

MEDICINE AND SPIRITUALITY IN SIR THOMAS BROWNE'S *RELIGIO MEDICI* (1642)

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Introduction

The English Renaissance was characterized by religious dissensions which echoed the "*climates of opinions*" (Ashley: 34) that were prevailing among Christians. In concomitance, a new wind of change blowing from foreign parts of the world was spreading revolutionary scientific theories advocated by such eminent scientists as Copernicus, Giordano Bruno, Tycho Brahe, Kepler and later Galileo. These theories which were about the nature of the universe cast a new vision on the earth, assigning to it a quite modest place. However, they were to put religious truth on shaky grounds. Indeed, they aroused critical thinking in men and gave rise to doubts about the literal truth of the Holy Testaments. But for Basil Willey, "*Galileo did not refute the Angelic Doctor; he [simply] took no notice of him*" (1).

The progress of science had begun to constitute a threat to the universe of the Christian dogma, and the temper of the epoch was characterized by a conflict between science and religion. All the grounds on which the teachings of the Bible lay underwent subversive attacks. The debate about science and religion found an echo in the minds of the 17th century thinkers.

In England, Sir Francis Bacon published his *Novum Organum* (1620), an essay in which he denied the scholastic tradition. Bacon advocated the inductive method to the detriment of deductive reasoning, and made of the observation of nature the heuristic key method rather than abstract speculation, assigning to experimentation a central place in science. However, Bacon failed to bridge the gap between the scientific methods and the study of the Bible. For him, nature and reason must not be the gateway to sacred theology, instead, the Word and works of God must be the starting point of sacred theology. Bacon was an advocate of science in an age of religion, who "*rang the bell that called the wits together*" (Ashley: 34).

In the literature of the first half of the 17th century, there was a conflict between science and religion, but also an attempt to reconcile these two. In the works of the great Puritan poet John Donne, the opposition between not only religion and science but also religion and passion or sensuality can be traced. Although Donne eventually took holy orders and became a great Christian poet, an early verse by him laid emphasis on the impact of science: "*The new philosophy calls all in doubt*" (2), he wrote.

With Sir Thomas Browne, religion won its spurs, notably through his essay *Religio Medici*, or literally a "doctor's religion". In *Religio Medici*, Browne, who belonged to the Church of England, attempted to convince doubters by expounding his religion as a doctor. Browne first graduated as a doctor in medicine at Leiden in 1633, after having studied at Montpellier and Padua. Four years later, he was granted another doctorate in medicine at Oxford. In view of this, *Religio Medici* is a plea for religion in an age of science. It is also a meditation on spirituality through the prism of science, notably medicine, biology, genetics and embryology, to name just these. The text welds medicine

and metaphysics. Browne believed in the immanence of God in nature. Drawing on both scientific findings and Biblical revelations, Browne proceeds to a deciphering of God's two Books: *The Bible* and Nature. The text is the end-product of the synthesis of many nutrient influences among which stand out the seventeenth-century heritage, Christian values, and scientific education. *Religio Medici* is also an attempt to put, so to speak, the English society on medication for the dissensions that were a real gangrene, especially in the religious field. Browne released his essay as a balsam to cure the intolerance and the lack of moderation which were prevailing. The essay came in due course, that is, in a period of soul-searching and mental readjustment. It illustrates the necessity for the individual to take in charge his own religious convictions.

The purpose of this article is to show how medicine serves the cause of God in Sir Thomas Browne's essay *Religio Medici*. The first section will expound on man as a microcosm. The second and last section will explore man's existence from death to God's Judgement. The word existence is considered here in the philosophical and religious conception of palingenesis, that is to say, the successive existences of man and the belief that, after death, there is a new existence.

I - From Biology to Spirituality: Man, a Microcosm

Religio Medici promotes medicine and rehabilitates the figure of the doctor. In Browne's days, doctors were generally reputed to be non-believers. Indeed, two doctors out of three were atheists at that time. Moreover, a few doctors held erroneous beliefs about some metaphysical points. Some of these beliefs, notably those held by outstanding figures such as Galen and others, misled people since they were emanating from voices of authority. Surprisingly enough, even doctors were counted among the negatively influenced people. As a case in point, Galen's doubt about the immortality of the soul led a doctor in medicine from Italy to think along the same lines: "*I remember a Doctor in Physic of Italy who could not perfectly believe the immortality of the soul, because Galen seemed to make a doubt thereof*" (Browne: 23).

