ENGLISH prose literature towards the end of the seventeenth century, in the hands of Dryden and Locke, was becoming, as that of France had become at an earlier date, a matter of design and skilled practice, highly conscious of itself as an art, and, above all, correct. Up to that time it had been, on the whole, singularly informal and unprofessional, and by no means the literature of the "man of letters," as we understand him. Certain great instances there had been of literary structure or architecture--The Ecclesiastical Polity, The Leviathan--but for the most part that earlier prose literature is eminently occasional, closely determined by the eager practical aims of contemporary politics and theology, or else due to a man's own native instinct to speak because he cannot help speaking. Hardly aware of the habit, he likes talking to himself; and when he writes (still in undress) he does but take the "friendly reader" into his confidence. The type of this literature, obviously, is not Locke or Gibbon, but, above all others, Sir Thomas Browne; as Jean Paul is a good instance of it in German literature, always in its developments so much later than the English; and as the best instance of it in French literature, in the century preceding Browne, is Montaigne, from whom indeed, in a great measure, all those tentative writers, or essayists, derive.

It was a result, perhaps, of the individualism and liberty of personal development, which, even for a Roman Catholic, were effects of the Reformation, that there was so much in Montaigne of the "subjective," as people say, of the singularities of personal character. Browne, too, bookish as he really is claims to give his readers a matter, "not picked from the leaves of any author, but bred amongst the weeds and tares" of his own brain. The faults of such literature are what we all recognise in it: unevenness, alike in thought and style; lack of design; and caprice--the lack of authority; after the full play of which, there is so much to refresh one in the reasonable transparency of Hooker, representing thus early the tradition of a classical clearness in English literature, anticipated by Latimer and More, and to be fulfilled afterwards in Butler and Hume. But then, in recompense for that looseness and whim, in Sir Thomas Browne for instance, we have in those "quaint" writers, as they themselves understood the term (coint, adorned, but adorned with all the curious ornaments of their own predilection, provincial or archaic, certainly unfamiliar, and selected without reference to the taste or usages of other people) the charm of an absolute sincerity, with all the ingenuous and racy effect of what is circumstantial and peculiar in their growth.

The whole creation is a mystery and particularly that of man. At the blast of His mouth were the rest of the creatures made, and at His bare word they started out of nothing. But in the frame of man He played the sensible operator, and seemed not so much to create as to make him. When He had separated the materials of other creatures, there consequently resulted a form and soul: but having raised the walls of man, He was driven to a second and harder creation--of a substance like Himself, an incorruptible and immortal soul.

There, we have the manner of Sir Thomas Browne, in exact expression of his mind!--minute and curious in its thinking; but with an effect, on the sudden, of a real sublimity or depth. His style is certainly an unequal one. It has the monumental aim which charmed, and perhaps influenced, Johnson--a dignity that can be attained only in such mental calm as follows long and learned pondering on the high subjects Browne loves to deal with. It has its garrulity, its various levels of painstaking, its mannerism, pleasant of its kind or tolerable, together with much, to us intolerable, but
of which he was capable on a lazy summer afternoon down at Norwich. And all is so oddly mixed, showing, in its entire ignorance of self, how much he, and the sort of literature he represents, really stood in need of technique, of a formed taste in literature, of a literary architecture.

And yet perhaps we could hardly wish the result different, in him, any more than in the books of Burton and Fuller, or some other similar writers of that age—mental abodes, we might liken, after their own manner, to the little old private houses of some historic town grouped about its grand public structures, which, when they have survived at all, posterity is loth to part with. For, in their absolute sincerity, not only do these authors clearly exhibit themselves ("the unique peculiarity of the writer's mind," being, as Johnson says of Browne, "faithfully reflected in the form and matter of his work") but, even more than mere professionally instructed writers, they belong to, and reflect, the age they lived in. In essentials, of course, even Browne is by no means so unique among his contemporaries, and so singular, as he looks. And then, as the very condition of their work, there is an entire absence of personal restraint in dealing with the public, whose humour they come at last in a great measure to reproduce. To speak more properly, they have no sense of a "public" to deal with, at all—only a full confidence in the "friendly reader," as they love to call him. Hence their amazing pleasantry, their indulgence in their own conceits; but hence also those unpremeditated wildflowers of speech we should never have the good luck to find in any more formal kind of literature.

It is, in truth, to the literary purpose of the humourist, in the old-fashioned sense of the term, that this method of writing naturally allies itself—of the humourist to whom all the world is but a spectacle in which nothing is really alien from himself, who has hardly a sense of the distinction between great and little among things that are at all, and whose half-pitying, half-amused sympathy is called out especially by the seemingly small interests and traits of character in the things or the people around him. Certainly, in an age stirred by great causes, like the age of Browne in England, of Montaigne in France, that is not a type to which one would wish to reduce all men of letters. Still, in an age apt also to become severe, or even cruel (its eager interest in those great causes turning sour on occasion) the character of the humourist may well find its proper influence, through that serene power, and the leisure it has for conceiving second thoughts, on the tendencies, conscious or unconscious, of the fierce wills around it. Something of such a humourist was Browne—not callous to men and their fortunes; certainly not without opinions of his own about them; and yet, undisturbed by the civil war, by the fall, and then the restoration, of the monarchy, through that long quiet life (ending at last on the day himself had predicted, as if at the moment he had willed) in which "all existence," as he says, "had been but food for contemplation."

