



Sir Thomas Browne Day

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Sir Thomas Browne as Melville's Crack'd Angel

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G K Chesterton, who regarded Sir Thomas Browne as a mystic, thinks of him not so much as “a man who reverences large things ... as a man who reverences small ones, who reduces himself to a point, without parts or magnitude, so that to him the grass is really a forest and the grasshopper a dragon.” To which he adds: “Little things please great minds.”

There are indeed delightful passages in Browne on the most apparently minor phenomena such as this personal favourite of mine from his notes on Bubbles:

“That the last circumference of the universe is butt the bubble of the chaos & pellicle arising from the grosser foundation of the first matter, containing all the higher & diaphanous bodies under it, is noe affirmation of myne; Butt that bubbles on watery & fluid bodies are butt the thinne parts of ayre, or a diaphanous texture of water, arising about the ayre & holding awhile from eruption. They are most lasting & large in viscous humidities wherin the surface will bee best extended without dissolving the continuity, as in bladders blown out of soap. Wine & spirituuous bodies make bubbles, butt (not) long lasting, the spirit veering thorough & dissolving the investiture. Aqua fortis upon concussion makes fewe & soone vanishing, the acrimonious effluvium suddenly rending them. Some grosse and windy urines make many & lasting, wch may bee taken away or hindred by vinegar of juice of lemon; & therefore the greatest bubbles are made in fatt viscous decoctions_as in the manufacture of soape & sugar, wherin there is nothing more remarkable then that experiment wherin not many graynes of butter cast upon (a) copper of boyling sugar presently strikes down the ebullitions & makes a subsidence of the bubbling liquor. Boyling is literally nothing butt bubbling; any liquor attenuated by decoction sends forth its evaporous & attenuated parts wch elevate the surface of the liquor into bubbles.”

What Chesterton so admired in mystics, the revering of small things as emblems of the great, is certainly in evidence here. After all there are few things smaller than a bubble. Nevertheless I very much doubt that Browne was a mystic in any common

religious sense. The case I would like to make is that he is not so much a mystic as a scholar poet for whom juxtaposition offers a taste of the miraculous.

The rapid journey in the passage from Bubbles; from the universe down to vinegar juice and to windy urines, is balanced, in Browne's phrase on, "thinne parts of ayre". Those thin parts of air produce, for me, the magical elements of a poetry that shifts with perfect naturalness from one mode of discourse to another. It does so by way of an orotundity that is fully intent on its object while, at the same time, developing inventive personal ways of describing phenomena. That manner of proceeding establishes a fascinating voice that persists beyond the subject itself while remaining deeply implicit in the subject - a voice that, in its comprehensiveness and rapidly moving associations, exercises a powerful spell.

A shilling life, as Auden wrote in his sonnet, 'Who is Who', will give you all the facts. A shilling guide will also tell you that Browne wrote in the currently fashionable baroque style preferred by older contemporaries such as Sir Robert Burton of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a style that at its extreme approximates to the earlier Euphuism parodied by Shakespeare in the figure of the schoolmaster Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*, a style according to scholar Stephanie Shirilan consisting of a "long series of absolute and participial constructions, appositional members, and relative clauses" all of which add up in her words again, to "the famously intractable prose of Browne, Burton and Montaigne, as well as in the 'curt' rather than 'loose' style of Bacon, Lipsius and Pascal."

What kind of voice is it and how intractable is it?

What is it to encounter phrases such as: "the chaos & pellicle arising from the grosser foundation of the first matter" or "bubbles on watery & fluid bodies are butt the thinne parts of ayre, or a diaphanous texture of water, arising about the ayre & holding awhile from eruption" or "Aqua fortis upon concussion makes fewe & soone vanishing, the acrimonious effluvium suddenly rending them"?

There is a deep, almost voluptuous resonance to such phrases. We have met them elsewhere, in Shakespeare for instance, an orotundity schooled in the Bible. You can roll its cadences, its sheer wealth of words, round the tongue and feel how it rejoices in its possibilities without being carried away by them. You are, while reading, convinced that these are not mere rhetorical flourishes, but precisions lavished on specific objects. They are not the hollow sounds of an empty vessel, not a barrage of

big-speak, but a way of negotiating the sensible world through an equally sensible language.

