

Sir Thomas Browne and Antiquity

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In the Epistle Dedicatory of *the Garden of Cyrus*, Sir Thomas Browne (1605-82) wrote that “of old things we write something new”.¹ It may be said that the phrase was, as it were, a motto of Browne, because he was supposed to write something appropriate to it. This essay aims to consider Browne’s attitude toward antiquity, and to show the meaning of his “motto”.

First, we should like to make a brief survey of the age in which Browne lived, and examine how he lived his life in the age, and discuss religion, mystery, and timelessness in him. Secondly, we should like to discuss antiquity and its significance in the seventeenth century, and also science, truth and progress in him. Lastly, Browne’s relation with the formation of a new idea in the current of thought in the century is to be discussed.

1

Sir Thomas Browne was born in 1605 and died in 1682. The age in which he lived was one of the most troubled in the history of England. There were two great revolutions that brought great turmoil to the people. The old order collapsed and a new order appeared. The age was confused, and so were the people. How did he live during times of such public unrest?

In brief, he seems to be aloof from such a thing as would make ordinary people uneasy or drive them to act. His life was uneventful particularly in comparison to, for example, the life of John Milton (1608-74), who was one of Browne’s contemporaries. Milton, who acted as secretary to Oliver Cromwell, was sent to jail when the Republic fell, and had a narrow escape. While Milton was fond of satire and wrote a great number of political pamphlets, Browne says, in *Religio Medici*, that he could “behold Vice without a Satyre, content onely, with an admonition, or instructive reprehension” (140). He also says that “[i]t is as compleate a piece of madnesse to miscall and rave

against the times, or thinke recall men to reason, by a fit of passion” (140). He wrote these passages before he was thirty years old.

Browne as well as Milton was a devout Christian. The former, however, lived in seclusion without getting involved in the disorders of the times that would later lead to the Puritan Revolution; the latter took up a positive attitude to the Revolution. Browne’s calm and cool attitude to the world did not change during his life, which is obvious when one takes it into consideration that his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica (Vulgar Errors)*, was published in 1646, a year before the Parliamentary army took possession of London, and that, moreover, *Hydriotaphia (Urn Burial)* and *The Garden of Cyrus* were published in one volume in 1658 when Cromwell died. These three works have nothing to do with the times.²

In such times, Browne presumed to defend religion and avow his faith.

[M]ethinkes there be not impossibilities enough in Religion for an active faith; the deepest mysteries ours containes, have not only been illustrated, but maintained by syllogisme, and the rule of reason: I love to lose my selfe in a mystery to pursue my reason to an *oh altitudo* [italics in original]. (69)

[T]o beleieve onely possibilities, is not faith, but meere Philosophy; many things are true in Divinity, which are neither inducible by reason, nor confirmable by sense, and many things in Philosophy confirmable by sense, yet not inducible by reason. (120)

Thus Browne loved mystery, but, at the same time, he was also a man of reason because one cannot “pursue reason” if he or she does not have it.

Browne does not clearly present his thoughts on time in the form of a lucid theory, but they are scattered here and there in *Religio Medici*. His thoughts are based on Christianity that provides the end of the world, that is, the Last Judgement. The happiness of Christians depends on whether they will get salvation on that occasion or not. Browne says:

[T]hose continued instances of time which flow into thousand yeares, make not to him one moment; what to us is to come, to his Eternitie is present, his whole duration being but one permanent point without succession, parts, flux, or division. (73)

This passage is the point of his thoughts on time. Browne does not stick to the world, for he knows or believes that the world is only a moment. He also describes the same ideas in his work, *Christian Morals* (1716).

Think not thy time short in this World since the World it self is not long. The created World is but a small *Parenthesis* in Eternity, and a short interposition for a time between such a state of duration, as was before it and may be after it[italics in original]. (471)

We started with the question why Browne was so indifferent to the troubled times in which he lived, and examined his tolerant attitude to the world and other people. Browne does not separate reason and his faith but leave them to conflict with each other, for he regards the world as a temporary dwelling and thinks all is vanity, and perceives “a man may be buried alive, and behold his grave in his owne issue” (160).

Browne thinks that the world is a kind of transition period where man prepares to enter the spiritual world. Browne also says that “[c]ertainly there is no happinesse within this circle of flesh, nor is it in the Opticks of these eyes to behold felicity; the first day of our Jubilee is death” (115-16).

A man who holds such ideas and thinks that the world is a momentary being as represented in the passage that “to his eternitie which is indivisible, and all together, the last Trumpe is already sounded, the reprobates in the flame and the blessed in *Abrahams bosome* [italics in original]” (72-73) would make himself tolerant to everything.

As Browne's love for mystery produces the idea of timelessness or eternity, so his quest for truth, which is derived from his attitude toward antiquity, results in the idea of progress.