Johnson, in beginning his Life of Browne, remarks that Browne "seems to have had the fortune, common among men of letters, of raising little curiosity after their private life." Whether or not, with the example of Johnson himself before us, we can think just that, it is certain that Browne's works are of a kind to directly stimulate curiosity about himself—about himself, as being manifestly so large a part of those works; and as a matter of fact we know a great deal about his life. To himself, indeed, his life at Norwich, as he gives us to understand, seemed wonderful enough. "Of these wonders," says Johnson, "the view that can now be taken of his life offers no appearance." But "we carry with us," as Browne writes, "the wonders we seek without us," and we may note on the other hand, a circumstance which his daughter, Mrs. Lyttleton, tells us of his childhood: "His father used to open his breast when he was asleep, and kiss it in prayers over him, as 'tis said of Origen's father, that the Holy Ghost would take possession there." It was perhaps because the son inherited an aptitude for a like profound kindling of sentiment in the taking of his life, that, uneventful as it was, commonplace as it seemed to Johnson, to Browne himself it was so full of wonders, and so stimulates the curiosity of his more careful reader of to-day. "What influence," says Johnson again, "learning has had on its possessors may be doubtful." Well! the influence of his great learning, of his constant research on Browne, was its imaginative influence—that it completed his outfit as a poetic visionary, stirring all the strange "conceit" of his nature to its depths.

Browne himself dwells, in connexion with the first publication (extorted by circumstance) of the Religio Medici, on the natural "inactivity of his disposition"; and he does, as I have said, pass very quietly through an exciting time. Born in the year of the Gunpowder Plot, he was not, in truth, one of those clear and clarifying souls which, in an age alike of practical and mental confusion, can anticipate and lay down the bases of reconstruction, like Bacon or Hooker. His mind has much of the perplexity which was part of the atmosphere of the time. Not that he is without his own definite
opinions on events. For him, Cromwell is a usurper, the death of Charles an abominable murder. In spite of what is but
an affectation, perhaps, of the sceptical mood, he is a Churchman too; one of those who entered fully into the Anglican
position, so full of sympathy with those ceremonies and observances which "misguided zeal terms superstition," that
there were some Roman Catholics who thought that nothing but custom and education kept him from their communion.
At the Restoration he rejoices to see the return of the comely Anglican order in old episcopal Norwich, with its ancient
churches; the antiquity, in particular, of the English Church being, characteristically, one of the things he most valued
in it, vindicating it, when occasion came, against the "unjust scandal" of those who made that Church a creation of
Henry the Eighth. As to Romanists--he makes no scruple to "enter their churches in defect of ours." He cannot laugh at,
but rather pities, "the fruitless journeys of pilgrims--for there is something in it of devotion." He could never "hear the
Ave Mary! bell without an oraison." At a solemn procession he has "wept abundantly." How English, in truth, all this
really is! It reminds one how some of the most popular of English writers, in many a half-conscious expression, have
witnessed to a susceptibility in the English mind itself, in spite of the Reformation, to what is affecting in religious
ceremony. Only, in religion as in politics, Browne had no turn for disputes; was suspicious of them, indeed; knowing,
as he says with true acumen, that "a man may be in as just possession of truth as of a city, and yet be forced to
surrender," even in controversies not necessarily maladroit--an image in which we may trace a little contemporary
colouring.

The Enquiries into Vulgar Errors appeared in the year 1646; a year which found him very hard on "the vulgar." His
suspicion, in the abstract, of what Bacon calls Idola Fori, the Idols of the Market-place, takes a special emphasis from
the course of events about him: "being erroneous in their single numbers, once huddled together, they will be error
itself." And yet, congruously with a dreamy sweetness of character we may find expressed in his very features, he
seems not greatly concerned at the temporary suppression of the institutions he values so much. He seems to possess
some inward Platonic reality of them--church or monarchy--to hold by in idea, quite beyond the reach of Roundhead or
unworthy Cavalier. In the power of what is inward and inviolable in his religion, he can still take note: "In my solitary
and retired imagination (neque enim cum porticus aut me lectulus accepit, desum mihi) I remember I am not alone, and
therefore forget not to contemplate Him and His attributes who is ever with me."

His father, a merchant of London, with some claims to ancient descent, left him early in possession of ample means.
Educated at Winchester and Oxford, he visited Ireland, France, and Italy; and in the year 1633, at the age of twenty-
eight, became Doctor of Medicine at Leyden. Three years later he established himself as a physician at Norwich for the
remainder of his life, having married a lady, described as beautiful and attractive, and affectionate also, as we may
judge from her letters and postscripts to those of her husband, in an orthography of a homeliness amazing even for that
age. Dorothy Browne bore him ten children, six of whom he survived.

Their house at Norwich, even then an old one it would seem, must have grown, through long years of acquisition, into
an odd cabinet of antiquities--antiquities properly so called; his old Roman, or Romanised British urns, from
Walsingham or Brampton, for instance, and those natural objects which he studied somewhat in the temper of a
curiosity-hunter or antiquary. In one of the old churchyards of Norwich he makes the first discovery of adipocere, of
which grim substance "a portion still remains with him." For his multifarious experiments he must have had his
laboratory. The old window-stanchions had become magnetic, proving, as he thinks, that iron "acquires verticity" from
long lying in one position. Once we find him re-tiling the place. It was then, perhaps, that he made the observation that
bricks and tiles also acquire "magnetic allicency"--one's whole house, one might fancy; as indeed, he holds the earth
itself to be a vast lodestone.

