

John Donne's Physician and Sir Thomas Browne : Social and Spiritual Healing

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In a comfortable air-conditioned office during the early 1970s, Stanley Fish proceeded to discredit and ridicule the prose of Sir Thomas Browne, viewing *Religio Medici* from the perspective of a twentieth-century secular reader, with little respect for spiritual matters. In 1642–3, with England on the brink of civil war, the nation needed not bold invectives that sparked men to further dissension, but a cool unifying treatise like *Religio Medici* to bring peace and community to the strife-ridden land. Because of Browne's self-reflectiveness and theocentric world-view, Fish calls him a "bad physician." Browne, however, fulfills the role of the bodily/spiritual physician defined in John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1642), and *Religio Medici* is Browne's prescription for spiritual and social health.

John Donne, in his *Devotions*, pays close attention to the physician's role. His physician resembles "a Hercules against these giants, these monsters."¹ Since "man hath not that innate instinct, to apply those natural medicines to his present danger,"² he needs the physician to apply hitherto unknown soothing balms to the diseased wounds that imperil the body. The physician's trained and knowledgeable mind uses curing methods of which the common person was never aware. In fact, the ailing man relies wholly on the physician's advice, deferring judgment to one above him.

However, in Donne's *Devotions* there are "two physicians authorized by [God], the bodily, and the spiritual physician."³ The bodily

doctor, however insufficient and fallible, works valiantly to cure disease. This elevated, somewhat heroic, role of the bodily doctor extends to the spiritual doctor, oftentimes a minister or priest. Both types heal. One heals the body and cures disease ; the other concentrates upon the soul and spiritual divisiveness. Both physicians are earthly reflections of God, whom Donne defines as "thou in thy Son art the physician." ⁴⁾ Since all human doctors reflect God, the one great Healer, the actions of bodily and spiritual healing which doctors perform are holy.

Donne parallels the diseased body with the diseased state. The human body and the body of the state contribute to a larger unity. He writes that "the heavens contain this earth ; the earth, cities ; cities, men." ⁵⁾ In addition, the larger body of the "communion of saints... makes the militant and triumphant church one parish." ⁶⁾ Disease, though, jeopardizes the health of this unified parish. The divisive diseases in the body mirror the divisive sects in the social and spiritual community ; as diseases destroy the body, sects contribute to the disintegration of society. Indeed, Donne even uses a military image, a startlingly violent image of social destruction, to describe the debilitating effects of disease : "a cannon batters all, overthrows all, demolishes all." ⁷⁾ Donne's idea of a physician , then, encompasses not only doctors of bodily diseases, but also refers to universal healers, those working to unite human souls with each other and with God.

Stanley Fish develops the image of the healing physician also, but he applies the term to the producer of texts. Fish defines the medicines of the physician (i. e., the texts of the writer) in this fashion :

an uncomfortable and unsettling experience is offered as the way to self-knowledge... And by offering that experience rather than another, these works shift the focus of attention

from themselves and from what is happening in their formal confines to the reader and what is happening in the confines of his mind and heart. ⁸⁾

According to this idea, Fish's physician changes rather than heals the ailing reader ; that is, the reader must peruse the diagnosis and produce his own prescription, while Donne's physician offers the patient a potential cure. Fish calls Browne a "bad physician" because he draws attention to his own writing, offering solutions that Fish deems inappropriate, since Browne does not allow the reader to confront himself, to construct his own cure.

Thomas Browne, a professional physician, knew of his duties beyond those of his secular, medical profession. He anguished over the warring religious factions, each proclaiming to be Christian, yet each acting in manners unbecoming of their religious faith. Although Browne initially wrote *Religio Medici* for himself and for private circulation, the document soon grew beyond his original intent. Consequently, *Religio Medici* presents a complex problem for modern readers. We expect writers to "express themselves" by writing, but this notion is alien to the pre-Romantic mind. Browne states in his preface that his "intention was not publik ;" ⁹⁾ however, he revises the book with the public's perception in mind. He writes that "I have at present represented unto the world a full and intended copy of that Peece." ¹⁰⁾ However, the word "Peece" can be read in two manners : "piece," the literal meaning in this context, and "peace," a pun that enlarges his work to a public scope. This allusive and humble method Browne employs is consistent with his overall style. He does not bluntly confront his audience, demanding that one must heed his advice ; on the contrary, he downplays the significance of his book, sneaking up on the unsuspecting patient

with a medicine that initially appears distasteful. By these peaceful, Christian methods, he encourages tolerance and thoughtful respect of others. Browne offers *Religio Medici* as a healing balm for the public wounds of dissension.

Browne understands how close the conflicting sects really are. He points out that, after Christians omit the "termes of scurrility betwixt us,...there is between us one common name and appellation, one faith, and necessary body of principles." ¹¹⁾ Browne strives to make the sects understand this common unifying foundation. He humbly admits, however, that "true...is as my last end."¹²⁾ This admission, amid many similar ones, spurs the serious reader into contemplation, encouraging him to think responsibly rather than condemn. Browne's introspective reflection urges similar devotional responses in the reader's heart, thereby, if effective, extending tolerance and some measure of peace to England. He circles away from direct confrontation with the reader, instead softly whispering in his ear. This circular approach reflects Browne's world-view; all things revolve around and through God.