Before we discuss antiquity, we should make the meaning of the word" clear. "Antiquity" which we are to discuss denotes the ancient ages themselves, including classical Greek and Roman authors and their works, especially Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Ovid, Virgil, Cicero, Seneca and so on. We already have a study on the influence of classical authors on Browne, that is, the one by R. R. Cawley and G. Yost.³ As remarked in it, the best and most useful guide to Browne's reading is a sale catalogue of the libraries of Browne and his son published in 1710.⁴ When we glance at the catalogue, we can see how extensive Browne's reading is. It looks as if it were, in itself, a Loeb Classical Library. In *Religio Medici*, Browne says that he understands no less than six languages. As a polyglot, he could read a variety of books, but, besides them, his knowledge is also based on practical experience as a doctor and antiquary.

One of the characteristics in Browne's works is, as we admit, many references to classical works. His flexible mind causes him to quote from a variety of classics such as mentioned above. Browne not only quotes from them, but also offers reasonable sympathy toward them. The word "sympathy" is important because Browne thinks that all of them should be not in heaven but in "limbo" as a result of not having been born after Jesus Christ.

It is hard to place those soules in Hell, whose worthy lives doe teach us vertue on Earth; methinks amongst those many subdivisions of Hell, there might have bin one Limbo left for these. (127)

Though it may be said that Browne's eyes were fixed not on the future, but on the past, he did not obey those classical authors blindly. However great in

their virtue they may be, for Browne they are pagans in terms of religion.

The same thing applies to the search for truth which Browne loved as well as mystery. It is in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* that his stupendous enquiring mind is at its zenith. In Chapter VI of the work, Browne says as follows:

BUT the mortallest enemy unto Knowledge, and that which hath done the greatest execution upon Truth, hath beene a peremptory adhesion unto Authority, and more especially, the establishing of our beliefe upon the dictates of Antiquity. For (as every capacity may observe) most men of Ages present, so superstitiously do look on Ages past, that the authorities of the one, exceed the reasons of the other. Whose persons indeed being farre removed from our times, their works, which seldome with us passe uncontrouled, either by contemporaries, or immediate successors, are now become out of the distance of envies: And the farther removed from present times, are conceived to approach the neerer unto truth it selfe. Now hereby me thinks wee manifestly delude our selves, and widely walke out of the tracke of Truth.⁵

In this passage Browne expresses, in strong language, danger of the unquestioning obedience to authority and the blind following of the dictates of antiquity. Moreover, he contrasts the present age with antiquity, and indicates that the latter never surpasses the former. For Browne, it is not self-evident that antiquity is better than the present age. Though he pays his respects to antiquity and its accomplishments, he never takes them in faith. We can say that his critical mind works on any age, past or present. However, he does not make social or political statements on his age in public though he expresses concern over it in his private letters to his son and friends.

In the paragraph following the quotation above, Browne enumerates the reasons of danger of adherence to antiquity:

For first, men hereby impose a thraldome on their times, which the ingenuity of no age should endure, or indeed, the presumption of any did ever yet enjoyne.⁶

Secondly, men that adore times past, consider not that those times were once present, that is, as our owne are at this instant, and wee our selves unto those to come, as they unto us at present. . . .⁷

Thirdly, the testimonies of Antiquity and such as passe oraculously amongst us, were not, if wee consider them, alwayes so exact, as to examine the doctrine they delivered.⁸

Fourthly, while we so eagerly adhear unto Antiquity, and the accounts of elder times, we are to consider the fabulous condition thereof. . . .⁹

Fiftly, we applaude many things delivered by the Ancients, which are in themselves but ordinarie, and come short of our own conceptions.¹⁰

Sixtly, we urge authorities, in points that need not, and introduce the testimony of ancient writers, to confirm things evidently beleaved, and whereto no reasonable hearer but would assent without them. . . .¹¹

Lastly, while we so devoutly adhere unto Antiquity in some things, we doe not consider we have deserted them in severall others. . . .¹²

As long as we read the passages, Browne's explanation seems so convincing that we can assume that he may be such a modern as proves the truth of a theory by experiment, adopting scientific methods. Why can Browne write such passages? What is the ground that allows Browne to have so "modern" conceptions? Two things may be said to the questions: one is that Browne is, by profession, a physician; the other that he is a pious Christian. Medical students at Oxford University in his age were required to study Galenic

system of medicine, including the theory of four humours of the body. On the other hand, Browne studied “modern” medicine or anatomy beginning with Andreas Vesalius (1514-64), who dissected human cadavers, and William Harvey (1578-1657), who discovered the circulation of blood in the human body. They are said to have overthrown the established theory of medicine by Galen. We may say, therefore, that Browne began to recognise supremacy of modern medicine over ancient one, and consequently he became convinced that antiquity does not always excel the present age. Besides, Browne had a Christian idea that time flows linearly from the past to the future. The goal or end of history is considered to be the Day of the Judgement. As Herbert Butterfield says in his book, “Progress was Providence: unless there was progress there could be no God in history”.¹³

