Introduction

The City of Norwich's handsome bronze monument to its most famous man of letters was erected in 1905, the tercentenary of Browne's birth. The large effigy is seated in a chair contemplating the fragment of a funeral urn in its outstretched right hand, its head resting thoughtfully in its left. On a summer's day early in the twenty-first century, this memorial was in the middle of a large flock of little boys furiously skateboarding in the Haymarket; a few yards beyond them the outdoor market stalls were doing a brisk trade; and Sir Thomas himself was wearing an orange plastic traffic cone on his head. In the midst of business and pleasure, no one was paying the slightest attention to this grave figure, even with its unusual headgear. The scene is so quintessentially Brownean that it defies comedy and even irony: time makes pyramids pillars of snow, and monuments, he concludes in *Urne-Buriall*, are 'but the irregularities of vainglory, and wilde enormities of ancient magnanimity'. To be apparently derelict and unknown in the bustle of future ages is no more than the fate of Methusaleh, whose long life has become his only chronicle; by the same token, a day-glow plastic traffic cone is no more than the cold consolation of eternity.

This monument is not Browne's tomb. His bones lie nearby, under the floor in the chancel of St Peter Mancroft, the large, incomparably beautiful parish church which dominates the Haymarket. By a curious coincidence, his remains suffered the kind of fate he so often refers to in *Urne-Buriall*. Disturbed in 1840 during repair work in the church, the coffin was robbed of Browne's skull in mysterious circumstances, but not before a plaster cast had been made of it. Later in the decade a skull reputedly Browne's and matching the cast was presented to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. There it remained, while the plaster cast was put on display at the local museum. The skull was not reinterred in St Peter Mancroft until 1922. Before this was done, biometric studies were made comparing the skull with the known and purported portraits of Browne, the results of which confirmed that the skull was indeed his. 'Who knows

the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?' he asks, and the rumination is prophetic, with the serial in- and exhumation, multiple relics (varyingly authentic), grave-robbery, and antiquarian examination of his bodily fragments sounding like a vignette of his own invention.

Browne was primarily interested in fragments, remains, tokens – material, textual, and conceptual clues to a ruined or lost order. An organising structure of all his major works, this book proposes, is the restitution – attempted, achieved, or failed – of that order. The following chapters examine his work in the light of a range of related disciplines and practices loosely grouped under the heading of natural philosophy or the new empiricism of the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, disciplines which include reparative cataloguing, collecting, experimentation, observation, and antiquarianism (in artefactual and documentary forms). These categories are linked to Browne's writing through the areas of study especially interesting to him, including certain forms of medical diagnosis, the study of physic and botany, archaeology, numismatics, etymology, scientific nomenclature, and anatomy. The spectrum of his interests and accomplishments is informed, I argue, by the developing and conventionless essay-form (a form which in his hands is sometimes a primitive dramatic monologue), by the necessity for an authenticating discourse of scientific experiment, report, and analysis, and above all by the overwhelmingly influential Baconian model of intellectual progress and cooperation, all features of what was then termed, by scientist and layman alike, 'civility'.

In my first chapter I argue that Browne's writing and themes must primarily be understood in terms of civil behaviour, a concept essential both to polite social interaction and more importantly to the developing culture of scientific and antiquarian investigation, for which civility is the foremost tool in the advancement of learning. I use the initiating event of his literary career, the pirating of *Religio Medici* in 1642, as the referent for his understanding of cooperation and tolerance, ideas which inform all his subsequent work.

Religio Medici is a first and very immature work, one in which the young Browne is trying out effects, is not always in control of his material, and is attempting, not always convincingly and even occasionally comically, to make an intellectual *summa* despite his youth. The second chapter discusses the competing 'voices' of *Religio*, that of the original compositional moment (*circa* 1635), and that of ten years on in the 1643 preface and in the additions to the authorised version; this bivocalism, I argue, can be read as a nascent dramatic monologue. Despite its earliness, the contingent

nature of Browne's thought is fully on display in *Religio Medici*, and my discussion notes the important connexions this early style has with the essays of Montaigne and Bacon, and how it represents what would become in the later works a link between the early form of essay-writing and the post-Restoration scientific report as practised by Hooke, Boyle, and other members of the Royal Society. It extends the concept of learned sociability by examining Browne's use of natural civility in certain insects, who become for him a signature of the cooperative endeavour he is about to join.

