

Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial: Chapter IV

Sir Thomas Browne

Anglican · Post-Reformation · Meditation

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INTRODUCTION

In this fourth movement of Urn Burial, Browne turns antiquarian - cataloguing how Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Christians alike handled their dead, each rite freighted with some inarticulate hope of a hereafter. Pagan superstition and Christian ceremony are set side by side without condescension; Browne finds in both the same stubborn refusal to believe the grave is final. The prose moves associatively, one curious custom summoning the next - burning, anointing, the placing of coins for Charon's fee - until the chapter turns, in its closing paragraphs, toward the graver question beneath the ethnography: what it would mean to face death without any expectation of what comes after.

Christians have handsomely glossed the deformity of death, by careful consideration of the body, and civil rites which take of brutall terminations. And though they conceived all reparable by a resurrection, cast not all care of enterrment. And since the ashes of Sacrifices burnt upon the Altar of God, were carefully carried out by the Priests, and deposited in a clean field; since they acknowledged their bodies to be the lodging of Christ, and temples of the holy Ghost, they devolved not all upon the sufficiency of soul existence; and therefore with long services and full solemnities concluded their last Exequies, wherein to all distinctions the Greek devotion seems most pathetically ceremonious.

Christian invention hath chiefly driven at Rites, which speak hopes of another life, and hints of a Resurrection. And if the ancient Gentiles held not the immortality of their better part, and some subsistence after death; in severall rites, customes, actions and expressions, they contradicted their own opinions: wherein Democritus went high, even to the thought of a resurrection, as scoffingly recorded by Pliny. What can be more expresse than the expression of Phryocyllides? Or who would expect from Lucretius a sentence of Ecclesiastes? Before Plato could speak, the soul had wings in Homer, which fell not, but flew out of the body into the mansions of the dead; who also observed that handsome distinction of Demas and Soma, for the body conjoynd to the soul and the body separated from it. Lucian spoke much truth in jest, when he said, that part of Hercules which proceeded from Alchmena perished, that from Jupiter remained immortall. Thus Socrates was content that his friends should bury his body, so they would not think they buried Socrates, and regarding only his immortall part, was indifferent to be burnt or buried. From such Considerations Diogenes might contemn Sepulture. And being satisfied that the soul could not perish, grow carelesse of corporall enterrment. The Stoicks who thought the souls of

wise men had their habitation about the moon, might make slight account of subterraneous deposition; whereas the Pythagorians and transcorporating Philosophers, who were to be often buried, held great care of their enterrment. And the Platonicks rejected not a due care of the grave, though they put their ashes to unreasonable expectations, in their tedious term of return and long set revolution.

Men have lost their reason in nothing so much as their religion, wherein stones and clouts make Martyrs; and since the religion of one seems madnesse unto another, to afford an account or rationall of old Rites, requires no rigid Reader; That they kindled the pyre aversly, or turning their face from it, was an handsome Symbole of unwilling ministration; That they washed their bones with wine and milk, that the mother wrapt them in Linnen, and dried them in her bosome, the first fostering part, and place of their nourishment; That they opened their eyes towards heaven, before they kindled the fire, as the place of their hopes or originall, were no improper Ceremonies. Their last valediction thrice uttered by the attendants was also very solemn, and somewhat answered by Christians, who thought it too little, if they threw not the earth thrice upon the entered body. That in strewing their Tombs the Romans affected the Rose, the Greeks Amaranthus and myrtle; that the Funerall pyre consisted of sweet fuell, Cypresse, Firre, Larix, Yewe, and Trees perpetually verdant, lay silent expressions of their surviving hopes: Wherein Christians which deck their Coffins with Bays have found a more elegant Embleme. For that tree seeming dead, will restore it self from the root, and its dry and exuccous leaves resume their verdure again; which if we mistake not, we have also observed in fures. Whether the planting of yewe in Churchyards, hold not its originall from ancient Funerall rites, or as an Embleme of Resurrection from its perpetual verdure, may also admit conjecture.

They made use of Musick to excite or quiet the affections of their friends, according to different harmonies. But the secret and symbolically hint was the harmonical nature of the soul; which delivered from the body, went again to enjoy the primitive harmony of heaven, from whence it first descended; which according to its progresse traced by antiquity, came down by Cancer, and ascended by Capricornus.

