

## INFORMATION TO USERS

This was produced from a copy of a document sent to us for microfilming. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the material submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or notations which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or "target" for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is "Missing Page(s)". If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting through an image and duplicating adjacent pages to assure you of complete continuity.
2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a round black mark it is an indication that the film inspector noticed either blurred copy because of movement during exposure, or duplicate copy. Unless we meant to delete copyrighted materials that should not have been filmed, you will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.
3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., is part of the material being photographed the photographer has followed a definite method in "sectioning" the material. It is customary to begin filming at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. If necessary, sectioning is continued again—beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.
4. For any illustrations that cannot be reproduced satisfactorily by xerography, photographic prints can be purchased at additional cost and tipped into your xerographic copy. Requests can be made to our Dissertations Customer Services Department.
5. Some pages in any document may have indistinct print. In all cases we have filmed the best available copy.

University  
Microfilms  
International

300 N. ZEEB ROAD, ANN ARBOR, MI 48106  
18 BEDFORD ROW, LONDON WC1R 4EJ, ENGLAND

8018929

MAYFIELD, SANDRA JANE

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ART OF MEDITATION ON SIR THOMAS  
BROWNE'S IMAGINATION

*The University of Oklahoma*

PH.D.

1980

University  
Microfilms  
International

300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106

18 Bedford Row, London WC1R 4EJ, England

Copyright 1980

by

Mayfield, Sandra Jane

All Rights Reserved

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ART OF MEDITATION  
ON  
SIR THOMAS BROWNE'S IMAGINATION

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY  
SANDRA J. MAYFIELD  
University of Oklahoma

May 1, 1980

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ART OF MEDITATION  
ON  
SIR THOMAS BROWNE'S IMAGINATION

Approved by:

Gwenn Davis  
Gwenn Davis, Ph.D.  
Advisor

Paul G. Ruggiers  
Paul G. Ruggiers, Ph.D.

James J. Yoch  
James J. Yoch, Ph.D.

Huston Diehl  
Huston Diehl, Ph.D.

Jonathan W. Spurgeon  
Jonathan Spurgeon, Ph.D.

For My Mother and Father

and

For John, Pat, Kevin, and Jill

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the people who have supported me in this project. I have always valued the dedicated teachers who have nurtured in me the love of literature, and I acknowledge with gratitude their significant influence on my life. I am equally grateful for my students in literature classes, who have been, in reality, my greatest teachers.

I could not have completed this project without the guidance and encouragement of the members of my committee at the University of Oklahoma. Special thanks go to Dr. Paul Ruggiers, Dr. James Yoch, Dr. Huston Diehl, and Dr. John Spurgeon. I would not have begun this study without the direction of my advisor, Dr. Gwenn Davis, who, by precept and example, taught me the "duty of a devout and learned admiration." I am sincerely and humbly grateful for her support. Finally, I offer deepest gratitude to my family, who, in this endeavor as in all the ventures of my life, have believed in me without question or equivocation.

Language leads us to a thought which is no longer ours alone, to a thought which is presumptively universal, though this is never the universality of a pure concept which would be identical for every mind. . . . Communication in literature is not the simple appeal on the part of the writer to meanings which would be part of an a priori of the mind; rather communication arouses these meanings in the mind through enticement and a kind of oblique action. The writer's thought does not control his language from without; the writer is himself a kind of new idiom, constructing itself, inventing ways of expression, and diversifying itself according to its own meaning.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty,  
The Primacy of Perception

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Page</u>
Introduction . . . . .	1
I. Sir Thomas Browne and the Meditative Tradition . .	20
II. Seventeenth-Century Aesthetic and the Art of Meditation . . . . .	45
III. <u>The Religio Medici</u> and the Stair of Meditation . .	65
IV. Imagination in <u>The Religio Medici</u> . . . . .	85
V. <u>Urne Buriall</u> and <u>The Garden of Cyrus</u> : The <u>Meditations Completed</u> . . . . .	134
Conclusion . . . . .	152
Bibliography . . . . .	156



