

A letter to Sir Thomas Browne.

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THE DAILY CHRONICLE, FRIDAY,

APRIL 1, 1898.

A LETTER TO SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

"Religio Medici and other Essays." Edited with an Introduction by D. Lloyd Roberts, M.D., F.R.C.P. (London: Smith, Elder and Co. 3s. 6d. net.)

by Lionel Johnson

Sir,—I, that did sometime dwell at large upon the congruity of event, whereby those your rich and eminent pieces were brought forth anew for the delectation of modernity by a brother in art, Dr. Greenhill, of Oxford, now departed, and doubtless with you in blessed neighborhood to Luke, "the beloved physician"; I do now commend to your goodwill a second Æsculapian brother, D. Lloyd Roberts, of Manchester, who hath right worthily rendered unto you the like true and loyal service. For I question not but that the confraternities of learned men upon earth have their counterparts and continuities in heaven; and that he who did terrestrially follow some good profession or art, loseth not in celestial felicity all gust thereof. Wherefore, though beneath the healing leaves of the Tree of Life, and within the permanent embrace of immortality, there be no sickness, and the beatified physician be cast out of employ, yet shall he sometimes direct his meditations upon his brethren in this lower world, wishing them, in the plenitude of his joy, a like joy hereafter, and in the perfection of his knowledge, ever more light amid the obscurities and dark recesses of the healing mystery. Be these, sir, your votes and good desires for the welfare of Dr. Lloyd Roberts; so shall you play the nobler Glaucus unto his worthy Diomedes.

As in all human and mortal affairs, so is it in the fortunes of the erudite and the ingenious, that touching the fruits of their labor there be great shiftings, veerings, and vicissitudes of judgment; so as that one generation cometh to feel coldly toward that which inflamed their fathers. But from these mutations of repute rest you now, long since removed unto a security of position. To enumerate the exemplifiers of your fame were a tedious superfluity; yet may I not wholly pretermitt all mention of them. Of such was your grave chronicler and fellow Pembroch-



ensis, Dr. Samuel Johnson; who from his studious converse with your goodly tractates caught the happy contagion of your style; and in your pages we have a plain foretaste and anticipatory gust of *Rasselas* and the *Rambler*. In your solemn and brave treatise of the Christian Morals, I read that "festination may prove precipitation; deliberating delay may be wise cunctation; and slowness no slothfulness." Even so would the sonorous Johnson ejaculate wisdom, attaining not always to that loftiness of thought where-with the Latinism of your style was well assorted, neither flowing with your vein of poesy. Natheless he did esteem you truly; having in himself a strain of high and mystical religion not inharmonious with your own, and therewith a jealous zeal for the more exalted exercises of our English tongue. It needs not that I should tarry upon the name of Coleridge, who to a rare magic of aery poesy wedded an enraptured passion of his philosophising wit, which did equip and furnish him for your fit commentator. Upon the margins and empty spaces of your volumes he deposited the sudden overflowings of his ecstasy, and quick sallies of his private admiration; little deeming that posterity should treasure such hasty relics and brief leavings above elaborated expatiations. By the delicate and quick spirit of his *condiscipulus* and friend Charles Lamb you were entirely beloved; doubt not, sir, but that some part of you lived again in him, as by spiritual transmission or communication across the separative ages. To the least touch of your speculating spirit his own made instant answer, as 'twere by *magica sympathia* and a communion of souls. Nay, though Norwich held your ashes, and Paradise yourself, yet there was somewhat of you that abode with him, whether he were in the study or went abroad; give me leave to say, speaking after the Platonic oracles, that he remembered in you his former being, and in your phantasy discovered the original of his moods. If then there might be a veracious possibility in his pleasant conceit of "writing for antiquity," 'tis certain that you were his earliest reader, and a first approver of so sweet a spirit. And now will I but note that De Quincey and Carlyle, speculators diversely famous, have paid tribute to you; and Walter Pater, latest of your panegyrical appraisers, curious ever in the subtleties of speech, and the refinements of a learned humor, hath left some hearts yet sore for so dear a loss; not humanly comforted to think of him in the double eternity that he handselleth. Of a truth, if the pre-eminent praise be that of *laudari a laudatis*, you have it in perpetuity of possession.

