

URNE-BURIAL AND THE INTERREGNUM ROYALIST

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I

Thomas Browne's well-attested Royalism is nowhere more evident than in his letters to his son, Thomas, at the Restoration of Charles II (1630–1685) in 1660. These reveal Browne's excitement at the preparations for the King's Coronation, relate with approbation a national day of humiliation and fast for the 'Abominable murder' of Charles I (1600–1649), and demonstrate his unswerving devotion to the Church of England, relaying news of the 'sweet organ', and traditional Anglican service, now, at last, being reintroduced to a Norwich Cathedral desecrated and de-sanctified by Parliamentary forces during the Civil Wars.¹ Additional evidence of Browne's Royalism can be found in his published work, where, for example, we may adduce *Repertorium* (1680), with its barely concealed bitterness at puritan iconoclasm. 'In the time of the late civil wars', Browne writes, 'there were about a hundred brass inscriptions torn and taken away from grave stones and tombs, in the cathedral church of Norwich' (3.123), the alliterative 'torn and taken away' strikingly emphasizing Browne's indignation.²

Also to be found in *Repertorium*, strengthening the impression of Browne's anti-Puritanism, is a laudatory passage on a Royalist and Anglican *cause célèbre*, the ejected and sequestered Bishop of Norwich, Joseph Hall (1574–1656), Browne's patient until his death. Among other acts earning him the opprobrium of Parliament, Hall had railed

¹ Browne T., *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. G. Keynes, 2nd ed., 4 vols (London: 1964) 4.5, 4.8. References to Browne hereafter will be in text and to this edition. Browne's Royalism is discussed in: Preston C., *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science* (Cambridge: 2005) 14–15; Wilding M., "Religio Medici in the English Revolution" in *Dragons Teeth: Literature in the English Revolution*, (Oxford: 1987) 89–113; Post J., "Browne's Revision of *Religio Medici*", *Studies in English Literature* 25 (1985) 145–163; Berensmeyer L., "Rhetoric, Religion and Politics in Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*", *Studies in English Literature* 46 (2006) 113–132.

² See also Killeen K., "In the time of the late Civil Wars': Post-Restoration Browne and the Political Memory of *Repertorium*", in this volume.

in print, even more uncompromisingly than Browne was to do, against the damage caused to Norwich Cathedral.³ Hall, Browne declares, suffered ‘in the Rebellious times, when the revenues of the church were alienated’, an allusion to the confiscation of all Hall’s properties during the Civil Wars, along with the withholding of his annual allowance. To Browne, Hall was, despite – or perhaps because of – his travails at the hands of Parliament, a man of ‘singular humillity, patience and pietie’ (3.134).

Yet both of these sources – Browne’s letters to his son and *Repertorium* – post-date the English Revolution; it has always been much more difficult to accurately establish Browne’s political position – that is, to find any tangible evidence of his Royalism – during it. His wide circle of royalist and Anglican friends during these years, including, apart from Hall, Sir Thomas Knyvett (1596–1658), Sir Hamon L’Estrange (1605–1660), and Charles Le Gros (1596–1656), to whose son, Thomas (*b.* 1616–*fl.* 1656), *Urne-Buriall (Hydriotaphia)* was dedicated, may in itself signpost his political loyalties.⁴ Yet it would be naïve to pronounce on Browne’s opinions on the basis of the company he kept: as Kathryn Murphy has recently shown, Browne was in contact with the Puritan Barrington circle in 1640.⁵ More direct evidence of Browne’s Royalism during the 1640s and 1650s has proved elusive. For example, his extant correspondence during these decades, unlike that at the Restoration, betrays barely a hint of political partisanship, though it has been speculated that this was in part for reasons both of self-censorship and self-preservation.⁶ Jeremiah Finch has remarked that Browne ‘made it a point to allow no scrap of evidence about his political feelings or activities to remain among his papers’, since ‘it would have been foolhardy to fail to destroy even mildly incriminating documents’.⁷

As for his published work in this period, one hundred years ago Edmund Gosse spoke for most commentators in noting an ‘absence of almost all allusion to the Civil War’ in Browne’s corpus; indeed,

³ Hall J., “Bishop Hall’s *Hard Measure*” (1647), in *The Works of Joseph Hall* (London: 1714) xvii.

⁴ Toynbee M., “Some Friends of Sir Thomas Browne”, *Norfolk Archaeology* 31 (1956–1957) 377–394.

⁵ Murphy K., “‘A Man of Excellent Parts’: The Manuscript Readers of Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici*”, *Times Literary Supplement* 5492 (4 July 2008) 14–15.

⁶ For more on Browne’s correspondence at the Restoration, see Kevin Killeen’s essay in this volume.

