

## Sir Thomas Browne and *ars moriendi*

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And thence retire me to my Milan, where  
Every third thought shall be my grave.

—*The Tempest*, V, i, 310-311—

As the present century draws to a close, we are again reminded of the imminent end of the world and of our deaths. Yet mortality has been a recurrent theme in literature; it is by far the most imaginative stimulus to poets, dramatists and novelists. So Prospero retires to his Milan, there to contemplate on death. At the thought of decay and death, Swift revels in scatology. In this the seventeenth century writers were no exception. Living as they did in an age of religious controversies and in an era, like ours, when the theory of decay was prevalent, they were even more sensitive to the threat of death as an end. To them eschatology was a real and imminent fact, and the question of salvation was never far from their thoughts.

Even though the Church of England came to be predominantly Arminian toward the end of the century, Calvinism was the prevailing theology in the latter part of the sixteenth and the earlier part of the seventeenth century. It had affected the religious thoughts of the period. Many of the writers were devout Christians and believed in soul's immortality, but at the same time they were troubled by the lively image of hell-fire, promulgated by the Puritan conscience. If Christianity brought a joyous miracle, Calvinists insisted on the somber side of Christianity—fear, trembling dread, anxiety, the absurd, culminating in the idea of "predestination." If eternal life is promised to the elect, what about the reprobate? And how do they know if they are to be saved or damned? In *Religio Medici*, Sir Thomas Browne echoes such contemporary temperament, and it sounds almost Calvinistic. "For to His eternity, which is indivisible and all together, the last trump is already sounded, the reprobates in the flame, and the blessed in Abraham's bosom."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, despite his bravado in his sonnet VI, John Donne voices a note of uncertainty and humility in his sonnet on the Judgment Day :

But let them [souls] sleep, Lord, and mee mourne a space,  
For, if above all these, my sinnes abound,  
'Tis late to aske abundance of thy grace,  
When wee are there ; here on this lowly ground,  
Teach mee how to repent ; for that's as good  
As if thou hadst seal'd my pardon with thy blood.

The emphasis on this side of the grave, asking for "a space . . . on this lowly ground," makes this religious divine more human and closer to us. However, as Douglas Bush

points out, these meditations on death and mortality, so numerous and so rich in the seventeenth century writings, are not "the rhetorical funguses of an age of decay, . . . they tell rather of immense vitality contemplating its inevitable extinction."<sup>2</sup>

Such frame of mind leads them to the question of what it means to "die well" and to the question of what it means to "live well," as Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying* may suggest. Due to the Calvinistic belief that the manner of dying sheds some light on the ultimate mysteries of human personality and its destiny after death, what constitutes a good death becomes a crux of the whole Christian faith. Nancy Lee Beaty explains that out of such concern a little conduct book on *ars moriendi* was written in the fifteenth century and she claims that Taylor's *Holy Dying* is the artistic culmination of the genre.<sup>3</sup>

"Holy Dying" is synonymous with "Holy Living"; these constitute a Christian's life. Taylor insists on the importance of the present: He that by a present and a constant holiness secures the present, and makes it useful to his noblest purpose, he turns his condition into his best advantage, by making his unavoidable fate become his necessary religion.<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on the present and a thought of the unavoidable fate led the ancient Greeks and Romans to seize upon the present so that they would lose nothing of the day's pleasure, which leads to hedonistic philosophy. Early Christians, on the other hand, made it into religion; the question of how to die well becomes that of how to live well. "While acknowledging that in the present all our certainty consists, we must be careful of this instant, for it may be this instant that will declare or secure the fortune of a whole eternity."<sup>5</sup> And Taylor preaches that a physical death is really a relief from the ills of this world and a beginning of a better life, a view of death shared by Sir Thomas Browne. The purpose of this essay is to explore the idea of "holy dying" in the writings of Sir Thomas Browne, who, among the seventeenth century writers, seems to have a most exuberant and imaginative mind. With Taylor and Donne, he shares a Christian's faith in soul's immortality; and with Herrick, he shares a robust gusto for life. Though his haunting and sustained preoccupation with death may sometimes lead us to associate Browne with Jaques' or Hamlet's melancholia, his writings, taken as a whole, reveal a sincere distaste for living without any corresponding enthusiasm for "this lowly ground" and for the "world beyond."