I must confess myself neither a scholar of Browne nor indeed of much else. I am an immigrant to whom English is a second language, whose education in the practice of Fine Art was almost entirely practical and not even particularly practical. I came across Browne in my project of self-education, a project I started in my early twenties in the effort, as a poet, to catch up with the history of English literature through the sketchy reading of primary texts, a process wholly undisciplined, since I had given up proper critical reading in Eng Lit at O Level to concentrate on other, in the long term almost entirely irrelevant subjects.

Falling not quite in love with Sir Thomas Browne, but, rather, forming a kind of early romantic attachment to him, probably came from the fascination with what Shirilan describes as “intractable prose”, which may be what the later Yeats was struggling against in his poem ‘The Fascination of What’s Difficult’ where he complains that “The fascination of what's difficult / Has dried the sap out of my veins” and declares “My curse on plays / That have to be set up in fifty ways”

The bubbles in this passage have been set up in fifty ways but to a purpose, in a manner that seems self-evidently necessary. For us – for me – it was not entirely comprehensible in all its parts but that was no deterrent.

The fascination of what’s difficult is at least two-fold. There is, in the first place, the idea that the difficult will become easier in due course and that, as with all education, one will learn something valuable and potentially useful by application. But beyond that, there is an intimation that something else is going on in the language, that the difficulty is not there to conceal or hedge about the simple truth of an argument or prescription, but that there is something else implicit in it – something like music - and that that music is in itself both value and meaning. T S Eliot famously suggested that poetry can communicate before it is understood: it is something like that. The prose communicates more than manner: it is a way, even now, even today, of being in the world.

That is easy enough to assert but how do we distinguish the merely fustian, bombastic, overweening, or pretentious from what is essential? Or at least, if there appears to be fustian, how might we understand what the fustian is doing to meaning? T S Eliot also suggested that poetry in his time had to be – was obliged to be – difficult. I always imagined this to be based on the effect of living in very difficult

times when dramatic complexities played themselves out on the battlefield as well as in the individual psyche. In order to address these complex and interrelated issues it was necessary to integrate them in some manner and that integration was bound to be difficult - not fustian but difficult.

That implies that there are intrinsic reasons and affected reasons for difficulty and intractability. But Browne did not seem either intractable or fustian to me. The music of his phrases, his circlings and listings, combined with the wit, profundity and sentiment that are woven into them had a kind of hypnotic effect. Browne's was a voice I wanted, and still want, to listen to.

The voice in itself is compulsive and not intractable. The difficulty – for me at least – was the level of the scholarship. The long list of Browne's authorities and sources, let alone his direct quotations, from Aristotle, through Scaliger, was daunting. One would never be able to check them all; one could only gasp at the range and depth of them.

What then to do with that gasp? Reading the list of sources in his arguments may become an exercise in a different kind of hypnosis. It can be like hearing an endless roll call at an old fashioned school assembly on prize-giving day, from student Aristotle through to students Unman, Wittering and Zigo, those characters out of Giles Cooper's play. One recognises them as necessary, but essentially they are footnotes absorbed into the text. They also put one in one's place. Thus, in *Hydriotaphia* or *Urne Buriall* discussing cremation Browne tells us:

“...that the Druids and ruling priests used to burn and bury, is expressed by Pomponius; that Bellinus the brother of Brennus, and king of Brittain was burnt, is acknowledged by Polydorus, as also by Amandus Zierexensis in Historia, and Pineda in his *Universa Historia*. That they held that practise in Gallia, Cæsar expresly delivereth.”

Even so, that list is not quite as daunting as it might seem. That is because it is part of a vividly presented narrative or argument. For an unscholarly reader (and who among us is as scholarly as Browne?) it is part of the music constituting the underpinnings and assumptions on which the harmony and melody of Browne's mind are predicated. Furthermore, the learning is supported by vivid empirical observation, by an insatiable curiosity, and by a constant series of meditations on that which is being observed. In other words it matters, and matters deeply.

Auden's shilling life – now comprehensively supplanted by Wikipedia - will give you the necessary facts of Browne's life, such as that he was born in Cheapside, London in 1605 and died in Norwich in 1682. His father, also called Thomas, was a silk merchant, who died young. His mother was a Sussex woman, Anne Garraway. On his father's death Thomas junior was sent to Winchester College, then to Oxford, to a college that in his lifetime became known as Pembroke College. After that he travelled and studied at various European universities, qualifying as a doctor in Leiden, before returning to England to settle in Norwich in 1637 where he continued to practice. These are the basics.

