modern languages on his travels. He took his B.A. in 1626 and his M.A. in 1629.

For a short while he practised medicine in Oxfordshire, then, in 1630, he began his travels by a visit to his stepfather in Ireland, where Sir Thomas Dutton was Scoutmaster-general. He then went to France and studied in the School of Medicine at Montpellier. Montpellier was partly Protestant, partly Catholic, and in the University students from all over Europe were gathered together. There was 'an active medical school of long standing and European repute, in which observation, experiment and logic were prevailing over traditional medical and religious authority'.⁴ After a year at Montpellier Browne proceeded in

¹ Jean-Jacques Denonain, *Sir Thomas Browne, Religio Medici*, New Edition, with Biographical and Critical Introduction (Cambridge, 1955), p. vii.

² Denonain, *op. cit.* p. viii.

³ *Religio Medici*, Part II, sect. 8. John Whitefoot tells us that he knew most European languages, Latin and Greek, a little Hebrew but no Arabic. See 'Some Minutes for the Life of Sir Thomas Browne' (1712), quoted by Wilkin, *op. cit.* I, xlv.

⁴ Denonain, *op. cit.* p. viii.

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1632 to Padua, 'celebrated for its teaching of anatomy and clinical observation, and for its early experiments in vivisection'.¹ William Harvey, after taking his Cambridge degree, studied at Padua under Fabricius of Aquapendente from 1599 to 1602 and Fabricius was still Professor when Browne was at Padua. He was one who, Professor Charles Singer tells us, 'made many contributions to the advancement of anatomy, most of which had physiological bearings. Thus, he was the effective founder of modern embryology and the author of the first illustrated work on that subject, in which he describes the formation of the chick in the egg.'² This is of interest because Sir Thomas continued to be especially concerned with this subject and made a number of discoveries in this field. My authority for this is Dr Joseph Needham,³ who is less impressed than is Professor Charles Singer with Fabricius' contribution to embryology. Whatever the precise worth of that contribution, it is agreed by both experts that Fabricius was as much devoted to ancient authority as to experiment; he 'never shook himself free from Aristotle and Galen. This backward-looking habit prevented his work from being as important as it might otherwise have been', writes Professor Charles Singer. And for the student of Browne this double allegiance is of special interest. His own allegiance, when he explored natural phenomena, was to experiment rather than to authority, and in this he was, I believe, exactly typical of his own generation. He had been trained to respect both, and he rejected authority only when it was contradicted by experience. In 1633 Sir Thomas Browne went on to Leyden where he took his doctor's degree and where, Professor Denonain writes: 'as in England previously, he could witness the raging controversies between Arminians, Socinians, and the supporters of Protestant orthodoxy'.

¹ Denonain, *op. cit.* p. ix.

² Charles Singer, *A Short History of Medicine* (Oxford, 1928), p. 110.

³ Joseph Needham, *A History of Chemical Embryology* (Cambridge, 1931), vol. 1, p. 136.

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After his return to England, Thomas Browne practised medicine for two years at Shipden Hall, near Halifax in Yorkshire. There, between 1634 and 1636, he wrote *Religio Medici*, the work by which he first became known in his own time and which of all his works still gives the most delight. He was thirty years old when he wrote it and thirty-two when, according to Anthony à Wood, he 'was induced in 1637 to remove, after a residence of about three years to Norwich, by the persuasions of Dr Thomas Lushington, formerly his tutor, then Rector of Burnham Westgate, in Norfolk'. Others of his Oxford contemporaries, resident near Norwich, added their persuasions to the Rector's. In 1637 he was incorporated Doctor of Medicine.

In 1641, at the age of thirty-six, he married Dorothy, aged twenty, the fourth daughter of Edward Mileham, Esq. Six years before he had written in *Religio Medici*, Part II, sect. 9:

I was never yet once, and commend their resolutions who never marry twice; not that I disallow of second marriage; as neither in all cases of Polygamy, which, considering some times, and the unequall number of both sexes, may bee also necessary. The whole woman was made for man, but the twelfth part of man for woman: man is the whole world, and the breath of God; woman the rib and crooked piece of man. I could be content that we might procreate like trees, without conjunction, or that there were any way to perpetuate the world without this triviall and vulgar way of coition; It is the foolishhest act a wise man commits in all his life; nor is there anything that will more deject his coold imagination, when he shall consider what an odde and unworthy piece of folly hee hath committed; I speake not in prejudice, nor am I averse from that sweet sexe, but naturally amorous of all that is beautifull; I can looke a whole day with delight upon a handsome Picture, though it be but of an Horse. It is my temper, and I like it the better, to affect all harmony, and sure there is a musicke even in the beauty, and the silent note which *Cupid* strikes, farre sweeter than the sound of an instrument.

