

Christian Morals, Part II

Sir Thomas Browne

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Meditation

STROMATA 211

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INTRODUCTION

The second of three parts making up Sir Thomas Browne's *Christian Morals*, gathered and published posthumously in 1716 from manuscript left at his death. Where *Religio Medici* showed Browne turning his curiosity on his own soul, these aphorisms turn outward - brief, densely allusive counsels on temperance, intellectual honesty, self-estimation, and the shape a life takes as it nears its end. The prose is characteristically knotted: long balanced clauses stacked with classical reference, more suited to slow rereading than quick sense-making. Read a section at a time, and let the syntax do its patient, accumulating work.

Section 1

Punish not thyself with pleasure; glut not thy sense with palative delights; nor revenge the contempt of temperance by the penalty of satiety. Were there an age of delight or any pleasure durable, who would not honour voluptia? But the race of delight is sport, and pleasures have mutable faces. The pleasures of one age are not pleasures in another, and their lives fall short of our own. Even in our sensual days, the strength of delight is in its seldomness or rarity, and sting in its satiety: mediocrity is its life, and immoderacy its confusion. The luxurious emperors of old inconsiderately satiated themselves with the dainties of sea and land, till, wearied through all varieties, their refectons became a study unto them, and they were fain to feed by invention: novices in true epicurism! Which by mediocrity, paucity, quick and healthful appetite, makes delights smartly acceptable; whereby epicurus himself found jupiter's brain in a piece of cytheridian cheese, and the tongues of nightingales in a dish of onions. Hereby healthful and temperate poverty hath the start of nauseating luxury; unto whose clear and naked appetite every meal is a feast, and in one single dish the first course of metellus; who are cheaply hungry, and never lose their hunger, or advantage of a craving appetite, because obvious food contents it; while nero, half famish'd, could not feed upon a piece of bread, and, lingring after his snowed water, hardly got down an ordinary cup of calda. by such circumscriptions of pleasure the contemned philosophers reserved unto themselves the secret of delight, which the helluo's of those days lost in their exorbitances. In vain we study delight: it is at the command of every sober mind, and in every sense born with us: but nature, who teacheth us the rule of pleasure, instructeth also in the bounds thereof, and where its line expieth. And therefore temperate minds, not pressing their pleasures until the sting appeareth, enjoy

their contentations contentedly, and without regret, and so escape the folly of excess, to be pleased unto displacency.

Section 2

Bring candid eyes unto the perusal of men's works, and let not zoilism or detraction blast well-intended labours. He that endureth no faults in men's writings must only read his own, wherein for the most part all appeareth white. Quotation mistakes, inadvertency, expedition, and human lapses, may make not only moles but warts in learned authors; who, notwithstanding, being judged by the capital matter, admit not of disparagement. I should unwillingly affirm that cicero was but slightly versed in homer, because in his work "de gloria" he ascribed those verses unto ajax, which were delivered by hector. What if plautus in the account of hercules mistaketh nativity for conception?

Who would have mean thoughts of apollinaris sidonius, who seems to mistake the river tigris for euphrates? And though a good historian and learned bishop of avergne had the misfortune to be out in the story of david, making mention of him when the ark was sent back by the philistins upon a cart; which was before his time. Though I have no great opinion of machiavel's learning, yet I shall not presently say that he was but a novice in roman history, because he was mistaken in placing commodus after the emperor severus. Capital truths are to be narrowly eyed; collateral lapses and circumstantial deliveries not to be too strictly sifted. And if the substantial subject be well forged out, we need not examine the sparks which irregularly fly from it.