## INTRODUCTION

A study of English prose must include the genius of Sir Thomas Browne. That severe critic of English prose, Samuel Johnson, is reported to have imitated Browne's style. Boswell's Life of Johnson records the note that many critics of Johnson attribute his phraseology to the influence of Sir Thomas Browne, and Boswell himself acknowledges that Johnson's early essays were directly influenced by Browne.<sup>1</sup> Johnson's first biography was the Life of Sir Thomas Browne, published with an edition of Browne's Christian Morals. Coleridge analyzed Browne carefully but sympathetically: "Sir Thomas Browne is among my first favorites, rich in various knowledge, exuberant in conceptions and conceits, contemplative, imaginative; often truly great and magnificent in his style and diction. . . . He is a quiet and sublime enthusiast with a strong tinge of the fantast--the humourist constantly mingling with, and flashing across, the philosopher, as the darting colours in shot silk play upon the

---

<sup>1</sup>James Boswell, Boswell's Life of Johnson (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 158. Boswell's notation is as follows: "Sir Thomas Brown, whose life Johnson wrote, was remarkably fond of Anglo-Latian diction; and to his example we are to ascribe Johnson's sometimes indulging himself in this kind of phraseology."

main dye. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Among novelists, Herman Melville professed a fascination for Browne.<sup>3</sup>

The contemporary student of style confronts a number of problems, however, in the attempt to praise the achievement of Browne. For most contemporary readers, Browne is too Latinate, too obscure, too prolix. He appears to exceed the necessities of a clear and understandable style. Modern readers classify Browne as an outmoded classical writer, one who by imitating the style of the ancients condemned himself to obscurity in an age which prizes clarity and brevity.

Style is an elusive literary quality which may be describable only in terms of a period of history, particular cultural expectations, prevailing theories of rhetoric and logic, and the relationship between technology and information flow. All of these cultural influences define the effectiveness and the aesthetic of language. Browne's literary genius transcends such culture-bound conventions as the

---

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, II (New York: AMS Press, 1967), p. 413.

<sup>3</sup>Herman Melville, The Letters of Herman Melville, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 78. In a letter to Evert A. Duyckinck, March 3, 1849, Melville writes, "Lay it down that had not Sir Thomas Browne lived, Emerson would not have mystified. . . ." The editors note that Melville borrowed two volumes of Browne from Duyckinck in 1848; Melville apparently bought his own copies of Browne a year later. R. M. Weaver, in Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic (New York: Doran, 1920), notes Melville's continuing interest in Browne. In London, 1849, Melville "haunted the bookshops" and purchased Rousseau's Confessions as well as an 1686 folio of Sir Thomas Browne (p. 299).

metaphysical conceit, the symmetrical sentence, or the Latinate diction. If Browne's prose receives a just evaluation, it must be praised for the perfection of an aesthetic which will endure beyond the mutability of English words and sentences.<sup>4</sup>

This aesthetic manifests itself as a very rich, fecund concept of imagination. Egon Stephen Merton recognized the significance of imagination for Browne in his work Science and Imagination in Sir Thomas Browne.<sup>5</sup> A remarkably lucid study of Browne's interpretation of seventeenth-century science, this work will probably remain one of the most appreciative studies of Browne's imagination. Merton begins his study of Browne with this assertion: "The circumference of Browne's being is represented by his science; the center, by his imagination."<sup>6</sup> Browne is, he says, outwardly a physician, inwardly a poet. The circumference includes most of his work; the center illumines the last of Urne Buriall, the last paragraphs of the Garden of Cyrus, and "countless paragraphs of the Religio Medici."<sup>7</sup> Merton defines his own

---

<sup>4</sup>Most readers of Browne feel compelled to interpret Browne holistically, perhaps because the most common praise of Browne is veneration for his style. Austin Warren, in "The Style of Sir Thomas Browne," Kenyon Review, 13 (1951), 674-687, voices this compulsion: "This essay was prompted by the sense that Browne, much written on . . . still lacked integral treatment: he had been studied as a figure in the history of ideas . . . and he had been considered by narrowly stylistic methods. . . ."

<sup>5</sup>Egon Stephen Merton, Science and Imagination in Sir Thomas Browne (New York: Octagon Books, 1949).

<sup>6</sup>Merton, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Merton, p. 7.

attempt to penetrate Browne's genius as an attempt to "seek the center from the circumference." Merton's book is basically a study of Browne's science. Merton classifies Browne's mind as "an eclectic rather than a philosophic mind." Merton is convinced that Browne's poetic capacities were the gratuitous results of his scientific endeavors. He explains many of the ambiguities in Browne as the products of an inner conflict in Browne between his natural gift for poetic expression and his profession as a scientist.