Since you, sir, "entered the great nations of the dead," learning hath widely extended her conquests. For the material earth, it will shortly be altogether *terra cognita*; there remain but few tribes in the seclusion of



their incivility; earth is yielding up her mysteries and witnesses daily a disclosure of her secrets. The inviolacy is over of her dark places, and the nations contend for a first conquest of her ultimate snows. Antiquity, nearer to you in time, is grown nearer to us in intimacy; the ruined and lost cities are laid bare, and we hear voices that have kept a more than millenary silence. Pindar's rival is no more dumb, Aristotle discourses of the Athenian regiment; we look upon Priam's citadel, and trouble the sleep of Agamemnon. Nay, as 'twere in a last fulfilment of that word, "out of Egypt will I call my Son," the land of the captivity hath let go its grasp upon fresh sayings of Christ, whereby we are more verily contemporaries of the primitive Christians, than have ever Christians been, who lived since these sayings were lost or clean forgotten: I mean, as concerning not innocency of life, but riches of divine knowledge. In either hemisphere vast reliquaries of the dead contend in pomp with the most majestical palaces of the living; we gaze upon vanished empires in a miniature, conserved for the usage of the learned, and for the popular amusement. Buried generations rest not now in a common solitude of oblivion and the shades of our ignorance, but the living feast their eyes upon them, making commodious inquisition into Pharaoh's bedchamber and the libraries of Assyrian kings. There will presently be upon earth no mortuary place unspoiled of its long peace, and we handle the household gear of them that were before the Flood: wherein, though there be something piteous, yet is it to the increase of good knowledge and the satisfaction of a natural curiosity. But though we have thus pushed beyond your science in the study of mortality and the relics of the dead, yet in the exploring of that which you were wont with passionate iteration to explore, even death itself, we are nothing wiser than yourself. That is a kingdom of night immitigable, whether our faith concerning it persuade us to dolorous or to jubilant expectancy. From the bleached and cavernous skulls of dead men immemorial doth no news proceed; and what we fondly take to be the thin voice and flitting spirit of our dead friend may prove but a sigh of the wind across a moonlit shadow. Herein are we all contemporaries and children; yet must that *ripas ultioris amor* constrain us to all manner of longing speculation, and cast the dullest wits into a wonder. They be now more numerous than in your day, who repeat after Seneca his stoical and desperate ambiguity, "Askest thou, where lie the dead? With the unborn!" or that Lucretian bravery, "death is then nothing, and toucheth us not a jot, since the soul is proven a thing of death." In these schools you, sir, were no scholar; but your excellent charity bestowed itself upon



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the query, whether the charity of God could save them. For of God you doubted not at all, grieving only that His incomprehensibility were not more incomprehensible, and the darkness round about Him less penetrable by faith. Questionless, death was to your living spirit neither bugbear nor nothingness, but by appointment a mysterious state, whereinto you strained unweariedly eyes yet clouded with mortal scales; ambitious of glorified vision, and eager, with him you called "the elegant apostle," *dissolvi et esse cum Christo*. From the fixity of determinate faith could neither the nimbleness of your apprehensions nor the broils of sectaries remove you: faith was your steady torch along the hollow passages and dusky cavities of death; nor were you perturbed with solitudinous scruples, though its light fell upon the ruined face of Helen, or discovered uncomeliness in Cleopatra. Faith made you spherical music amid the disgladiations of reason and the clash of fratricidal swords: so was your going hence but a gentle journey and a "soft departure" unto the choirs of the seraphical Trisagion.

And now, sir, remains it but to give you thanks for that excellent subtile gift of speech, wherewith to the glory of English letters you were enriched. You were none of those apish wits, who are for composing poesy in prose, and confound thereby the just dichotomy of the written word: yet you obtained in prose a mastery so majestic, that with a brief line you exalt us to the empyreal home and birth-place of high thoughts; and in the concerted music of your periods is your least fancy eternised for the lovers of harmonical language. You had in proper possession the secrets of a valiant sonority and of a melodious breathing, to the ravishment of eager ears and to the wonder of all practitioners in that your art of speech. And herein greatly consisted your success, that you were no pleaurist in language, delighting to titillate the ear with a vacant prettiness: but your every sentence was a repository of imaginations internally musical, whereto that external music served but for a correspondent beauty. Doubtless, you that did so diligently pursue the miracles and oracles of nature, were no blind stranger to the deep mystery of speech and the curious signification of words, which speak many things beyond their immediate seeming, and as it were with a noble amphibology! You needed not that lesson taught to the Prince of the Apostles, to call nothing common nor unclean; and in your writings will terms of a vulgar simplicity appear things of price and unsuspected treasure. Would that your spirit might by transinamation infuse itself into the body of our writers: then had we less phantasy without substance, and less dryness unadorned. But shame were it for the unworthiest of your servants longer to distract



your animadversion, from pure employs unto these expressions of an earthly gratitude. Among Arcopagitical Hierarchies and the impassible legions of the sanctified you have the fruition of truth in an ecstasy, and you tread upon the riddling Sphinx. Divinity is nothing occult to you, nor do you read its transcendencies but by a perdurable and meridian light, *lumen luminis* and *splendor veritatis*, the express glory and irradiation of God. Wherein infinitely dwelling, you cannot receive of us the salutation of a farewell: for how shall he be bidden to fare well, who fares inevitably the best possible, even *sum-mum bonum*? Yet will love in its pretty foolishness not be defrauded of wishing well to those it loves, though the devil and his angels may no more attempt them, and they stand secure within the citadel of innocency. Fare you then well, sir, and believe that among many lovers you have a thousand worthier, but none truer, than your ever faithful servant to serve you, —