Further basics: Browne never ceased from studying both books and life, was forever writing notes and letters and developed arguments from his position as an empirical scientist who was, nevertheless, in his instincts and tastes, a man of his time. Some of his works became popular and served as the foundation of his reputation then and into our own time.

The first of his published works, in 1643, following its pirated edition the previous year, was **Religio Medici**, followed his book about common errors and popular assumptions, **Pseudodoxia Epidemica**, published in a series of changed or amended editions over some twenty-six years from 1646 on, then in the same year of 1658, the beautiful **Hydriotaphia or Urn Burial**, and **The Garden of Cyrus**, combined into one book, where he expounds his theory of the quincunx. There were various delightful miscellaneous pieces in between and after, including **Museum Clausum**, a catalogue published posthumously in 1687.

Museum Clausum or Bibliotheca Abscondita is a catalogue that Browne refers to in his title and address as “containing some remarkable Books, Antiquities, Pictures and Rarities of several kinds scarce or never seen by any man now living”. It is a wonderfully romantic enterprise comprising material catalogued as:

- *A poem of Ovidius Naso, written in the Getick Language, during his exile at Tomos, found wrapt up in wax at Sabaria, on the frontiers of Hungary, where there remains a tradition that he died, in his return towards Rome from Tomos, either after his pardon or the death of Augustus.*
- *The letter of Quintus Cicero, which he wrote in answer to that of his brother Marcus Tullius, desiring of him an account of Britany, wherein are described the country, state and manners of the Britains of that Age.*
- *An ancient British herbal, or description of divers plants of this island, observed by that famous physician Scribonius Largus, when he*

attended the Emperour Claudius in his expedition into Britany.

Down to:

- *Batrachomyomachia, or the Homerican battel between frogs and mice, neatly described upon the chizel bone of a large pike's jaw.*
- *Pyxis Pandoræ, or a box which held the unguentum pestiferum, which by anointing the garments of several persons begat the great and horrible plague of Milan.*
- *A glass of spirits made of Æthereal salt, hermetically sealed up, kept continually in quick-silver; of so volatile a nature that it will scarce endure the light, and therefore only to be shown in winter, or by the light of a carbuncle or Bononian stone*

To which list Browne adds the words:

“He who knows where all this treasure now is, is a great Apollo. I’m sure I am not he. However, I am, Sir, yours, etc. “

The fact that this is, in effect, a missing library, the equivalent of a cabinet of curiosities, was bound to appeal to the great Argentinian writer Jose Luis Borges whose protagonist in *Tlon*, declares that his intention to translate Browne.

Borges is just one instance. It is fascinating how Browne floats as a ghost through other writers. His voice and person are infectious. They arrive, shuffling and ambling, with pauses just long enough to establish a recognizable cadence.

Here is a more conspicuous example. At the end of his *The Rings of Saturn*, another great writer, W G Sebald turns directly to Browne. Allow me here to take a longer, slightly circuitous routed back to Browne via Sebald.

In reflecting on the items in Browne’s *Musaeum Clausum*, which, Sebald, rightly suggests, were “more likely the products of his imagination, the inventory of a treasure house that existed purely in his head and to which there is no access except through the letters on the page” Sebald sets out on a haunting journey of his own, proceeding from Browne’s list to a Sebaldian digression on silkworm moths and silkworms, ‘Those strange and mysticall transmigrations that’ to quote Browne, “turn’d my philosophy into divinity’. Having examined the development of the silk

moth from a caterpillar, Sebald examines China and the silk road, following the spread of silk manufacture through Europe, thence to the Duc de Sully's memoir, to French silk cultivation, then to England and indeed to Norwich via Flemish and Walloon weavers whose industry was such that, in Sebald's words "a traveller approaching Norwich under the black sky of a winter night would be amazed by the glare over the city, caused by light coming from the windows of the workshops, still busy at this late hour", moving from there naturally enough to the looms at which the weavers worked. And so Sebald goes on, producing one of those characteristically copious lists beginning, "silk brocades and water tabinets, satin and satinettes, camblets and cheverettes..." a little like Browne's lists of sources and epithets.