⁷ Finch J., *Sir Thomas Browne: A Doctor’s Life of Science and Faith* (New York: 1950) 129.

in confidently asserting that ‘nothing in his works would lead us to suppose that he ever had any personal cognisance of it’.⁸ It is a view which persisted well into the second half of the twentieth century: Joan Bennett claimed that ‘there is nothing in his published writings to remind us of the Civil War’; and D.W. Jefferson, while acknowledging that the ‘outpouring of dissident opinion after 1640 must have brought home to a royalist and Anglican sensibility the disconcerting strength of alien forces’, nevertheless read into Browne’s writings ‘an untroubled contemplation of eternity’, in which the author ‘represents a sensibility that chooses not to relate itself to the turbulence of the age’.⁹

Where, in this case, may we turn for more substantial evidence of Browne’s Royalism during the 1640s and 1650s? Traditionally, two possible examples, at most, have been cited: first, Browne’s refusal, in October 1643, along with 431 other members of the Norwich gentry, to provide funds for the retaking of Royalist-held Newcastle by the Parliamentary army; and second, his apparent signature to a pamphlet published under the heading of *Vox Norwichi*, or *The Cry of Norwich*, ‘reviling the Magistrates and Ministry of Norwich’ for ejecting Norwich’s local Anglican ministers.¹⁰ Such evidence, however, is far from incontrovertible; indeed, the significance of the one and factual basis of the other have come under close scrutiny. As Jonathan Post has argued, Browne’s response to the demands of Parliament in 1643 might well ‘express a neutralist sentiment or even simply his antipathy to violence’ rather than signal his Royalism; while the authenticity of the ‘Browne’ signature on *Vox Norwichi* is complicated by the existence of at least four other men of that name in Norwich at the time.¹¹

Other than in these two instances, both of them problematic, the records are silent on the subject of Browne’s Royalism during these years. And this evidential lacuna has in turn informed the typical – and, as I will argue in this essay, increasingly unsustainable – image we have of him as a man essentially disengaged from the political and religious controversies of the day, living a studious life in Norwich, busy

⁸ Gosse E., *Sir Thomas Browne* (London: 1905) 102.

⁹ Bennett J., *Sir Thomas Browne: A Man of Achievement in Literature* (Cambridge: 1962) 1; Jefferson D.W., “‘Pitch beyond Ubiquity’: Thought and Style in Sir Thomas Browne”, in Patrides C.A. (ed.), *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne: The Ann Arbor Tercentenary Lectures and Essays* (Columbia, MO and London: 1982) 143–154, here 154.

¹⁰ Beecheno F.R., “The Norwich Subscription for the Regaining of Newcastle”, *Norfolk Archaeology* 18 (1914) 149–160.

¹¹ Post J., *Sir Thomas Browne* (Boston: 1987) 50.

with his flourishing medical practice, his remarkably disparate literary activities somehow transcending the turmoil and prejudices of the English Revolution. In this view, if Browne held strong political opinions, he was unwilling to advertise them, like so many other Royalists who reluctantly chose a *modus vivendi* with Parliament and the Commonwealth over exile. This image is reinforced by the idyllic terms in which the Norwich and Norfolk of these years, universally considered as steadfastly Parliamentary, have been described. As R.W. Ketton-Cremer somewhat quaintly put it:

Work went on as usual in fields and cowsheds and barns; the looms of Norwich clacked and rattled as busily as ever; the spinners and knitters toiled industriously in every village; the little ships crept about the coast, in and out of Wells and Blakeney, Cley and Cromer. Dr Thomas Browne visited his patients.¹²

Over the last twenty years this orthodoxy has begun to be successfully challenged. Important work has been done to temper the traditional image of Browne as politically passive during the Civil Wars and Interregnum, and the notion of Norfolk as a stronghold of Puritanism and Parliamentaryism is now widely contested. For example, the refusal of hundreds of members of the Norwich gentry to offer financial support for the retaking of Newcastle by Parliament in 1643, whether or not Browne was among their number, echoes the response at the outset of the Civil Wars, in August 1642, when many of the same individuals were reluctant to contribute to the Parliamentary war effort. Though probably of more symbolic than practical value, this earlier act of defiance was nevertheless taken seriously by Parliament, leading to an order in October 1642 authorizing the Deputy Lieutenants and Committees of Norfolk to disarm a number of its gentry 'for not contributing with the rest of the good subjects to the common charge in this time of imminent danger'.¹³

The apparent neutrality of Browne's published works in these years has been called into question, including that of Browne's complex, highly wrought essay, *Urne-Buriall*, begun in 1656 and completed and published, together with *The Garden of Cyrus*, in May 1658, when the Restoration was still two years away. Graham Parry, for example, has placed Browne's composition of *Urne-Buriall* within the wider context

¹² Ketton-Cremer R.W., *A Norfolk Gallery* (London: 1948) 56–57.