In the following discussion I shall change the chronological order of Brwone's writings and discuss first his *Letter to a Friend*. For this particular *Letter to a Friend*, it seems to me, is a modification of *ars moriendi* or conversely, *ars vivendi*. If not in form, in its theme the *Letter* belongs to the genre of conduct books on how to "live well." Then I would like to trace the idea of "holy dying" in *Religio Medici*, and in *Urn Burial* and *The Garden of Cyrus*.

## I

Mortality is the one theme that is never far from Sir Thomas Browne's thoughts and this preoccupation adds a great emotional intensity to his writings. This is only

natural, because life and death are the two major concerns of every doctor, and to a Christian doctor death involves both physical and spiritual death. Browne's *Letter to a Friend* is a unique clinical report, accompanied by a haunting meditation on mortality. *A Letter to a Friend* is more than a bedside medical report. Browne also expounds a "Strange Pathology" from Hippocrates, Pliny, Cardan and Dante. Every occasion seems to have stimulated his encyclopaedic thirst and versatile scholarly achievement, as we observe also in *Urn Burial* and in *The Garden of Cyrus*; in *A Letter to a Friend* he writes: "Death hath not only particular Stars in Heaven, but malevolent Places on earth, which single out our Infirmities and strike at our weaker Parts."<sup>6</sup>

Browne takes the occasion of the death of his patient to give advice to the friend (John Pettus)<sup>7</sup> on how best to live—rather than comfort the same for the loss of his intimate friend. As has been mentioned above, *A Letter to a Friend* can be read as a conduct book and as such it may be read together with *Christian Morals*. In the following passage from *Christian Morals*, we observe the same view of a Christian's life that Jeremy Taylor envisions in *Holy Dying*. Curiously enough, the advice is repeated in *A Letter to a Friend*; the rhetoric and vocabulary are almost identical in both writings:

Be Temperate and Sober, not to preserve your body in an ability for wanton ends: . . . but in one word, that thereby you may truly serve God, which every sickness will tell you you cannot well do without health. The sick Man's Sacrifice is but a lame Oblation....<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the occasion of death turns Browne's mind to this side of the grave rather than to a morbid harping on death. Since we cannot avoid the "incessant Mortality of Mankind," the best the living can do is to learn how to live well: *ars moriendi* is *ars vivendi*. Yet at the same time in the back of Browne's mind there is a sense of uncertainty as to the end of the world: "The uncertainty of the End of the World hath confounded all Human Predictions."<sup>9</sup>

Now what has most impressed the doctor on the occasion of his patient's death is the condition of his death. Robert Loveday<sup>10</sup> dies in contentment without any struggle, which seems to have impressed Browne as an example of "holy dying." Robert Loveday had a moral purity, namely his chastity, Browne tells his friend, he "hath early arrived unto the measure of a perfect Stature in Christ, has already fulfilled the prime and longest Intention of his Being."<sup>11</sup>

Tho' we could not have his life, yet we missed not our desires in his soft Departure, which was scarce an Expiration; and his End not unlike his Beginning, . . . And his Departure so like unto Sleep, that he scarce needed the civil Ceremony of closing his eyes.<sup>12</sup>

The life and death of Robert Loveday, then, is a model of Christian piety. It does not matter how long we live, the important thing is how we live. Robert Loveday "hath early arrived unto the measure of a perfect Stature in Christ, has already fulfilled the prime and longest Intention of his Being." "If long life is but a prolongation of death," Browne is to write in *Urn Burial*, "our life is a sad composition."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, he urges his friend to take an example from this young man to walk "the narrow path of Goodness," and repeats the same advice that has been quoted already from *Christian Morals*: "Be Temperate and Sober." The rest of the letter continues in pretty much the same tone and intent. Browne seems to be fond of such aphorisms as "Take no Satisfaction in dying but living rich," "No dead man is rich, to famish in Plenty, and live poorly to die rich, were a multiplying Improvement in Madness, and Use in Folly."<sup>14</sup>