The very faults of his literary work, its desultoriness, the time it costs his readers, that slow Latinity which Johnson
imitated from him, those lengthy leisurely terminations which busy posterity will abbreviate, all breathe of the long
quiet of the place. Yet he is by no means indolent. Besides wide book-learning, experimental research at home, and
indefatigable observation in the open air, he prosecutes the ordinary duties of a physician; contrasting himself indeed
with other students, "whose quiet and unmolested doors afford no such distractions." To most persons of mind sensitive
as his, his chosen studies would have seemed full of melancholy, turning always, as they did, upon death and decay. It
is well, perhaps, that life should be something of a "meditation upon death": but to many, certainly, Browne's would
have seemed too like a lifelong following of one's own funeral. A museum is seldom a cheerful place--oftenest induces
the feeling that nothing could ever have been young; and to Browne the whole world is a museum; all the grace and beauty it has being of a somewhat mortified kind. Only, for him (poetic dream, or philosophic apprehension, it was this which never failed to evoke his wonderful genius for exquisitely impassioned speech) over all those ugly anatomical preparations, as though over miraculous saintly relics, there was the perpetual flicker of a surviving spiritual ardency, one day to reassert itself--stranger far than any fancied odylic gravelights!

When Browne settled at Norwich, being then about thirty-six years old, he had already completed the Religio Medici; a desultory collection of observations designed for himself only and a few friends, at all events with no purpose of immediate publication. It had been lying by him for seven years, circulating privately in his own extraordinarily perplexed manuscript, or in manuscript copies, when, in 1642, an incorrect printed version from one of those copies, "much corrupted by transcription at various hands," appeared anonymously. Browne, decided royalist as he was in spite of seeming indifference, connects this circumstance with the unscrupulous use of the press for political purposes, and especially against the king, at that time. Just here a romantic figure comes on the scene. Son of the unfortunate young Everard Digby who perished on the scaffold for some half-hearted participation in the Gunpowder Plot, Kenelm Digby, brought up in the reformed religion, had returned in manhood to the religion of his father. In his intellectual composition he had, in common with Browne, a scientific interest, oddly tinged with both poetry and scepticism: he had also a strong sympathy with religious reaction, and a more than sentimental love for a seemingly vanishing age of faith, which he, for one, would not think of as vanishing. A copy of that surreptitious edition of the Religio Medici found him a prisoner on suspicion of a too active royalism, and with much time on his hands.

The Roman Catholic, although, secure in his definite orthodoxy, he finds himself indifferent on many points (on the reality of witchcraft, for instance) concerning which Browne's more timid, personally grounded faith might indulge no scepticism, forced himself, nevertheless, to detect a vein of rationalism in a book which on the whole much attracted him, and hastily put forth his "animadversions" upon it. Browne, with all his distaste for controversy, thus found himself committed to a dispute, and his reply came with the correct edition of the Religio Medici published at last with his name. There have been many efforts to formulate the "religion of the layman," which might be rightly understood, perhaps, as something more than what is called "natural," yet less than ecclesiastical, or "professional" religion. Though its habitual mode of conceiving experience is on a different plane, yet it would recognise the legitimacy of the traditional religious interpretation of that experience, generally and by implication; only, with a marked reserve as to religious particulars, both of thought and language, out of a real reverence or awe, as proper only for a special place. Such is the lay religion, as we may find it in Addison, in Gray, in Thackeray; and there is something of a concession--a concession, on second thoughts--about it. Browne's Religio Medici is designed as the expression of a mind more difficult of belief than that of the mere "layman," as above described; it is meant for the religion of the man of science. Actually, it is something less to the point, in any balancing of the religious against the worldly view of things, than the religion of the layman, as just now defined. For Browne, in spite of his profession of boisterous doubt, has no real difficulties, and his religion, certainly, nothing of the character of a concession. He holds that there has never existed an atheist. Not that he is credulous; but that his religion is only the correlative of himself, his peculiar character and education, a religion of manifold association. For him, the wonders of religion, its supernatural events or agencies, are almost natural facts or processes. "Even in this material fabric, the spirits walk as freely exempt from the affection of time, place and motion, as beyond the extremest circumference." Had not Divine interference designed to raise the dead, nature herself is in act to do it--to lead out the "incinerated soul" from the retreats of her dark laboratory. Certainly Browne has not, like Pascal, made the "great resolution," by the apprehension that it is just in the contrast of the moral world to the world with which science deals that religion finds its proper basis. It is from the homelessness of the world which science analyses so victoriously, its dark unspirituality, wherein the soul he is conscious of seems such a stranger, that Pascal "turns again to his rest," in the conception of a world of wholly reasonable and moral agencies. For Browne, on the contrary, the light is full, design everywhere obvious, its conclusion easy to draw, all small and great things marked clearly with the signature of the "Word." The adhesion, the difficult adhesion, of men such as Pascal, is an immense contribution to religious controversy; the concession, again, of a man like Addison, of great significance there. But in the adhesion of Browne, in spite of his crusade against "vulgar errors," there is no real significance. The Religio Medici is a contribution, not to faith, but to piety; a refinement and correction, such as piety often stands in need of; a help, not so much to religious belief in a world of doubt, as to the maintenance of the
From about this time Browne's letters afford a pretty clear view of his life as it passed in the house at Norwich. Many of these letters represent him in correspondence with the singular men who shared his own half poetic, half scientific turn of mind, with that impressibility towards what one might call the thaumaturgic elements in nature which has often made men dupes, and which is certainly an element in the somewhat atrabilial mental complexion of that age in England. He corresponds seriously with William Lily, the astrologer; is acquainted with Dr. Dee, who had some connexion with Norwich, and has "often heard him affirm, sometimes with oaths, that he had seen transmutation of pewter dishes and flagons into silver (at least) which the goldsmiths at Prague bought of him." Browne is certainly an honest investigator; but it is still with a faint hope of something like that upon fitting occasion, and on the alert always for surprises in nature (as if nature had a rhetoric, at times, to deliver to us, like those sudden and surprising flowers of his own poetic style) that he listens to her everyday talk so attentively. Of strange animals, strange cures, and the like, his correspondence is full. The very errors he combats are, of course, the curiosities of error--those fascinating, irresistible, popular, errors, which various kinds of people have insisted on gliding into because they like them. Even his heresies were old ones--the very fossils of capricious opinion.