¹³ Ketton-Cremer R.W., *Norfolk Gallery* 66.

of Royalists such as William Burton (1609–1657) and Thomas Fuller (1608–1661) turning for political expression in troubled times to works of antiquity, in a political and religious climate where ‘numerous antiquaries had High Church inclinations which chimed with their sense of tradition and their fondness for ceremonies’.¹⁴ Amplifying this theme, Achsah Guibbory has argued that, at a time when Parliament’s *Directory of Public Worship* (1645) proscribed Anglican burial rites, Browne’s essay is ‘in part a defence of these rites and, indeed, of ceremony more largely’, that his urns have ‘voices’ which ‘speak’ to the present.¹⁵

Valuable as these findings have been, however, the rich seam of *Urne-Buriall*’s political potentialities is still to be fully mined. Vivid new light on the essay’s Royalism is cast by two fresh lines of enquiry: first, an examination of a much stronger and more specific link than has previously been acknowledged between Browne’s essay and a funeral sermon delivered by John Whitefoot (1610–1699) in honour of Bishop Hall, which Browne attended; and second, the identification of several thematic intersections between *Urne-Buriall* and the poems of Henry Vaughan (1621–1695); that is, the association of *Urne-Buriall* with a particular strain of contemporary royalist “survivalist” literature, a strain that was so widespread, and so recognizable, that by marshalling its tropes Browne was sending unmistakable signals about his political position.

2

Whitefoot’s funeral sermon was preached at Browne’s church of St. Peter Mancroft in Norwich on 30 September 1656, and published in London as *Death’s Alarum* in 1658.¹⁶ Inevitably, with its subject in royalist eyes

¹⁴ Parry G., *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: 1995) on Browne, 249–274; quotation from 18.

¹⁵ Guibbory A., *Ceremony and Community from Herbert to Milton* (Cambridge: 1988) 132. The full name of this measure, enacted by Parliament on 4 January 1645, was *An Ordinance for taking away the Book of Common Prayer, and for establishing and putting in execution of the Directory for the publique worship of God*. Post’s *Sir Thomas Browne* also calls Browne’s neutrality into question.

¹⁶ Whitefoot J., *Israel agchithanes, Deaths Alarum, or, The presage of approaching death given in a funeral sermon [...]* (London: 1656). All quotations from Whitefoot’s sermon to this source. Although the sermon does not appear in the catalogue of his library it is, however, likely that Browne would have wanted to own a copy, since printed funeral sermons of this period were often treated as mementos of the deceased.

a revered and persecuted Anglican bishop, it is freighted with contemporary political significance. Moreover, the fact that twenty years after the event, in *Repertorium*, Browne is moved to describe the sermon of his 'learned and faythfull old friend' Whitefoot as 'excellent', implies that it made a considerable personal impression on him (3.134).¹⁷ But why exactly did Browne regard it so highly, and what does this say about its possible influence on *Urne-Buriall* itself, which Browne had begun composing four months, at most, before he heard the sermon?¹⁸

Most obviously, Browne doubtless approved of the conspicuously reverential – if perhaps in places formulaic – tones in which Whitefoot, the Rector of Heigham, the parish to which Hall had retired, memorialized his subject. In his dedicatory epistle to Hall's son Robert, Whitefoot avers that the saintly Hall had in death been 'gathered to the spirits of the just that are made perfect'. More significantly, however, there is an intriguing and hitherto under-explored thematic overlap between *Death's Alarum* and *Urne-Buriall*.¹⁹ The former is based, at least initially, on Genesis 47 and 50, chapters suffused, like Browne's essay, with the subject not simply of death, but of burial rites. Emphasis is placed by Whitefoot on the imperatives of how and where to be buried, instanced by an early passage:

For that Israel did foresee and consider the approach of his death is plainly implied, as the reason why he took such a careful order with his son Joseph, about the place of his burial [...] The like order did Joseph give to his sons, about his burial, when he saw his time to die drew nigh, Gen 50.25,26. Both of them were very solicitous to be buried in the land of Canaan.²⁰

Furthermore, within this thematic congruence the specific subject of the fate of man's bones, an interlinking and constantly recurring topic in *Urne-Buriall*, features equally prominently in the sermon:

¹⁷ Whitefoot provided the first biography of Browne in "Some minutes for the life of Sir Thomas Browne", first published in Brownes's *Posthumous Works* (London: 1712) xxiv–xxxvii, in which he claimed to have known Browne better than 'any other Man, that is now left alive' (xxvii).

¹⁸ Guibbory has dated *Urne-Buriall*'s composition between May 1656 and its publication date in 1658: Guibbory A., "'A rationall of old Rites': Sir Thomas Browne's *Urne-Buriall* and the Conflict over Ceremony", *Yearbook of English Studies* 21 (1991) 229–241, here 231.

¹⁹ Post has observed 'buried reminiscences' of the sermon in *Urne-Buriall*: Post J., *Sir Thomas Browne* 134.

²⁰ Whitefoot J., *Death's Alarum* 3.

By faith, Joseph when he died made mention of the departing of Israel [out of Egypt] and gave commandment concerning his bones. Namely, that they should be carried with them into Canaan: Thereby declaring his own, and confirming their faith, concerning their deliverance out of the Egyptian Thralldom, which for some time they were yet to indure, and their certain possession of the Land of Promise.²¹

For Royalists and Anglicans living under the Commonwealth the contemporary political import of ‘deliverance out of the Egyptian Thralldom’, of ‘some time yet to endure’, and of eventual ‘possession of the Land of Promise’, would have been only too clearly inferred. What is particularly pertinent here, though, for its close resemblance to *Urne-Buriall*, is the precise reference to bones and burial, and the need to be ‘very solicitous’ over where one is laid to rest. In his dedication to Thomas Le Gros, Browne poses the central questions of his essay, and in so doing parallels the concerns of Whitefoot: ‘But who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried? who hath the Oracle of his ashes, or whither they are to be scattered?’ (1.131). Moreover, in Browne’s subsequent, lengthy description of the manner and custom of burial rites, including the respective histories of burial and inhumation, both Christian and pagan, the question not just of how but where one is buried, and its perceived importance for attaining immortality, continues, as in Whitefoot’s sermon, to loom large, whether it concerns the traditions of Rome, Norway, Denmark or Britain.