They burnt not children before their teeth appeared, as apprehending their bodies too tender a morsell for fire, and that their gristly bones would scarce leave separable reliques after the pyral combustion. That they kindled not fire in their houses for some days after, was a strict memoriall of the late afflicting fire. And mourning without hope, they had an happy fraud against excessive lamentation, by a common opinion that deep sorrows disturbed their ghosts.

That they buried their dead on their backs, or in a supine position, seems agreeable unto profound sleep, and common posture of dying; contrary to the most naturall way of birth; Nor unlike our pendulous posture, in the doubtfull state of the womb. Diogenes was singular, who preferred a prone situation in the grave, and some Christians like neither, who decline the figure of rest, and make choice of an erect posture.

That they carried them out of the world with their feet forward, not inconsonant unto reason: As contrary unto the native posture of man, and his production first into it. And also agreeable unto their opinions, while they bid adieu unto the world, not to look again upon it; whereas Mahometans who think to return to a delightfull life again, are carried forth with their heads forward, and looking toward their houses.

They closed their eyes as parts which first die or first discover the sad effects of death. But their iterated clamations to excitate their dying or dead friends, or revoke them unto life again, was a vanity of affection; as not presumably ignorant of the criticall tests of death, by apposition of feathers, glasses, and reflexion of figures, which dead eyes represent not; which however not strictly verifiable in fresh and warm cadavers, could hardly elude the test, in corps of four or five dayes.

That they suck'd in the last breath of their expiring friends, was surely a practice of no medecall institution, but a loose opinion that the soul passed out that way, and a fondnesse of affection from some Pythagoricall foundation, that the spirit of one body passed into another; which they wished might be their own.

That they powred oyle upon the pyre, was a tolerable practise, while the intention rested in facilitating the accension; But to place good Omens in the quick and speedy burning, to sacrifice unto the windes for a dispatch in this office, was a low form of superstition.

The Archimime, or Jester attending the Funerall train, and imitating the speeches, gesture, and manners of the deceased, was too light for such solemnities, contradicting their Funerall Orations, and dolefull rites of the grave.

That they buried a peece of money with them as a Fee of the Elysian Ferriman, was a practise full of folly. But the ancient custome of placing coynes in considerable Urnes, and the present practise of burying medals in the Noble Foundations of Europe, are laudable wayes of historicall discoveries, in actions, persons, Chronologies; and posterity will applaud them.

We examine not the old Laws of Sepulture, exempting certain persons from buriall or burning. But hereby we apprehend that these were not the bones of persons Planet-struck or burnt with fire from Heaven: No Reliques of Traitors to their Countrey, Self-killers, or Sacrilegious Malefactors; Persons in old apprehension unworthy of the earth; condemned unto the Tartara's of Hell, and bottomlesse pit of Plato, from whence there was no redemption.

Nor were only many customes questionable in order to their Obsequies, but also sundry practises, fictions, and conceptions, discordant or obscure, of their state and future beings; whether unto eight or ten bodies of men to adde one of a woman, as being more inflammable, and unctuously constituted for the better pyral combustion, were any rationall practise: Or whether the complaint of Perianders Wife be tolerable, that wanting her Funerall burning she suffered intolerable cold in Hell, according to the constitution of the infernall house of Pluto, wherein cold makes a great part of their tortures; it cannot passe without some question.

Why the Female Ghosts appear unto Ulysses, before the Heroes and masculine spirits? Why the Psyche or soul of Tiresias is of the masculine gender; who being blinde on earth sees more then all the rest in hell; Why the Funerall Suppers consisted of Eggs, Beans, Smallage, and Lettuce, since the dead are made to eat Asphodels about the Elyzian medows? Why since there is no Sacrifice acceptable, nor any propitiation for the Covenant of the grave; men set up the Deity of Morta, and fruitlessly adored Divinities without ears? it cannot escape some doubt.

The dead seem all alive in the humane Hades of Homer, yet cannot well speak, prophesie, or know the living, except they drink bloud, wherein is the life of man. And therefore the souls of Penelope's Paramours conducted by Mercury chirped like bats, and those which followed Hercules made a noise but like a flock of birds.

The departed spirits know things past and to come, yet are ignorant of things present. Agamemnon foretels what should happen unto Ulysses, yet ignorantly enquires what is become of his own Son. The Ghosts are afraid of swords in Homer, yet Sybilla tels Æneas in Virgil, the thin habit of spirits was beyond the force of weapons. The spirits put off their malice with their bodies, and Cæsar and Pompey accord in Latine Hell, yet Ajax in Homer endures not a conference with Ulysses: And Deiphobus appears all mangled in Virgils Ghosts, yet we meet with perfect shadows among the wounded ghosts of Homer.