But he doesn't stop there. Leaving Norwich Sebald considers his home country, Germany, in the eighteenth century, where, among other things he discovers an old master dyer called Seybolt, then on – almost inevitably - to Nazi Germany and the role of silk manufacture in its plans, and beyond, to the present day – which for him then was the 13 April 1995 – where he commemorates the anniversary of various world events over the centuries, including a personal death. "Now as I write, and think once more of our history which," he says, "is but a long account of calamities, it occurs to me that at one time the only expression of profound grief, for ladies of the upper classes was to wear heavy robes of black silk" and, in Holland, "to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors".

All this is developed out of Browne in a kind of Browneian manner: each step logical and scholarly, the whole chapter accumulating, twisting and turning, extending sentences, always with some vision – or glimpse of vision – in prospect. History for Sebald is absence and a mirror draped in black silk ribbons.

'Few people love the writings of Sir Thomas Browne,' thinks Virginia Woolf, 'but those who do are of the salt of the Earth.'

Here, as in no other English prose except the Bible the reader is not left to read alone in his armchair but is made one of a congregation. But here, too, there is a difference; for while the Bible has a gospel to impart, who can be quite sure what Sir Thomas Browne himself believed? The last chapters of *Urn Burial* beat up on wings of extraordinary sweep and power, yet towards what goal?

But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity. ... Darknesse and light divide the course of time, and oblivion snares with memory, a great part even of our living beings; we slightly remember our felicities, and the smartest stroaks of affliction leave but short smart upon us.... The Ægyptian Mummies, which *Cambyses* or time hath spared, avarice now consumeth. Mummie is become Merchandise, *Mizraim* cures wounds, and *Pharaoh* is sold for balsoms.

Decidedly that is the voice of a strange preacher, of a man filled with doubts and subtleties and suddenly swept away by surprising imaginations. But it is not for the asperities of dogma that we go to Sir Thomas Browne. The words quoted above will revive the old amazement. It is as if from the street we stepped into a cathedral where the organ goes plunging and soaring and indulging in vast and elephantine gambols of awful yet grotesque sublimity.

The great names of antiquity march in astonishing procession; flowers and trees, spices and gems load the pages with all kinds of colour and substance. The whole is kept fresh by a perpetual movement of rhythm which gives each sentence its relation to the next and yet is of huge and cumulative effect. A bold and prodigious appetite for the drums and trappings of language is balanced by the most exquisite sense of mysterious affinities between ghosts and roses'

That wonderful passage by Woolf is balanced on a wonderful passage in Browne. Here be flowers and trees, spice and gems, drums and trappings, ghosts and roses. And here is Browne's own ghost complete with his own sense of listing and collating, of bringing together whatever strikes him as fresh and proximate.

Coleridge considered Browne "a humourist constantly mingling with, and flashing across the philosopher". I don't think he meant that Browne made jokes, more that Browne's apparently unlikely associations and juxtapositions were aspects of an essentially humane temperament that rejoiced in discovering the surprising whereby, to return to Chesterton, grass is a forest and the grasshopper a dragon. The world is unlikely, or, as Louis MacNeice put it in his poem 'Snow' 'suddener than we fancy it,' crazier and more of it than we think, incorrigibly plural," "more spiteful and gay than one supposes". Humour in that sense, yes. But spice and gems, ghosts and roses and snow and tangerines, are not jokes. They are what bubble up in Browne and in MacNeice's poem. They are a discovery of the world.

That sense of discovery is there in Browne's terrific coinings of words. The list is very long and includes the following Browneian inventions:

medical, electricity, hallucination, inconsistent, migrant, ambidextrous, computer, coma, cryptography, ferocious, incisor, follicle, expectoration, antediluvian, circumstantially, presumably, traditionally, invariably, append, aquiline, biped, carnivorous, coexistence, compensate, exhaustion, indigenous, locomotion, misconception, prefix, pubescent, temperamental, veterinarian, typographer, deleterious...

To quote the Oxford English Dictionary website which, incidentally, supports Coleridge's thesis of Browne as humorist:

Browne's neologisms are mostly scholarly derivations from Latin. They are often minutely, scientifically precise, but have a quality of baroque humour and curiosity which prevents them being merely pedantic ink-horn terms. Many originate through his efforts as, in one of his own terms, a *zodiographer*: a person who writes about or describes animals.