Browne participated in networks of civil intellectual exchange between virtuosi, naturalists, and doctors, and Chapter Three considers *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* in terms of the polarities of vulgarity and civility which govern such networks and their activities, and of the rhetoric of technological and scientific advancement and social improvement. A textual cabinet of curiosities, a Baconian compilation which civilly displays Browne's vast learning for the benefit of other civil investigators and readers, *Pseudodoxia* is conceptually linked with early-modern collections and with the history of museums. The optimistic tone of *Religio Medici*, however, which ought to be foremost in *Pseudodoxia*, begins to fail by the end of the book, and we detect the emergence of the darker and more sceptical Browne of *Urne-Buriall*.

The themes of Urne-Buriall discussed in Chapter Four introduce specifically antiquarian cooperation between Browne and his colleagues in learning, and situate Browne's own style of open-minded antiquarianism in relation to the great English tradition that begins with Camden and flourishes well beyond the end of the seventeenth century. But this essay on cremation and burial finally disparages the antiquarian project: using his archaeological learning Browne explodes the myth of preservation and shows that the true theology of the past is that which reminds us of the end of days. This resurrection theme is one which has been indicated from the beginning of my book and which will cumulatively be shown to colonise much of his thought.

Chapter Five offers a brief excursus on *Musæum Clausum* and other spoofs of antiquarian learning and natural philosophy. Although out of chronological order, it serves as a foil to *Urne-Buriall*, one which alerts us to Browne's uneasy sense of the Baconian project to restore 'a knowledge broken', and which in a quite different mode from *Urne-Buriall* examines the futility of collecting and compiling.

Chapter Six discusses *The Garden of Cyrus*, Browne's last major investigative work. Here he most fully integrates his investigative antiquarianism with his natural theology and his empirical botany and embryology. The *decussis* or the quincunx is for Browne a mystical signature of renewal and

resurrection, but it is one which he must piece out as a practising, empirically rigorous scientist, one who is most at home with the observation of seeds and insects, two categories of life which were of special interest to biologists working on generation, and to craftsmen attempting to perfect the technologies of observation. The discussion considers theories of generation, the development of microscopes, and the ways in which these ideas and tools allowed Browne to construct a theory of life from the smallest observable parts of nature. This chapter links *Cyrus* with ideas of retirement and of paradise, and proposes that with its outstanding central scientific digression on generation it be read as a *structural*, and not simply a thematic, counterpart to *Urne-Buriall*.

Chapter Seven considers Browne's fugitive writings – the remains of his experimental and observational life included in his notebooks and tracts – and concludes the book as a whole.

If I have omitted two substantial minor compositions (*Letter to a Friend* and *Christian Morals*) from extended treatment it is because they repeat the more powerful themes of the four major works and the *Tracts* without usefully extending them in the terms of my own discussion. It may be objected, too, that I have chosen to refer to Browne without the title of his knighthood. Although virtually every book and electronic database which includes him lists him as 'Sir' Thomas Browne, the honour was granted in the final decade of his life, possibly as a mere formality to please the visiting King, and seems to me essentially unconnected with the spirit of his civil behaviour and of his voice in the compositions of 1635–72.

If Browne had doubts about the afterlife of human relics, his own literary remains have survived with extraordinary vigour in the imaginative universe of English letters. My own enthusiasm began very prosaically during an otherwise dull morning sitting an SAT (American college entrance) examination in a bland high-school classroom. The setters of the multiple-choice exercise had (quite improbably as it now seems) chosen the rhapsodic passage from *Urne-Buriall* V where oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy and diuturnity is a dream and folly of expectation. With this transfixing prose reverberating in my mind, it was not easy to complete the test; and because it was unattributed I did not discover its source for some years. One quotable fragment – 'and Methusaleh's long life his only chronicle' – casually dropped into an unrelated undergraduate essay caught the attention of my tutor, who informed me, at last, whom I was plagiarising with such delight.