If Merton sought the center from the circumference, the present study seeks the circumference from the center. Browne's imagination explains not only his science but his genius as a prose artist. Browne is neither the pure scientist nor the pure philosopher; neither is he the casual herbalist. He is the poet, allowing his imagination to play with the varieties of human experience as he perceives them.

Browne's imagination was fired by the processes of the art of meditation, as it was practiced in seventeenth-century Europe. The present study deals with the relationship between the art of meditation and Browne's writings. I felt that previous approaches to Browne had dealt extensively with other significant aspects of Browne's intellectual and cultural environment.<sup>8</sup> Previous studies of Browne's style obviate

---

<sup>8</sup>The intensive studies of Browne by Joan Bennett (Sir Thomas Browne, Cambridge, 1962) and Frank L. Huntley (Sir Thomas Browne, Ann Arbor, 1962) reveal the biographical, religious, and philosophical influences on Browne. Bennett's perceptive observations on Browne's domestic life and immediate cultural milieu place him firmly in a tradition which

an additional analysis of sentence patterns.<sup>9</sup> Distinguished critics have characterized Browne's position as scientist.<sup>10</sup> I remain convinced that a study of the art of meditation best explains the working of Browne's imagination. Meditation offered to him an acceptable mode of preserving the beauty and mystery of imaginative prose. Professor Louis Martz has effectively demonstrated the relationship between the art of meditation and the poetry of the seventeenth century. He affirms the possibility of a common source of creativity in both the arts of poetry and meditation: "Poetry and meditation are by no means synonymous; and yet there is, I believe,

---

Browne himself is reluctant to reveal in his writings. Huntley's study of the religious controversies of Browne's day provide helpful insight into the religious tradition of Browne. William P. Dunn (Sir Thomas Browne" A Study in Religious Philosophy, Minneapolis, 1950) studies Browne within the context of Platonic philosophy, and Leonard Nathanson (The Strategy of Truth, Chicago, 1967) refines the study of Browne the philosopher to emphasize Browne's epistemology.

<sup>9</sup>In addition to the remarkably fine analysis of style by Bennett, Huntley, Dunn, and Nathanson, such general works as Rosemund Tuve's Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery (Chicago, 1947) and Ruth Wallerstein's Studies in Seventeenth-Century Poetic (Madison, 1966) provide exhaustive treatment of the analysis of seventeenth-century style. Morris Croll's Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm (Princeton, 1966), is unsurpassed, not only for a study of seventeenth-century rhetoric but for a close analysis of Browne's style. Joan Webber's Eloquent "I" (Madison, 1968) studies Browne's style as an integral part of the genre within which Browne wrote.

<sup>10</sup>The most fascinating study of Browne's science is Egon Stephen Merton's Science and Imagination in Sir Thomas Browne (New York, 1949), but readers interested in Browne's science should also consult Jeremiah S. Finch, Sir Thomas Browne: A Doctor's Life of Science and Faith (New York, 1950), and Gordon Chalmers, "Sir Thomas Browne, True Scientist," Osiris, 2 (1936), pp. 28-79. A more general work which reveals the relationship between science and religion in the seventeenth century is Paul Kocher's Science and Religion in Elizabethan England (New York, 1953).

a middle ground of the creative mind in which the two arts meet to form a poetry of meditation."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, there is a relationship between the processes of creativity in meditation and the processes of creative prose.

Renaissance writers concerned themselves with the nature of the creative process. And both the art of meditation and the art of rhetoric present the timeless quest for understanding the way in which the mind perceives order in chaos, the way in which it fuses the perceptions of abstraction with intuitive response to produce meaningful symbols. Both the art of meditation and the art of rhetoric celebrate the mystery and ambiguity of language as well as the utilitarian purposes of language. Both the art of meditation and the art of rhetoric revere the potential of language for preserving that most basic of human needs, the need of one human being to relate to another through the emotional efficacy of symbol.