In *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* – an encyclopaedic exploration of received wisdom which refutes such vulgar errors as the belief that elephants don't have any joints, or that children, without instruction, would grow up naturally speaking Hebrew – Browne describes a snail not as a boneless creature, but an *exosseous* one.

He writes not of the flight of birds, but of their acts of *volitation*. Not the twittering of cicadas, but their *fritiniency*; not the booming call of bitterns, but their 'mugient noyse'. Nightingales aren't melodious, but *canorous*; earwigs aren't wingless, but *impennous*. He invents peculiarly specific adjectives such as *tauricornous* ('having horns like those of a bull') and *anatiferous*:

Welter and cornucopia are not Browne's words but they describe the constant level of production and invention his language offers us.

Regarding Browne's mysticism, as Chesterton saw it, Browne's most recent editor Kevin Killeen puts it like this:

Browne's style, intricate, opulent, performed with tweezers and microscope, describes a malleable prose, in whose minutiae, every object, and each twist of the pen has theological purpose. But he is less mystical jeweller than mystical anatomist, who finds in his relentless microcosmic manoeuvres all creation reiterated in the form of the body, natural philosophy yielding natural theology...

But, as he points out, Browne's career as scientist or mystical anatomist is positioned precisely on the cusp of an Enlightenment that preferred measurement to mysticism.

His writing, proposing, as it so often did, the dislocation of reason at the vital moment of submerging itself into the divine, was at odds with the direction of science as it was represented in the pages of the Royal Society's Philosophical Transactions. His mannered rhetoric and his humanist habits of reference were increasingly alien to the more terse and functional prose of scientific writing.

It may be that it is precisely his 'dislocation of reason at the vital moment of submerging itself into the divine' that so entrances us, because we do after all – do we not – feel that we too move between the two worlds.

Ostensibly Browne is keen enough to distinguish between science and what he, in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, his collection of argumenta against vulgar errors, he regards as the “contemptible pibbles, and feeble arguments, drawne from the scrip and slender stocke of our selves”. There is no dislocation of reason at this point. His scepticism is clear and extends to the Garden of Eden.

It hath empuzzed the enquiries of others to apprehend, and enforced them unto strange conceptions, to make out how without feare or doubt she [that is Eve] could discourse with such a creature, or heare a serpent speake, without suspition of imposture.

He goes on to consider ‘the people’, the class with whom we ourselves are so familiar through political rhetoric, who are, he suggests:

the most deceptible part of mankind, and ready with open armes to receive the encroachments of error... [whose] understanding is so feeble in the discernement of falsities, and averting the errors of reason, that it submitteth unto the fallacies of sence, and is unable to rectifie the error of its sensations.

These falsities impinge on everyday matter in nature, such as in the case of the badger:

That a brock or badger hath his legs of one side shorter then of the other, though an opinion perhaps not very ancient, is yet very generall, received not only by theorists and unexperienced beleevers, but assented unto by most who have the opportunity to behold and hunt them dayly; which notwithstanding upon enquiry I finde repugnant unto the three determinators of truth, authority, sense and reason: for first, Albertus Magnus speaks dubiously, confessing he could not confirme the verity hereof, but Aldrovand affirmeth plainly, there can be no such inequality observed; and for my own part, upon indifferent enquiry, I cannot discover this difference, although the regardible side be defined, and the brevity by most imputed unto the left.

Such a book in our day might be marketed as *1001 Ways In Which You are Wrong*, followed, since the first edition was expanded by Browne himself, by *A Thousand More Ways in which You are Wrong* and it is meticulous and skeptical about all that does not explicitly deny the existence of God.

Later, he wonders at the assumed power of wolves to render people hoarse or dumb should the wolf spy them first, and, very reasonably. explains:

The ground or occasional original hereof was probably the amazement and sudden silence, the unexpected appearance of wolves do often put upon travellers; not by a supposed vapour, or venemous emanation, but a vehement fear which naturally produceth obmutescence, and sometimes irrecoverable

silence: thus birds are silent in presence of an hawk, and Plinie saith that dogs are mute in the shadow of an hyaena; but thus could not the spirits of worthy martyrs be silenced, who being exposed not onely unto the eyes, but the mercilesse teeth of wolves, gave lowd expressions of their faith, and their holy clamours were heard as high as heaven.

So Classical authors, modern learning (Aristotle and Scaliger regularly turn up), personal observation and homely instance are combined but often, as here, with a turn and nod to Christianity at the end. But not without another coining - or so I assume - in obmutescence.