It is as an industrious local naturalist that Browne comes before us first, full of the fantastic minute life in the fens and "Broads" around Norwich, its various sea and marsh birds. He is something of a vivisectionist also, and we may not be surprised at it, perhaps, in an age which, for the propagation of truth, was ready to cut off men's ears. He finds one day "a Scarabaus capricornus odoratus," which he takes "to be mentioned by Monfetus, folio 150. He saith, 'Nucem moschatam et cinnamomum vere spirat'--but to me it smelt like roses, santalum, and ambergris." "Musca tuliparum moschata," again, "is a small bee-like fly of an excellent fragrant odour, which I have often found at the bottom of the flowers of tulips." Is this within the experience of modern entomologists?

The Garden of Cyrus, though it ends indeed with a passage of wonderful felicity, certainly emphasises (to say the least) the defects of Browne's literary good qualities. His chimeric fancy carries him here into a kind of frivolousness, as if he felt almost too safe with his public, and were himself not quite serious, or dealing fairly with it; and in a writer such as Browne levity must of necessity be a little ponderous. Still, like one of those stiff gardens, half-way between the medieval garden and the true "English" garden of Temple or Walpole, actually to be seen in the background of some of the conventional portraits of that day, the fantasies of this indescribable exposition of the mysteries of the quincunx form part of the complete portrait of Browne himself; and it is in connexion with it that, once or twice, the quaintly delightful pen of Evelyn comes into the correspondence--in connexion with the "hortulane pleasure." "Norwich," he writes to Browne, "is a place, I understand, much addicted to the flowery part." Professing himself a believer in the operation "of the air and genius of gardens upon human spirits, towards virtue and sanctity," he is all for natural gardens as against "those which appear like gardens of paste-board and march-pane, and smell more of paint than of flowers and verdure." Browne is in communication also with Ashmole and Dugdale, the famous antiquaries; to the latter of whom, who had written a work on the history of the embanking of fens, he communicates the discovery of certain coins, on a piece of ground "in the nature of an island in the fens."

Far more interesting certainly than those curious scientific letters is Browne's "domestic correspondence." Dobson, Charles the First's "English Tintoret," would seem to have painted a life-sized picture of Sir Thomas Browne and his family, after the manner of those big, urbane, family groups, then coming into fashion with the Dutch Masters. Of such a portrait nothing is now known. But in these old-fashioned, affectionate letters, transmitted often, in those troublous times, with so much difficulty, we have what is almost as graphic--a numerous group, in which, although so many of Browne's children died young, he was happy; with Dorothy Browne, occasionally adding her charming, ill-spelt postscripts to her husband's letters; the religious daughter who goes to daily prayers after the Restoration, which brought Browne the honour of knighthood; and, above all, two Toms, son and grandson of Sir Thomas, the latter being the son of Dr. Edward Browne, now become distinguished as a physician in London (he attended John, Earl of Rochester, in his last illness at Woodstock) and his childish existence as he lives away from his proper home in London, in the old house at Norwich, two hundred years ago, we see like a thing of to-day.

At first the two brothers, Edward and Thomas (the elder) are together in everything. Then Edward goes abroad for his...
studies, and Thomas, quite early, into the navy, where he certainly develops into a wonderfully gallant figure; passing away, however, from the correspondence, it is uncertain how, before he was of full age. From the first he is understood to be a lad of parts. "If you practise to write, you will have a good pen and style:" and a delightful, boyish journal of his remains, describing a tour the two brothers made in September 1662 among the Derbyshire hills. "I received your two last letters," he writes to his father from aboard the Marie Rose, "and give you many thanks for the discourse you sent me out of Vossius: De motu marium et ventorum. It seemed very hard to me at first; but I have now beaten it, and I wish I had the book." His father is pleased to think that he is "like to proceed not only a good navigator, but a good scholar": and he finds the much exacting, old classical prescription for the character of the brave man fulfilled in him. On 16th July 1666 the young man writes--still from the Marie Rose--

If it were possible to get an opportunity to send as often as I am desirous to write, you should hear more often from me, being now so near the grand action, from which I would by no means be absent. I extremely long for that thundering day: wherein I hope you shall hear we have behaved ourselves like men, and to the honour of our country. I thank you for your directions for my ears against the noise of the guns, but I have found that I could endure it; nor is it so intolerable as most conceive; especially when men are earnest, and intent upon their business, unto whom muskets sound but like pop-guns. It is impossible to express unto another how a smart sea-fight elevates the spirits of a man, and makes him despise all dangers. In and after all sea-fights, I have been very thirsty.