Yet, Galen was not an atheist as he professed to have written his famous works *De Usu Partium*, meaning *On the Use of the Parts of the Human Body*, to show the wisdom, power and goodness of the Creator (3). For Browne, Galen's medical work is as theological as Suarez's book *Metaphysics*, a treaty about universal natural theology, and which broaches various questions from Aristotle's writings: "...there appears to me as much divinity in Galen his books *De Usu Partium*, as in Suarez's *Metaphysics*" (Browne: 15).

In Browne's days, medicine was also correlated with certain beliefs that were at odds with spirituality, charity and faith. As a true Christian, however, Browne did not subscribe to those beliefs:

I feel not in me those sordid and unchristian desires of my profession: I do not secretly implore and wish for plagues, rejoice at famines, revolve ephemerides and almanacs in expectation of malignant aspects, fatal conjunctions, and eclipses; I rejoice not at unwholesome springs, nor unseasonable winters; my prayer goes with the husbandman's - I desire everything in its proper season, that neither men nor the times be out of temper. (Browne: 77).

Religio Medici objects to the atheistic beliefs historically attached to the medical profession, and clearly evidences its author's theism. Medicine is a way of showing humanism. It does not run counter to spirituality either. Rather, it is a science of benevolence and charity, but not malevolence and barbarity. And in this respect, medicine is a spring-board to God. On the other hand, Browne honours his profession, medicine, for the sake of God's wisdom – which he considers as the Creator's most beautiful attribute – and its implications: "*For this do I honour my own profession...*" (Browne: 13).

The essay sets man in his real place by means of medical, biological and metaphysical arguments and demonstrations. Adam and Eve, "*our first parents*" (Browne: 41), were created by God. As for their progeny, mankind, they come into the world by means of not creation but procreation. Paradoxically, Browne disapproves of man's way of procreating, that is to say, coition. Although he is a doctor, he finds sexual reproduction vulgar. He would rather see man procreate by asexual reproduction. In this, he considers the paradigm in vigour in plant biology as his preference, that is to say, no sexual intercourse as a means to perpetuate the species:

I could be content that we might procreate like trees, without conjunction, or that there were any way to perpetuate the world without this trivial and vulgar way of coition. It is the foolishest act a wise man commits in all his life, nor is there anything that will more deject his cooled imagination when he shall consider what an odd and unworthy piece of folly he hath committed. (Browne: 76)

Unlike Adam who is said to have been 30 years old at his creation, an age which is considered as "*the perfect age and stature of man*" (Browne: 41), we other human beings totally miss the point when we come to evaluate our ages. Contrarily to what is commonly believed, each and every one of us is a few months older than he really thinks he is. Indeed, we all start the calculation by the very moment we were born whereas our lives truly started not when we were born but when we were in the wombs of our mothers.

As a doctor, Browne grounds his arguments on embryology and shows that the human existence starts within the mother's womb which is "*the truest microcosm*" (Browne: 42). The life of man successively takes place in three different worlds, each one having its own realities and characteristics: "*...we enjoy a being and life in three distinct worlds, wherein we receive most manifest graduations*" (Browne: 42).

The mother's womb is the first of these worlds. It is a primary and inner world where man enjoys a basic existence and already experiences motion, diseases and the effects of the elements such as the sun and the moon: "*... we live, move, have a being, and are subject to the actions of the elements and the malice of diseases, in that other world...*" (Browne: 42).

In the mother's womb, man exists in a state of chaos. As a matter of fact, he but potentially exists as material cause, that is to say as matter. He is not yet manufactured by efficient cause according to the very formal cause. The formal cause refers to the very structure in which he is supposed to carry his final cause

or purpose. As a result, in the mother's womb "we are conceived to hold in our chaos and whilst we sleep within the bosom of our causes" (Browne: 42).

The world of the mother's womb has its own specificities that distinguish it from the two other worlds. The time man spends in this world is rather short and is measured by the moon. Browne probably refers here to the nine-month gestation period that corresponds to pregnancy. And along with sense, reason which is the basic factor or seat of humanness is already ordained in this world. So man is already gifted with the fundamentals of life, but he is to wait for the fulfillment of the conditions of their activity and exercise:

In that obscure world and womb of our mother our time is short, computed by the moon, yet longer than the days of many creatures that behold the sun, ourselves being not yet without life, sense, and reason, though for the manifestation of its actions it awaits the opportunity of objects, and seems to live there but in its root and soul of vegetation" (Browne: 42).