Browne's delight in discovering, confirming, describing, arguing, itemizing, coining and singing his way through prose is balanced by - and darkened by - his profundity, his mysticism or, what Kevin Killeen calls, his 'natural theology'.

One might call it that, I suppose, because Browne's reading and direct observation lodges him in a universe that has not just Louis MacNeice's delight in incorrigible plurality but in the solemnity and grandeur of a system that allows for religion and whose miraculous precision is underwritten by both God and mortality. For Browne, I think, it is not just a matter of what happens to our bodies when we die but what happens to all that animates both soul and body.

The mysterious mechanics of the universe are explored in *The Garden of Cyrus*, where the quincunx, that rectangular shape with a vital centre, like the number five on a dice or on a domino, represents a universal principle of some kind, as, perhaps, the Golden Section did for the artists of the Renaissance, or the modular figure did for Corbusier. Numbers may be the greatest of mysteries in that they seem to lead their own lives irrespective of us. "But even the very hairs on your head are numbered," it says in Luke's Gospel. 'Get free Numerology and decode the patterns of the universe' declares one advertisement. Number lies at the heart of things and in Browne's mind it is the number five.

the squared stones and bricks in ancient fabricks, were placed after this order. And two above or below conjoynd by a middle stone or Plinthus, observable in the ruines of Forum Nervæ, the mausoleum of Augustus, the Pyramid of Cestius, and the sculpture draughts of the larger Pyramids of Ægypt... To omit many other analogies, in architectonically draughts, which art it self is founded

upon fives, as having its subject, and most gracefull peeces divided by this number.

Browne finds the figure in every area of life: in plants, in architecture, in medals and medallions, in coins, in windows, in stone-work, in embroideries, even in the military formation of the Macedonian Phalanx.

If numbers are the foundation of eternal states and conditions, funerary monuments are the most striking signs of our mortality and thus also, of our souls and our being on earth. In his personal *Commonplace Books* he notes:

I attained my purpose and came to reach this port by a bare wind, much labour, great pains and little assistance.

One life suffereth too long for the iniquities thereof; one life is sufficient for the anguish therof if we live no better the life &c.

In his notes contemplating sleep, sometimes titled *On Dreams*, he recalls that:

Half our dayes wee passe in the shadowe of the earth, and the brother of death exacteth a third part of our lives. A good part of our sleepes is peeced out with visions, and phantasticall objects wherin wee are confessedly deceived...

Happy are they that go to bed with grave musick like Pythagoras, or have wayes to compose the phantasticall spirit, whose unrulie wandrings takes of inward sleepe, filling our heads with St. Anthonies visions, and the dreams of Lipara in the sober chambers of rest.

But it is, death, the brother of sleep that takes his attention in *Urne Burial*, the book in which he examines every known way of dealing with human remains.

In some ways *Urne Burial* is simply a scholarly and dramatically cumulative survey of those ways but it is also a meditation on the brevity and purpose of life, on the prospects of an afterlife, and on the vanity of wishing to be remembered in life after one's own death.

It is the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man, to tell him he is at the end of his nature; or that there is no further state to come, unto which this seems progressionall, and otherwise made in vaine.

Here are some of his greatest phrases, his most profound and well known meditations. These are a glory to read so let me quote at a little length.

Time which antiquates antiquities, and hath an art to make dust of all things, hath yet spared these minor monuments...

If we begin to die when we live, and long life be but a prolongation of death; our life is a sad composition; we live with death, and die not in a moment. How

many pulses made up the life of Methuselah, were work for Archimedes:

common counters summe up the life of Moses his man. Our dayes become considerable like petty sums by minute accumulations; where numerous fractions make up but small round numbers; and our dayes of a span long make not one little finger...

...What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions are not beyond all conjecture.

What time the persons of these Ossuaries entred the famous nations of the dead, and slept with princes and counsellours, might admit a wide solution. But who were the proprietaries of these bones, or what bodies these ashes made up, were a question above antiquarism.

Had they made as good provision for their names, as they have done for their reliques, they had not so grosly erred in the art of perpetuation. But to subsist in

bones, and be but pyramidally extant, is a fallacy in duration. Vain ashes, which in the oblivion of names, persons, times, and sexes, have found unto themselves, a fruitlesse continuation, and only arise unto late posterity, as emblemes of mortall vanities; antidotes against pride, vain-glory, and madding vices. Pagan vain-glories which thought the world might last for ever, had encouragement for ambition, and finding no Atropos unto the immortality of their names, were never damp't with the necessity of oblivion.