The art of meditation offered Browne an appropriate means of transcending forces operating in the seventeenth century to reduce language to utilitarian purposes. Browne is a transitional figure in the study of English prose. He is himself the "great and true amphibian" embodying aspects of both the classical and modern concepts of rhetoric. Browne is a kind of synthesizing force of the ancients and the moderns. He liked to draw contrasts between the ancients and the moderns, and he viewed himself as a peacemaker between

---

<sup>11</sup> Louis L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).

the two eras. Unwilling to surrender the view of rhetoric as imitation of nature and of classical models, he nonetheless sympathized with the position of the New Scientists. Browne was irresistibly drawn to the experimental methods of the New Scientists, as his own record of experiments indicates. But Browne was not invited to join the Royal Society, suggesting that he was never fully regarded as a member of the New Scientists.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps because Browne was thoroughly Aristotelian in the basic precepts of his biology, or perhaps because he would not relinquish his respect for classical rhetoric, he was not hailed as a forerunner of modern science or language.

One has only to read Thomas Sprat's view of language in his "History of the Royal Society" to understand why Browne is at such odds with certain aspects of the New Science:

Thus they have directed, judg'd, conjectured upon, and improved Experiments. But lastly, in these, and all other businesses, that have come under their care; there is one thing more, about which the Society has been most solicitous; and that is, the manner of their Discourse: which, unless they had been very watchful to keep in due temper, the whole spirit and vigour of their Design, had been soon eaten out, by the luxury and redundance of Speech. The ill effects of this superfluity of talking, have already overwhelm'd most other Arts and Professions; insomuch, that when I consider the means of happy living, and the causes of their corruption, I can hardly forebear

---

<sup>12</sup>Browne's son, Edward, was an active member of the Royal Society, however, and Browne appears to have contributed papers to the society through his son. Robert Boyle had great respect for Browne's experiments.

recanting what I said before; and concluding  
that eloquence ought to be banish'd out of  
civil Societies, as a thing fatal to Peace  
and good Manners. . . .<sup>13</sup>

Sprat continues at length to condemn eloquence for its corruptive power; metaphors and tropes must be eschewed for their trickery and deceit, and words must be plain and unadorned to approximate as closely as possible things, the only substantial reality with which language is concerned.

Another force operating in the seventeenth century to reduce language to utilitarian purposes was the force of Puritanism. The Puritans condemned eloquence as a tool of the devil for corrupting the minds of the youth. R. F. Jones, in "The Humanistic Defence of Learning in the Mid-Seventeenth Century," cites William Dell, the master of a college in Cambridge University, as a notable Puritan who condemned the classical poets "who were for the most part the Devils Prophets, and delivered forth their writings in his spirit, and who through the smoothness, quaintness, and sweetness of their language do insensible instil the poison of lust and wickedness into the hearts of youth."<sup>14</sup> Richard Baxter, one of the most respected Puritan ministers, is especially harsh in his condemnation of classical rhetoric. Baxter admonishes young ministers to "speak pertinently, plainly,

---

<sup>13</sup> Richard Foster Jones, "The Humanistic Defence of Learning in the Mid-Seventeenth Century," in Reason and the Imagination, ed. Joseph A. Mazzeo (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 74.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, p. 75.



9

piercingly and somewhat properly."<sup>15</sup> Jones quotes Henry Wilkinson, another Puritan minister, who suggests that tropes of rhetoric destroy a proper attitude toward the worship of Christ: "Are swelling words suitable to this examination of the Son of God? Is a lofty stile correspondent with this abasement? Is it fit to discourse sweetly and delightfully upon gall and vinegar, and to beset nailes and thornes with flowers of Rhetorick, and to bring our Savior in pompe of words, and vainglorious pagents of Art unto his crosse?"<sup>16</sup>

Sir Thomas Browne lived and wrote when the forces of the New Science and of Puritanism urged a rejection of eloquence. The effects of these two forces, it may be noted along the way, are still felt in contemporary attitudes toward rhetoric. Browne, as a transitional figure, exists as a reminder that the tradition of classical rhetoric is not wholly alien to the modern temper, and that the processes of the mind, preserved in the Western cultural traditions of logic, rhetoric, and poetic persist in the creations of artistic language.

Morris Croll has most accurately and incisively placed Browne in a tradition of prose writers. His essay, "Attic Prose in the Seventeenth Century," provides the clearest insight into the nature of Browne's prose.<sup>17</sup> Browne belongs,

---

<sup>15</sup>Jones, p. 75.