As little as four months, at most, after commencing work on *Urne-Buriall*, therefore, Browne witnesses, and in his own words is greatly impressed by, a royalist-leaning sermon by Whitefoot which invokes themes of burial and bones to help espouse a royalist cause which is presently afflicted but will ultimately triumph. This provides adequate grounds for asserting the strong likelihood that the imagery of *Urne-Buriall* was influenced by the sermon, and that through such parallels we can uncover some of the covert royalist sentiment in Browne.

Yet one of the enduring, if for the present purpose frustrating, features of Browne’s authorial intent is that we never quite seem able to pin it down. That is, just when, as here, a correlation with a contemporary work presents itself, Browne’s independence of thought resurfaces, casting doubt upon the strength of such connections. All too often, indeed, to borrow from *Urne-Buriall* itself, ‘Great examples grow thin

²¹ Whitefoot J., *Death’s Alarum* 4.

[...] Simplicity flies away' (1.132). In this instance our problem is that, on the specifics of the Canaan passage, though the subject matter is identical, Browne is appreciably more ambivalent than Whitefoot, who unequivocally relegates Israel's and Joseph's wish to be buried in Canaan to mere 'fancy', or

ridiculous absurdity; namely, because there shall be no resurrection at all of any but Jews, and of them only in the Land of *Canaan*, whither all bodies that are not buried there must be rol'd through some secret burroughs of the earth, from their most distant places of burial, before they can be rais'd to life.²²

By contrast, Browne incorporates the same passage of scripture into his own work in a manifestly more sympathetic and accommodating manner:

Some think the ancient Patriarchs so earnestly desired to lay their bones in *Canaan*, as hoping to make a part of that Resurrection, and though thirty miles from Mount *Calvary*, at least to lie in that Region, which should produce the first-fruits of the dead. And if according to learned conjecture, the bodies of men shall rise where their greatest Reliques remain, many are not like to erre in the Topography of their Resurrection. (1.157)

Browne, like Whitefoot, ultimately exposes the inefficacy, indeed futility, of the ancients' desire to 'lay their bones in *Canaan*', and to that end the tone of 'the Topography of their Resurrection' could conceivably be mockingly sardonic. Yet unlike Whitefoot's, Browne's tenor in this passage, as Claire Preston has observed, is generally 'fluid and conjectural rather than fixed and unqualified'.²³ In contrast to Whitefoot, he does not dismiss out of hand, as 'ridiculous absurdity', the wishes of those who would 'make a part of that Resurrection'. Thus, while the thematic convergence between the two works is striking, sufficiently so to assert a direct influence of *Death's Alarum* on *Urne-Buriall*, the particular style and sensitivity applied by Browne set clear parameters to that influence.

²² Whitefoot J., *Death's Alarum* 4.

²³ Preston C., *Thomas Browne* 134.

3

For Royalists living in England during the English Revolution, the genre of the funeral sermon was only one of many which provided a potent source of consolation and indeed subversive defiance. A much deeper well of recurring themes and motifs designed to sustain Royalists and Royalism in defeat can be found in the religious and secular cavalier poetry of the 1640s and 1650s. Among the most prevalent of these are friendship, contemplation, solitude, and stoic notions of seeing out the “cavalier winter”. The devotional poetry of the Welsh writer and translator Henry Vaughan – like Browne, a trained physician – embraces all of these, as well as other equally important royalist literary themes, such as hidden potentiality, subterranean survival, recovery, quietude, privacy, obscurity, innocence, and the transience of time.²⁴ Vaughan’s hermetic beliefs, with their concealed and occult connotations, can equally well be read in terms of a hidden royalist agenda, in much the same way as Browne (as I am arguing here) conceals his royalist convictions in *Urne-Buriall*.

Juxtaposing Vaughan’s poems with *Urne-Buriall*, it should readily be conceded, is methodologically problematic, since it entails drawing analogies between distinct literary genres. In addition, there is currently no firm evidence that Browne had read the work of, much less met, Henry Vaughan, although he certainly knew other royalist writers, such as Roger L’Estrange (1616–1704), and may at least have heard of Vaughan through their mutual acquaintance, Bishop Hall.²⁵ Nevertheless, in the wider context of royalist and Anglican oppositional writers and writings in this era, a judicious comparison between the responses of Vaughan and Browne to political disaster is not only a legitimate, but also a productive exercise, deepening our understanding of one of Browne’s most celebrated works.