Section 3

Let well-weighed considerations, not stiff and peremptory assumptions, guide thy discourses, pen, and actions. To begin or continue our works like trismegistus of old, "verum certè verum atque verissimum est," would sound arrogantly unto present ears in this strict enquiring age; wherein, for the most part, probably, and perhaps, will hardly serve to mollify the spirit of captious contradictors. If cardan faith that a parrot is a beautiful bird, scaliger will set his wits o' work to prove it a deformed animal. The compage of all physical truths is not so closely jointed, but opposition may find intrusion; nor always so closely maintained, as not to suffer attrition. Many positions seem quodlibetically constituted, and like a delphian blade will cut on both sides. Some truths seem almost falshoods, and some falshoods almost truths; wherein falshood and truth seem almost æquilibriumously stated, and but a few grains of distinction to bear down the balance. Some have digged deep, yet glanced by the royal vein; and a man may come unto the pericardium, but not the heart of truth. Besides, many things are known, as some are seen, that is by parallaxis, or at some distance from their true and proper beings, the superficial regard of things having a different aspect from their true and central natures. And this moves sober pens unto suspensory and timorous assertions, nor presently to obtrude them as sibyls' leaves, which after considerations may find to be but solious apparances, and not the central and vital interiors of truth.

Section 4

Value the judicious, and let not mere acquests in minor parts of learning gain thy preexistimation. 'Tis an unjust way of compute, to magnify a weak head for some latin abilities; and to undervalue a solid judgment, because he knows not the genealogy of hector. When that notable king of france would have his son to know but one sentence in latin, had it been a good one, perhaps it had been enough. Natural parts and good judgments rule the world. States are not governed by ergotisms. many have ruled well, who could not, perhaps, define a commonwealth; and they who understand not the globe of the earth, command a great part of it. Where natural logick prevails not, artificial too often faileth. Where nature fills the sails, the vessel goes smoothly on; and when judgment is the pilot, the ensurance need not be high. When industry builds upon nature, we may expel pyramids: where that foundation is wanting, the structure must be low. They do most by books, who could do much without them; and he that chiefly owes himself unto himself, is the substantial man.

Section 5

Let thy studies be free as thy thoughts and contemplations: but fly not only upon the wings of imagination; join sense unto reason, and experiment unto speculation, and so give life unto embryon truths, and verities yet in their chaos. There is nothing more acceptable unto the ingenious world, than this noble elucutation of truth; wherein, against the tenacity of prejudice and prescription, this century now prevaieth. What libraries of new volumes aftertimes will behold, and in what a new world of knowledge the eyes of our posterity may be happy, a few ages may joyfully declare; and is but a cold thought unto those, who cannot hope to behold this exantlation of truth, or that obscured virgin half out of the pit: which might make some content with a commutation of the time of their lives, and to commend the fancy of the pythagorean metempsychosis; whereby they might hope to enjoy this happiness in their third or fourth selves, and behold that in pythagoras, which they now but foresee in euphorbus. the world, which took but six days to make, is like to take six thousand to make out: meanwhile old truths voted down begin to resume their places, and new ones arise upon us; wherein there is no comfort in the happiness of tully's elizium, or any satisfaction from the ghosts of the antients, who knew so little of what is now well known. Men disparage not antiquity, who prudently exalt new enquiries; and make not them the judges of truth, who were but fellow enquirers of it. Who can but magnify the endeavours of aristotle, and the noble start which learning had under him; or less than pity the slender progression made upon such advantages? While many centuries were lost in repetitions and transcriptions sealing up the book of knowledge. And therefore rather than to swell the leaves of learning by fruitless repetitions, to sing the fame song in all ages, nor adventure at essays beyond the attempt of others, many would be content that some would write like helmont or paracelsus; and be willing to endure the monstrosity of some opinions, for divers singular notions requiting such aberrations.