Since Charon in Lucian applauds his condition among the dead, whether it be handsomely said of Achilles, that living contemner of death, that he had rather be a Plowmans servant then Emperour of the dead? How Hercules his soul is in hell, and yet in heaven, and Julius his soul in a Starre, yet seen by Æneas in hell, except the Ghosts were but Images and shadows of the soul, received in higher mansions, according to the ancient division of body, soul, and image or simulachrum of them both. The particulars of future beings must needs be dark unto ancient Theories, which Christian Philosophy yet determines but in a Cloud of opinions. A Dialogue between two Infants in the womb concerning the state of this world, might handsomely illustrate our ignorance of the next, whereof methinks we yet discourse in Platoes denne, and are but Embryon Philosophers. Pythagoras escapes in the fabulous hell of Dante, among that swarm of Philosophers, wherein whilest we meet with Plato and Socrates, Cato is to be found in no lower place then Purgatory. Among all the set, Epicurus is most considerable, whom men make honest without an Elyzium, who contemned life without encouragement of immortality, and making nothing after death, yet made nothing of the King of terrours.

Were the happinesse of the next world as closely apprehended as the felicities of this, it were a martyrdome to live; and unto such as consider none hereafter, it must be more then death to dye, which makes us amazed at those audacities, that durst be nothing, and return into their Chaos again. Certainly such spirits as could contemn death, when they expected no better being after, would have scorned to live had they known any. And therefore we applaud not the judgment of Machiavel, that Christianity makes men cowards, or that with the confidence of but half dying, the despised virtues of patience and humility, have abased the spirits of men, which Pagan principles exalted, but rather regulated the wildenesse of audacities, in the attempts, grounds, and eternall sequels of death; wherein men of the boldest spirits are often prodigiously temerarious. Nor can we extenuate the valour of ancient Martyrs, who contemned death in the uncomfortable scene of their lives, and in their decrepit Martyrdomes did probably lose not many moneths of their dayes, or parted with life when it was scarce worth the living. For beside that long time past holds no consideration unto a slender time to come they had no small disadvantage from the constitution of old age, which naturally makes men fearfull; And complexionally superannuated from the bold and couragious thoughts of youth and fervent years. But the contempt of death from corporall animosity, promoteth not our felicity. They may sit in the Orchestra, and noblest Seats of Heaven, who have held up shaking hands in the fire, and humanely contended for glory.

Mean while Epicurus lyes deep in Dante's hell, wherein we meet with Tombs enclosing souls which denied their immortalities. But whether the virtuous heathen, who lived better then he spake, or erring in the principles of himself, yet lived above Philosophers of more specious Maximes, lye so deep as he is placed; at least so low as not to rise against Christians, who beleeving or knowing that truth, have lastingly denied it in their practise and conversation, were a quæry too sad to insist on.

But all or most apprehensions rested in Opinions of some future being, which ignorantly or coldly beleevd, begat those perverted conceptions, Ceremonies, Sayings, which Christians pity or laugh at. Happy are they, which live not in that disadvantage of time, when men could say little for futurity, but from reason. Whereby the noblest mindes fell often upon doubtfull deaths, and melancholy Dissolutions; With these hopes Socrates warmed his doubtfull spirits, against that cold potion, and Cato before he durst give the fatall stroak spent part of the night in reading the immortality of Plato, thereby confirming his wavering hand unto the animosity of that attempt.

It is the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man, to tell him he is at the end of his nature; or that there is no further state to come, unto which this seems progressionall, and otherwise made in vaine; Without this accomplishment the naturall expectation and desire of such a state, were but a fallacy in nature, unsatisfied Considerators would quarrell the justice of their constitutions, and rest content that Adam had fallen lower, whereby by knowing no other Originall, and deeper ignorance of themselves, they might have enjoyed the happiness of inferiour Creatures; who in tranquility possesse their Constitutions, as having not the apprehension to deplore their own natures. And being framed below the circumference of these hopes, or cognition of better being, the wisdom of God hath necessitated their Contentment: But the superiour ingredient and obscured part of our selves, whereto all present felicities afford no resting contentment, will be able at last to tell us we are more then our present selves; and evacuate such hopes in the fruition of their own accomplishments.

Source: Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial* (1658), Chapter IV.

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Translation: Author died 1682. Original English composition, no translation involved. Verified consistent 17th-century register throughout, no modern paraphrasing detected.

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