

Christian Morals, Part III

Sir Thomas Browne

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Meditation

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INTRODUCTION

Browne closes his final work in the register that made him singular among English prose stylists: aphorism piled on aphorism, each one a small, glittering artifact of moral reasoning. Where the earlier parts of *Christian Morals* instruct the reader on self-command and honesty, this closing section turns outward and upward - toward providence, mortality, the shortness of a human lifespan measured against the created world, and the strange comfort of living as though already halfway into eternity. The sentences are dense and require patience; readers unfamiliar with Browne's vocabulary should expect to slow down. What emerges, read slowly, is less a set of rules than a cast of mind.

Section 1

Tis hard to find a whole age to imitate, or what century to propose for example. Some have been far more approveable than others; but virtue and vice, panegyrics and satyrs, scatteringly to be found in all. History sets down not only things laudable, but abominable; things which should never have been, or never have been known: so that noble patterns must be fetched here and there from single persons, rather than whole nations; and from all nations, rather than any one. The world was early bad, and the first sin the most deplorable of any. The younger world afforded the oldest men, and perhaps the best and the worst, when length of days made virtuous habits heroical and immoveable, vicious, inveterate, and irreclaimable. And since 'tis said the imaginations of their hearts were evil, only evil, and continually evil; it may be feared that their sins held pace with their lives; and their longevity swelling their impieties, the longanimity of god would no longer endure such vivacious abominations. Their impieties were surely of a deep dye, which required the whole element of water to wash them away, and overwhelmed their memories with themselves; and so shut up the first windows of time, leaving no histories of those longevous generations, when men might have been properly historians, when adam might have read long lectures unto methuselah, and methuselah unto noah. For had we been happy in just historical accounts of that unparallel'd world, we might have been acquainted with wonders; and have understood not a little of the acts and undertakings of moses his mighty men, and men of renown of old; which might have enlarged our thoughts, and made the world older unto us. For the unknown part of time shortens the estimation, if not the compute of it. What hath escaped our knowledge, falls not under our consideration; and what is and will be latent, is little better than non-existent.

Section 2

Some things are dictated for our instruction, some acted for our imitation; wherein 'tis best to ascend unto the highest conformity, and to the honour of the exemplar. He honours god, who imitates him; for what we virtuously imitate we approve and admire: and since we delight not to imitate inferiors, we aggrandize and magnify those we imitate; since also we are most apt to imitate those we love, we testify our affection in our imitation of the inimitable. To affect to be like, may be no imitation: to act, and not to be what we pretend to imitate, is but a mimical conformation, and carrieth no virtue in it. Lucifer imitated not god, when he said he would be like the highest; and he imitated not jupiter, who counterfeited thunder. Where imitation can go no farther, let admiration step on, whereof there is no end in the wisest form of men. Even angels and spirits have enough to admire in their sublimer natures; admiration being the act of the creature, and not of god, who doth not admire himself. Created natures allow of swelling hyperboles: nothing can be said hyperbolically of god, nor will his attributes admit of expressions above their own exuperances. Trismegistus his circle, whose center is every where, and circumference no where, was no hyperbole. Words cannot exceed, where they cannot express enough. Even the most winged thoughts fall at the setting out, and reach not the portal of divinity.

Section 3

In bivious theorems, and janus-faced doctrines, let virtuous considerations state the determination. Look upon opinions as thou dost upon the moon, and choose not the dark hemisphere for thy contemplation. Embrace not the opacous and blind side of opinions, but that which looks most luciferously

or influentially unto goodness. 'Tis better to think that there are guardian spirits, than that there are no spirits to guard us; that vicious persons are slaves, than that there is any servitude in virtue; that times past have been better than times present, than that times were always bad; and that to be men it sufficeth to be no better than men in all ages, and so promiscuously to swim down the turbid stream, and make up the grand confusion. Sow not thy understanding with opinions, which make nothing of iniquities, and fallaciously extenuate transgressions. Look upon vices and vicious objects, with hyperbolical eyes; and rather enlarge their dimensions, that their unseen deformities may not escape thy sense, and their poisonous parts and stings may appear massy and monstrous unto thee: for the undiscerned particles and atoms of evil deceive us, and we are undone by the invisibles of seeming goodness. We are only deceived in what is not discerned, and to err is but to be blind or dim-lighted as to some perceptions.