After the first and inner world, man is cast into the second world which is the outer world by the process of delivery. This new world also has its own specificities. Here man fully experiences and enjoys life. He also partly enjoys his divine heritage, the soul, before fully and perfectly incarnating it in the third and last world, the world of spirits. Indeed, in the outer world, "that immortal spirit and incorruptible substance of the soul... lies obscure, and sleeps awhile within this house of flesh" (Browne: 42).

In the characterization of the nature of man, a combination of descriptive elements pertaining to both biology and metaphysics is used, which informs about the complexity of man. The biological aspect is rendered in the text by the term "*amphibium*". An Amphibian – it is a modern word – is an animal that lives both on land and in water. This concept grounds man in the sensible world. As for the metaphysical aspect, it is grounded in the spiritual dimension of man. These two characteristics are moulded in the same definition, which better highlights the "hybrid" nature of man. And only man has such a characteristic:

...we are only that amphibious piece between a corporal and spiritual essence; that middle form that links those two together, and makes good the method of God and nature, that jumps not from extremes, but unites the incompatible distances by some middle and participating natures. (Browne: 36)

As a true believer, Browne unquestionably acknowledges that man is "*the breath and similitude of God*" (Browne: 36), because it is clearly written in the Holy Scripture. However, it took him some time to admit that man is a "*microcosm*", that is, a little world (Browne: 36). For him, such a characterization of man was just a discursive artifice, "*a pleasant trope of rhetoric*", as he says. However, after close examination of the question, he comes to the conclusion that he could not agree more. As a matter of fact, man leads an absolute and a universal life. His life encompasses not only the lives of all the other biological species, be they plants or animals, but also the lives of spirits. Man's life circumscribes all other types of lives in the universe.

The world of man includes all the other worlds. As a result, he can live like all the other creatures. In addition, his "hybrid" nature makes it possible for him to live

in distinct worlds. Indeed, as a biological creature, man can evolve freely in the world of sense. And as a creature of spiritual essence, he is gifted with reason and is supposed to use it not only in the visible world but also in the invisible world. Man's reason is then made for two distinct worlds: "*Thus is man that great and true amphibium whose nature is disposed to live, not only like other creatures in divers elements, but in divided and distinguished worlds, for though there be but one world to sense, there are two to reason: the one visible, the other invisible*" (Browne: 37).

By merely contemplating marvels of nature such as the tides of the sea, the increase of Nile, the turning of magnetic compass and so on, man can fully apprehend God. But there is a marvel of nature the contemplation of which does not require any trip: it is man himself. Man is a biological marvel that undeniably speaks for God: "*We are that bold and adventurous piece of nature which he that studies wisely learns in a compendium what others labour at in a divided piece and endless volume*" (Browne: 16).

Among the characteristics of man, there is his physiognomy. Browne uses the alphabet metaphor to talk about man's physiognomy, which he considers as an alphabet assigned to man from Adam, as a symbol of his peculiarity. And for this very reason, there are none alike, despite the multitude of human beings. In the same way as the limited letters of the alphabet compose so many thousand different words, likewise there is a limited number of lines that shape so many different human beings. Even in creatures that seem to look alike, there is difference. Although the word is not coined, there is, at this point, an expounding about the modern concept biodiversity. Absolute resemblance is contrary to nature and to the works of God. Indeed, difference is an ontological mark that guarantees the preservation of identity. Modern science absolutely evidences these observations, notably with the discovery of the Deoxyribo Nucleic Acid (DNA), which enables to discriminate between people, be they alike or not. Browne was well aware of genetics.

Two forms of devotional practices can be identified in *Religio Medici*: *inner* practices and *outer* practices. Whereas the former are invisible, the latter are visible. Prayers can be performed inwardly. However, they are sometimes visible outer expressions of devotion, showing thus how spirituality makes the most of anatomy. Man was created in such a way that his anatomy is a means of worshipping God. The human body is fully involved in devotional acts. Indeed, the different parts of the human anatomy outwardly express what is inwardly felt. The sacred is respected. Browne had rather hurt some parts of his anatomy than be disrespectful to the sacred: "*I should violate my own arm rather than a church window, nor willingly deface the memory of saint or martyr*" (Browne: 4). The eyes and the ears are both put in the service of devotion. The mouth does not express any sign or sound of mockery intended to other unfortunate believers. Rather, Browne shows that he is endowed with a Christian heart by displaying compassion:

At the sight of a cross or a crucifix I can dispense with my hat, but scarce with the thought or memory of my Saviour. I cannot laugh at, but rather pity the fruitless journeys of pilgrims; or contemn the miserable condition of friars: for, though misplaced in circumstance, there is something in it of devotion. I could never hear the Ave Maria bell without an elevation (Browne: 4:5).

