

SOUNDINGS

Symphonic praise

Why should any modern doctor still want to read Sir Thomas Browne? He has been dead for over 300 years. He made no medical discoveries. He practised no evidence based medicine, and actually believed in witches, a species now uncommon except in certain households.

His precept (in the book *Christian Morals*) not to look for whales in the Black Sea—because there are none—could be taken as a warning against making fanciful rare diagnoses because common diseases occur most commonly. “Look not for profundity where there is none,” he writes, “nor place great expectations of happiness here below,” reflecting that “there are many canonized on earth, that shall never be saints in heaven.”

He would also rather “go off at one blow than be sawed in pieces by the grating torture of a disease,” as he has examined the parts of man and knows “on what tender filament that fabrick hangs.” Rather than take good health for granted and complain about being sick, he wonders 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.”

As a young medical practitioner in Norwich he seems to have been averse to sexual intimacy, wishing (in *Religio Medici*) that we could procreate like trees, without conjunction, and “without this trivial and vulgar way of union”—“the foolishlest act a wise man commits all his life.” Later he had second thoughts and fathered 10 children.

He was the favourite of Sir William Osler, who kept his book at his bedside and ranked him among “the great saints of humanity,” with whom one should spend the last few minutes of the day. I like best the last chapter of *Urn Burial (Hydrothapia)*, in which he writes that “there is nothing strictly immortal but immortality,” that “there is no antidote against the opium of time,” that most of us must be content to be as though we had not been, “to be found in the Register of God, not in the record of man.” One of his editors compared “the magnificent discourse of the *Hydrothapia*” with a symphony of Beethoven, “with its vast undulations of rhythmic sound, its triumphal processions, its funeral pageants, its abysmal plunges into unfathomable depths, its ecstatic soarings to the heights of heaven.”