*A Letter to a Friend* thus turns out to be full-hearted mortal lessons on how best to live, as Miss Beaty understands *ars moriendi*. Contemplation on mortality eventually turns Browne's mind to life, either here or after, the pattern on which Taylor's *Holy Dying* is constructed. Browne concludes the *Letter* in a triumphant note, looking beyond the grave:

Live like a Neighbor unto Death; and think there is but little to come. And since there is something in us that must still live on, join both Lives together: He who ordereth the Purposes of this Life, will never be far from the next, and is in some manner already in it, by a happy Conformity, and close Apprehension of it.<sup>15</sup>

This is not eschewing the fact of death, but embracing even death, since it is not only "the End of Sin, but the Horizon and Isthmus between this Life and a better."<sup>16</sup> Hence the exhortation: "Do contentedly submit unto the common Necessity and envy not Enoch or Elias." *A Letter to a Friend* elaborates, in a direct and discursive way, Browne's idea of "holy dying," which model he saw in the death of Robert Loveday.

## II

*Religio Medici* is the best known of Browne's works, written before he was thirty years old. Again death is the leit-motif; thoughts on mortality and death peculiar to the religious temperament of the period are observed. But unlike *A Letter to a Friend* which is written as a piece of advice by a devout Christian doctor on how best to live, *Religio Medici* (also addressed to a friend, yet unidentified) has a more personal, intimate tone, and is written in a more intense and unrelieved form. The confession reflects Browne's beautiful personality as well as his exuberant mind. It is a sincere confession of a Christian doctor, who is not encumbered by his scientific knowledge and speculation.

Browne refuses to "prie into the mazes of God's counsels" and prefers to wait for

for the ultimate revelation of heaven.<sup>17</sup> Later in *The Garden of Cyrus*, Browne records: "All things began in order, so shall they end, and so shall they begin again, according to the ordainer of order and mystical mathematics of the City of Heaven."<sup>18</sup> This is by no means the blind belief of a simple mind. Sir Thomas Browne faces mysteries of the universe with a positive and even genial delight simply because they are mysteries. If all is known, what is the charm and joy of life? he might ask. He believes *because* the mystery is impossible.

*Religio Medici* consists of two parts: the first part is on a harmony between man and God, and the second on a harmony among men.<sup>19</sup> Rich and exuberant as the book is, here the focus shall be on his idea of "holy dying," though his contemplation on eternity and mortality is necessarily related to our main topic.

Browne envisions eternity as a perfect circle, the image he takes from Hermes Trismegistus: God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Browne perceives in this circle image God's two attributes: Eternalness and Wisdom. The wisdom of God is the center of the circle, that dot which is seen in nature—"Nature is the art of God"—; the eternity of God is the circumference, the circle which has no beginning nor end,<sup>20</sup> reminiscent of "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (*Revelation*: 21: 6). But eternity exists nowhere in this world, or did Henry Vaughan see eternity in his poem, "The World"?

I saw eternity the other night  
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,  
All calm as it was bright; . . .

Surely, Browne would be humbler and would rather agree with the poet of *Ecclesiastes*: "He has also put eternity in man's mind, yet so that no man can find out what God makes from the beginning to the end." Our mortality is expressed as a straight line that stretches out from the center and meets eternity at two points, our birth and death.