No matter how long man may live, he will never succeed in overcoming vices or getting rid of sins. There is a hegemony of vice over morality. Browne himself has experienced that: "*I find my growing judgement daily instruct me how to be better, but my untamed affections and confirmed vitiosity makes me daily do worse*" (Browne: 44:45). By "*vitiosity*" is meant moral viciousness.

Like all men, Browne commits sins. He transgresses and offences. However, he is not an outstanding sinner. He is not trapped into sins to the point of being in the depths of despair either. Compared to some notorious sinners, he finds that his sins are merely "*epidemical*", and he praises God for that:

I thank the goodness of God I have no sins that want a name; I am not singular in offences – my transgressions are epidemical and from the common breath of our corruption. For there are certain tempers of body which, matched with an humorous depravity of mind, do hatch and produce vitiosities whose newness and monstrosity of nature admits no name (Browne: 73).

Vices and sins are not related to age. They do not disappear with old age. If such was the case, Browne wishes he lived so long and even reached the age of the patriarch Methuselah who lived 969 years, as reported in the Bible. Age is not an antidote or a medication against vices. In *Religio Medici*, age is rather compared to diseases that affect man and cause him to multiply vices and sins. In growing old, man grows vicious. The dialectic of age and sin is expounded by using a comparison and a metaphor both referring to morbidity: "*like diseases*" age brings "*incurable vices*" in man's life (Browne: 44).

There exists a quantitative relationship between age and sin. But there is also a qualitative relationship between the two. Indeed, the badness of a sin proportionally depends on the age it was committed. If a given person commits the same sin, first in his prime then at old age, or if two different persons commit the same sin, the first person in his prime and the second person at old age, that sin is considered as worse at old age. A sin is all the more inconceivable as it is committed at old age. A given sin does not have the same degree of badness when it is committed by a young person as when it is committed by an elderly person. Whereas the former profits by the prerogative of young age, the latter is not given benefit of extenuating circumstances. The sin is considered as unforgivable because the sinner is supposed to have some capacity of discernment due to his advanced age. Browne also identifies a qualitative relationship between sin and time in general. But since time includes age, one can easily deduce that this qualitative relationship applies to age too. For him, the repetition of a sin in time eventually turns it into evil. In other words, the more a sin is repeated, the higher it ranks in time. Sins symbolically stop the course of time and makes man live in an extra temporal world, a world where youth and old age overlap. By still committing at old age the same sins as in his youth, man fails to grow up. Sins confine man to the age of infancy, the age of innocence: "*I find in my confirmed age the same sins I discovered in my youth: I committed many then because I was a child, and because I commit them still I am yet an infant*" (Browne: 45).

Man is everything but perfect. For Browne who quotes Plutarch, even great men of virtues commit vices: "*Great virtues, no lesser vices*" (Browne: 78). On the

other hand, there are some men who are in close contact with unspeakable vices, but who manage to escape the contagion of those vices, and by reaction or contrast in such an environment of vice, even become more virtuous persons. Manichaeism is at the core of life and gives it a system of referential values and a margin of improvement. Both vices and virtues are necessary in life. In the contradiction between vice and virtue lies their complementarity. The existence of vices guarantees the survival of virtue. The proliferation of vices but increases both the nostalgia and the quest for virtues. Browne adopts a wise attitude toward vice, though he does not give it his support. Even virtuous men do not escape vices. Moreover, virtue should find in man protection against vices: *...we should be all so far the orators of goodness as to protect her from the power of vice, and maintain the cause of injured truth.* (Browne: 69)

God's mercies cover all people, be they bad or good people. And although this may seem paradoxical, it is not absurd to say that God punishes no one on earth. Indeed, what man sometimes considers as punishment by God does not really match the seriousness of the offence. The example of a judge who condemns a murderer to pay but a fine for his crime can be taken by way of illustration. This sentence is not a punishment but rather clemency on the judge's part. God acts upon the same principle. Where man deserves a death sentence from God, due to his unspeakable offences, God only tests him by a disease or by another form of wretchedness. For Browne, diseases are but one form of merciful sentences God condemns man to, no matter how serious the offence is:

Thus, our offences being mortal, and deserving not only death but damnation, if the goodness of God be content to traverse and pass them over with a loss, misfortune or disease – what frenzy were it to term this a punishment rather than an extremity of mercy, and to groan under the rod of his judgements rather than admire the sceptre of his mercies! (Browne: 56)

As the saying goes, *"God moves in mysterious ways"*, or else, *"Les voies du Seigneur sont impenetrable"*. No creature whatsoever can make out the justice and the mercy of God who will surprise all on the Judgement Day, Browne thinks.

As can be seen, the divine is put forward in the explanation of diseases. Such a conception of diseases was not born in Browne's days. In the Century of Pericles (around 495 – 429 BC) there was a religious medicine based on a divine conception of the disease in the popular imagination. The plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides represent Gods inflicting diseases or curing them (Jouanna: 267). The Hippocratic doctor replaces a more or less obscure divine justice punishing the guilty person by a disease by an order of the universe that is both divine and natural and which accounts for all the diseases and relieves the patient of any guilt. In other words, for the Hippocratic doctor, the divine aspect is included in the explanation of pathological phenomena seen as both divine and human. On the one hand, they are considered as divine in so far as they have a cause and a nature that do not depend on man. On the other hand, they are seen as human in so far as man can act upon them by means of therapy (Jouanna: 273:274).

In *Religio Medici*, life span is not considered as a matter of heredity. It is not governed by genetics. An individual must not be expected to live a long life just

because his ascendants did. If the causes of long life were based on an essence of organic bodies, that is to say, if they were handed down from parents to children, Adam's son, Abel, would have lived as long as his genitor. Man's days are governed by a secret cause that is determined by God's wisdom, and is after fulfilled by His providence. As a matter of fact, the spirits and all the other creatures only execute God's will secretly and in a disputed way. For this reason, it is not relevant to complain about short life, because, just like the world, man, spirits and all the other creatures will see their days come to an end.

A parallel between the death of creatures and the end of the world is drawn. Both phenomena do not depend on the fulfillment of the life span attached to them. They rather depend on the completeness or accomplishment of the things in them. For instance, the world will not come to an end after the fulfillment of the six thousand years it was predicted to last in Browne's days. Instead, the world will fall after the accomplishment of the things in it, and this might occur far less than the life span predicted. And all creatures obey the same principle. The apocalyptic moment is evoked through a medical metaphor. The world will fall after it is gripped by a "fever" of a specific type: "...when all things are completed in it, its age is accomplished, and the last and general fever may as naturally destroy it before six thousand, as me before forty" (Browne: 45). So man and nature are both governed by a divine principle. Man is not the master of his days. The latter are covered by a veil of mystery at both extremities.

As shown by the numerous occurrences of the word *humour* in the text, "*radical humour*" (Browne: 45), "*humorous depravity of mind*" (Browne: 73) and so on, Browne grounds some of his medical conceptions in the theory of humours elaborated on by Galen. According to Galen, health rests on the equilibrium of four humours. As he expounds, by analogy to the Aristotelian system of the four elements – earth, water, air and fire – subjected to the primary qualities – cold, hot, dry and humid –, physiology is governed by four humours. Vincent Barras points out: « *Ces humeurs, la bile jaune, la bile noire ou mélancolie, le sang et le flegme, ou pituite déterminent une sorte de teinte globale du corps* » (4). Galen was inspired by Hippocratic treatises written between the 5th century and the 3rd century before Jesus Christ, by a group of sixty authors. From these, Galen elaborated on a unified theory, to which Arabic medicine brought its own touch. In Western countries, the doctrine underwent a remarkable complexification in the Middle Ages. As a case in point, the fact of relating the four humours to constituents of a mental nature took place in this period. Dating from the Antiquity, Galen's works strongly influenced Middle-Age medicine which, in turn, had a strong impact on Renaissance medicine. In the Middle Ages, doctors made the most of the works of Galen and of other authors of Antiquity in their own way. This rediscovery was the starting point of not only a scholarly medicine taught in universities, but also a radical modification of the status of the doctor in society. Vincent Barras notes: « *La place de la pensée de Galien est cruciale, cependant elle est pour partie réélaboree et interprétée* » (5). This scholastic medicine gave precedence to the study of texts over experiment, and was practiced in conformity with theological doctrine. It also rested on a philosophy of nature rather than on science.