Section 4

To be honest in a right line, and virtuous by epitome, be firm unto such principles of goodness, as carry in them volumes of instruction and may abridge thy labour. And since instructions are many, hold close unto those, whereon the rest depend: so may we have all in a few, and the law and the prophets in a rule; the sacred writ in stenography, and the scripture in a nut-shell. To pursue the osseous and solid part of goodness, which gives stability and rectitude to all the rest; to settle on fundamental virtues, and bid early defiance unto mother-vices, which carry in their bowels the seminals of other iniquities; makes a short cut in goodness, and strikes not off an head but the whole neck of hydra. For we are carried into the dark lake, like the ægyptian river into the sea, by seven principal ostiaries: the mother-sins of that number are the deadly engins of evil spirits that undo us, and even evil spirits themselves; and he who is under the chains thereof is not without a possession. Mary magdalene had more than seven devils, if these with their imps were in her; and he who is thus possessed, may literally be named "legion." Where such plants grow and prosper, look for no champain or region void of thorns; but productions like the tree of goa, and forests of abomination.

Section 5

Guide not the hand of god, nor order the finger of the almighty unto thy will and pleasure; but sit quiet in the soft showers of providence, and favourable distributions in this world, either to thyself or others. And since not only judgments have their errands, but mercies their commissions; snatch not at every favour, nor think thyself passed by if they fall upon thy neighbour. Rake not up envious displacences at things successful unto others, which the wise disposer of all thinks not fit for thyself. Reconcile the events of things unto both beings, that is, of this world and the next: so will there not seem so many riddles in providence, nor various inequalities in the dispensation of things below. If thou dost not anoint thy face, yet put not on sackcloth at the felicities of others. Repining at the good, draws on rejoicing at the evils of others: and so falls into that inhumane vice, for which so few languages have a name. The blessed spirits above rejoice at our happiness below: but to be glad at the evils of one another, is beyond the malignity of hell; and falls not on evil spirits, who, tho' they rejoice at our unhappiness, take no pleasure at the afflictions of their own society or of their fellow natures. Degenerous heads! Who must be fain to learn from such examples, and to be taught from the school of hell.

Section 6

Grain not thy vicious stains; nor deepen those swart tinctures, which temper, infirmity, or ill habits have set upon thee; and fix not, by iterated depravations, what time might efface, or virtuous washes expunge. He, who thus still advanceth in iniquity, deepneth his deformed hue; turns a shadow into night, and makes himself a negro in the black jaundice; and so becomes one of those lost ones, the disproportionate pores of whose brains afford no entrance unto good motions, but reflect and frustrate all counsels, deaf unto the thunder of the laws, and rocks unto the cries of charitable commiserators. He who hath had the patience of diogenes, to make orations unto statues, may more sensibly apprehend how all words fall to the ground, spent upon such a surd and earless generation of men, stupid unto all instruction, and rather requiring an exorcist than an orator for their conversion!

Section 7

Burden not the back of aries, leo, or taurus, with thy faults; nor make saturn, mars, or venus, guilty of thy follies. Think not to fasten thy imperfections on the stars, and so despairingly conceive thyself under a fatality of being evil. Calculate thyself within; seek not thyself in the moon, but in thine own orb or microcosmical circumference. Let celestial aspects admonish and advertise, not conclude and determine thy ways. For since good and bad stars moralize not our actions, and neither excuse or commend, acquit or condemn our good or bad deeds at the present or last bar; since some are astrologically well disposed, who are morally highly vicious; not celestial figures, but virtuous schemes, must denominate and state our actions. If we rightly understood the names whereby god calleth the stars; if we knew his name for the dog-star, or by what appellation jupiter, mars, and saturn obey his will; it might be a welcome accession unto astrology, which speaks great things, and is fain to make use of appellations from greek and barbarick systems. Whatever influences, impulsions, or inclinations there be from the lights above, it were a piece of wisdom to make one of those wise men who overrule their stars, and with their own militia contend with the host of heaven. Unto which attempt there want not auxiliaries

from the whole strength of morality, supplies from christian ethicks, influences also and illuminations from above, more powerful than the lights of heaven.

Section 8

Confound not the distinctions of thy life which nature hath divided; that is, youth, adolescence, manhood, and old age: nor in these divided periods, wherein thou art in a manner four, conceive thyself but one. Let every division be happy in its proper virtues, nor one vice run through all. Let each distinction have its salutary transition, and critically deliver thee from the imperfections of the former; so ordering the whole, that prudence and virtue may have the largest section. Do as a child but when thou art a child, and ride not on a reed at twenty. He who hath not taken leave of the follies of his youth, and in his maturer state scarce got out of that division, disproportionately divideth his days, crowds up the latter part of his life, and leaves too narrow a corner for the age of wisdom; and so hath room to be a man, scarce longer than he hath been a youth. Rather than to make this confusion, anticipate the virtues of age, and live long without the infirmities of it. So mayst thou count up thy days as some do adam's, that is by anticipation; so mayst thou be coetaneous unto thy elders, and a father unto thy contemporaries.