<sup>16</sup>Jones, p. 76.

<sup>17</sup>Morris W. Croll, Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm, ed. J. Max Patrick and Robert O. Evans (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

according to Croll, in the tradition of the Anti-Ciceronians, or those who write "Attic" as opposed to "Asiatic" prose. These two prose traditions had their origin in Greek and Latin antiquity, the Asiatic tradition describing the oratorical rhetoric of Cicero, and the Attic tradition describing the familiar rhetoric of Seneca, Tacitus, and Lucan.

In order to understand Croll's perception of Browne in the Attic tradition, it is necessary to understand Croll's descriptions of these two classical modes of rhetoric.<sup>18</sup> The Ciceronian rhetoric was the language of oratory, appealing with its sensuous rhythms, to the ear of the listener. The Latin rhetoric was the language of the essay, intended to promote the discipline of philosophy. Not primarily concerned with the affective aspect of language, it was aimed at the individual thinking mind. Croll contends that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are comparable to the Greek and Latin eras; the sixteenth century used rhetoric for oratorical purposes, and the seventeenth century, the age of Montaigne and Lipsius, used rhetoric in the philosophical essay, whose aim was evocation of self-knowledge. Aristotle's Rhetoric was helpful in this use of rhetoric, as Croll suggests: "This book was a wholly new thing in the world: for the theory of rhetoric was here worked out for the first time, not on the basis of the susceptibilities of audiences, and the aural

---

<sup>18</sup>I am in sympathy with Croll's classifications of Asiatic and Attic prose; I am aware, however, that critics of Croll's position could protest that he was superimposing somewhat artificial classifications upon English prose.

effect of language, but on the basis of the processes of reasoning and in strict relations with the science of logic."<sup>19</sup>

The Anti-Ciceronians did not denigrate the beautiful turn of phrase of oratory, but they sought to persuade by logic and not by emotion, "by portraying in one's style exactly those athletic movements of the mind by which it arrives at a sense of reality and the true knowledge of itself and the world."<sup>20</sup> The Anti-Ciceronians tried to portray the reality of the mind in its active movements toward truth. Croll describes this activity as a penetrating search for inward and moral truth:

It was a reality not visible to the eye, but veiled from common observation; hidden in a shrine toward which one might win his way, through a jostling, noisy mob of illusory appearances, by a series of partial initiations. This kind of reality can never be quite portrayed, of course, because ultimate knowledge of the mystery of truth is never attained. But it is at least possible to depict the effort of the athletic and disciplined mind in its progress toward the unattainable goal.<sup>21</sup>

Prose writers like Browne decried the artificiality of imitation of the ancients, while at the same time they admired their Latin models. Their own prose was the search for a style which would reveal the nakedness of the mind in

---

<sup>19</sup>Croll, p. 95.

<sup>20</sup>Croll, p. 194.

<sup>21</sup>Croll, p. 201.

its search for truth. Croll describes the seventeenth-century Anti-Ciceronians as explorers in search of a form that would express the "candor of the soul." Their search for a style, he says, must include a mode of depicting "the difficulties of a soul exploring unfamiliar truth by the unaided exercise of its own faculties."<sup>22</sup>

The prose style of the seventeenth century had to include, along with "ceremonious dignity," the capacity for profound moral experience: "A prose style that should adequately express this age must contrive, therefore, to mingle elements that in any other period would appear oddly contrasted. It must be at once ingenious and lofty, intense yet also profound, acute, realistic, revealing, but at the same time somewhat grave and mysterious. It must have in short that curious sublimity which is felt in the painting of El Greco, in the sermons and letters of Donne, and in certain sculptures of Bernini."<sup>23</sup>

The New Science had one profoundly beneficial effect for writers like Browne, and that was the tendency to apply the methods of science to the Stocial and Christian search for self-knowledge. In a curious kind of amalgamation, writers like Bacon, DesCartes, Wotton, Pascal, and Browne applied the schematics of science to the realm of moral experience. Croll mentions one writer, an Anglican minister, as the especial symbol of this amalgamation; that writer, so

---

<sup>22</sup>Croll, p. 210.