He died, as I said, early in life. We only hear of him later in connexion with a trait of character observed in Tom the grandson, whose winning ways, and tricks of bodily and mental growth, are duly recorded in these letters: the reader will, I hope, pardon the following extracts from them:--

Little Tom is lively.... Frank is fayne sometimes to play him asleep with a fiddle. When we send away our letters he scribbles a paper and will have it sent to his sister, and saith she doth not know how many fine things there are in Norwich.... He delights his grandfather when he comes home.

Tom gives you many thanks for his clothes (from London). He has appeared very fine this King's day with them.

Tom presents his duty. A gentleman at our election asked Tom who hee was for? and he answered, "For all four." The gentleman replied that he answered like a physician's son.

Tom would have his grandmother, his aunt Betty, and Frank, valentines: but hee conditioned with them that they should give him nothing of any kind that hee had ever had or seen before.

"Tom is just now gone to see two bears which are to be shown." "Tom, his duty. He is begging books and reading of them." "The players are at the Red Lion hard by; and Tom goes sometimes to see a play."

And then one day he stirs old memories--

The fairings were welcome to Tom. He finds about the house divers things that were your brother's (the late Edward's), and Betty sometimes tells him stories about him, so that he was importunate with her to write his life in a quarter of a sheet of paper, and read it unto him, and will have still more added.

Just as I am writing (learnedly about a comet, 7th January 1680-81) Tom comes and tells me the blazing star is in the yard, and calls me to see it. It was but dim, and the sky not clear.... I am very sensible of this sharp weather. (1)

(NOTES
1. In the original, this quotation, like several above it, is not indented; it is in smaller type.)

He seems to have come to no good end, riding forth one stormy night. Requiescat in pace!
Of this long, leisurely existence the chief events were Browne's rare literary publications; some of his writings indeed having been left unprinted till after his death; while in the circumstances of the issue of every one of them there is something accidental, as if the world might have missed it altogether. Even the Discourse of Vulgar Errors, the longest and most elaborate of his works, is entirely discursive and occasional, coming to an end with no natural conclusion, but only because the writer chose to leave off just there; and few probably have been the readers of the book as a consecutive whole. At times indeed we seem to have in it observations only, or notes, preliminary to some more orderly composition. Dip into it: read, for instance, the chapter "Of the Ring-finger," or the chapters "Of the Long Life of the Deer," and on the "Pictures of Mermaids, Unicorns, and some Others," and the part will certainly seem more than the whole. Try to read it through, and you will soon feel cloyed;—miss very likely, its real worth to the fancy, the literary fancy (which finds its pleasure in inventive word and phrase) and become dull to the really vivid beauties of a book so lengthy, but with no real evolution. Though there are words, phrases, constructions innumerable, which remind one how much the work initiated in France by Madame de Rambouillet—work, done for England, we may think perhaps imperfectly, in the next century by Johnson and others—was really needed; yet the capacities of Browne's manner of writing, coming as it did so directly from the man, are felt even in his treatment of matters of science. As with Buffon, his full, ardent, sympathetic vocabulary, the poetry of his language, a poetry inherent in its elementary particles—the word, the epithet—helps to keep his eye, and the eye of the reader, on the object before it, and conduces directly to the purpose of the naturalist, the observer. But, only one half observation, its other half consisting of very out-of-the-way book-lore, this work displays Browne still in the character of the antiquary, as that age understood him. He is a kind of Elias Ashmole, but dealing with natural objects; which are for him, in the first place, and apart from the remote religious hints and intimations they carry with them, curiosities. He seems to have no true sense of natural law, as Bacon understood it; nor even of that immanent reason in the natural world, which the Platonic tradition supposes. "Things are really true," he says, "as they correspond unto God's conception; and have so much verity as they hold of conformity unto that intellect, in whose idea they had their first determinations." But, actually, what he is busy in the record of, are matters more or less of the nature of caprices; as if things, after all, were significant of their higher verity only at random, and in a sort of surprises, like music in old instruments suddenly touched into sound by a wandering finger, among the lumber of people's houses. Nature, "the art of God," as he says, varying a little a phrase used also by Hobbes, in a work printed later—Nature, he seems to protest, is only a little less magical, its processes only a little less in the way of alchemy, than you had supposed. We feel that, as with that disturbed age in England generally (and it is here that he, with it, is so interesting, curious, old-world, and unlike ourselves) his supposed experience might at any moment be broken in upon by a hundred forms of a natural magic, only not quite so marvellous as that older sort of magic, or alchemy, he is at so much pains to expose; and the large promises of which, its large words too, he still regretfully enjoys.

