



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



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Edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Ramie Targoff. New York: NYRB Classics, 2012. pp. 224.

Reviewer(s): Ed Simon

Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (December 2013), pp. 34-40.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/simon%20review.html>

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Toward the end of Sir Thomas Browne's extended essay on mortality *Hydriotaphia, or Urne-Buriall*, he makes an observation that applies perfectly to its author when he wrote, "Who knows whether the best of men be known" (135)? Published in 1658, *Urne-Buriall* is one of the most perfect reflections on death and mourning to be written in a century that was arguably the golden age of melancholic thought and yet it is largely absent from our contemporary moment. The seventeenth century was permeated with violently splintered religious faith, but old certainties were cast in enough doubt that a figure like Browne could straddle science and faith to produce a work of ambiguous introspection such as *Urne-Buriall*. Like Hamlet's soliloquy or John Donne's Death's Duel, his writings were once considered classics of death-literature, unlike those other texts his has fallen into relative obscurity. Browne's corpus exemplifies a novel interiority that if not modern at least prefigures modernity. Along with the similarly forgotten Robert Burton, Browne is among the seventeenth century's greatest theorists of death and depression and he accomplished this with a mind that

was wide-ranging, curious, introspective, skeptical, delighted, humane and comfortable with uncertainty. But where Shakespeare and Donne's names are still commonly uttered, Browne is one of the "best of men" who seems to lack a place in our current imagination. New York Review Books Classics has partially rectified this lacuna with a new combined edition of two of Browne's most important works, *Religio Medici* and *Urne-Buriall*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Ramie Targoff.

Browne was not always an obscure writer. For generations he was widely read and admired, appreciated not just by specialists and teachers of seventeenth century text but indeed by the general reader as well. As an influence he was cited by Dr. Johnson, James Joyce, Jorge Louis Borges, Virginia Wolf, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allen Poe, Thomas de Quincey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Herman Melville. Many of these authors claimed Browne as the English language's greatest prose stylist, a native-born Montaigne who transcended simple autobiography to record the nuances, subtleties, ebbs and flows of a mind in process. In their estimation his was a voice that ranged from the homespun observations of the village doctor to the heights of baroque magnificence. He opined on subjects as varied as the previously mentioned reflections on death, to esoterica like analyzing examples of the repetition of the number five in nature or enumerating the contents of a fictional library and *Wunderkammer*. And his was not a static deployment of English prose, but indeed he shaped it as heavily as any English author with the exception of Shakespeare and the translators of the King James

Bible. As the introduction to this new edition points out, the Oxford English Dictionary attributes over a hundred neologisms to Browne, including “the nouns ‘exhaustion,’ ‘hallucination,’ and ‘suicide’; the verbs ‘compensate,’ ‘invigorate,’ and ‘bisect’; the adjectives ‘precocious,’ ‘medical,’ and ‘literary’” (x). But for the modern general reader he is all but unknown, the last collection of any of his works being the Miltonist C.A. Patrides’ (excellent) Penguin Classics edition which is out of print in the United States.

This handsome new edition reprints two of Browne’s most well regarded pieces, including an extended introduction that provides a concise overview and interpretation of Browne’s work and life. A European-trained physician, he lived and practiced in Norwich where despite receiving a knighthood he lived a largely uneventful life. Yet Browne’s genius was recognized during his lifetime, his first major work being *Religio Medici*, initially printed against his wishes and then later prepared in an official version. In this memoir/intellectual autobiography/statement of faith Browne defends both his status as a doctor against the common charges of that discipline being prone to atheism, while simultaneously investigating conjectures and questions of religious thought not directly answered by dogma. Browne’s ideology is that curious seventeenth-century mixture of religion and science that flourished right before the full flowering of the scientific revolution. He radiates a cheerful tolerance despite the fact that he insists he is every bit the faithful and orthodox Anglican. Browne writes, “I observe according to the rules of my private reason, or the humour and fashion of my devotion, neither believing

this, because Luther affirmed it, nor disapproving that because Calvin hath disavouched it" (8). The author's caste of mind can seem shockingly liberal for the era in which it was written. For example, a passage where Browne argues that it's possible for a dutiful Protestant to pray in Catholic churches provided that his mind is oriented towards God reminded me of a scene in Melville's *Moby-Dick* where the ironically pious Presbyterian Ishmael rationalizes praying to a Polynesian tiki-idol. The reasoning in these two texts was so similar (if tongue-in-cheek) that I'm curious as to the possibility that this is a direct reference to Browne. After all, it was Melville who referred to his idol Browne with the dubious distinction of being a "cracked archangel." It would just be one more way in which his subtle influence permeates much of what we think of as canonical.