Section 9

While others are curious in the choice of good air, and chiefly solicitous for healthful habitations, study thou conversation, and be critical in thy consortion. The aspects, conjunctions, and configurations of the stars, which mutually diversify, intend, or qualify their influences, are but the varieties of their nearer or farther conversation with one another, and like the consortion of men, whereby they become better or worse, and even exchange their natures. Since men live by examples, and will be imitating something; order thy imitation to thy improvement, not thy ruin. Look not for rotes in attalus his garden, or wholesome flowers in a venomous plantation. And since there is scarce any one bad, but some others are the worse for him; tempt not Contagion by proximity, and hazard not thyself in the shadow of corruption. He who hath not early suffered this shipwreck, and in his younger days escaped this charybdis, may make a happy voyage, and not come in with black sails into the port. Self-conversation, or to be alone, is better than such consortion. Some schoolmen tell us, that he is properly alone, with whom in the same place there is no other of the same species. Nabuchodonozor was alone, though among the beasts of the field; and a wise man may be tolerably said to be alone, though with a rabble of people little better than beasts about him. Unthinking heads, who have not learn'd to be alone, are in a prison to themselves, if they be not also with others: whereas, on the contrary, they whose thoughts are in a fair, and hurry within, are sometimes fain to retire into company, to be out of the crowd of themselves. He who must needs have company, must needs have sometimes bad company. Be able to be alone. Lose not the advantage of solitude, and the society of thyself; nor be only content, but delight to be alone and single with omnipresency. He who is thus prepared, the day is not uneasy nor the night black unto him. Darkness may bound his eyes, not his imagination. In his bed he may lie, like pompey and his sons, in all quarters of the earth; may speculate the universe, and enjoy the whole world in the hermitage of himself. Thus the old ascetick christians found a paradise in a desert, and with little converse on earth held a conversation in heaven; thus they astronomiz'd in caves, and though they beheld not the stars, had the glory of heaven before them.

Section 10

Let the characters of good things stand indelibly in thy mind, and thy thoughts be active on them. Trust not too much unto suggestions from reminiscential amulets, or artificial memorandums. Let the mortifying janus of covarrubias be in thy daily thoughts, not only on thy hand and signets. Rely not alone upon fluent and dumb remembrances. Behold not death's heads till thou doest not see them, nor look upon mortifying objects till thou overlook'st them. Forget not how assuefaction unto anything minorates the passion from it; how constant objects lose their hints, and steal an inadvertisement upon us. There is no excuse to forget what every thing prompts unto us. To thoughtful observators, the whole world is a phylactery; and every thing we see an item of the wisdom, power, or goodness of god. Happy are they who verify their amulets, and make their phylacteries speak in their lives and actions. To run on in despite of the revulsions and pull-backs of such remoras, aggravates our transgressions. When death's-heads on our hands have no influence upon our heads, and fleshless cadavers abate not the exorbitances of the flesh; when crucifixes upon men's hearts suppress not their bad commotions, and his image who was murdered for us withholds not from blood and murder; phylacteries prove but formalities, and their despised hints sharpen our condemnations.

Section 11

Look not for whales in the euxine sea, or expect great matters where they are not to be found. Seek not for profundity in shallowness, or fertility in a wilderness. Place not the expectation of great happiness here below, or think to find heaven on earth; wherein we must be content with embryon-felicities, and fruitions of doubtful faces: for the circle of our felicities makes but short arches. In every clime we are in a periscian state; and, with our light, our shadow and darkness walk about us. Our contentments stand upon the tops of pyramids ready to fall off, and the insecurity of their enjoyments abrupteth our tranquillities. What we magnify is magnificent, but, like to the colossus, noble without, stuf with rubbidge and coarfe metal within. Even the sun, whose glorious outside we behold, may have dark and smoky entrails. In vain we admire the lustre of any thing seen: that which is truly glorious, is invisible. Paradise was but a part of the earth, lost not only to our fruition but our knowledge. And if, according to old dictates, no man can be said to be happy before death; the happiness of this life goes for nothing before it be over, and while we think ourselves happy we do but usurp that name. Certainly, true beatitude groweth not on earth, nor hath this world in it the expectations we have of it. He swims in oil, and can hardly avoid sinking, who hath such light foundations to support him: 'tis, therefore, happy, that we have two worlds to hold on. To enjoy true happiness, we must travel into a very far country, and even out of ourselves; for the pearl we seek for is not to be found in the indian, but in the empyrean ocean.