Some critics completely ignore the spiritual intents of Browne. For example, Michael Wilding derides Browne's "firm, antipopulist stance." ¹³⁾ But when Browne labels the populace as a "numerous piece of monstrosity," ¹⁴⁾ he honestly describes the unthinking groups who blindly follow any leader and harm England through divisive and violent actions. The angry Browne notices that "[t] he wisdom of God receives small honour from those vulgar heads, that rudely stare about, and with a gross rusticity admire his workes." ¹⁵⁾ His *Religio Medici*, if applied properly, divides the masses into individual, thinking, reflecting, and tolerant persons, with a peaceful England being the result. Wilding, three hundred and thirty-nine years removed, also complains that Browne has a "university-educated, elitist contempt for the 'ignor-

ance' of the clashing sects ; " ¹⁶⁾ but Browne actually lives among these destructive groups of divisiveness, groups that pull and tear the unifying fabric of peace. Browne admonishes these sects to think and pray ; and Wilding responds sarcastically, "The implication is that all would be well if heretics and schismatics and dissenters would stop being troublesome and disturbing the peace." ¹⁷⁾ Although accurate in his evaluation, Wilding's bitter tone undermines Browne's Christian intention of unity, and the former's superficial perspective strikes at the heart of tolerance and love.

Contrary to this secular and limited outlook, *Religio Medici* documents Browne's introspective, peaceful attitude which, ideally, should be adopted by the readers. The pain of division, that is to "lose an arme" and "be quartered into pieces," ¹⁸⁾ analogous to Browne's division of the masses into individuals, is preferable to the ignorance of human grief and misery. Browne combines his role as a bodily physician with his more important role as spiritual physician. An urgent need for spiritual healing exists in seventeenth-century Englishmen whose religious and political factions endanger the bodily health of the nation. Since, as Browne proclaims, "all our Antidotes, drawne from Scripture and Philosophy, could not expell the poyson" ¹⁹⁾ of Seneca's atheism, akin to the various "conceits and opinions" of current sects, a different kind of antidote must be proffered, an antidote composed of Christian love and tolerance.

Browne, acting in both roles of the physician, offers *Religio Medici* to the English public as prescription for spiritual reflection and tolerance of others. Fish deplores this ethereal attitude, griping that "Browne's 'O altitudos' always leave us in rapt contemplation of a world unified by God's informing presence." ²⁰⁾ This assertion is true, but Fish treats the above as mystical and insubstantial conclusions. This

preoccupation with spiritual matters frustrates Fish. Browne sees the Holy Trinity as the model for a perfect society, "not divided nor separated by the intellect, but actually comprehended in its Unity." ²¹⁾ David W. Atkinson summarizes this idea and the entire text of *Religio Medici*, asserting that "doctrinal debate based on reason separates, devotional practice rooted in love of God unites." ²²⁾ The central strength of *Religio Medici*, as Atkinson point out, is when Browne focuses attention on how intolerance takes one outside what it means to be truly Christian." ²³⁾ In this "self-indulgent" text, Fish cries, "Browne does not say to us, 'awake, remember, change,' but 'take it easy, don't let it bother you, let it be.'" ²⁴⁾ Indeed, this peaceful, Christian attitude that Fish derides is exactly the attitude needed to quell civil unrest. Fish demands something not offered or intended in *Religio Medici*; consequently, he dismisses the work and its author as "concerned with the winning of applause . . . [rather] than with the sounding of souls." ²⁵⁾

Thomas Browne wrote *Religio Medici* to show people how tolerance could be practiced. The very title of the book refers to the need for religion in secular professions, and this need extends to all men. By offering his book to the public, Browne cries out for a widespread tolerance among people whose religion demands love and kindness. He wants to heal the wounded nation; and, in imitation of John Donne's physician, he successfully combines his dual role of bodily/spiritual physician in *Religio Medici*, his public plea for civil peace and Christian devotion.

Notes

- 1) John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (Ann Arbor, MI : U of Michigan Press, 1990) 24.
- 2) Donne 24.
- 3) Donne 27.

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- 4) Donne 28.
 - 5) Donne 63.
 - 6) Donne 31.
 - 7) Donne 7.
 - 8) Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley : U of California P. 1972) 371.
 - 9) Sir Thomas Browne, "Religio Medici," *The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides (NY ; Penguin, 1977) 59.
 - 10) Browne 59.
 - 11) Browne 62.
 - 12) Browne 132.
 - 13) Michael Wilding, "Religio Medici in the English Revolution," *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne; The Ann Arbor Tercentenary Lectures and Essays*, ed. C. A. Patrides (Columbia and London : U of Missouri P, 1982) 106.
 - 14) Browne 134.
 - 15) Browne 75.
 - 16) Wilding 102.
 - 17) Wilding 103.
 - 18) Browne 141.
 - 19) Browne 87.
 - 20) Fish 385.
 - 21) Browne 73.
 - 22) David W. Atkinson, "'Who Cares How Noah Got Them All In' : The Religious Views of Sir Thomas Browne," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 59.1 (1990) 37.
 - 23) Atkinson 36.
 - 24) Fish 372.
 - 25) Fish 373.