II - Death and God's Judgement: Two Remedies

In *Religio Medici* the world is considered to be "not an inn, but an hospital, and a place not to live but to die in" (Browne: 79). As a result, Browne is only concerned with the microcosm of his own being which is his world. One of the key points of his humanism is his powerlessness, as a doctor, in front of death and incurable diseases. He wishes he could overcome all the incurable diseases and death, for the great benefit of mankind. In making his own the causes of other people, he implicitly abides by the Biblical command: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself".

Death and incurable diseases are considered to be part of the three major consequences of three domains engendered by the fall of Adam. As stated, the Adamic fall has begotten three noble domains in man's life: religion, medicine and law. However noble they are, these domains have their own negative aspects, which are referred to by the medical term "infirmities" (Browne: 77). The latter are: incorrigible vices in religion, incurable diseases in medicine and indissoluble cases in law.

Death is circumscribed as the universal remedy that cures all diseases, and the potion that guarantees immortality to true believers: "...death is the cure of all diseases. There is no catholicon or universal remedy I know but this, which though nauseous to queasy stomachs, yet to prepared appetites is nectar, and a pleasant potion of immortality" (Browne: 78). The conception of death as the gateway to immortality can also be found in other philosophers.

For Jankélévitch, for instance, immortality has its root in death: « *La vie vieillissante est misérablement labile et caduque, mais la positivité de son message se reconstitue à l'infini le jour même de la mort, dans le dos de cette mort et par l'effet même de cette mort* » (Jankélévitch : 458). But Jankélévitch's characterization of death contrasts with that of Browne in so far as for the former, death is not a remedy against all diseases, but rather the disease that no remedy whatsoever can cure, that no medicine can conquer. For all these reasons, he speaks of death as "l'incurable absolu" (Jankélévitch: 422).

The term "ligament" is used as an anatomical metaphor to show that there is no attachment whatsoever to life to the point of fearing death: "I thank God I have not those strait ligaments or narrow obligations to the world as to dote on life, or be convulsed and tremble at the name of death" (Browne: 41). The reason for such a courage in front of death is not directly related to the practice of the medical profession. Indeed, as one might think, in general doctors demystify death because of their permanent contact with dead bodies or corpses, just as grave-diggers and corpse-bearers do. Death is part of the immediate environment of doctors. From the days of their medical studies, a period during which they perform lab work on dead bodies, or attend autopsies, to the end of their careers, doctors continuously experience death. But Browne's demystification of death is not based on an over-exposure to dead anatomies within the framework of his medical practice. It is not something inherent to his very personality either. Instead, his stoicism in front of death is based on two simple facts. The first one is ontological: he is a human being. The second one is

spiritual: he is a Christian. These two realities are sufficient conditions for him not to fear death. His contemplation of death led him to come to the conclusion that the most common individual has nothing to fear, let alone a true believer. As a result, as some people do, Adam and Eve must not be condemned for being at the origin of death by yielding to Satan's whisper and by eating the forbidden fruit.

As the saying goes, "*Death is the great leveler*". All human beings are equal in front of death. Doctors deal with dead people belonging to all the walks of life. In *Religio Medici*, death is conceived as a moderator, that is to say a judge. If death did not exist, life would be so miserable. The existence of death brings hope in man's life. The life man leads in this world is everything but a life of dignity. It is a kind of life that does not pay tribute to man. So, with the existence of death, man can content himself with life in this world while awaiting death's promise of another life. So death is an existential balance. Browne really appreciates soldiers whom he finds very courageous because they live with the imminence of death on the battle field. But he holds no esteem for people who are afraid of death. He can well conceive that a non-believer be afraid of death and hooked on life, but not a Christian whose life would then be torn by a dilemma: "*that he is too sensible of this life, or hopeless of the life to come*" (Browne: 41)

The definition of death combines clinical and spiritual characteristics. Death is posited between biology and spirituality. It is a journey having as starting point the cessation of the mechanical and the physiological functions, and the metamorphosis into a spirit as destination; and in between, there is a passage to nothingness, that is to say, a period of "indifferentiation" of identity. As Browne writes, to die is: *to cease to breathe, to take a farewell to elements, to be a kind of nothing for a moment, to be within one instant of a spirit*" (Browne: 41).