Browne has also lived in many great imaginations. His powerful tropes so exercised the splenetic Presbyterian controversialist Alexander Ross that

he issued lengthy rebuttals of *Religio Medici* and *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* shortly after their publication, rebuttals whose fury only magnifies the cool brilliance of his target. Other seventeenth-century voices did Browne the honour of mimicking his title and manner, such as MacKenzie's *Religio Stoici* (1663), Meriton's *Religio Militis* (1672), T. A.'s *Religio Clerici* (1681), Dryden's *Religio Laici* (1682), and Bridgwater's *Religio Bibliopolae* (1691), and further 'Religios' – *Philosophi*, *Chemici*, *Grammatici*, *Obstetrici*, *Bibliographici*, *Journalistici*, *Libertini*, *Mathematici*, *Poetae*, *Religiosi*, and *Veterum* – have been appearing unabated since the eighteenth century.

Johnson committed his only essay on a writer solely of prose in *Lives of the Poets* to Browne, of whom he said 'the horizon of his understanding was much larger than the hemisphere of the world',[1] but whose foibles and eccentricities he characterised with elegant, affectionate irony; indeed, Walter Pater detected in Johnson's own 'slow latinity' an imitation of Browne.[2] Noah Webster was not so temperate in his criticism of Johnson's injudicious selections of Browne for the *Dictionary*: 'the style of Sir Thomas is not English; and it is astonishing that a man attempting to give the world a standard of the English language should have ever mentioned his name but with a reprobation'.[3] Coleridge, on the other hand, carefully annotated a copy of *Religio Medici* for Sara Hutchinson, with special symbols to apprise her of 'sublimity', 'majesty', 'ingenuity', and 'quaintness'.[4]

Charles Lamb named Thomas Browne and Fulke Greville as the two literary personages he would most wish to have met in their nightgowns and slippers. James Russell Lowell compared him to Shakespeare. The American Romantics and Transcendentalists of the mid-nineteenth century were avid readers of Browne: Poe commended Browne as 'a model of manners, with a richly marginalic air', by which he meant that Browne expresses himself 'freshly – boldly – originally – with abandonment – without conceit';[5] Emerson took pleasure in recommending him to Margaret Fuller; Melville, who called Browne 'a crack'd Archangel', had much inspiration for *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* from *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* and *Religio Medici*; Emily Dickinson told Thomas Higginson in 1862 that Ruskin, Revelation, and Browne were the indispensable prose works she kept by her.[6] Thoreau

[1] Samuel Johnson, *The Life of Sir Thomas Browne* in Patrides *STB*, 502. [2] Patrides *STB*, 481.
[3] To David Ramsay, 1807 (*The Letters of Noah Webster*, ed. Harry H. Warfel (New York: Library Publishers, 1953), 286).
[4] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia* in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), XII, 765.
[5] Edgar Allen Poe, 'Marginalia', *Democratic Review* (November 1844), 484–94; reprinted in Poe, *Marginalia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981), 1.
[6] Emily Dickinson to Thomas Higginson, 26 April 1862 in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johns, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), II, 404.

mimicked *Urne-Buriall* in his remarks in *Walden* on the *vanity* of opulence;[7] and no one reading Thoreau on old clothes can avoid detecting this inflection:

> if my jacket and trousers, my hat and shoes, are fit to worship God in, they will do; will they not? Who ever saw his old clothes, – his old coat, actually worn out, resolved into its primitive elements, so that it was not a deed of charity to bestow it on some poor boy, by him perchance to be bestowed on some poorer still, or shall we say richer – who could do with less? I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes.[8]

Bram Stoker read *Religio Medici* in preparation for writing *Dracula*, perhaps gathering ideas and material for the character of van Helsing; and in the annals of scholarship there can be few more surprising developments than the serendipitous discovery of Stoker's reading list in which this fact is revealed, an anecdote of a discovered fugitive manuscript which would make part of a modern *Musæum Clausum*: two scholars, expecting to be shown an early German woodcut of Vlad the Impaler which they had come to Philadelphia to examine, were casually asked by the curator of the Rosenbach Foundation Library if they would be interested in seeing Stoker's working notes for *Dracula*. 'At first we could not believe our ears. No scholar had ever found Stoker's notes.'[9] The relics of many lie, as Browne says, in all parts of the earth; these may seem to have wandered far.