Vaughan most memorably articulates his own evocative brand of poetry for the Royalist in retreat, while like Browne claiming – or rather, affecting – detachment from political events of the day, in his collection of poems entitled *Silex Scintillans*, first published in 1650, with an equally popular second edition published in 1655. Of particular

²⁴ For a recent account of Vaughan’s experience of the Civil Wars see Philip West’s *Henry Vaughan’s Silex Scintillans: Scripture Uses* (Oxford: 2001) 150–153.

²⁵ Gosse E., *Sir Thomas Browne* 107.

significance is the allusion to retired, buried and concealed Royalism and Anglicanism that pervades the poems of *Silex*. The imagery of the poems' titles, such as "Burial", "The Seed Growing Secretly", and "The Retreat", is suggestive in itself of this key theme, immediately signalling a consonance with the language – at the very least – of Browne's essay. Like Robert Herrick's (1591–1674) lament for the British Church in *Noble Numbers* (1648), these are ostensibly private poems with a palpably public quality.²⁶

"The Seed Growing Secretly" is a meditation on Mark 4.26, in which Vaughan, underlining the piquancy of the obscurity motif, consoles:

Dear, secret greenness! Nursed below
 Tempests and winds, and winter-nights,
 Vex not, that but one sees thee grow,
 That One made all these lesser lights.

[...] Then bless thy secret growth, nor catch
 At noise, but thrive unseen and dumb;
 Keep clean, bear fruit, earn life and watch
 Till the white winged Reapers come!²⁷

Robert Wilcher has cogently argued that this poem can be read 'in the context of a countryside peopled by Royalists biding their time until the great day comes when their loyalty will be vindicated'.²⁸ The application of such a reading to the imagery and political possibilities of *Urne-Buriall* is equally valid; that is, if Vaughan's 'secret greenness' has been read as a reference to Royalism, then so too may Browne's recently unearthed urns, buried close beneath the surface. In his explication of burial practices, there are a number of passages where Browne bears witness to the same politically loaded theme of hidden growth. As with Vaughan's 'secret greenness', Royalism in Browne's *Urne-Buriall*, embodied, in one sense, in the urns themselves, is required to lie low, to live furtively, 'unseen and dumb', waiting for its potential to be realized. It is a latent yet potent Royalism, revealed by archaeo-

²⁶ Summers C., "Tears for Herrick's Church", *George Herbert Journal* 14 (1990–1991) 51–71. Highlighting the implicitness characteristic of royalist "survivalist" literature, Summers comments that one of the key poems in Herrick's volume, "The Widdowes teares: or, Dirge of Dorcas", 'appears at first glance to have nothing to do with either the Church or persecution' (55).

²⁷ Vaughan H., *Henry Vaughan: The Complete Poems*, ed. A. Rudrum (Yale: 1981) 277–278.

²⁸ Wilcher R., *The Writing of Royalism* (Cambridge: 2001) 337.

logical rediscovery to have been “The Hidden Treasure”, the title of another Vaughan poem in *Silex*.²⁹ Royalism, it should be conceded, is always strictly encoded in *Urne-Buriall*; indeed, Browne was assiduous in misdirecting ill-intended would-be observers of its royalist imagery. Doubtless, as I have mentioned, this owed much to avoiding the attention of censors, but the probability is that he also derived, like Vaughan, a tangible and welcome sense of empowerment from employing the pervasive royalist motif of clandestineness, from betraying something of the ‘psychological need for secrecy’ which Lois Potter has identified in royalist writers of the mid-century.³⁰

Allied, for both writers, to the politically charged notion of veiled potentiality is the theme of quietude or silence, another ubiquitous and influential idea in royalist writings of the English Revolution. Its kudos-carrying connotations of reflection, contemplation, and moral elevation are supplemented by a concomitant, implicit criticism of the inherent busyness, as royalist writers commonly perceived it, of successive, excessively law-making, Parliamentary governments.³¹ For Vaughan, quiet and silence provide virtuously contemplative conditions in which meditation on the true significance of death and burial – burial, pointedly, conducted according to the proscribed Book of Common Prayer – can flourish. In his elegy “Silence, and stealth of dayes!”, for example, possibly reflecting on the death of his brother, William, he ponders:

Silence, and stealth of days! ’tis now
 Since thou art gone,
 Twelve hundred hours, and not a brow
 But clouds hang on
 [...]
 So o’r fled minutes I retreat
 Unto that hour
 Which shew’d thee last [...]³²

²⁹ These are themes also present in *Urne-Buriall*’s companion piece: Claire Preston comments that ‘Browne’s interest in seeds and generation, both literal and metaphorical, is the subject of *The Garden of Cyrus*’ (Preston C., *Thomas Browne* 175).

³⁰ Potter L., *Secret Rites and Secret Writing: Royalist Literature 1641–1660* (Cambridge: 1987) xiii.

³¹ See, for example, Richard Flecknoe’s poem “The Ant” in *Miscellania, or Poems of all Sorts, with divers other Pieces* (London: 1653) 10–11.

³² Vaughan H., *Poems* 180–181.