Of this death Browne is more ashamed than afraid for "'tis the very disgrace and ignominy of our natures that in a moment can so disfigure us that our nearest friends, wife and children stand afraid and start at us."<sup>21</sup> Despite all the horrors and ignominies, he finds nothing that will daunt the courage of a man, much less "a well resolved Christian."<sup>22</sup> For "to die, that is to cease to breathe, is to take farewell of the elements, to be a kind of nothing for a moment, to be within one instant of a spirit."<sup>23</sup> Browne's attitude toward death often comes close to that of a Stoic. Yet as "a well resolved Christian," he gives an eloquent protest against "self-assassin." If a miserable life makes us wish for death, a virtuous one, which is the advantage of a well resolved Christian, makes us wish to rest in it. Here is Sir Thomas Browne on the suicide of Cato:

This is indeed not to fear death but yet to be afraid of life. It is a brave act of valor to contemn death; but where life is more

terrible than death, it is then the truest valor to dare to live, and herein religion hath taught us a noble example . . . that of Job.<sup>24</sup>

Hemingway once told his interviewer that it is not hard to die. The implication is the same : it is harder to live. It is interesting to note that in the cancelled passage of *Religio Medici*, Browne writes that "it is a symptom of melancholy to be afraid of death, yet sometimes to desire it ; I think no man ever desired life, as I have sometimes death."<sup>25</sup> "A miserable Life makes us wish for Death," and here "life is more terrible than death," Browne carefully qualifies life as no joke, then it is "the truest valor to dare to live." Under a calm reconciliation we have a glimpse into the inner depth of the man.

These trains of thought lead Browne to imagine the picture of the Judgment Day. The opinion that the world was nearing its end was prevalent in the seventeenth century ; that terrible term "predestination" "had troubled so many weak heads to conceive and the wisest to explain," Browne writes. As Donne depicts the Last Day in his sonnet quoted earlier, "At the round earth's imagin'd corners," Part I of *Religio Medici* ends with a view of death and a picture of the Last Day :

This is the day that make good that great attribute of God, His justice ; that must reconcile those unanswerable doubts that torment the wisest understanding ; and reduce those seeming inequalities and respective distributions in this world to an equality and recompensive justice in the next. This is that one day that shall include and comprehend all that went before it ; wherein, as in the last scene, all the actors must enter to complete and make up the catastrophe of this great piece. This is the day whose memory hath only power to make us honest in the dark and to be virtuous without a witness.<sup>26</sup>

Browne echoes his age which was influenced by Calvin's theology, but unlike Calvinists, he upholds what is called synergism in Christian doctrine. He is convinced that the hero of the last day is God himself, whose justice alone reconciles the "unanswerable doubts," yet at the same time his reason sees it in another perspective : "The life, therefore, and spirit of all our actions is the resurrection and stable apprehension that our ashes shall enjoy the fruit of our pious endeavors. Without this, all religion is a fallacy."<sup>27</sup> If the last day means anything to us at all, it is that the very thought of it makes us "honest in the dark and virtuous without a witness."

Browne believes that there is no salvation for those who do not believe in Christ ; as for his own salvation, he is confident of God's mercy as well as His justice. "I am confident and fully persuaded, yet dare not take my oath, of my salvation."<sup>28</sup> The final judgment rests with God. As a resolved Christian, what he can do on "this lowly ground" is to hope for immortality and live a virtuous life. A Christian's death, that is to die well, is only the final act of his duty of self-offering to God, what

Jeremy Taylor means by "holy dying."

In Part II of *Religio Medici*, the sober side of Browne's temperament conceives of life in this world as a hospital rather than as an inn, and he says plainly that we all labor against our cure. In his characteristic bravado, he writes; "... to speak nothing of the sin against the Holy Ghost, whose cure not only but whose nature is unknown, I can cure the gout or stone in some sooner than divinity [can cure] pride or avarice in others."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, "death is the cure of all diseases"; it is "the End of Sin," he writes in *A Letter to a Friend*. Though death is "nauseous to queasy stomachs yet to prepared appetites is nectar and a pleasant potion of immortality."<sup>30</sup> Again we see his unwavering faith in salvation and eternal life. William Dunn contends that in *Religio Medici* or elsewhere in Browne's writing what seems like the beginning of "a triumphant peroration" is always turned into dirgelike measures and the refrain of old mortality.<sup>31</sup> This is somewhat misleading, for the tension between the other and this world is equally great. As has been observed earlier, if Browne longs for death, it is yet with a corresponding enthusiasum for the world beyond. Dunn's contention surely has its own value and validity, since his point is to see in Browne some strands of the seventeenth century melancholia.