E. M. Forster made Browne, along with Dante and Shelley, one of the drivers of the celestial omnibus which travels to a place where literary characters and motifs are real, and Browne is imagined as a more than usually philosophical English cab-driver who refuses the hero's watch in lieu of a ticket:

> Tickets on the line, whether single or return, can be purchased by coinage from no terrene mint. And a chronometer, though it had solaced the vigils of Charlemagne, or measured the slumbers of Laura, can acquire by no mutation the doublecake that charms that fangless Cerberus of Heaven![10]

One Benjamin Dockray claimed to have discovered the dialogue suggested by Browne in *Urne-Buriall* 'between two Infants in the womb concerning the state of this world [which] might handsomely illustrate our

[7] See Robin Grey, The *Complicity of Imagination: The American Renaissance, Contests of Authority, and 17th-Century English Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[8] Henry Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 23.
[9] Raymond McNally and Radu Florescu, quoted by Elizabeth Miller, '[Stoker's Research]' in *Three Vampire Tales*, ed. Anne Williams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 47.
[10] 'The Celestial Omnibus' in *Collected Short Stories of E.M. Forster* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1948), 45.

ignorance of the next'. Published in 1855, it sounds nothing like Browne, a fact explained by Dockray as the effect of translation back into English from an early German translation of the lost original.[11] It has been suggested that the thirteenth variation in Elgar's *Enigma Variations* (1899) is based on *Religio Medici*; and indeed, Browne seems to generate a certain kind of mystery. J. B. Priestly, hearing that the plaque at number 12 Orford Place commemorating Browne's residence there was once mistaken for a doctor's surgery by Kelley's *Directory of Norwich 1929*, told the following ghost story to his friend:

> 'Don't you see it? The year is 1929, after the publication of that directory. Late at night, with everything closed solid, a woman is suddenly taken ill and her husband, frantic, grabs for the directory to look for a physician. There is no telephone, but the nearest doctor is a man named Browne, a few squares away. The husband snatches his hat, rushes out into the darkened streets, and in a few minutes is standing before the tablet in Orford Place. Yes, there he is! – "*Thomas Browne, M.D.*" He plunges his thumb into the bell and –'
>
> 'And what?'
>
> 'Gets him'.[12]

Who, indeed, knows the fate of his bones? Even gravestones tell the truth scarce forty years, and to be read by bare inscriptions, by enigmatical epithets or first letters of our names, to be studied by antiquaries who we were, are cold consolations unto the students of eternity.

Other admirers of Browne have included Thomas de Quincey, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, Cyril Connolly, and Jorge Luis Borges. A massive project, the construction of a universal encyclopaedia of an apparently lost civilisation, is accidentally discovered by the narrator in Borges' 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (1941). The *First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*, itself now vanished but for a single volume, signals the melancholy dispersion of a culture and of its only record – beautifully Brownean themes. The narrator eventually discovers that Tlön had in fact been the creation of an early-seventeenth-century hermetic group somewhere in Europe, a fictional world which has since been insinuated into the realm of learning like an intellectual virus. Borges's narrator retreats in despair to the only consolation he can think of, the translating into Spanish of *Urne-Buriall*. The very real Kingdom of Redonda – a Tlön-like state consisting of a tiny guano island

[11] Benjamin Dockray, 'Reminiscences of the Unborn Life of Twins, 1683' in *Conjectural Restoration of the Lost Dialogue between Two Twins* (1855).

[12] Originally told by Vincent Starrett, *Books Alive* (New York: Random House, 1940); quoted by Jeremiah Finch, *Sir Thomas Browne: A Doctor's Life of Science and Faith* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), 26–7.

in the Caribbean ruled by Javier I – has its own publishing house (Reino de Redonda), much of whose output consists of Spanish translations of Browne's works by his royal admirer, Javier Marias.

W. E. Sebald (dedicatee of the Redondan translations) produced in *The Rings of Saturn* a perambulation of the Norfolk-Suffolk borders in the style of, and suffused with references to, the Norfolk doctor.[13] Susan Sontag, Allen Kurzweil, and Philipp Blom have used curious and natural historical collecting as themes in recent works, Blom with reference to Browne himself.[14] J. A. Cuddon's magisterial memoir of Istanbul in the 1950s finds words expressive of that great city in *Religio Medici*.[15] Tony Kushner's eccentric play *Hydriotaphia* is remotely connected to Browne's writings, and even more remotely to Browne himself, who features as the main character: Kushner characterises him rather improbably as a 'nasty bloated logorrheic old bugger', a series of epithets even his arch-enemy Alexander Ross would have resisted.[16]