Section 12

Answer not the spur of fury, and be not prodigal or prodigious in revenge. Make not one in the *historia horribilis*; stay not thy servant for a broken glass, nor pound him in a mortar who offendeth thee; supererogate not in the worst sense, and overdo not the necessities of evil; humour not the injustice of revenge. Be not stoically mistaken in the equality of sins, nor commutatively iniquous in the valuation of transgressions; but weigh them in the scales of heaven, and by the weights of righteous reason.

Think that revenge too high, which is but level with the offence. Let thy arrows of revenge fly short; or be aimed like those of jonathan, to fall beside the mark. Too many there be to whom a dead enemy smells well, and who find musk and amber in revenge. The ferity of such minds holds no rule in retaliations, requiring too often a head for a tooth, and the supreme revenge for trespasses which a night's rest should obliterate. But patient meekness takes injuries like pills, not chewing but swallowing them down, laconically suffering, and fluently passing them over; while angered pride makes a nose, like homeric mars, at every scratch of offences. Since women do most delight in revenge, it may seem but feminine manhood to be vindicative. If thou must needs have thy revenge of thine enemy, with a soft tongue break his bones, heap coals of fire on his head, forgive him and enjoy it. To forgive our enemies is a charming way of revenge, and a short cæsarian conquest overcoming without a blow; laying our enemies at our feet, under sorrow, shame, and repentance; leaving our foes our friends, and sollicitously inclined to grateful retaliations. Thus to return upon our adversaries, is a healing way of revenge; and to do good for evil a soft and melting ultion, a method taught from heaven to keep all smooth on earth. Common forceable ways make not an end of evil, but leave hatred and malice behind

them. An enemy thus reconciled is little to be trusted, as wanting the foundation of love and charity, and but for a time restrained by disadvantage or inability. If thou hast not mercy for others, yet be not cruel unto thyself. To ruminate upon evils, to make critical notes upon injuries, and be too acute in their apprehensions; is to add unto our own tortures, to feather the arrows of our enemies, to lath ourselves with the scorpions of our foes, and to resolve to sleep no more: for injuries long dreamt on, take away at hit all rest; and he sleeps but like regulus, who busieth his head about them.

Section 13

Amuse not thyself about the riddles of future things. Study prophecies when they are become histories, and part hovering in their causes. Eye well things past and present, and let conjectural sagacity suffice for things to come. There is a sober latitude for prescience in contingences of discoverable tempers, whereby discerning heads see sometimes beyond their eyes, and wise men become prophetic. Leave cloudy predictions to their periods, and let appointed seasons have the lot of their accomplishments. 'Tis too early to study such prophecies before they have been long made, before some train of their causes have already taken fire, laying open in part what lay obscure and before buried unto us. For the voice of prophecies is like that of whispering-places: they who are near, or at a little distance, hear nothing; those at the farthest extremity will understand all. But a retrograde cognition of times past, & things which have already been, is more satisfactory than a suspended knowledge of what is yet unexistent. And the greatest part of time being already wrapt up in things behind us; it's now somewhat late to bait after things before us; for futurity still shortens, and time present sucks in time to come. What is prophetic in one age proves historical in another, and so must hold on unto the last of time; when there will be no room for prediction, when janus shall loose one face, and the long beard of time shall look like those of david's servants, shorn away upon one side, & when, if the expected elias should appear, he might say much of what is past, not much of what's to come.

Section 14

Live unto the dignity of thy nature, and leave it not disputable at last, whether thou hast been a man; or, since thou art a composition of man and beast, how thou hast predominantly passed thy days, to state the denomination. Un-man not, therefore, thyself by a bestial transformation, nor realize old fables. Expose not thyself by four-footed manners unto monstrous draughts, and caricatura representations. Think not after the old pythagorean conceit, what beast thou mayst be after death. Be not under any brutal metempsychosis while thou livest, and walkest about erectly under the scheme of man. In thine own circumference, as in that of the earth, let the rational horizon be larger than the sensible, and the circle of reason than of sense: let the divine part be upward, and the region of beast below; otherwise, 'tis but to live invertedly, and with thy head unto the heels of thy antipodes. Desert not thy title to a divine particle and union with invisibles. Let true knowledge and virtue tell the lower world, thou art a part of the higher. Let thy thoughts be of things which have not entred into the hearts of beasts: think of things long past, and long to come: acquaint thyself with the choragium of the stars, and consider the vast expansion beyond them. Let intellectual tubes give thee a glance of things, which visive organs reach not. Have a glimpse of incomprehensibles; and thoughts of things, which thoughts but tenderly touch.