Death is not frightening for Browne, it is rather shameful. And he is ashamed of the sorrow and pain his death will cause to his family and friends. Consequently, he would rather die in deep waters and disappear for ever so that nobody would see his body, pity him and pray for him. And only for these reasons would he rather spare people the spectacle of his dead body, but not for anatomical and morbid ones:

Not that I am ashamed of the anatomy of my parts, or can accuse nature for playing the bungler in any part of me, or my own vicious life for contracting any shameful disease upon me whereby I might not call myself as wholesome a morsel for the worms as any. (Browne: 43)

It is courageous to brave death, but it is more courageous to aspire to live in a situation where life is worse than death. The examples of Curtius, Scaevola and Codrus who all displayed an attitude of bravery in front of death are given as yardsticks for courage. However, it is in the field of religion that the most edifying ones are found. Indeed, the Biblical story of Job is a nobler illustration. Job died after his refusal to renounce God.

Some people think that health is the prerogative of life and do not conceive to be sick. As a doctor, Browne knows the anatomy of man perfectly well. And the fragility of the human frame makes him wonder why man is not sick all the time. It is also a miracle that man but once experiences death in his existence. Indeed,

the human life is very precarious because man is daily exposed to many situations than can cause his loss:

Men that look no further than their outsides think health an appurtenance unto life, and quarrel with their constitutions for being sick; but I that have examined the parts of man, and know upon what tender filaments that fabric hangs, do wonder that we are not always so; and considering the thousand doors that lead to death, do thank my God that we can die but once (Browne: 46:47).

The textile metaphors "*tender filaments*" and "*fabric*" inform about the fragility of the body of man as well as the precariousness of his health. Susan Sontag shows that in the history of metaphoric thought about the body, there are many metaphors borrowed from arts and technology, especially architecture. Some of these metaphors are anti-explanatory. Such is the case of the moralistic and poetic notion of the body as a temple, stated by Saint Paul.

Other metaphors have a considerable scientific resonance, such as the conception of the body as a factory, with an image of the functioning of the body marked by health, or else the image of the body as a stronghold, which accentuates catastrophe. As a case in point, John Donne describes the disease as an enemy that invades or besieges the stronghold of the body, in his prosaic works *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1620) written at a moment when he thought he was going to die. This shows that the image of the body as a stronghold has a long pre-scientific genealogy and goes at least as far back as the Renaissance (Sontag: 128:129).

The precariousness of the human life is not caused by diseases and villain poisons only. They also have anthropogenic causes. Man expends all his energy and genius to contrive new methods to cause the death of his fellows. Browne calls these new methods "*The new inventions of death*" (Browne: 47). Every man is at the same time a potential executioner and victim.

As a student, Browne studied anatomy at the University of Rabelais in Montpellier which was well renowned for its courses in anatomy and botany. He also studied medicine at the University of Padua in Italy, reputed for its thorough grounding in anatomy and surgery, two domains in which significant advances were being made out there in those days. Indeed, The University of Padua was of very high repute thanks to the professorship of eminent personalities such as Andrea Vesale who wrote the seminal work on the human anatomy *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), Gabriele Fallopio who is still world-famous because of the Fallopian tubes that are named after him and that are part of women's anatomy. Not mention Girolamo Fabrizio of Acquapendente who made on an exhaustive description of the valves in the veins. Fabrizio's description played a paramount role in the discovery of blood circulation by his pupil William Harvey. In his study of anatomy, Browne came across many strange theories about the soul: "*In our study of anatomy, there is a mass of mysterious philosophy, and such as reduced the very heathens to divinity*" (Browne: 39). But despite all his discoveries, he has never seen in the anatomy of man the slightest organ pertaining to the soul. In addition, man is gifted with reason whereas animals are not. And yet, in his study of the brain of man which is the seat of reason, he has not found any difference with the brain of an animal either:

Yet amongst all those rare discoveries and curious pieces I find in the fabric of man, I do not so much content myself as in that I find not, that is, no organ or instrument for the rational soul; for in the brain, which we term the seat of reason, there is not anything of moment more than I can discover in the crany of a beast. (Browne: 39)

This discovery is enough to conclude that the soul is of an incorporeal nature, it is inorganic and mysterious. If medicine aims at curing the body, religion seeks to cure the soul by overcoming vices for instance. However, medicine sometimes appears to be more efficient than religion in the cure of the soul: "*I can cure the gout or stone in some, sooner than divinity, pride or avarice in others. I can cure vices, by physic when they remain incurable in divinity, and shall obey my pills when they contemn their precepts*" (Browne: 77:78).