These are magnificent passages about what is lost and what remains. Vain ashes, says Browne, a fruitless continuation. Emblems of mortal vanities, vain-glories. Thus saith the preacher, one might think.

I'd like to end with excerpts from two more scraps from his notebooks that bring together the natural, the scientific and the apprehension of worlds beyond. This is from his notes, later titled, *Account of a Thunderstorm* in Norwich.

After 7 o'clock in the evening there was almost a continued thunder untill 8, wherin the *Tonitru & Fulgur*, the noyse & lightening were so terrible that they putt the whole citty into an Amazement,& most unto their prayers. The clowdes went lowe & the cracks seemed neere over our heads during the most part of the thunder.

About 8 aclock an *Ignis Fulmineus, pila ignea fulminans, Telum igneuem fulmineum* or fire ball hit agaynst the litle wooden pinnacle of the high Leucome windowe of my howse toward the market place... The greatest Terror from the noyse, answerable unto 2 or 3 canons. The smell it left was strong like that after

the discharge of a canon. The balls that flewe were not like fire in the flame, butt the coale,& the people sayd twas like the sunne. It was *discutiens*, *terebrans*, butt not *urens*. It burnt nothing, nor anything it touched smelt of fire, nor melted any lead of windowe or cisterne...

Further noting that

2 or 3 dayes after a woeman & horse were killed neere Bungay; her hatt so shivered that no peece remained bigger then a groat, whereof I had some peeces sent unto mee.

Browne notes, registers, counts, costs, and receives parts of a dead woman's hat. She too is an incidental. Her ashes too are with the urns. But here she appears as if by some terrible miracle that is almost comical yet lives on the edge of the emblematic.

In another scrap, later titled, *Upon the darke thicke miste*, he recounts a strange phenomenon:

This great mist was not onely observable about London but in remote parts of England and as we heare in Holland, so that it was of larger extent then mists are commonly apprehended to be, most men conceiving that they reach not much beyound the places where they behold them. Mist makes an obscure air but they beget not darknesse, for the atomes and particules thereof admit the light, but if the the matter thereof be very thick, close, and condensed, the mist growes considerably obscure and like a clowde, so the miraculous and palpable darknesse of Egypt is conceived to have been effected by an extraordinary dark miste or a kind of clowde spreade over the land of Egypt, and also miraculously restrained from the land of Goshen... There is a kind of continued mist in the bodies of Animalls, especially in the cavous parts, as may be observed in bodies opened presently after death, and some thinke that in sleepe there is a kind of miste in the brayne; and upon exceeding motion some animalls cast out a mist about them.

In sleep, he says, there is a kind of mist in the brain. The sleep of reason produces monsters, suggested Goya at a time of superstition and war. There are not real felicities enough in nature, Browne tells us in his *Commonplace Notebooks*, "to satisfy a serious mind. And therefore to sweeten the stream of our lives, we are fain to take in the received contentations of the world, to unite with the crowd in their beatitudes & make ourselves happy by consortion, opinion & coimagination. For strictly to separate from reputed & customary felicities or to confine unto the rigour of Realities, were to contract the consolation of our beings, unto comfortless circumscriptions."

Hearing a lot of Browne is like being lost in a music that is both sprightly and solemn. That is what style is about. It is the music of saying, not just the whatness but the howness of things. That is what, for me, makes him a poet – a meditative, scholarly, scientific, empirical yet mystical poet – one living at the end of a time when such a complex whole was possible. Through Browne we discover not so much the world as it is, but the world as it danced and sang around him. His is the world of the desired synthesis, of the here and the beyond and the consciousness of both.

Herman Melville, on being presented with a selection from Browne by his publisher declared Browne a ‘crack’d Archangel’. Cracked meant both broken and excellent. That he is, but also, miraculously, whole.

Written by George Szirtes for the Thomas Browne Project on the occasion of Sir Thomas Browne Day - the 413th anniversary of the birth of Sir Thomas Browne and of his death on his 77th birthday, read at The National Centre for Writing, Dragon Hall King Street, Norwich NR1 1QE on Friday 19 October 2018