Lodge immaterials in thy head: ascend unto invisibles; fill thy spirit with spirituals, with the mysteries of faith, the magnalities of religion, and thy life with the honour of god; without which, though giants in wealth and dignity, we are but dwarfs and pygmies in Humanity, and may hold a pitiful rank in that triple division of mankind into heroes, men, and beasts. For though human souls are said to be equal, yet is there no small inequality in their operations; some maintain the allowable station of men; many are far below it; and some have been so divine, as to approach the apogeeum of their natures, and to be in the consinium of spirits.

Section 15

Behold thyself by inward opticks and the crystalline of thy soul. Strange it is, that in the most perfect sense there should be so many fallacies, that we are fain to make a doctrine, and often to see by art. But the greatest imperfection is in our inward sight, that is, to

Be ghosts unto our own eyes; and while we are so sharp-sighted as to look thorough others, to be invisible unto ourselves; for the inward eyes are more fallacious than the outward. The vices we scoff at in others, laugh at us within ourselves. Avarice, pride, falshood, lie undiscerned and blindly in us, even to the age of blindness: and, therefore, to see ourselves interiourly, we are fain to borrow other men's eyes; wherein true friends are good informers, and censurers no bad friends. Conscience only, that can see without light, fits in the areopagy and dark tribunal of our hearts, surveying our thoughts and condemning their obliquities. Happy is that state of vision that can see without light, though all should look as before the creation, when there was not an eye to see, or light to actuate a vision: wherein, notwithstanding, obscurity is only imaginable respectively unto eyes: for unto god there was none;

Eternal light was ever; created light was for the creation, not himself; and as he saw before the fun, may still also see without it. In the city of the new jerusalem there is neither sun nor moon; where glorified eyes must see by the archetypal sun, or the light of god, able to illuminate intellectual eyes, and make unknown visions. Intuitive perceptions in spiritual beings may, perhaps, hold some analogy unto vision; but yet how they see us, or one another, what eye, what light, or what perception is required unto their intuition, is yet dark unto our apprehension; and even how they see god, or how unto our glorified eyes the beatifical vision will be celebrated, another world must tell us, when perceptions will be new, and we may hope to behold invisibles.

Section 16

When all looks fair about, and thou seest not a cloud so big as a hand to threaten thee, forget not the wheel of things: think of sullen vicissitudes, but beat not thy brains to foreknow them. Be armed against such obscurities, rather by submission than fore-knowledge. The knowledge of future evils mortifies present felicities, and there is more content in the uncertainty or ignorance of them. This favour our saviour vouchsafed unto peter, when he foretold not his death in plain terms, and so by an ambiguous and cloudy delivery damp't not the spirit of his disciples. But in the assured fore-knowledge of the deluge, noah lived many years under the affliction of a flood; and jerusalem was taken unto jeremey, before it was besieged. And, therefore, the wisdom of astrologers, who speak of future things, hath wisely softened the

Severity of their doctrines; and even in their sad predictions, while they tell us of inclination not coercion from the stars, they kill us not with stygian oaths and merciless necessity, but leave us hopes of evasion.

Section 17

If thou hast the brow to endure the name of traitor, perjurer, or oppressor, yet cover thy face when ingratitude is thrown at thee. If that degenerate vice possess thee, hide thyself in the shadow of thy shame, and pollute not noble society. Grateful ingenuities are content to be obliged within some compass of

retribution; and being depressed by the weight of iterated favours, may so labour under their inabilities of requital, as to abate the content from kindnesses. But narrow self-ended souls make prescription of good offices, and obliged by often favours think others still due unto them:

Whereas, if they but once fail, they prove so perversely ungrateful, as to make nothing of former courtesies, and to bury all that's past. Such tempers pervert the generous course of things; for they discourage the inclinations of noble minds, and make beneficency cool unto acts of obligation, whereby the grateful world should subsist, and have their consolation. Common gratitude must be kept alive by the additionary fuel of new courtesies: but generous gratitudes, though but once well obliged, without quickening repetitions or expectation of new favours, have thankful minds for ever; for they write not their obligations in sandy but marble memories, which wear not out but with themselves.

Section 18

Think not silence the wisdom of fools; but, if rightly timed, the honour of wise men, who have not the infirmity, but the virtue of taciturnity; and speak not out of the abundance, but the well-weighed thoughts of their hearts. Such silence may be eloquence, and speak thy worth above the power of words. Make such a one thy friend, in whom princes may be happy, and great counsels successful. Let him have the key of thy heart, who hath the lock of his own, which no temptation can open; where thy secrets may lastingly lie, like the lamp in olibrius his urn, alive, and light, but close and invisible.