<sup>23</sup>Croll, p. 223.

important to this present study of Browne, is Bishop Joseph Hall, whose Epistles and Meditations reflect the intense moral spirit of the seventeenth century and the scrupulous method of the logician and scientist.

Croll attempts to describe the uniqueness of seventeenth-century prose: "For this tendency there is unfortunately no convenient name in English. 'Metaphysical' is even a less happy term to describe the kinds of prose in which it appears than the related kinds of poetry, and there seems to be no possibility of making a practicable adjective or noun in English from the continental terms conceitism, etc. It may be known as the 'prose of imaginative conceit' in order that we may keep in line with the terms of current criticism."<sup>24</sup>

In a final attempt to explain Anti-Ciceronian prose, Croll recalls the significant relationship between logic and rhetoric: "Their purpose was to portray, not a thought, but a mind thinking, or, in Pascal's words, la peinture de la pensée. They knew that an idea separated from the act of experiencing it is not the idea that was experienced. The ardor of its conception in the mind is a necessary part of its truth; and unless it can be conveyed to another mind in something of the form of its occurrence, either it has changed into some other idea or it has ceased to be an idea. . . ."<sup>25</sup> Seventeenth-century prose artists chose to

---

<sup>24</sup>Croll, p. 228.

<sup>25</sup>Croll, p. 228.

express their perceptions "in the moment in which truth is still imagined."

With Croll's appreciative study in mind, the present study of Browne focuses on the art of meditation as the means at Browne's disposal for transmuting the concepts of seventeenth-century science and religion into meaningful poetic symbols. Meditation, with its schema for personalizing concepts and for allowing the thinking self to withdraw temporarily from the object of thought, is a comfort to the creative mind. It is one of the means Browne chose to facilitate the operation of his imagination.

The influence of the art of meditation of Sir Thomas Browne may be examined from two broad perspectives. From the perspective of content, Browne's contemplations follow the meditative tradition of the "Book of the Creatures," popularized by the German mystic Jacob Boehme but probably initiated by St. Francis of Assisi. The subject matter of Browne's writings is, for the most part, the minutiae of the created order. Even the most reflective aspects of the Religio Medici are never far removed from the observations of this world. And Browne's most intense meditations, the Urne Buriall and the Garden of Cyrus, are saturated with the creatures of this world. This tradition of meditation worships God by a wholesome appreciation of His created order. Browne's distinctive contribution, as a transitional figure, is the working of his synthetic imagination to fuse the devotion of the mystical writer with the humane reason

of the scientist. The products of Browne's imagination are not the pious writings of the cloistered monk nor the dream visions of the medieval mystics; neither are they the cryptic notes of an experimental scientist. They are the artistry of the imaginative writer who synthesizes his analytical perceptions of the created order with the spirit of devotion. The result for Browne, and for certain prose writers after him, is a secularized metaphysic palatable to the modern temper though not the less profound for its insight into the human psyche, humanistic values, and the relation of the soul to God.

From a second perspective, the thought processes Browne demonstrates in his prose have much in common with the thought processes involved in the art of meditation. The Religio may be interpreted as a kind of dialectic which proceeds from reason to emotion and eventually to the conscious acts of will involved in faith. The unevenness and ambiguity of the Religio are deliberate; they portray "the candor of the soul," the "athletic movement of the mind" as Browne's persona struggles toward certainty in the knowledge of God and of himself.

The external structure of the Religio may conform to the "stair of meditation," a method of meditation which probably originated with Joannus Mauburnus; it was popularized by Cardinal Robert Bellarmine in The Ascent of the Mind to God and reinterpreted by Bishop Joseph Hall in The Art of Divine Meditation (1606). The dialectic present in Browne's

prose affords him the opportunity of a reflective stance, allowing him the freedom of withdrawing from the flow of his thoughts to view them from a transcendent perspective. This quality of Browne's prose contributes to the making of one of the most complicated personae in all of English prose. Browne's persona is elusive, erratic, both visible and invisible, giving his prose an uneven quality and a constant movement from subjective reflection to objective disinterestedness.

The dialectic of meditation allows Browne to operate by "contraries" in the mind. The ability to hold contradictions in the mind at the same time indicates the sophistication of Browne's contemplative imagination. What he cannot explain by reason, he adheres to by faith. And reason and faith often possess Browne's mind in a stunning discordia concors. The darkness of the mind lives alongside the light of faith, often producing the paradoxes for which Browne is so memorable. Browne's thought is stimulated by ambiguity, and his faith rests in uncertainty, an unsettling phenomenon for readers unfamiliar with this meditative tradition.