Certain modern artists, even if they do not read Browne, nevertheless respond to the same impulses of collecting and encyclopaedic assemblage. Brian Catling cites Browne as a favourite as he discusses the 'half-remembered pattern of observance' in his own work.[17] In the same spirit, Joseph Cornell's cabinets of memory, Mark Dion's bio-installations, and the curious artefacts made by Man Ray, André Breton, Luigi Ontani, Ian Hamilton-Finlay, Yves Klein, Claudio Parmiggiani, Pino Pascali, Kurt Schwitters, Jean Arp, and Marcel Broodthaers respond to the same collecting and ordering impulses to which Browne reacted in early museums and cabinets of curiosity, arrays and displays strongly reflected in their work.[18] Perhaps the most extended and brilliantly Brownean project of all is the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Culver City, California, a scholarly

[13] W. E. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), trans. from the German by Michael Hulse (London: Harvill, 1998). Sebald's encounter with *Musæum Clausum* generates unacknowledged additions of his own to the catalogue, an effect Browne seems to have on some of his fans. See my next note on Philipp Blom.

[14] Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover* (1992); Allen Kurzweil, *A Case of Curiosities* (1992); and Philipp Blom, *To Have and to Hold: An Intimate History of Collectors and Collecting* (London: Allen Lane, 2002). Blom is one of the few writers to interest himself in *Musæum Clausum* (although has confused some of Browne's imaginary books with those of Rabelais and of Johann Fischart (187) – an occupational hazard, apparently, for those who read this work (see my previous note on Sebald).

[15] J. A. Cuddon, *The Owl's Watch-Song: A Study of Istanbul* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1960), 84, 183, 197–8.

[16] Tony Kushner, *Death and Taxes: Hydriotaphia and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000), 31.

[17] Brian Catling, *Tending the Vortex: The Works of Brian Catling*, ed. Simon Perril (Cambridge: CCCP Books, 2001), 45.

[18] Mark Dion, *Natural History and Other Fictions* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, Hamburg: Kunstverein, and Amsterdam: De Appel, 1997); Adalgisa Lugli, *Wunderkammer* (Torino: Umberto Allemandi, 1997).

collection of meticulously catalogued and ironised items – a map of the siege and battle of Pavia, a scale model of Noah's ark, a wall of antlers, microscopic carving of unfeasible complexity, a selection of mouse-cures, and a vitrine of inhaled objects – which seem like refugees from *Musæum Clausum*.[19]

Like the commemorands of the Walsingham urns, little might Browne have expected the curiosity of future ages to honour his memory in quite these ways, although it is tempting to believe that the author of *Musæum Clausum* would have appreciated the wit and invention of such 'after-considerations'. It is one of the undertakings of this book to show why.

[19] See Lawrence Wechsler, *Mr Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

CHAPTER 1

Browne's civility

Happy are they whom privacy makes innocent.
(*U-B* v, 170)

THE PRESS AND THE APOCALYPSE

In the fourth act of Seneca's *Thyestes*, fearful Chorus imagines a universal cataclysm which issues from the murder of Thyestes' young sons by their uncle Atreus, who means to secure the kingdom for himself and his heirs. Thyestes is about to learn that he has cannibalised his own sons at Atreus' banquet, and for this, says Chorus, the heavens will revolt, the seasons will be confused, and chaos will come again. This vision ends in a desperate apostrophe:

> And are we chosen out of all earth's children
> Of a disjointed universe? Are we
> To see the world's end come?
> A cruel fate brought us to birth, if we
> Have lived to lose the Sun, or if our sins
> Have driven him away.
> But we must not complain, nor fear;
> *Too fond of life is he who would not die*
> *When all the world dies with him*.[1] [italics mine]

It is with a paraphrase of the final lines of this apocalyptic passage that Thomas Browne chooses to open his preface 'To the Reader' in the 1643 *Religio Medici* authorising the previously anonymous essay as his own.

It is always useful to unpack such prefaces, especially one linked to the later printing of a much earlier work; and *Religio Medici*, written at

[1] Seneca, *Thyestes*, ll. 875–84 (in Seneca, *Four Tragedies and Octavia*, trans. E. F. Watling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 83. Seneca offers a related sentiment in *Troades*, lines 162–4: 'Happy Priam, happy is any man who dying in war has taken with him all things spent' (*Seneca's 'Troades': A Literary Introduction with Text, Translation, and Commentary*, trans. Elaine Fantham (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 136–7).