As Part I ends with a vision of the last day, so Part II of *Religio Medici* closes with thoughts on death—sleep—and the love of man in the love of God. This is appropriate and shows Browne's artistic control over his subject matter. Browne regards the teaching of *I Corinthians* as the greatest code of life that illustrates *ars vivendi*, which eventually makes *ars moriendi*. Thus *Religio Medici* has a thematic development and a structural unity.

Like Prospero's speech in *The Tempest*, Browne concludes his confession with the contemplation on sleep: "Surely, it is not a melancholy conceit to think we are all asleep in this world, and that the conceits of this life are as mere dreams to those of the next."<sup>32</sup> But, sleep is part of life that best expresses death, and "everyman truly lives so long as he acts his nature or some way makes good the faculties of himself."<sup>33</sup> Though Robert Loveday dies early, he has fulfilled "the prime and longest Intention of his Being." *Religio Medici* ends with thoughts on death and sleep, but here again the shift is from sleep to waking hours, from the inertia of sleep to the action of making good the faculties of ourselves, from death to life. This oscillation between life and death gives Browne's writing a peculiar beauty and strength. Life and death are integral parts of mortality; the straight line of mortality that touches the center *must* meet twice the circumference of eternity.

### III

Life, and death, which leads to life, are the subject of Browne's most artistically successful writings—*Urn Burial* and *The Garden of Cyrus* published together in 1658. Frank Huntley and William Dunn agree that these should be read as one piece of work. In view of the tension between life and death, which this paper has been considering from *A Letter to a Friend* and *Religio Medici*, it is more than valid and

proper to read *Urn Burial and The Garden of Cyrus* in relation to each other. The conventional image of urn itself is suggestive of both life and death—an urn and a womb that contains a seed of life. As Browne takes the occasion of his patient's death to give advice on how to live a life of Christian piety, so he takes the discovery of some forty or fifty urns in a field of old Walsingham to meditate on death and the vanity of life. *Urn Burial* is a sustained meditation on the vanity of life, but it also has a majestic immensity of that eternity to which man must return.<sup>34</sup>

His meditations on the urns remind us of the grave yard scene of *Hamlet*. Holding the skull (also urn-like) in his hand the Prince muses on the vanity of human life that the imperious Caesar, turned to clay, might stop a hole to keep the wind away. The worries over funeral rites are nothing but the vanity of human wishes as if a careful interment itself would perpetuate soul's immortality, even though the thought of resurrection necessitates elaborate burial customs :

Christians have handsomely glossed the deformity of death by careful consideration of the body and civil rites which take off brutal terminations ; and though they conceived all reparable by a resurrection, cast not off all care of interment . . . .

Christian invention hath chiefly driven at rites which speak hopes of another life and hints of a resurrection.<sup>35</sup>

Browne uses his favorite circle image to convince us of the inevitable fact of death and the vanity of human wishes : "Circles and right-lines limit and close all bodies, and the mortal right-lined circle must conclude and shut up all."<sup>36</sup> So, the business of our life is to be awake, to make good our faculties, to *live well*.

Similarly important is that his conjectures of historical events occasioned by the excavation of the urns and the ultimate uncertainty of such conjectures lead Browne to the vanity of human knowledge, reminiscent of *Ecclesiastes* : "For in much wisdom is much grief ; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (1 : 18). Browne's meditation on the urns is a quest for knowledge and he is lost in the wonder of God's mysteries. "There is nothing strictly immortal but immortality. Whatever hath no beginning may be confident of no end, which is the peculiar of that necessary essence that cannot destroy itself and [which is] the highest strain of omnipotency."<sup>37</sup>

Yet, something in Browne presses him to strive against the finite to seek the infinite : "Life is a pure flame and we live by an invisible sun within us."<sup>38</sup> For the sense of immortality is ours from the sources from which our very being is drawn. Marvell explains man's aspiration toward God as the restlessness of a drop of dew that returns to the sun ("On a Drop of Dew") :

Restless it [the dew] rolls and unsecure,  
Trembling lest it grow impure,  
Till the warm sun pity its pain  
And to the skies exhale it back again.