Section 5

Despise not the obliquities of younger ways, nor despair of better things whereof there is yet no prospect. Who would imagine that diogenes, who in his younger days was a falsifier of money, should in the after-course of his life be so great a contemner of metal? Some negroes who believe the resurrection, think that they shall rise white. even in this life, regeneration may imitate resurrection; our black and vicious tinctures may wear off, and goodness clothe us with candour. Good admonitions knock not always in vain. There will be signal examples of god's mercy, and the angels must not want their charitable rejoices for the conversion of lost sinners. Figures of most angles do nearest approach unto circles, which have no angles at all. Some may be near unto goodness, who are conceived far from it; and many things happen, not likely to ensue from any promises of antecedencies. Culpable beginnings have found commendable conclusions, and infamous courses pious retractations. Detestable sinners have proved exemplary converts on earth, and may be glorious in the apartment of mary magdalen in heaven. Men are not the same through all divisions of their ages: time, experience, self-reflexions, and god's mercies, make in some well-temper'd minds a kind of translation before death, and men to differ from themselves as well as from other persons. Hereof the old world afforded many examples to the infamy of latter ages, wherein men too often live by the rule of their inclinations; so that, without any astral prediction, the first day gives the last: men are commonly as they were; or rather, as bad dispositions run into worsen habits, the evening doth not crown, but sowerly conclude the day.

Section 6

If the almighty will not spare us according to his merciful capitulation at sodom; if his goodness please not to pass over a great deal of bad for a small pittance of good, or to look upon us in the lump; there is slender hope for mercy, or sound presumption of fulfilling half his will, either in persons or nations: they who excel in some virtues being so often defective in others; few men driving at the extent and amplitude of goodness, but computing themselves by their best parts, and others by their worst, are content to rest in those virtues which others commonly want. Which makes this speckled face of honesty in the world; and which was the imperfection of the old philosophers and great pretenders unto virtue, who well declining the gaping vices of intemperance, incontinency, violence and oppression, were yet blindly peccant in iniquities of closer faces, were envious, malicious, contemnors, scoffers, censurers, and stult with vizard vices, no less depraving the ethereal particle and diviner portion of man. For envy, malice, hatred, are the qualities of satan, close and dark like himself; and where such brands smoke, the soul cannot be white. Vice may be had at all prices; expensive and costly iniquities, which make the noise, cannot be every man's sins: but the soul may be foully iniquated at a very low rate; and a man may be cheaply vicious, to the perdition of himself.

Section 7

Opinion rides upon the neck of reason; and men are happy, wise, or learned, according as that empress shall set them down in the register of reputation. However, weigh not thyself in the scales of thy own opinion, but let the judgment of the judicious be the standard of thy merit. Self-estimation is a flatterer too readily intitling us unto knowledge and abilities, which others sollicitously labour after, and doubtfully think they attain. Surely, such confident tempers do pass their days in best tranquillity, who, resting in the opinion of their own abilities, are happily gull'd by such contentation; wherein pride, self-conceit, confidence, and opiniatry, will hardly suffer any to complain of imperfection. To think themselves in the right, or all that right, or only that, which they do or think, is a fallacy of high content; though others laugh in their sleeves, and look upon them as in a deluded state of judgment: wherein, notwithstanding, 'twere but a civil piece of complacency to suffer them to sleep who would not wake, to let them rest in their securities, nor by dissent or opposition to stagger their contentments.

Section 8

Since the brow speaks often true, since eyes and noses have tongues, and the countenance proclaims the heart and inclinations; let observation so far instruct thee in physiognomical lines, as to be some rule for thy distinction, and guide for thy affection unto such as look most like men. Mankind, methinks, is comprehended in a few faces, if we exclude all visages which any way participate of symmetries and schemes of look common unto other animals. For as though man were the extra of the world, in whom all were "in coagulato," which in their forms were "in soluto," and at extension; we often observe that men do most act those creatures, whose constitution, parts, and complexion do most predominate in their mixtures. This is a corner-stone in physiognomy, and holds some truth not only in particular persons but also in whole nations. There are, therefore, provincial faces, national lips and noses, which testify not only the natures of those countries, but of those which have them elsewhere. Thus we may make england the whole earth, dividing it not only into europe, asia, africa, but the particular regions

