



## Religio Medici & Urne-Buriall

*Thomas Browne* , *Stephen Greenblatt (Editor)* , *Ramie Targoff (Editor)*

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Sir Thomas Browne is one of the supreme stylists of the English language: a coiner of words and spinner of phrases to rival Shakespeare; the wielder of a weird and wonderful erudition; an inquiring spirit in the mold of Montaigne. Browne was an inspiration to the Romantics as well as to W.G. Sebald, and his work is quirky, sonorous, and enchanting.

Here this baroque master's two most enduring and admired works, *Religio Medici* and *Urne-Buriall*, appear in a new edition that has been annotated and introduced by the distinguished scholars Ramie Targoff and Stephen Greenblatt (author of the best-selling *Will in the World* and the National Book Award-winning *The Swerve*). In *Religio Medici* Browne mulls over the relation between his medical profession and his profession of the Christian faith, pondering the respective claims of science and religion, questions that are still very much alive today. The discovery of an ancient burial site in an English field prompted Browne to write *Urne-Buriall*, which is both an early anthropological examination of different practices of interment and a profound meditation on mortality. Its grave and exquisite music has resounded for generations.

## Religio Medici & Urne-Buriall Details

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# From Reader Review Religio Medici & Urne-Buriall for online ebook

## Robert says

I have been told that the style of Sir Thomas Browne's prose surpasses anything else written in the English language. After finishing this beautiful NYRB edition, I am inclined to add my support to that claim. It's sheer playfulness. I often find embellished writing tedious and suspicious, as if the author is trying to slip some deep flaw past me by applying a heavy varnish of awe and wonder. But Browne embraces his flaws and inconsistencies (of which there are many!) He dawdles over "irrelevant" details and fondly rattles off long lists of Greek poets and Biblical characters, commenting and speculating on their contradictory viewpoints.

For me, his writing is most captivating when it's rooted in curiosity. Perhaps this is why I enjoyed the Urne-Buriall much more than the Religio Medici on the whole.

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## Caleb says

But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity. Who can but pity the founder of the Pyramids? *Herostratus* lives that burnt the Temple of *Diana*, he is almost lost that built it; Time hath spared the Epitaph of *Adrians* horse, confounded that of himself. In vain we compute our felicities by the advantage of our good names, since bad have equall durations; and *Thersites* is like to live as long as *Agamemnon*. Who knows whether the best of men be known? or whether there be not more remarkable persons forgot, than any that stand remembred in the known account of time? Without the favour of the everlasting Register the first man had been as unknown as the last, and *Methuselahs* long life had been his only Chronicle.

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## Anand says

Blessed be the cracked archangel. Religio Medici, his eloquent and learned treatise of being a Christian and a scientist - full of the deep questions of faith that animate us all to the end. Urne Burial, a writing on the discovery of some urns that is suffused with a poetic brilliance that shines best in the last two or so chapters; not as exhilarating as the long-sentence extravaganzas of Religio Medici, but still with that same brilliance.

By loving Browne, I am with Virginia Woolf in that I am "the salt of the earth."

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## Alex says

not for nothing did virginia woolf describe thomas browne as "*first of the autobiographers*" - in "religio medici" he exonerates himself from the "*vice*" of pride and denies the charge of egotism, but, peering out from the depths of his supreme solipsism, claims to "*understand no less then six Languages (...) [to] have not onely seene severall Countries, beheld the nature of their climes, the Choreography of their Provinces,*

*Topography of their Cities, but understand their severall Lawes, Customes and Policies (...) [to] know the names, and somewhat more, of all the constellations in my Horizon (...) [to] know most of the Plants of my Country, and of those about mee".* one wonders if there is anything under the sun that escapes the notice of this erudite, near-omniscient savant. i felt like i was steeped in an atmosphere of religiosity, tempered now & then by salubrious doubt, and earnest navel-gazing; reading this was alternately amusing and extremely irritating. "urne-buriall", though, is fantastic. i chose to read this after so many other writers praised the style of browne's prose and cited him as an influence, in the reverent tone with which one speaks of a forefather without whose contributions one's resources and privileges would not exist; it did give me some insight into how w.g. sebal, whose books i love and who alludes to "urne-buriall" in *the rings of saturn*, might have drawn inspiration from browne's writings.