And yet the Discourse of Vulgar Errors, seeming, as it often does, to be a serious refutation of fairy tales—arguing, for instance, against the literal truth of the poetic statement that "The pigeon hath no gall," and such questions as "Whether men weigh heavier dead than alive?" being characteristic questions—is designed, with much ambition, under its pedantic Greek title Pseudodoxia Epidemica, as a criticism, a cathartic, an instrument for the clarifying of the intellect. He begins from "that first error in Paradise," wondering much at "man's deceivability in his perfection,"--"at such gross deceit." He enters in this connexion, with a kind of poetry of scholasticism which may interest the student of Paradise Lost, into what we may call the intellectual and moral by-play of the situation of the first man and woman in Paradise, with strange queries about it. Did Adam, for instance, already know of the fall of the Angels? Did he really believe in death, till Abel died? It is from Julius Scaliger that he takes his motto, to the effect that the true knowledge of things must be had from things themselves, not from books; and he seems as seriously concerned as Bacon to dissipate the crude impressions of a false "common sense," of false science, and a fictitious authority. Inverting, oddly, Plato's theory that all learning is but reminiscence, he reflects with a sigh how much of oblivion must needs be involved in the getting of any true knowledge. "Men that adore times past, consider not that those times were once present (that is, as our own are) and ourselves unto those to come, as they unto us at present." That, surely, coming from one both by temperament and habit so great an antiquary, has the touch of something like an influence in the atmosphere of the time. That there was any actual connexion between Browne's work and Bacon's is but a surmise. Yet we almost seem to hear Bacon when Browne discourses on the "use of doubts, and the advantages which might be derived from drawing up a calendar of doubts, falsehoods, and popular errors;" and, as from Bacon, one gets the impression that men
really have been very much the prisoners of their own crude or pedantic terms, notions, associations; that they have been very indolent in testing very simple matters—with a wonderful kind of "supinity," as he calls it. In Browne's chapter on the "Sources of Error," again, we may trace much resemblance to Bacon's striking doctrine of the Idola, the "shams" men fall down and worship. Taking source respectively, from the "common infirmity of human nature," from the "erroneous disposition of the people," from "confident adherence to authority." the errors which Browne chooses to deal with may be registered as identical with Bacon's Idola Tribus, Fori, Theatri; the idols of our common human nature; of the vulgar, when they get together; and of the learned, when they get together.

But of the fourth species of error noted by Bacon, the Idola Specus, the Idols of the Cave, that whole tribe of illusions, which are "bred amongst the weeds and tares of one's own brain," Browne tells us nothing by way of criticism; was himself, rather, a lively example of their operation. Throw those illusions, those "idols," into concrete or personal form, suppose them introduced among the other forces of an active intellect, and you have Sir Thomas Browne himself. The sceptical inquirer who rises from his cathartic, his purging of error, a believer in the supernatural character of pagan oracles, and a cruel judge of supposed witches, must still need as much as ever that elementary conception of the right method and the just limitations of knowledge, by power of which he should not just strain out a single error here or there, but make a final precipitate of fallacy.

And yet if the temperament had been deducted from Browne's work—that inherent and strongly marked way of deciding things, which has guided with so surprising effect the musings of the Letter to a Friend, and the Urn-Burial—we should probably have remembered him little. Pity! some may think, for himself at least, that he had not lived earlier, and still believed in the mandrake, for instance; its fondness for places of execution, and its human cries "on eradication, with hazard of life to them that pull it up." "In philosophy," he observes, meaning to contrast his free-thinking in that department with his orthodoxy in religion—in philosophy, "where truth seems double-faced, there is no man more paradoxical than myself:" which is true, we may think, in a further sense than he meant, and that it was the "paradoxical" that he actually preferred. Happy, at all events, he still remained—undisturbed and happy—in a hundred native prepossessions, some certainly valueless, some of them perhaps invaluable. And while one feels that no real logic of fallacies has been achieved by him, one feels still more how little the construction of that branch of logical inquiry really helps men's minds; fallacy, like truth itself, being a matter so dependent on innate gift of apprehension, so extra-logical and personal; the original perception counting for almost everything, the mere inference for so little! Yes! "A man may be in as just possession of truth as of a city, and yet be forced to surrender," even in controversies not necessarily maladroit.

The really stirring poetry of science is not in guesses, or facile divinations about it, but in its larger ascertained truths—the order of infinite space, the slow method and vast results of infinite time. For Browne, however, the sense of poetry which so overmasters his scientific procedure, depends chiefly on its vaguer possibilities; the empirical philosophy, even after Bacon, being still dominated by a temper, resultant from the general unsettlement of men's minds at the Reformation, which may be summed up in the famous question of Montaigne--Que scais-je? The cold-blooded method of observation and experiment was creeping but slowly over the domain of science; and such unreclaimed portions of it as the phenomena of magnetism had an immense fascination for men like Browne and Digby. Here, in those parts of natural philosophy "but yet in discovery," "the America and untravelled parts of truth," lay for them the true prospect of science, like the new world itself to a geographical discoverer such as Raleigh. And welcome as one of the minute hints of that country far ahead of them, the strange bird, or floating fragment of unfamiliar vegetation, which met those early navigators, there was a certain fantastic experiment, in which, as was alleged, Paracelsus had been lucky. For Browne and others it became the crucial type of the kind of agency in nature which, as they conceived, it was the proper function of science to reveal in larger operation. "The subject of my last letter," says Dr. Henry Power, then a student, writing to Browne in 1648, the last year of Charles the First, "being so high and noble a piece of chemistry, invites me once more to request an experimental eviction of it from yourself; and I hope you will not chide my importunity in this petition, or be angry at my so frequent knockings at your door to obtain a grant of so great and admirable a mystery."