As Thomas Calhoun has noted, Vaughan, in his long sequence of such elegies in *Silex*, ‘sees himself as becoming part of the process that moves with the inevitability of a[n Anglican] ritual’.³³

In *Urne-Buriall*, Browne attaches the merest, yet highly significant, hint of virtuous quiet to the bones on which he is ruminating when discussing the ultimate transience of burial in monuments above ground level: ‘He that lay in a golden Urne eminently above the Earth, was not likely to finde the quiet of these bones’ (1.152). The importance of ‘the quiet of these bones’ is accentuated by its appearance in a passage which, in keeping with the essay more generally, is unsentimental about the physical condition of dead bones; indeed, which is unashamedly clinical in its demystification of their material properties, and scathing about those who would associate such relics with supernatural powers:

What virtue yet sleeps in this *terra damnata* and aged cinders, were pretty magick to experiment; These crumbling reliques and long-fired particles superannuate such expectations: Bones, hairs, nails, and teeth of the dead, were the treasures of old Sorcerers. In vain we revive such practices; Present superstition too visibly perpetuates the folly of our Fore-fathers, wherein unto old Observation this Island was so compleat, that it might have instructed *Persia*. (1.153)

Yet the author still chooses to describe these misused and misconstrued bones, preserved by urn burial, as having ‘quiet’, if not inherently, then in their admirable persistence, undisturbed, below the surface. As such, and in going out of his way to reclaim them from would-be ‘Sorcerers’, Browne invests their condition with a residual virtue which, if inimical to superstition, reinforces the notion of the rediscovery and preservation of Royalism itself. Browne, that is, suggests there is a “survivalist” virtue in the bones’ lack of ostentation, that they win quiet through this virtue; in doing so, he implicitly commends to the reader the characteristic royalist literary theme of quietude and, by extension, retirement.³⁴ Indeed, for Browne the virtue associated with these bones casts abuse of such remains into bold relief: ‘To be gnaw’d out of our graves, to have our skulls made drinking-bowls, and our bones turned into pipes, to delight and sport our Enemies, are Tragical abominations, escaped in burning Burials’ (1.155).

³³ Calhoun T., *Henry Vaughan: The Achievement of Silex Scintillans* (London and Toronto: 1981) 164.

³⁴ Post has identified a “survivalist” reading of *Urne-Buriall*: Post J., *Sir Thomas Browne* 132.

In *Urne-Buriall's* dedication, it should be noted, Browne had already made a telling, and no less symbolic, reference to the silence of the bones on which he was to discourse:

We are coldly drawn unto discourses of Antiquities, who have scarce time before us to comprehend new things, or make out learned Novelties. But seeing they arose as they lay, almost in silence among us, at least in short account suddenly passed over, we were very unwilling they should die again, and be buried twice among us. (1.132)

In this passage, the antiquarian – and Browne includes himself in this – is reluctant, since understanding of the present times, let alone the ancient past, is challenging enough. Crucially, it is in part the symbolic silence of the urns which is invoked to justify the careful critical attention about to be paid to them in the essay, to ensure that they will not be overlooked again. What stirs the author to write this piece is that all the while, though ‘among us’, the urns have been literally and figuratively ‘passed over’ by learned authorities and the general public. Not only have they been neglected as important ancient relics in their own right, but also as potential symbols of royalist survival.

The silence of the urns thus comprises both passive and active elements, to provide a metaphor not simply for virtuously retired Royalism, but also for its involuntary defeat. Seen in this symbolic light, the urns’ rediscovery takes on an undeniably religious (and equally political) aspect, to signify the ultimate conquering of defeat: the Resurrection, more overt references to which are found both in *Urne-Buriall's* closing paragraphs and throughout *The Garden of Cyrus*. This signification is strengthened by the conspicuous absence of human agency: reference is made elsewhere in the essay to the active role of archaeologists. The urns were ‘dugged up’ (1.140); yet in this passage Browne recounts how these relics ‘arose as they lay’, seemingly independent of human – and hence, like the Resurrection, dependent on divine – intervention.

Another implicit rhetoric of revival is found in Chapter IV, where Browne illustrates how, in contrast to Roman and Greek customs, ‘Christians which deck their Coffins with Bays have found a more elegant Embleme. For that tree seeming dead will restore itself from the root, and its dry and exuccous leaves resume their verdure again’ (1.159). Vaughan provides further examples of the Christian Resurrection being overlaid with the royalist and Anglican hopes of recovery, or at least of consolation. “Easter-Day”, for instance, from *Silex Scintillans*, urges royalist sympathizers like the poet to cast off the despair of political defeat, as seen in the first verse:

Thou, whose sad heart, and weeping head lyes low
 Whose Cloudy brest cold damp invades,
 Who never feel'st the Sun, nor smooth'st thy brow,
 But sitt'st oppressed in the shade,
 Awake, awake,
 And in his Resurrection partake,
 Who on this day (that thou might'st rise as he,)
 Rose up, and cancell'd two deaths due to thee.³⁵

In Vaughan's translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (I.v), the motif of hiddenness, here mediated by burial, and blended with the equally partisan notion of innocence, is once more evident:

Only human actions thou
 Hast no care of, but to the flow
 And Ebb of Fortune leav'st them all
 Hence the innocent endures that thrall
 Due to the wicked, whilst alone
 They sit possessors of his throne
 The just are killed, and virtue lies
 Buried in obscurities.³⁶

The thematic resonance with *Urne-Buriall* is again inescapable. Just as, for Vaughan, reconciliation to Royalism's present parlous position is afforded by man's vulnerability to the Godless randomness of fortune, so, for Browne, 'the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy'. Where Vaughan avers that 'virtue lies buried in obscurities', Browne postulates that 'in vain we hope to be known by open and visible conservatories, when to be unknown was the means of their continuation and obscurity their protection', and, aphoristically capturing the very essence of the royalist credo in defeat, 'Happy are they whom privacy makes innocent' (1.167, 164, 170). Once more, then, both the individual and cumulative evidence is compelling: Browne, echoing the imagery and language of concealment and renewal copiously employed by Vaughan, proffers encoded advice and solace to those he holds to be the subjugated and marginalized of England in the 1650s. In doing so, he reveals far more about his royalist political sympathies during the English Revolution than has previously been recognized.

³⁵ Vaughan H., *Poems* 215.

³⁶ Vaughan H., *Poems* 114.

4

In the celebrated beginning to the fifth chapter of *Urne-Buriall*, Browne claims that:

these dead bones have already outlasted the living ones of Methusaleh, and in a yard underground, and thin walls of clay, outworn all the strong and specious buildings above it; and quietly rested under the drums and tramlings of three conquests. (1.164)

These are phrases packed with contemporary political meaning. The sub-text is that whatever the difficulties of present circumstances, Royalism and Anglicanism can, and will, eventually triumph, the military vocabulary of ‘drums and tramlings’ alluding at least in part to the recent Civil Wars. Noteworthy in particular is the suggestive symbolism in the urns lying merely ‘a yard underground’; Royalism and Anglicanism may in the present political climate be buried, Browne implies, but, like the urns of Old Walsingham, they are only *just* below the surface; it is eminently conceivable that they will be recovered. On this reading, further contemporary significance may be inferred from Browne’s urns lying not ‘farre from one another’ (1.140), with its connotation of royalist togetherness, friendship, and solidarity. Indeed, it is not too fanciful from this position to speculate that the elaborately detailed description of Roman, Norman, Saxon, and Danish finds over all parts of Britain is suggestive of the sizable numbers of royalist sympathizers lying underground across the country.

Although on one level a doleful analysis of decay, this is also an optimistic message of a political, as well as ancient and material, rediscovery and recovery which is almost at one’s fingertips, a message that reinforces the opening lines of the essay, where Browne affirms that

In the deep discovery of the Subterranean world, a shallow part would satisfie some enquirers [...] The treasures of time lie high, in Urnes, Coynes, and Monuments, scarce below the roots of some vegetables [...] few have returned their bones farre lower than they might receive them. (1.135)

In this way, Browne can skilfully interweave with his ostensibly antiquarian, politically disinterested enquiries into burial practices of previous ages both the numbing reality of royalist defeat and the hope of its reversal.

As is readily apparent in the study of royalist and Anglican writings of this period, cross-currents of tension, like Browne’s urns, are never far

from the surface, and *Urne-Buriall* proves no exception. For example, in framing his sentiments on royalist rehabilitation and resurgence within the overarching notion that ‘Time hath endlesse rarities, and shows all varieties’ (1.135), Browne betrays a reconciliation to the longer-term, consolatory, though also chastening idea that the downfall of the monarchy – and its flip-side, the present success of Parliament – was divinely sanctioned. In an era where the idea that success betokened moral right was common currency, the stream between accepting the reality of the country’s new political and religious order and contemplating its overthrow could, as evidenced here, be a narrow one for the royalist and Anglican writer, covert or otherwise, to navigate.

The likelihood that Browne embraces the doubleness of this consolatory position in *Urne-Buriall* increases when we consider the last line of the opening paragraph in chapter one: ‘That great Antiquity *America* lay buried for thousands of years; and a large part of the earth is still in the Urne unto us’ (1.135). For the author, the rediscovery of urns and, by extension, of Royalism, is entirely possible, indeed – like the millennium – assured, since the urns lie ‘scarce below the roots of some vegetables’; yet exactly *when* this rediscovery will take place is by no means certain. If *America* lay ‘buried for thousands of years’ before its unexpected discovery then Browne, even by 1658, has little reason to predict an imminent Restoration, however expected that event remains. That this duality – an emphasis on the continuing need to endure, combined with the prospect, however distant, of an end to suffering – is a commonplace both of recusant writing of the late sixteenth century and royalist writing of the mid-seventeenth century supports the argument that *Urne-Buriall* is in part a piece of consolatory retirement-resistance literature.