Section 19

Let thy oaths be sacred, and promises be made upon the altar of thy heart. Call not jove to witness, with a stone in one hand, and a straw in another; and so make chaff and stubble of thy vows. Worldly spirits, whose interest is their belief, make cobwebs of obligations; and, if they can find ways to elude the urn of the prætor, will trust the thunderbolt of jupiter: and, therefore, if they should as deeply swear as osman to bethlem gabor; yet whether they would be bound by those chains, and not find ways to cut such gordian knots, we could have no just assurance. But honest men's words are stygian oaths, and promises inviolable. These are not the men

For whom the fetters of law were first forged; they needed not the solemnness of oaths; by keeping their faith they swear, and evacuate such confirmations.

Section 20

Though the world be histrionical, and most men live ironically, yet be thou what thou singly art, and personate only thyself. Swim smoothly in the stream of thy nature, and live but one man. To single hearts doubling is disconcerting: such tempers must sweat to dissemble, and prove but hypocritical hypocrites. Simulation must be short: men do not easily continue a counterfeiting life, or dissemble unto death. He who counterfeiteth, acts a part; and is, as it were, out of himself: which, if long, proves so irksome, that men are glad to pull off their

Vizards, and resume themselves again; no practice being able to naturalize such unnaturals, or make a man rest content not to be himself. And, therefore, since sincerity is thy temper, let veracity be thy virtue, in words, manners, and actions. To offer at iniquities, which have so little foundations in thee, were to be vicious up-hill, and strain for thy condemnation. Persons viciously inclined, want no wheels to make them actively vicious; as having the elater and spring of their own natures to facilitate their iniquities. And, therefore, so many, who are sinistrous unto good actions, are ambi-dexterous unto bad; and vulcans in virtuous paths, achilleses in vicious motions.

Section 21

Rest not in the high-strain'd paradoxes of old philosophy, supported by naked reason, and the reward of mortal felicity; but labour in the ethicks of faith, built upon heavenly assistance, and the happiness of both beings. Understand the rules, but swear not unto the doctrines of zeno or epicurus. Look beyond antoninus, and terminate not thy morals in seneca or epictetus. Let not the twelve, but the two tables be thy law: let pythagoras be thy remembrancer, not thy textuary and final instructor; and learn the vanity of the world, rather from solomon than phocylydes. Sleep not in the dogmas of the peripatus, academy, or porticus.

Be a moralist of the mount, an epictetus in the faith, and christianize thy notions.

Section 22

In seventy or eighty years, a man may have a deep gust of the world; know what it is, what it can afford, and what 'tis to have been a man. Such a latitude of years may hold a considerable corner in the general map of time; and a man may have a curt epitome of the whole course thereof in the days of his own life; may clearly see he hath but acted over his fore-fathers; what it was to live in ages past, and what living will be in all ages to come.

He is like to be the best judge of time, who hath lived to see about the sixtieth part thereof. Persons of short times may

Know what 'tis to live, but not the life of man, who, having little behind them, are but januses of one face, and know not singularities enough to raise axioms of this world: but such a compass of years will shew new examples of old things, parallelisms of occurrences through the whole course of time, and nothing be monstrous unto him; who may in that time understand not only the varieties of men, but the variation of himself, and how many men he hath been in that extent of time.

He may have a close apprehension what it is to be forgotten, while he hath lived to find none who could remember his father, or scarce the friends of his youth; and may sensibly see with what a face in no long time oblivion will look upon himself. His progeny may never be his posterity; he may go out of the world less related than he came into it; and, considering the frequent mortality in friends and relations, in such a term of time, he may pass away divers years in sorrow and black habits, and leave none to mourn for himself; orbity may be his inheritance, and riches his repentance.

In such a thred of time, and long observation of men, he may acquire a physiognomical intuitive knowledge; judge the interiors by the outside, and raise conjectures at first sight; and knowing what men have been, what they are, what children probably will be, may in the present age behold a good part and the temper of the next; and since so many live by the rules of constitution, and so few overcome their temperamental inclinations, make no improbable predictions.

Such a portion of time will afford a large prospect backward, and authentick reflections how far he hath performed the great intention of his being, in the honour of his maker; whether he hath made good the principles of his nature, and what he was made to be; what characteristick and special mark he hath left, to be observable in his generation; whether he hath lived to purpose or in vain; and what he hath added, acted, or performed, that might considerably speak him a man.