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## Chelsea Rae says

(more like 4.5)

"The earth is a point not onely in respect of the heavens above us, but of that heavenly and celestiall part within us: that masse of flesh that circumscribes me, limits not my mind: that surface that tells the heavens it hath an end, cannot perswade me... whilst I study to find how I am a Microcosme or little world, I finde my selfe something more than the great."

these texts are gorgeous, and greenblatt&targoff's introduction is lovely as well. i spent a long night lying on the floor of a friend's loft, drinking cider and reading parts of it aloud to him when i couldn't help it, and honestly... that was maybe the best way to experience browne. he's engrossing.

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## Alex Sarll says

Two rambling, amazing essays from that spell of the early seventeenth century when the English language was really starting to stretch its legs and realise what it could do. In verse, Shakespeare; in prose, Burton and Browne. And whereas Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* is a monster, a sea into which I'll be dipping for years to come, Browne created these slender musings, each the perfect companion for an afternoon excursion. 'Religio Medici' is a curious creature; ostensibly one man's musings on his faith, it also works as a character study of a deeply unreliable narrator. The sections where he's telling us how he definitely doesn't suffer from the sin of pride one bit, indeed, he's the least proud man in the world ever, are a reminder that self-disgust was self-obsession long before the Manic Street Preachers, and then you get the passages where he uses his scientific knowledge to explain away various Biblical miracles, or point out the absurdity of other details in scripture - before noting that this just gives him better opportunity for the exercise of faith! Is he taking the piss, or is this a sincere example of how stupid ideology can make a smart man? At this distance, it's impossible to say. But every so often, the prose starts to thrum and he makes you remember why you're putting up with him. There's also a major homoerotic subtext going on, for those who like that sort of thing. 'Urne-Buriall', though, is simply great. A survey of burial practices through the ages, occasioned by the discovery of an ancient grave site in Norfolk, it is positively vibrant with Browne's great store of knowledge, and his melancholy at the thought of death. Most every sentence is fit for the ages, and given an extra resonance by the way in which this man, now himself dead for centuries, is brought back to us through the

trail his questing mind has left.

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### **Richard says**

Browne is a superb writer, an English Montaigne. I can see his stylistic influence on others, particularly Charles Lamb (and some of his prejudices are the same). *Religio* is a masterpiece of personal confession, an ode to reason but also to ambiguity. There's a modernist concept of "negative capability" which Browne delights in.

*Urn* is a bit tedious, although interesting in its own right, but feels even more like Montaigne. The style is not quite as exquisite as *Religio*.

I recommend Browne only to those who are interested in style, as opposed to content, and enjoy truly masterful writing. The sense is entertaining, but I think an average reader would find it tedious. Parts of *Urn* are difficult, and some evaded my comprehension. The particular NYBC edition had an excellent introduction, perhaps overly lengthy. The essential endnotes failed to translate several passages towards the end of *Urn*, including some in Greek for which Google Translator was unhelpful.

Browne invented several hundred mostly Latinate words, including "literary", "suicide" and "computer", about a hundred of which are commonly used today. For that, and his stylistic source for writers from Woolf to Hazlitt, we owe him.

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### **Tom Wascoe says**

*Religio Medici* is a book that must be read slowly and digested. It was written as someone writing to themselves like when one writes to clarify ones thoughts. Much discussion about religion, science, life, death the afterlife. Even though it was written in the mid 1600's much of the thoughts are relevant for today's reader and thinker.