Then, the vision of a Christian death (holy dying) is this naturalness, a graceful pull or attraction toward the eternity of God.

Douglas Bush points out that "*Urn Burial* is the last outcry of the dying Renaissance against devouring time."<sup>39</sup> Browne's view of man is somewhat resonant of Hamlet's idea of the Renaissance man :

But man is a noble animal, splendid in ashes and pompous in the grave, solemnizing nativities and deaths with equal lustre, nor omitting ceremonies of bravery in the infamy of his nature.<sup>40</sup>

Paradoxically, however, *Urn Burial* ends with Lazarus' resurrection, the hardest fact for a doctor to believe. (Or *because* he is a doctor, he believes that such a miracle is possible?) His reason sees no absurdity in God's wisdom. Thus the first essay is absorbed into the triumphant coda of *The Garden of Cyrus*.

In contrast to the darkness of the first essay, which begins with the excavation of the urns, the second essay is concerned with the open space of the green flourishing garden, suffused with light. Likewise, in contrast to the uncertainty of history and human affairs, we have the "mystical mathematics of the City of Heaven." Browne's scientific speculation and observation find "mystical" correspondences between man's work and nature, which is the art of God. The number five and the figure of quincunx (also the figure of cross in Donne's poem) are everywhere as the signature of God; the world is the theatre that represents God.

In *The Garden of Cyrus*, the leit-motif of life and death is embodied in the mystery of the seeds that lie in perpetual shades and aspire toward light. Browne perceives the image of eternity in the seasonal cycle of the universe. The circle image of timelessness reappears. The revolving year, the eternal spring, brings, unerringly, the new leaves—a remembrancer designedly dropped from Heaven. Leaves will be green in spring: "All things began in order, so shall they end, and so shall they begin again, according to the ordainer of order and mystical mathematics of the City of Heaven."

As *Religio Medici*, *The Garden of Cyrus* rounds off with sleep, and curiously enough, with an allusion to "Cleopatra's bed," which ingeniously gives the first and second essay that "marked felicity" James attributes to a work of art. Yet, it is a sleep that leads to waking to eternal life :

Though Somnus in Homer be sent to rouse up Agamemnon, I find no such effects in these drowsy approaches of sleep. To keep our eyes open longer were but to act our antipodes.... But who can be drowsy at that hour which freed us from everlasting sleep, or have slumbering thoughts at that time when sleep itself must end, and, as some conjecture, all shall awake again?<sup>41</sup>

Thus the second essay ends in a rhetorical question, which of course is to be an-

swered with a resounding "no." No one can be drowsy at that hour which "freed us from everlasting sleep," as Browne writes at the end of *Religio Medici* :

These are my drowsy days, in vain  
I do not wake to sleep again,  
O come that hour when I shall never  
Sleep again, but wake forever!<sup>42</sup>

Is it reading too much if we take sleep, to which Browne often refers, as his image of "holy dying"? Browne describes the death of Robert Loveday as "soft Departure": "his Departure so like unto Sleep." Since Browne was a doctor, the idea of a blessed death and a natural death were identical. It is the image of Marvell's dew being exhaled into the sun, or Herrick's blossom "[gliding] into the grave."