Browne is not the first person that thought antiquity to be inferior to the present day. Before him, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) had already written the same argument in his book, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605):

Thus have I gone over these three diseases of learning; besides the which there are some other rather peccant humours than formed diseases. . . . The first of these is the extreme affecting of two extremities: the one antiquity, the other novelty. . . . Antiquity deserveth that reverence, that men should make a stand thereupon and discover what is the best way; but when the discovery is well taken, then to make progression.¹⁴

There is a background in which Bacon could write as above in the early seventeenth century. Between the twelfth century and the sixteenth century, the introduction and pervasion of gunpowder, the compass and printing into Europe had expanded the world for the Europeans both geographically and spiritually. As a result, the Europeans in the seventeenth century must have felt that everything in the century had changed radically, compared with things in the previous centuries. It is reasonable to assume that they called the change “progress”. It may be said that the seventeenth century is the age

in which people “discovered” progress. However, things do not proceed easily. In the latter half of the century there is a famous controversy over the relative merits of the ancients and the moderns. The controversy arises chiefly between Nicolas Boileau (1636-1711) and Charles Perrault (1628-1703) in France. The former supports the ancients, and the latter the moderns. The dispute involves Sir William Temple (1628-99) and others in England. While Temple supports the ancients in his essay, *Upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1692), William Wotton (1666-1727) argues against him in his *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694) and applauds the moderns.¹⁵ Jonathan Swift, once a secretary to Temple, satirises the dispute in *The Battle of the Books* (1704), ostensibly taking his master’s side and defending the ancients.¹⁶ The controversy continues until the eighteenth century, and brings forth the idea of progress, which is to prevail in the age.

3

The seventeenth century was a period of transition from the Renaissance to the modern times, and saw modern science. Namely, it was the age in which what is called “the Scientific Revolution” took place. Consequently, when we compare the earlier years of the century with the later ones, we get the impression that everything underwent a complete change, as Basil Willey put it.¹⁷

One of the pioneers in such times was Francis Bacon, who advocated modern science, and pointed out the importance of experimental methods and collaboration in scientific study at the beginning of the century. Some of his ideas were realised by the foundation of the Royal Society in the middle of the century. And what is important is that it is the idea of progress that underlies the current of thought in the century. Although the controversy over the ancients and the moderns between Sir William Temple and William Wotton arose, and later Jonathan Swift participated in it at the end of the century and in the early part of the eighteenth century, the seed of it had already been sown by Bacon. And we may say that Browne, whose life span

stretched from 1605 to 1682, was also influenced by the change mentioned above as a creature of the age, and bore a part in the formation of the idea of progress. It is obvious when we think of his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. However, Browne was very quite different from Bacon, for Browne, as we have seen, loved both mystery and truth, and also loved to pursue them respectively. While his love of mystery leads to religion, his love of truth leads to science. Although his attitude seems to be inconsistent, his Janus-faced aspect like that is typical of him, which may be one of the reasons why we read him today. When he thinks from the point of view of timelessness, he becomes a mystic. However, when he thinks from the point of view of progress, he becomes a scientist. "Antiquity" may be a clue with which Browne thinks of timelessness and progress.

In conclusion, what is meant by his "motto", which is, we assume, "of old things we write something new", is his consciousness that a pattern of his thinking is twofold.

Notes

- 1 *Sir Thomas Browne: The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides (Penguin Books, 1977), 319. All further references to this edition are put in parentheses in the text.
- 2 At least we can say so only when we consider Browne's works as a whole. Though we must understand that it is also true that there are not a few allusions to the age and its vices in his respective works and the letters to his family, it is another question.
- 3 See Cawley, Robert Ralstone & George Yost, *Studies in Sir Thomas Browne* (University of Oregon, 1965).
- 4 See *A Catalogue of the Libraries of the Sir Thomas Browne, and Dr Edward Browne, his Son*, ed. Jeremiah S. Finch (E. J. Brill, 1986).
- 5 *Sir Thomas Browne's Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, vol. I, ed. Robin H. A. Robbins (Oxford University Press, 1981), 32.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 32.

- 7 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 37-38.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 13 Herbert Butterfield, *Man on his Past: the Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge University Press, 1955), 130.
- 14 Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis, The World's Classics* (Oxford University Press, 1906; 1966), 37-38.
- 15 Wotton was a genius in language. When he was only six years old in 1672, Sir Thomas Browne certified that he had heard him read Spencer, Virgil, Homer, Pythagoras, Genesis in Hebrew, and construe all accurately. See "Certificate for William Wotton", *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, vol. IV, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Faber and Faber, 1964), 399.
- 16 For a detailed account of the dispute, see R. F. Jones, "The Background of the Battle of the Books", R. F. Jones et al., *The Seventeenth Century: Studies in the History of English Thought and Literature from Bacon to Pope* (Stanford University Press, 1951), 10-40.
- 17 Basil Willey, "The Touch of Cold Philosophy", R. F. Jones et al., *op. cit.*, 369-76.