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### **Cornelius Browne says**

Three and a half centuries old, and handsomely resurrected this autumn by New York Review of Books, *Religio Medici* and *Urne-Buriall* are probably the works that have secured Sir Thomas Browne's afterlife. Had the vagaries of time robbed us of them, however, this 17th-century doctor would still have a foothold in our lives - many of his coinages are nowadays commonplace (literary, medical, ambidextrous, hallucination, ingenious, electricity, ascetic, carnivorous...) and if Virginia Woolf is correct, Browne paved the way for all psychological novelists, autobiographers, and confession-mongers, the latter of which, in particular, the health of the book trade now seems unhealthily dependent upon - to say nothing of television channels. In *Religio Medici* we follow Browne on his musings along the fault lines between his profession and his

faith. The writing of Urne-Buriall was sparked by the discovery by a group of men digging in a rural field not far from where Browne lived of between forty and fifty ancient urns full of human ashes, pieces of bones, and funerary objects.

Both pieces are unlike anything I've previously read - and I've now reached the midpoint in a lifetime of reading, a chill fact that Urne-Buriall (the most involving meditation on death I've ever come across) repeatedly brought home. From each paragraph gleam nuggets that mental fingers have no option but to dig for. The writing is incredibly atmospheric, and can be read for the pleasure of its textures alone - this perhaps largely due to the editors wise decision to retain the original spelling (foulenesse, souldier, sleepe, himselfe, shipwrackt...) The same editors are to be congratulated for an introduction that nimbly places compass, flashlight and rucksack of provisions into the hands of 21st-century minds that now and again will certainly go astray in the mists - though even this is part of the pleasure!

This is one of those rare books you cradle in your hands for long moments, allowing a thought or turn of phrase to sink in. It's also one that somewhere like here you feel like quoting in its entirety. Not possible, of course, but I still have to end this with Browne's voice. He loved music, and in Religio Medici marvels at its power over him:

"it unites the ligaments of my frame, takes me to pieces, dilates me out of myself, and by degrees, mee thinkes, resolves me into Heaven."

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### **DoctorM says**

Two brilliantly eccentric and intriguing essays by one of the masters of English prose. "Urne-Buriall" especially is one of the half-forgotten gems of English literature--- one of those long walks through a whole world of ideas and arcane bits of the past that make one's life just a bit...uncanny. Sit and let your tongue run over the prose and read "Urne-Buriall" aloud a bit. Then look around and ask yourself Browne's questions--- which of us can ever know how many times and places his remains will be buried? Which of us can ever know how long his memory will survive? A fine meditation--- and one forgotten for far too long.

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### **Jack Crouse says**

very weird and obscure writing with many bizarre opinions. the explanatory notes in this edition are insufficient

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### **Jackson Cyril says**

No review of mine can rival Virginia Woolf's magnificent judgement on Browne, "The tavern music, the Ave Mary bell, the broken urn that the workman has dug out of the field plunge him into the depths of wonder and lead him, as he stands fixed in amazement, to extraordinary flights of speculation as to what we are, where we go, and the meaning of all things. To read Sir Thomas Browne again is always to be filled with astonishment, to remember the surprises, the despondencies, the unlimited curiosities of youth."

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## Chuck LoPresti says

Possibly the greatest prose stylist the English language can claim also possesses a strong sense of courage, depth of discourse and musical sense of crescendo. What can't this be a five? Perhaps it's fair to suggest that it's only chapter five of *Urn Burial* that warrants the claim but the work doesn't easily separate into disparate chapters. I have no fair claim to suggest what Browne intended but, presented as such, *Urn Burial* starts as a piece of scholarship well researched and better intended and slowly but steadily builds to the most amazing climax I can recall. Ripe with all the wisdom present in Aurelius, La Rochefoucauld and Montaigne, Browne's work deserves all lofty praise - and you will work for it. This is not an easy read but at about 140 pages for both works - it's brief compared to Burton. Much has been written about Browne but to me, most comparisons fail to accurately describe the prowess of Browne's mind. *The Anatomy of Melancholy* might sit on a similar shelf to *Religio Medici* but Burton's rambling and often less than compelling prose is no brother to Browne's sapient efficiency. The key to this, for me at least, lies in the honest self-questioning that appears throughout *Religio Medici*. This is what many call modern thinking. Krasznahorkai and Jaimey Gordon compare more favorably to Browne in this aspect with their sheer love of words and lack of arrogance that would present their thoughts as facts otherwise. Both of these modern writers share Browne's inquisitive prowess, skillful prose and courage in presenting the formation of their thoughts as primary in place of the conclusions that some readers require. The reader of Browne quickly senses that he is writing with a concern about his audience, both weary and wary of the limits of dogmatic constraints in *Religio Medici*. All restraint is slowly tossed off like sand bags on an air balloon in *Urn Burial* as the work rises to heights unmatched in my reading experience. As Browne's vision slowly glows to a refulgent radiance his words increase with exponential measures of grace and any attentive reader should be left stunned at the vision enabled by this skillful master. To be read again and again.