Just as *Urn Burial* and *The Garden of Cyrus*, we have now come to a full circle. This paper has started with the actual death of Browne's patient, but turning back to "this lowly ground" and looking beyond death to eternity. Mortality (and immortality) is the one theme that never left Sir Thomas Browne's thoughts. If Browne dwelt too obsessively upon death, it is because death is the most interesting fact about life that stimulated his imagination—the mystery of adumbration, of light enfolded in darkness. As a doctor, he saw actual deaths and witnessed miracles, too. His preoccupation with death, however, has always shifted from death to life, life in this world and beyond. As Dunn observes, his writings show a sincere contempt for living without any hope for the world beyond: "In the changing world Browne understood the old and magnificent quest of the changeless with a speculative energy and poetic fire."<sup>43</sup>

The dichotomies of reason and faith, science and religion, are unified in this truly resolved Christian doctor, the sensibility shared by John Donne, Marvell, and other great seventeenth century writers. They were able to live in both worlds with an exquisite balance; they possessed to a great degree what Keats calls "negative capability"—"that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and resson." This is by no means a mere blind faith. Nor is it lamenting life in this world while laying hope in the other world, nor slighting scientific explorations. The very fact of the expanding horizon in various fields of science in the period refute such a surmise. They lived in an age of paradoxes, which made up a peculiar frame of mind, skepticism—but not our disbelief. It is perhaps in their kind of skepticism that we, who share many of their problems, have to emulate the seventeenth century writers. God "has also put eternity in man's mind, yet so that no man can find out what God makes from the beginning to the end." Sir Thomas Browne understood the truth of God's eternalness and wisdom. And we are drawn into the magic circle of his works.

## NOTES

1. Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, ed. Frank L. Huntley (New York, 1966), p. 14.
2. Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1952), p. 4.
3. Nancy Lee Beaty, *The Craft of Dying* (New Haven, 1970), p. 1.
4. Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Dying, Seventeenth Century Prose and Poetry*, ed. Witherspoon and Warnke (New York, 1963), p. 445.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Sir Thomas Browne, *A Letter to a Friend, Works*, Vol. III, ed. Charles Sayle (Edinburgh, 1927), p. 371.
7. Frank L. Huntley, *Sir Thomas Browne: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Ann Arbor, 1968), p. 186-97.
8. Sir Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals, Works*, p. 445.
9. *A Letter to a Friend*, p. 370.
10. See no. 7.
11. *A Letter to a Friend*, p. 387.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 372.
13. Sir Thomas Browne, *Urn Burial and The Garden of Cyrus*, ed. Frank L. Huntley (New York, 1966), p. 39.
14. *A Letter to a Friend*, p. 389.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 394.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 385.
17. Bush, p. 334.
18. *Urn Burial and The Garden of Cyrus*, p. 107.
19. Huntley, *Sir Thomas Browne*, p. 116.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
21. *Religio Medici*, p. 50.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
25. Quoted in William P. Denn, *Sir Thomas Browne: A Study in Religious Philosophy* (Minneapolis, 1950), p. 157.
26. *Religio Medici*, p. 58.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Dunn, p. 174.
32. *Religio Medici*, p. 94.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
34. Dunn, p. 159.
35. *Urn Burial and The Garden of Cyrus*, pp. 30-31.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
39. Bush, p. 337.
40. *Urn Burial and the Garden of Cyrus*, p. 46.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
42. *Religio Medici*, p. 96.
43. Dunn, p. 178.

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## Sir Thomas Browne and *ars moriendi*

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Death underlies the philosophy of life. As the present century approaches its end, we are again reminded of the imminent end of the world and of our individual deaths. Throughout history, poets and philosophers have registered auguries touching upon this most imagination-stimulating subject. The seventeenth century writers come foremost to our mind, as they lived in an era of evolution in religious philosophy as well as in scientific exploration. The theory of decay was prevalent ; and eschatology was all too real to them. Such spirit of the age produced a rich visionary literature : the poetry of John Donne, Andrew Marvell, or Henry Vaughan ; the prose of Jeremy Taylor, John Donne, and Sir Thomas Browne among others.

This essay traces speculations on *ars moriendi* in the writings of Sir Thomas Browne, starting with *A Letter to a Friend*, through *Religio Medici*, *Urn Burial* and *The Garden of Cyrus*. Browne's works reflect a certain strain of melancholia peculiar to the seventeenth century, but his thanatopsis — *ars moriendi* — is *ars vivendi*. As one of his critics observes, in the changing world this wise doctor understood the old and magnificent quest for immortality with a speculative energy and poetic fire.