thereof; and may in some latitude affirm, that there are ægyptians, scythians, indians among us, who, though born in england, yet carry the faces and air of those countries, and are also agreeable and correspondent unto their natures. Faces look uniformly unto our eyes: how they appear unto some animals of a more piercing or differing sight, who are able to discover the inequalities, rubbs, and hairiness of the skin, is not without good doubt: and, therefore, in reference unto man, cupid is said to be blind. Affection should not be too sharp-eyed, and love is not to be made by magnifying glasses. If things were seen as they truly are, the beauty of bodies would be much abridged. And, therefore, the wise contriver hath drawn the pictures and outsides of things softly and amiably unto the natural edge of our eyes, not leaving them able to discover those uncomely asperities, which make oyster-shells in good faces, and hedghogs even in venus's moles.

Section 9

Court not felicity too far, and weary not the favourable hand of fortune. Glorious actions have their times, extent, and non ultra's. To put no end unto attempts were to make prescription of successes, and to bespeak unhappiness at the last: for the line of our lives is drawn with white and black vicissitudes, wherein the extremes hold seldom one complexion. That pompey should obtain the surname of great at twenty-five years, that men in their young and alive days should be fortunate and perform notable things, is no observation of deep wonder; they having the strength of their fates before them, nor yet ailed their parts in the world for which they were brought into it: whereas men of years, matured for counsels and designs, seem to be beyond the vigour of their active fortunes, and high exploits of life, providentially ordained unto ages best agreeable unto them. And, therefore, many brave men finding their fortune grow faint, and feeling its declination, have timely withdrawn themselves from great attempts, and so escaped the ends of mighty men, disproportionable to their beginnings. But magnanimous thoughts have so dimmed the eyes of many, that forgetting the very essence of fortune, and the vicissitude of good and evil, they apprehend no bottom in felicity; and so have been frill tempted on unto mighty actions, reserved for their destructions. For fortune lays the plot of our adversities in the foundation of our felicities, blessing us in the first quadrate, to blast us more sharply in the last. And since in the highest felicities there lieth a capacity of the lowest miseries, she hath this advantage from our happiness to make us truly miserable: for to become acutely miserable we are to be first happy. Affliction smarts most in the most happy state, as having somewhat in it of bellisarius at beggars bush, or bajazet in the grate. and this the fallen angels severely understand; who having acted their first part in heaven, are made sharply miserable by transition, and more afflictively feel the contrary state of hell.

Section 10

Carry no careless eye upon the unexpected scenes of things; but ponder the acts of providence in the publick ends of great and notable men, set out unto the view of all for no common memorandums. The tragical exits and unexpected periods of some eminent persons, cannot but amuse considerate observers; wherein, notwithstanding, most men seem to see by extramission, without reception or self-reflexion, and conceive themselves unconcerned by the fallacy of their own exemption: whereas, the mercy of god hath singled out but few to be the signals of his justice, leaving the generality of

mankind to the pædagogy of example. But the inadvertency of our natures not well apprehending this favourable method and merciful decimation, and that he sheweth in some what others also deserve; they entertain no sense of his hand beyond the stroke of themselves. Whereupon the whole becomes necessarily punished, and the contrasted hand of god extended unto universal judgments: from whence, nevertheless, the stupidity of our tempers receives but faint impressions, and in the most tragical state of tunes holds but starts of good motions. So that to continue us in goodness there must be iterated returns of misery, and a circulation in afflictions is necessary. And since we cannot be wise by warnings; since plagues are insignificant, except we be personally plagued; since, also, we cannot be punish'd unto amendment by proxy or commutation, nor by vicinity, but contraction; there is an unhappy necessity that we must smart in our own skins, and the provoked arm of the almighty must fall upon ourselves. The capital sufferings of others are rather our monitions than acquitments. There is but one who died salvifically for us, and able to say unto death, hitherto shalt thou go and no farther; only one enlivening death, which makes gardens of graves, and that which was sowed in corruption to arise and flourish in glory: when death itself shall die, and living shall have no period; when the damned than mourn at the funeral of death; when life not death shall be the wages of sin; when the second death shall prove a miserable life, and destruction shall be courted.