I do not possess an exhaustive knowledge of the various editions of Browne's work sufficient enough to provide a more valuable comparative analysis but this small NRYB offering contains helpful notes, Latin translations, a glossary of historic names, insightful opening essay and as always - a beautiful cover featuring a delightfully comparable selection of art complemented by the somehow-always-right colors that make this a welcome addition to my shelf, my top shelf.

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## Geoff Wyss says

Virginia Woolf calls Browne the 'first autobiographer,' the first writer to turn his attention inward and consider his own mysteries. You've probably got to pretend there was no Montaigne to say that, but Browne is very much in the line of Montaigne: curious, wide ranging, intimidatingly learned, funny, humble (with an obverse of enormous self-regard), awake, alert. Reading *casts a really broad light into The Rings of Saturn*, in which Sebald dwells at length on Browne.

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## Eric Cheflen says

*Religio Medici* and *Urne-Buriall* by Sir Thomas Browne.

By the usual criteria, Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* and *Urne Buriall* are unarguably classics. They

were written in the mid-17 century, and are still in print to this day. They are the subject of ongoing commentary and analysis, and form the subject matter of graduate school courses in English literature.

But there are other criteria by which a book may be judged as a classic, and in at least one of these, these books fail to meet the mark.

If Shakespeare's works, or Bach's, were written today, they would be hailed as high art, unusual in style perhaps, but nonetheless carrying an artistic message to modern man. If Browne's works were published today, I think they would be rejected as unworthy of current interest.

Browne's style of writing is not the limiting factor. True, he writes in long meandering sentences, but (to me, at least) that is a charming style. His 17th century orthography is likewise not a barrier to the reader. No, the bigger problem is that he has little profound to teach.

*Religio Medici* is a disquisition on Browne's inner microcosm. He considers the tenets of his Christian faith, and finds them wholly reliable, even when not wholly comprehensible. He offers moral lessons based on his faith, but none of these strikes me as particularly novel. In *Urne-Buriall*, Browne dilates on burial techniques of the ancient and modern world. Both books are choc-a-bloc with references to Classical Greek and Latin literature, many of them opaque to the modern reader.

The maddening thing about Browne's books is that, like proverbial rotten eggs, parts of them are excellent. I found that, just as I was ready to toss the books aside, and not invest good time after bad, Browne would deliver a beautifully wrought insight. For example, in *Urne-Buriall*, he writes, "To be ignorant of evils to come, and forgetfull of evils past, is a mercifull provision in nature whereby we digest the mixture of our few and evil dayes, and our delivered senses not relapsing into cutting remembrances, our sorrows are not kept raw by the edge of repetition."

Browne is also the ur-source for numerous neologisms in English. The Oxford English Dictionary credits him with introducing more than a hundred words into modern English. Such nouns as "exhaustion," "hallucination," and "suicide," and such verbs as "compensate," "invigorate," and "bisect" were first penned by Browne. Others of Browne's Latinate creations have not been adopted into English. This includes words such as "diuturnity" (long duration) and "absumption" (wasting away).

These books are must reading for someone who want to investigate the development of Christian thought in 17th century England, and the emergence of introspective autobiography in that era. The books might also be useful for someone who wants to wrestle with his own antinomies of Christian doctrine, guided by a man of sincere reflection and thought, but not formal theological training. For most others, I cannot recommend these books.

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