If we take this *au pied de la lettre* we may suppose that Browne married only 'to perpetuate the world', and chose Dorothy only because she was beautiful. When he wrote it he was endorsing

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what Milton describes in *Tetrachordon* as the 'crabbed opinion' of St Augustine:

It is not good for man to be alone. Som would have the sense heerof to be in respect of procreation only; and *Austin* contests that manly friendship in all other regards had bin a more becomming solace for *Adam*, than to spend so many secret years in an empty world with one woman. But our Writers deservedly reject this crabbed opinion; and defend that there is a peculiar comfort in the married state besides the genial bed, which no other society affords.¹

This was clearly not Sir Thomas Browne's opinion in 1635; but how was it that he left the passage unchanged, when he prepared *Religio Medici* for publication in 1643? He certainly did not retain Part II, sect. 9, inadvertently. There had been two pirated editions and when Sir Thomas prepared his own he carefully revised his work. In this particular section he made several minor alterations to increase euphony or to convey a finer shade of meaning. For example, all the MSS and the 1642 editions read 'am resolved never to be married twice', which he alters to the more impersonal and more entertaining 'commend their resolutions who never marry twice'. Or again, 'not that I disallow of second marriage; as neither in all cases of Polygamie which considering the unequall number of both sexes, may bee also necessary', is modified for greater accuracy in 1643, and reads 'which, considering some times, and the unequall number', etc. Another interesting revision is the change from 'I wish that we could procreate like trees', which is the reading in all the MSS and in 1642, to the less drastic: 'I could be content that...'.² But while he carefully revised and reconsidered what he had written, he did not omit the now untrue statement *I was never yet once married*. He did not omit it, because it was essential to the pattern of sect. 9, which develops with unpredictable but inevitable sequaciousness out of its first sentence. From marriage he moves on to

¹ *Complete Prose Works of Milton* (New Haven, 1959), vol. II, p. 596.

² I am here indebted to the superb textual study of Jean-Jacques Dezonain, *Sir Thomas Browne, Religio Medici, edited from the Manuscript Copies and Early Editions* (Cambridge, 1953).

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love, from love to harmony, from harmony to music (with a characteristic aside on the controversial subject of Church music); from music which is 'a Hieroglyphical and shadowed lesson of the whole world' to poetry and man's natural inclination to rhythm, and all this about order and harmony naturally leads on to medicine, whose province it is to discern and relieve disorders. He reflects that he might, as a doctor, be expected to welcome these, but in fact: 'I rejoyce not at unwholesome Springs, nor unseasonable Winters: my Prayers go with the Husbandmans; I desire everything in its proper season, that neither men nor times bee out of temper.' So, by degrees, the paragraph moves to its unforeseen, yet perfectly consonant close, in 'the universall remedy'; 'for death is the cure of all diseases. There is no Catholicon or universall remedy I know but this; which, though nauseous to queasier stomachs, yet to prepared appetites is Nectar, and a pleasant potion of immortality.' The section is an artistic whole and, as such, he could not radically alter its opening lines. The mind travels in it from the inception to the close of life—from marriage and procreation to death and immortality. All the ideas in the paragraph are as interdependent as the verses in a stanza of poetry and while, like any work of art, it reveals the maker's mind, it must not be read literally as autobiography. No slight was intended to his young wife, just then expecting her first child, and we can be confident that none was taken.

Confidence that no offence was taken rests upon what we know of Dorothy Browne. The Reverend John Whitefoot, a close personal friend of the family, tells us that Sir Thomas 'had Ten Children by his Surviving only Wife, a Lady of such Symmetrical Proportion to her Worthy Husband, both in the Graces of her Body and Mind, that they seemed to come together by a Kind of Natural Magnetism'.¹ He is mistaken about the number of

¹ 'Some Minutes for the Life of Sir Thomas Browne', by the Rev. John Whitefoot, prepared at the request of Dame Dorothy Browne, 1679, printed in Browne, *Posthumous Works* (1712), p. xxxii. [Henceforward quoted as Whitefoot.]

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children; there were in fact twelve, but this number includes a pair of twins, born in 1656, who died within their first year. There is reason to think that he was right about Dorothy's 'graces of body and mind', though one must not suppose that 'symmetrical proportion' meant equality of erudition or of mental capacity. Our only direct evidence about Dorothy, besides this tribute, comes from the references to her in her sons' letters; from her own letters to them enclosed with her husband's; and from our knowledge about the family which she produced and ministered to. Her character emerges as that of a warm-hearted, energetic, practical woman, deeply devoted to her husband, children and grandchildren and, like her husband, a devout Christian. It is unlikely that she was a learned woman. Her spelling is as erratic as that of the average middle-class woman of her day. This in itself is not conclusive, but it is noteworthy that Sir Thomas, though he admonishes Edward about spelling, never refers to or corrects his wife's. She was occupied with household management, care of her family in sickness and health and various helpful offices to her neighbours. She must have been long-suffering about her husband's addiction to experiments. There was the dead kingfisher 'hung up by the bill' to see whether his veerings showed the direction of the wind; chickens and mice weighed before and after strangulation to see whether their weight increased when the vital spirits left them; the toad 'in a glass included with many spiders' to test the belief that there is a natural antipathy between them. Then there were carcasses of peacocks, turkeys, capons, hares, etc., 'suspended freely in the air, and after a year and a half the dogs have not refused to eat them'. At all times the house must have harboured strange creatures, alive or dead, and she must have helped to maintain the conditions necessary to each experiment. Between 1643 and 1650 Dorothy bore a child annually; five more were born between 1650 and 1662 with only slightly longer intervals between them. Seven of the twelve children lived to be adults. During these fruitful