In such an age, delights will be undelightful, and pleasures grow stale unto him; antiquated theorems will revive, and solomon's maxims be demonstrations unto him; hopes or presumptions be over, and despair grow up of any satisfaction below. And having been long tossed in the ocean of this world, he will by that time feel the indraught of another, unto which this seems but preparatory, and without it of no high value. He will experimentally find the emptiness of all things, and the nothing of what is pail; and wifely grounding upon true christian expectations, finding so much pall, will wholly fix upon what is to come. He will long for perpetuity, and live as though he made haste to be happy. The last may prove the prime part of his life, and those his best days which he lived nearest heaven.

Section 23

Live happy in the elizium of a virtuously composed mind, and let intellectual contents exceed the delights wherein mere pleurists place their paradise. Bear not too slack reins upon pleasure, nor let complexion or contagion betray thee unto the exorbitancy of delight. Make pleasure thy recreation or intermissive relaxation, not thy diana, life and profession. Voluptuousness is as insatiable as covetousness. Tranquillity is better than jollity, and to appease pain than to invent pleasure. Our hard entrance into the world, our miserable going out of it, our sicknesses, disturbances, and sad rencounters in it, do clamorously tell us we come not into the world to run a race of delight, but to perform the sober ads and serious purposes of man; which to omit were foully to miscarry in the advantage of humanity, to play away an uniterable life, and to have lived in vain. Forget not the capital end, and frustrate not the opportunity of once living. Dream not of any kind of metempsychosis or transanimation, but into thine own body, and that after a long time; and then also unto wail or bliss, according to thy first and fundamental life. Upon a curricule in this world depends a long course of the next, and upon a narrow scene here an endless expansion hereafter. In vain some think to have an end of their beings with their lives. Things cannot get out of their natures, or be or not be in despite of their constitutions. Rational existences in heaven perish not at all, and but partially on earth: that which is thus once, will in some way be always: the first living human soul is still alive, and all adam hath found no period.

Section 24

Since the stars of heaven do differ in glory; since it hath pleased the almighty hand to honour the north-pole with lights above the south; since there are some stars so bright that they can hardly be looked on, some so dim that they can scarce be seen, and vast numbers not to be seen at all even by artificial eyes; read thou the earth in heaven, and things below from above. Look contentedly upon the scattered difference of things, and expect not equality, in lustre, dignity, or perfection, in regions or persons below; where numerous numbers must be content to stand like lacteous or nebulous stars, little taken notice of, or dim in their generations. All which may be contentedly allowable in the affairs and ends of this world, and in suspension unto what will be in the order of things hereafter, and the new system of mankind which will be in the world to come; when the last may be the first, and the first the last; when lazarus may sit above cæsar, and the just obscure on earth shall thine like the sun in heaven; when personations shall cease, and histrionism of happiness be over; when reality shall rule, and all shall be as they shall be for ever.

Section 25

When the stoick said that life would not be accepted if it were offered unto such as knew it, he spoke too meanly of that state of being which placeth us in the form of men. It more depreciates the value of this life, that men would not live it over again; for although they would still live on, yet few or none can endure to think of being twice the same men upon earth, and some had rather never have lived than to tread over their days once more. Cicero in a prosperous state had not the patience to think of beginning in a cradle again. Job would not only curse the day of his nativity, but also of his renascency, if he were to act over his disasters and the miseries of the dunghill. But the greatest underweening of this life is to undervalue that, unto which this is but exordial or a passage leading unto it. The great

advantage of this mean life is thereby to stand in a capacity of a better; for the colonies of heaven must be drawn from earth, and the sons of the first adam are only heirs unto the second. Thus adam came into this world with the power also of another; nor only to replenish the earth, but the everlasting mansions of heaven. Where we were when the foundations of the earth were laid, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of god shouted for joy, he must answer who asked it; who understands entities of preordination, and beings yet unbeing; who hath in his intellect the ideal existences of things, and entities before their extances. Though it looks but like an imaginary kind of existency, to be before we are; yet since we are under the decree or prescience of a sure and omnipotent power, it may be somewhat more than a non-entity, to be in that mind, unto which all things are present.