Only heaven is a place of completeness for the soul, that essence whose infinite goodness quenches its own desires and the insatiable wishes of man in that very place. Browne is more attentive to the joys of heaven than to the tortures of hell. And his aspiration is to be the last man to enter heaven, and to be at the rear in that very place. He evokes heaven as a place attached to God: "*wherever God will thus manifest himself, there is heaven, though within the circle of this sensible world*" (Browne: 52). This is the reason why he finds it absurd on Moses' part to desire to see God with his eyes of flesh, because the glory of the vision of God but takes place in heaven.

Browne has never been afraid of hell. Neither the descriptions of hell nor the mere pronounciation of its name does make him afraid. In fact, his meditations are so devoted to heaven that he comes to forgets about hell. He considers that the simple fact of being deprived of the joys of heaven is itself perfect hell and that it is needless to afflict man further. The word hell has never frightened him to the point of dissuading him from committing a sin, nor made him perform a good action just out of fear. He is not afraid but rather ashamed of committing sins. He is not afraid of God, he fears Him. God's mercies here on earth are more dissuasive than His judgements on the last day. God's judgements appear as the last remedy He will use against man's vicious actions:

I fear God, yet am not afraid of him; his mercies make me ashamed of my sins, before his judgements afraid thereof: these are the forced and secondary method of his wisdom, which he useth but as the last remedy, and provocation – a course rather to deter the wicked than incite the virtuous to his worship. (Browne: 55)

Conclusion

Medication and meditation are twin sisters that make doctors surprisingly close to philosophers (Serres: 10). Written in the 17th century, *Religio Medici* is a spiritual meditation that seeks to propose medication for not only the religious dissensions in Renaissance England but also the soul of man. Sir Thomas Browne was a doctor, a philosopher, a theologian, to name but a few qualifications. His essay is a "*devotional treatise*" (6) in which he attempts to account for God's existence through man, the most perfect creature, with bio-medical arguments. He considers man to be a microcosm coming from the truest microcosm: the

mother womb. *Religio Medici* is also a spiritual autobiography written by a doctor, and it stems from its reading that a doctor cannot but be faithful. For Browne, medicine does not clash with spirituality. He rather reconciles medicine with his religious convictions. His essay appears as a plea for religion in an age of science, and is an answer to advocates of science such as Bacon and the others. Published in due course, the essay paves the way for people in an era of soul-searching and mentality readjustment.

To coin the word, Browne appears as a true "meta-physician", that is to say, a physician and a specialist of metaphysics. He uses medical demonstrations, medical metaphors and therapy imagery (cure, disease, remedy, potion, antidote, and so on) to expound metaphysical conceptions and notions such as death, the soul, God's judgement, hell, heaven, and so on. His discourse is based on a mixture of medical and Biblical parlance. The text also appears as a confessional, as shown by the numerous occurrences of expressions such as "I confess", "I must confess", and so on.

The work truly displays Browne's encyclopedic knowledge as well as his cultured mind and refined personality. It bears references to medicine, anatomy, biology, genetics, embryology, metaphysics and the Holy Testaments. His formation shows a multilateral contact with the works of prominent figures that undeniably stand out in the scientific and humanistic civilisation map, and this is reflected in his essay.

Browne elaborates on a true humanistic project in *Religio Medici*. His humanism partly rests on his celebration of otherness, and on his wish to overcome his powerlessness against death and the incurable diseases for the great benefit of mankind, but this is another story.

Notes

1- Basil Willey is quoted by Maurice Ashley. *England in the Seventeenth Century*. London. Penguin Books. 1968 (first pub. 1952): 34.

2- Donne is quoted by Maurice Ashley. op. cit.: 37.

3- Cf. notes, in Sir Thomas Browne. *Religio Medici, Hydriotaphia, and The Garden of Cyrus*. Robin Robbins (ed.). 1991. Oxford : Clarendon Press Oxford: 39.

4- Vincent Barras quoted by Marielle Mayo. 2009. « L'Homme de l'art soigne son profil ». *Les Cahiers de Science et Vie : Sciences et techniques au Moyen Âge*. Numéro 114. Paris: 56.

5- Ibid.

6- Cf. Introduction to *Religio Medici*. Op. cit. : xi.

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