What the enthusiastic young student expected from Browne, so high and noble a piece of chemistry, was the "re-individualling of an incinerated plant"--a violet, turning to freshness, and smelling sweet again, out of its ashes, under some genially fitted conditions of the chemic art.
Palingenesis, resurrection, effected by orderly prescription--the "re-individualling" of an "incinerated organism"--is a subject which affords us a natural transition to the little book of the Hydriotaphia, or Treatise of Urn-Burial--about fifty or sixty pages--which, together with a very singular letter not printed till after Browne's death, is perhaps, after all, the best justification of Browne's literary reputation, as it were his own curiously figured urn, and treasure-place of immortal memory.

In its first presentation to the public this letter was connected with Browne's Christian Morals; but its proper and sympathetic collocation would be rather with the Urn-Burial, of which it is a kind of prelude, or strikes the keynote. He is writing in a very complex situation--to a friend, upon occasion of the death of a common friend. The deceased apparently had been little known to Browne himself till his recent visits, while the intimate friend to whom he is writing had been absent at the time; and the leading motive of Browne's letter is the deep impression he has received during those visits, of a sort of physical beauty in the coming of death, with which he still surprises and moves his reader. There had been, in this case, a tardiness and reluctancy in the circumstances of dissolution, which had permitted him, in the character of a physician, as it were to assist at the spiritualising of the bodily frame by natural process; a wonderful new type of a kind of mortified grace being evolved by the way. The spiritual body had anticipated the formal moment of death; the alert soul, in that tardy decay, changing its vesture gradually, and as if piece by piece. The infinite future had invaded this life perceptibly to the senses, like the ocean felt far inland up a tidal river. Nowhere, perhaps, is the attitude of questioning awe on the threshold of another life displayed with the expressiveness of this unique morsel of literature; though there is something of the same kind, in another than the literary medium, in the delicate monumental sculpture of the early Tuscan School, as also in many of the designs of William Blake, often, though unconsciously, much in sympathy with those unsophisticated Italian workmen. With him, as with them, and with the writer of the Letter to a Friend upon the occasion of the death of his intimate Friend,--so strangely! the visible function of death is but to refine, to detach from aught that is vulgar. And this elfin letter, really an impromptu epistle to a friend, affords the best possible light on the general temper of the man who could be moved by the accidental discovery of those old urns at Walsingham--funeral relics of "Romans, or Britons Romanised which had learned Roman customs"--to the composition of that wonderful book the Hydriotaphia. He had drawn up a short account of the circumstance at the moment; but it was after ten years' brooding that he put forth the finished treatise, dedicated to an eminent collector of ancient coins and other rarities, with congratulations that he "can daily command the view of so many imperial faces," and (by way of frontispiece) with one of the urns, "drawn with a coal taken out of it and found among the burnt bones." The discovery had resuscitated for him a whole world of latent observation, from life, from out-of-the-way reading, from the natural world, and fused into a composition, which with all its quaintness we may well pronounce classical, all the heterogeneous elements of that singular mind. The desire to "record these risen ashes and not to let them be buried twice among us," had set free, in his manner of conceiving things, something not wholly analysable, something that may be properly called genius, which shapes his use of common words to stronger and deeper senses, in a way unusual in prose writing. Let the reader, for instance, trace his peculiarly sensitive use of the epithets thin and dark, both here and in the Letter to a Friend.

Upon what a grand note he can begin and end chapter or paragraph! "When the funeral pyre was out, and the last valediction over: "And a large part of the earth is still in the urn unto us." Dealing with a very vague range of feelings, it is his skill to associate them to very definite objects. Like the Soul, in Blake's design, "exploring the recesses of the tomb," he carries a light, the light of the poetic faith which he cannot put off him, into those dark places, "the abode of worms and pismires," peering round with a boundless curiosity and no fear; noting the various casuistical considerations of men's last form of self-love; all those whims of humanity as a "student of perpetuity," the mortuary customs of all nations, which, from their very closeness to our human nature, arouse in most minds only a strong feeling of distaste. There is something congruous with the impassive piety of the man in his waiting on accident from without to take start for the work, which, of all his work, is most truly touched by the "divine spark." Delightsome as its eloquence is actually found to be, that eloquence is attained out of a certain difficulty and halting crabbedness of expression; the wretched punctuation of the piece being not the only cause of its impressing the reader with the notion that he is but dealing with a collection of notes for a more finished composition, and of a different kind; perhaps a purely erudite treatise on its subject, with detachment of all personal colour now adhering to it. Out of an atmosphere of all-pervading oddity and quaintness--the quaintness of mind which reflects that this disclosing of the urns of the
ancients hath "left unto our view some parts which they never beheld themselves"--arises a work really ample and
grand, nay! classical, as I said, by virtue of the effectiveness with which it fixes a type in literature; as, indeed, at its
best, romantic literature (and Browne is genuinely romantic) in every period attains classical quality, giving true
measure of the very limited value of those well-worn critical distinctions. And though the Urn-Burial certainly has
much of the character of a poem, yet one is never allowed to forget that it was designed, candidly, as a scientific treatise
on one department of ancient "culture" (as much so as Guichard's curious old French book on Divers Manners of
Burial) and was the fruit of much labour, in the way especially of industrious selection from remote and difficult
writers; there being then few or no handbooks, or anything like our modern shortcuts to varied knowledge. Quite
unaffectedly, a curious learning saturates, with a kind of grey and aged colour most apt and congruous with the subject-
amatter, all the thoughts that arise in him. His great store of reading, so freely displayed, he uses almost as poetically as
Milton; like him, profiting often by the mere sonorous effect of some heroic or ancient name, which he can adapt to that
same sort of learned sweetness of cadence with which so many of his single sentences are made to fall upon the ear.