Written in an era of extreme religiously-motivated cruelty, Browne's ecumenical positions are not just boilerplate, they are courageous. It's crucial however to remember Browne's tolerances only went so far. One of the many paradoxes of the man is that he saw no conflict between his toleration, justified by a burgeoning Baconian skepticism, and testifying on behalf of the prosecution at a witch-craft trial which resulted in a woman's execution. Yet it's these contradictions that make Browne such a fascinating figure to read and consider. As an essayist he lets his reasoning zigzag through multiple possibilities, sometimes confirming one thing which he then later denies. But as enjoyable as it can be to dip into *Religio Medici* and marvel at Browne's incomparable

ability to construct a sentence that seems to function as an eternal aphorism, it's really in *Urne-Buriall* that he produces his consummate writing. It starts as a stunningly objective, almost proto-anthropological reflection on death rituals throughout history occasioned by the discovery of several Anglo-Saxon cremation urns unearthed in Norfolk (Browne misidentified the artifacts as Roman). But it then moves beyond its ostensibly journalistic purpose and builds up to a profound reflection on the nature of death. As a consideration of mortality the conclusion of *Urne-Buriall* is every bit the equal of the final paragraph of James Joyce's "The Dead" or the end of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

In terms of audience, this new edition seems particularly well suited to students and non-specialists, and one hopes that its publication will encourage more of a treatment of Browne in the undergraduate and graduate classroom. Indeed Greenblatt, Targoff, and the editorial staff at the New York Review of Books have performed a needed pedagogical service in this attractive new edition with its informative introduction. Though well annotated, this edition utilizes endnotes that are often annoying to have to consult, footnotes would have been preferable. It would also have been nice if they had included Browne's third great work, *The Garden of Cyprus*, as well as some of his more minor writings though that may have to wait for a future version; Patrides' earlier edition does include these writings. One provocative, though I think ultimately successful decision, lay in not modernizing spellings. Some non-specialist

readers may grow annoyed with the variable nature of early modern orthography, but difficulties in comprehension aside it helps give the reader a sense of the state of our language in the seventeenth-century. Another thing that students trained on the minimalist conventions of many modern style guides might at first find disquieting about Browne is his sheer wordiness. He is a writer who employs commas, semicolons, and clause upon clause. While specialists in seventeenth-century literature are obviously familiar with the conventions of that era's writing, our students should be expected to find Browne tough-going. Even the quickest of modern readers may find their speed considerably slowed down by authors like Browne, Burton, Milton and Donne who wrote sentences that seem cumbersome to our 140-character world. Though this impediment is probably part of why Browne is unknown today, casual readers who are interested should not be discouraged by his style. Like reading William Faulkner, Browne's work needs to be slowly parsed out. But this is the point; he is a writer who begs to be considered, not to be skimmed. That in part may be because he is a refugee from an age of less media static, but that does not mean that we shouldn't encourage him to be of our age as well.

Thankfully we are beyond the reductionist arguments of cannon-builders who would have it that claims can be universal and that texts can be crudely ranked. But at the risk of submitting Browne to some sort of absolutist aesthetic criteria, one of the most rewarding aspects of examining a mind like his is to come across the moving,

personal, very human and familiar observations that come from a person who lived in a time so different from our own. This is the utility of great literature: empathy that can come from the sepulcher that Browne was so obsessed with. As an orthodox Christian writing about a pagan past he was still able to recognize the human in his subjects, especially their fear of death and their desire for contact. Reflecting on the cremated remains found in those Norfolk urns, he meditates on loss and pain, and what it means that we fear never seeing dead loved ones again. He notes that the ashes of multiple people are commingled together in the urns, and wonders if “when distance of death denied such conjunctions, unsatisfied affections conceived some satisfaction to be neighbours in the grave, to lye Urne by Urne, and touch but in their names” (116). He is right that in death we can no longer touch, that all that are left are “names,” that is words. And yet his own words still vocalize his thoughts almost four centuries later. He writes “who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried” (93)? Hopefully with this most recent edition there will be an exhumation of an author who has too long been buried.