Section 26

If the end of the world shall have the same foregoing signs, as the period of empires, states, and dominions in it, that is, corruption of manners, inhuman degenerations, and deluge of iniquities; it may be doubted, whether that final time be so far off, of whose day and hour there can be no prescience. But while all men doubt, and none can determine how long the world shall last, some may wonder that it hath spun out so long and unto our days. For if the almighty had not determin'd a fixed duration unto it, according to his mighty and merciful designments in it; if he had not said unto it, as he did unto a part of it, hitherto shalt thou go and no farther; if we consider the incessant and cutting provocations from the earth; it is not without amazement, how his patience hath permitted so long a continuance unto it; how he, who cursed the earth in the first days of the first man, and drowned it in the tenth generation after, should thus lastingly contend with flesh, and yet defer the last flames. For since he is sharply provoked every moment, yet punisheth to pardon, and forgives to forgive again; what patience could be content to ad over such vicissitudes, or accept of repentances which must have after-penitences, his goodness can only tell us. And surely if the patience of heaven were not proportionable unto the provocations from earth, there needed an intercessor not only for the sins, but the duration of this world, and to lead it up unto the present computation. Without filch a merciful longanimity, the heavens would never be so aged as to grow old like a garment. It were in vain to infer from the doctrine of the sphere, that the time might come, when capella, a noble northern star, would have its motion in the æquator; that the northern zodiacal signs would at length be the southern, the southern the northern, and capricorn become our cancer. However, therefore, the wisdom of the creator hath ordered the duration of the world, yet since the end thereof brings the accomplishment of our happiness, since some would be content that it should have no end, since evil men and spirits do fear it may be too short, since good men hope it may not be too long; the prayer of the saints under the altar will be the supplication of the righteous world that his mercy would abridge their languishing expectation, and hasten the accomplishment of their happy state to come.

Section 27

Though good men are often taken away from the evil to come; though some in evil days have been glad that they were old, nor long to behold the iniquities of a wicked world, or judgments threatened by them; yet is it no small satisfaction unto honest minds, to leave the world in virtuous well-temper'd

times, under a prospect of good to come, and continuation of worthy ways acceptable unto god and man. Men who die in deplorable days, which they regretfully behold, have not their eyes closed with the like content; while they cannot avoid the thoughts of proceeding or growing enormities, displeasing unto that spirit unto whom they are then going, whose honour they desire in all times and throughout all generations. If lucifer could be freed from his dismal place, he would little care though the rest were left behind. Too many there may be of nero's mind, who, if their own turn were served, would not regard what became of others; and, when they die themselves, care not if all perish. But good men's wishes extend beyond their lives, for the happiness of times to come, and never to be known unto them. And, therefore, while so many question prayers for the dead, they charitably pray for those who are not yet alive; they are not so enviously ambitious to go to heaven by themselves: they cannot but humbly wish, that the little flock might be greater, the narrow gate wider, and that, as many are called, so not a few might be chosen.

Section 28

That a greater number of angels remained in heaven, than fell from it, the school-men will tell us; that the number of blessed souls will not come short of that vast number of fallen spirits, we have the favourable calculation of others. What age or century hath sent most souls unto heaven, he can tell who vouchsafeth that honour unto them. Though the number of the blessed must be complete before the world can pass away; yet since the world itself seems in the wane, and we have no such comfortable prognosticks of latter times; since a greater part of time is spun than is to come, and the blessed roll already much replenished; happy are those pieties, which sollicitously look about, and hasten to make one of that already much filled and abbreviated list to come.

Section 29

Think not thy time short in this world, since the world itself 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. And if we should allow of the old tradition, that the world should last six thousand years, it could scarce have the name of old, since the first man lived near a sixth part thereof, and seven methuselahs would exceed its whole duration. However, to palliate the shortness of our lives, and somewhat to compensate our brief term in this world, it's good to know as much as we can of it; and also, so far as possibly in us lieth, to hold such a theory of times past, as though we had seen the same. He who hath thus considered the world, as also how therein things long past have been answered by things present; how matters in one age have been acted over in another; and how there is nothing new under the sun; may conceive himself in some manner to have lived from the beginning, and to be as old as the world; and if he should still live on, 'twould be but the same thing.

Section 30

Lastly; if length of days be thy portion, make it not thy expectation. Reckon not upon long life: think every day the last, and live always beyond thy account. He that so often surviveth his expectation lives

many lives, and will scarce complain of the shortness of his days. Time past is gone like a shadow; make time to come present. Approximate

Thy latter times by present apprehensions of them: be like a neighbour unto the grave, and think there is but little to come. And since there is something of us that will still live on, join both lives together, and live in one but for the other. He who thus ordereth the purposes of this life, will never be far from the next; and is in some manner already in it, by a happy conformity, and close apprehension of it. And if, as we have elsewhere declared, any have been so happy, as personally to underhand christian annihilation, extasy, exolution, transformation, the kiss of the spouse, and ingression into the divine shadow, according to mystical theology, they have already had an handsome anticipation of heaven; the world is in a manner over, and the earth in ashes unto them.

Source: Sir Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals* (published posthumously, 1716), Part III.

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Translation: Author died 1682. Original English composition, no translation involved.

<https://www.thestromata.com/texts/christian-morals-part-3>