Pope Gregory, that great religious poet, requested by certain eminent persons to send them some of those relics he
sought for so devoutly in all the lurking-places of old Rome, took up, it is said, a portion of common earth, and
delivered it to the messengers; and, on their expressing surprise at such a gift, pressed the earth together in his hand,
whereupon the sacred blood of the Martyrs was beheld flowing out between his fingers. The veneration of relics
became a part of Christian (as some may think it a part of natural) religion. All over Rome we may count how much
devotion in fine art is owing to it; and, through all ugliness or superstition, its intention still speaks clearly to serious
minds. The poor dead bones, ghastly and forbidding--we know what Shakespeare would have felt about them.--"Beat
not the bones of the buried: when he breathed, he was a man!" And it is with something of a similar feeling that
Browne is full, on the common and general ground of humanity; an awe-stricken sympathy with those, whose bones
"lie at the mercies of the living." strong enough to unite all his various chords of feeling into a single strain of
impressive and genuine poetry. His real interest is in what may be called the curiosities of our common humanity. As
another might be moved at the sight of Alexander's bones, or Saint Edmund's, or Saint Cecilia's, so he is full of a fine
poetical excitement at such lowly relics as the earth hides almost everywhere beneath our feet. But it is hardly fair to
take our leave amid these grievous images of so happy a writer as Sir Thomas Browne; so great a lover of the open air,
under which much of his life was passed. His work, late one night, draws to a natural close:--"To keep our eyes open
longer," he bethinks himself suddenly, "were but to act our Antipodes. The huntsmen are up in America!"

What a fund of open-air cheerfulness, there! in turning to sleep. Still, even when we are dealing with a writer in whom
mere style counts for so much as with Browne, it is impossible to ignore his matter; and it is with religion he is really
occupied from first to last, hardly less than Richard Hooker. And his religion, too, after all, was a religion of
cheerfulness: he has no great consciousness of evil in things, and is no fighter. His religion, if one may say so, was all
profit to him; among other ways, in securing an absolute staidness and placidity of temper, for the intellectual work
which was the proper business of his life. His contributions to "evidence," in the Religio Medici, for instance, hardly
profit to him; among other ways, in securing an absolute staidness and placidity of temper, for the intellectual work
which was the proper business of his life. His contributions to "evidence," in the Religio Medici, for instance, hardly
tell, because he writes out of view of a really philosophical criticism. What does tell in him, in this direction, is the
witness he brings to men's instinct of survival--the "intimations of immortality," as Wordsworth terms them, which
were natural with him in surprising force. As was said of Jean Paul, his special subject was the immortality of the soul;
with an assurance as personal, as fresh and original, as it was, on the one hand, in those old half-civilised people who
had deposited the urns; on the other hand, in the cynical French poet of the nineteenth century, who did not think, but
knew, that his soul was imperishable. He lived in an age in which that philosophy made a great stride which ends with
Hume; and his lesson, if we may be pardoned for taking away a "lesson" from so ethical a writer, is the force of men's
temperaments in the management of opinion, their own or that of others;--that it is not merely different degrees of bare
intellectual power which cause men to approach in different degrees to this or that intellectual programme. Could he
have foreseen the mature result of that mechanical analysis which Bacon had applied to nature, and Hobbes to the mind
of man, there is no reason to think that he would have surrendered his own chosen hypothesis concerning them. He
represents, in an age, the intellectual powers of which tend strongly to agnosticism, that class of minds to which the
supernatural view of things is still credible. The non-mechanical theory of nature has had its grave adherents since: to
the non-mechanical theory of man--that he is in contact with a moral order on a different plane from the mechanical
order--thousands, of the most various types and degrees of intellectual power, always adhere; a fact worth the
consideration of all ingenuous thinkers, if (as is certainly the case with colour, music, number, for instance) there may be whole regions of fact, the recognition of which belongs to one and not to another, which people may possess in various degrees; for the knowledge of which, therefore, one person is dependent upon another; and in relation to which the appropriate means of cognition must lie among the elements of what we call individual temperament, so that what looks like a pre-judgment may be really a legitimate apprehension. "Men are what they are," and are not wholly at the mercy of formal conclusions from their formally limited premises. Browne passes his whole life in observation and inquiry: he is a genuine investigator, with every opportunity: the mind of the age all around him seems passively yielding to an almost foregone intellectual result, to a philosophy of disillusion. But he thinks all that a prejudice; and not from any want of intellectual power certainly, but from some inward consideration, some afterthought, from the antecedent gravitation of his own general character--or, will you say? from that unprecipitated infusion of fallacy in him--he fails to draw, unlike almost all the rest of the world, the conclusion ready to hand.

1886.

(The end)
Walter Horatio Pater's essay: Sir Thomas Browne

By Walter Pater