It is a duality explored, albeit in a more overtly devotional sense, by Vaughan in “Buriall”, where the vagaries of time – engendering a sense of inevitability and unpredictability – offer both a comforting guarantee of eventual deliverance for the defeated adherents of the English Church, and an urgent reminder of the necessity of the Second Coming:

The world’s thy boxe: how then (there tossed,
Can I be lost?
But the delay is all; Time now
Is old, and slow,
His wings are dull, and sickly;
Yet he

Thy servant is, and waits on thee,
 Cut then the sum,
 Lord haste, Lord come,
 O come Lord *Jesus* quickly!³⁷

In “The Hidden Treasure”, too, Vaughan uses remarkably similar language to Browne to communicate, as Philip West has put it, his ‘honourable suspicions of artistic vanity’.³⁸ Vaughan’s specific target is not necessarily the self-indulgent monumentalism of burial practices with which Browne is concerned, yet the general thrust of his argument is nevertheless in a wider sense directed, like Browne’s, at man’s fruitless ‘searches’ for immortality, his doomed attempts at saving himself from oblivion:

And those I saw searched through; yea those and all
 That these three thousand years time did let fall
 To blind the eyes of lookers-back, and I
 Now all is done, find all is vanity.
 Those secret searches, which afflict the wise,
 Paths that are hidden from the *vulture’s* eyes
 I saw at a distance, and where grows that fruit
 Which others only grope for and dispute.³⁹

While continually casting a sceptical eye upon the efficacy of the customs they reflect, Browne, writing a philosophical and historical, rather than devotional, essay, places greater stress than Vaughan on the intrinsic importance of physical objects captured from the ancient past, as illustrated in the dedication:

Unto these of our Urnes none here can pretend relation [...] But remembering the early civility they brought upon these Countreys, and forgetting long passed mischeifs; We mercifully preserve their bones, and pisse not upon their ashes. (1.133)

Browne’s deep – if never unqualified – respect for the ancient past, evidenced here and in other passages of the dedication, such as ‘Tis opportune to look back upon old times, and contemplate our Forefathers’ (1.132), potentially constitutes another implicit royalist message. As I have mentioned, Parry has shown that works of history and antiquarianism were a common source of consolation and memorialization

³⁷ Vaughan H., *Poems* 183.

³⁸ West P., *Scripture Uses* 97.

³⁹ Vaughan H., *Poems* 287.

for Royalists in the 1640s and 1650s, a means of sublimating powerlessness into glory. Accordingly, the subject matter of *Urne-Buriall* may in itself have alerted Browne's contemporaries to the availability of a political reading. Yet as Derek Hirst has pointed out, in the struggle for cultural authority which characterized the 'war of the pen' in the English Revolution it is difficult for one group to legitimately claim a monopoly on any particular literary or artistic form, or even theme. An illustration of this is the fact that the celebrated antiquarian, William Dugdale (1605–1686), with whom Browne regularly corresponded in the 1650s, was patronized by the Parliamentarian Commander-in-Chief, Thomas Fairfax (1612–1671). Indeed, in both his secular and devotional poetry of the 1650s, composed while in retirement at his Nun Appleton estate, Fairfax showed that the puritan apprehension of the futility of human ambition in the face of time's eternity was just as acute as the royalist.⁴⁰

5

In composing *Urne-Buriall*, then, Browne was living in a political and religious revolution whose demise he was to celebrate, and a contemporary literary landscape in which archaeology and antiquarianism could often prove a subtle casuistry of political activism. His essay is influenced in part by John Whitefoot's funeral sermon for Bishop Hall, which by association raises an unmistakably anti-puritan flag. It also exhibits arresting parallels with motifs central to Vaughan's poetry, such as regeneration, recovery and decay, unseen survival and growth, innocence and transience. Indeed, in a work where, as John Lepage has commented, the urns' 'contents must be reconstructed, resurrected, reborn',⁴¹ there is sufficiently persuasive evidence provided by these analogies to conclude that *Urne-Buriall* is deeply rooted in the discreetly subversive survivalist literature of the Interregnum. Like his other works during this period – *Religio Medici* (first authorized edition 1643) and *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), as well as *The Garden of Cyrus* –

⁴⁰ Hirst D., "Royalist Use of the Arts for Political Ends", *Seventeenth Century* 5 (1990) 133–155, here 142. For the fullest collection of Fairfax's literary works, see Reed E.B., *The Poems of Thomas Lord Fairfax* (New Haven, CT: 1909).

⁴¹ Lepage J., "Kindled Spirits: Cremation and Urn Burial in Renaissance Literature", *English Literary Review* 28/1 (1998) 3–17, here 12.

the essay remains tantalizingly devoid of explicit references to its author's Royalism. Yet there is a strong case for stating that, like many other royalist writers of the mid-century, this did not prevent Browne from making his views legible to those with the will – and capacity – to decode them.

Browne distilled one of his overriding purposes in writing *Urne-Buriall* into the stated wish to 'preserve the living, and make the dead to live' (1.132). This has hitherto been interpreted as an appropriately lapidary and non-partisan comment, in a treatise concerned not with the strife of the English Civil Wars and Interregnum but with ancient beliefs as they are emblemized in the ceremonies of the grave. Viewed in the intensified political light cast by this essay, however, it is a sentiment which, like *Urne-Buriall* itself, reverberates with subversive royalist notions of survival, recovery, and ultimate victory.

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