Section 11

Although their thoughts may seem too severe, who think that few ill-natur'd men go to heaven; yet it may be acknowledged that good-natur'd persons are best founded for that place; who enter the world with good dispositions and natural graces, more ready to be advanced by impressions from above, and christianized unto pieties; who carry about them plain and down-right dealing minds, humility, mercy, charity, and virtues acceptable unto god and man. But whatever success they may have as to heaven, they are the acceptable men on earth, and happy is he who hath his quiver full of them for his friends. These are not the dens wherein falshood lurks, and hypocrisy hides its head; wherein frowardness makes its nest; or where malice, hard-heartedness, and oppression love to dwell; not those by whom the poor get little, and the rich some time lose all; men not of retracted looks, but who carry their hearts in their faces, and need not to be look'd upon with perspectives; not sordidly or mischievously ingrateful; who cannot learn to ride upon the neck of the afflicted, nor load the heavy laden, but who keep the temple of janus shut by peaceable and quiet tempers; who make not only the best friends, but the best enemies, as easier to forgive than offend, and ready to pass by the second offence before they avenge the first; who make natural royalists, obedient subjects, kind and merciful princes, verified in our own, one of the best-natur'd kings of this throne. Of the old roman emperors the best were the best-natur'd; though they made but a small number, and might be writ in a ring. Many of the rest were as bad men as princes; humourists rather than of good humours; and of good natural parts rather than of good natures, which did but arm their bad inclinations, and make them wittily wicked.

Section 12

With what shift and pains we come into the world, we remember not; but 'tis commonly found no easy matter to get out of it. Many have studied to exasperate the ways of death, but fewer hours have been spent to soften that necessity. That the smoothest way unto the grave is made by bleeding, as common opinion presumeth, beside the sick and fainting languors which accompany that effusion, the experiment in lucan and seneca will make us doubt; under which the noble stoick so deeply laboured, that, to conceal his affliction, he was fain to retire from the sight of his wife, and not ashamed to implore the merciful hand of his physician to shorten his misery therein. Ovid, the old heroes, and the stoicks, who were so afraid of drowning, as dreading thereby the extinction of their soul, which they conceived to be a fire, stood probably in fear of an easier way of death; wherein the water, entering the possessions of air, makes a temperate suffocation, and kills as it were without a fever. Surely many, who have had the spirit to destroy themselves, have not been ingenious in the contrivance thereof. 'Twas a dull way practised by themistocles, to overwhelm himself with bulls-blood, who, being an athenian, might have held an easier theory of death from the state potion of his country; from which socrates in plato seemed not to suffer much more than from the fit of an ague. Cato is much to be pitied, who mangled himself with poniards; and hannibal seems more subtle, who carried his delivery, not in the point but the pummel of his sword. The egyptians were merciful contrivers, who destroyed their malefactors by asps, charming their senses into an invincible sleep, and killing as it were with hermes his rod. the turkish emperor, odious

For other cruelty, was herein a remarkable master of mercy, killing his favourite in his sleep, and sending him from the shade into the house of darkness. He who had been thus destroyed would hardly have bled at the presence of his destroyer: when men are already dead by metaphor, and pass but from one sleep unto another, wanting herein the eminent part of severity, to feel themselves to die; and escaping the sharpest attendant of death, the lively apprehension thereof. But to learn to die, is better than to study the ways of dying. Death will find some ways to untie or cut the most gordian knots of life, and make men's miseries as mortal as themselves: whereas evil spirits, as undying substances, are unseparable from their calamities; and, therefore, they everlastingly struggle under their anguftias (agonies), and bound up with immortality can never get out of themselves.

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