The meditative process also allows Browne's imagination to play on the level of discursive reasoning and the level of symbol simultaneously. By evoking responses to symbols, Browne touches the reader at a basic level of emotional response, but the framework of his prose is logical



and rational. The reader is usually unaware that these two levels are being brought together. The process of mind begun in logical thought often ends in a curious symbol which is emotionally satisfying but logically inconclusive. The thought processes of meditation, which may be observed in the dialectical patterns of the Religio, are both discursive and emotional. The reader is led quite rationally through Browne's arguments for his faith in God, but at the same time the reader is somewhat unconsciously aware that Browne's arguments are proving nothing in terms of logic. The moments of "rest" or certainty in the Religio are those pauses in the dialectic when Browne "freezes" his thought in a cryptic metaphor or symbol ("Thus is man that great and true amphibian"). The reader is temporarily satisfied but vaguely aware that the matter of discussion (the nature of man) is really not resolved.

This kind of dialectic, so readily observable in the Religio because Browne does actually portray a mind in the process of thinking, is refined in the Urne Buriall and the Garden of Cyrus. Browne appears to be more conscious of the effects of this kind of thought process. He uses the dialectic to engage the reader's mind as Browne, the writer, teases the reader from symbol (urn, quincunx) to discursive explanations of the symbol. The thought processes visible in Urne Buriall and the Garden of Cyrus have been described as "cryptic," the essential Browne. But they are most

understandable as the refinement of a kind of dialectic which prefers to leave enigmas unresolved.

Finally, the meditative process allows Browne to be one of the great ironists of English literature. His reflective stance allows him to shift positions with little or no explanation. What appears certain truth in one part of the Religio may be refuted in another. Perhaps the greatest irony exists in Browne's perception of himself as a writer; knowing that his words will become "superannuated folly," he cannot resist the attempt to portray the movement of his mind in search for the truth.

Chapter One of this study of Browne attempts to place Browne in the tradition of meditative literature. Western meditation has a variety of manifestations, but in general certain basic trends can be traced from the early Church Fathers to the seventeenth century. Browne fits very well into the kind of contemplative meditation that finds its roots in the thought of St. Augustine. Chapter Two attempts to draw relationships between rhetoric, logic, poetic, and the art of meditation. Western meditation appears to have nurtured the arts of rhetoric and logic, and, in certain time periods, it seems to have profoundly influenced the creative process. Chapter Two defines the kind of meditation found in Bishop Joseph Hall's Art of Divine Meditation, a work which had the most direct influence on Browne's meditational thought. Chapter Three

interprets the Religio Medici in terms of the "Scale of Meditation." Chapter Four explores the imaginative products of Browne's meditational thought. And Chapter Five is a study of Urne Buriall and the Garden of Cyrus as the most carefully constructed products of Browne's imagination. In terms of content and structure, Browne's writings reflect the kind of thought processes familiar to those who practice the art of meditation. In this sense, Western meditation may have enhanced creative processes of mind; it is safe to say that meditation facilitated Browne's view of the circumference of knowledge from the center of his imagination.

## CHAPTER I

### SIR THOMAS BROWNE AND THE MEDITATIVE TRADITION

Sir Thomas Browne's participation in the meditative tradition of the seventeenth century deserves more detailed examination than critics have acknowledged. That Browne was a member of the medical profession, a scholar, a dabbler in the new experimental science, a collector of odd bits of antiquity and history has led his admirers to emphasize one of these roles as the contributing factor to his worth as a writer. His uniqueness as a writer has been described as the rare achievement of eclecticism in which the marriage of science and religion produces brilliant works of imagination. The precise nature of Browne's imagination, however, has never been seriously studied. His imagination operates in a meditative tradition familiar to students of Western culture. Browne is the most subtle but most persistent example of the contemplative imagination in the seventeenth century.

The contemplative imagination, as the term is used in this work, derives from the art of meditation as it was

practiced in the seventeenth century. Some critics have raised the question of Browne's mystical tendencies. Leonard Nathanson traces the various responses: Robert Sencourt (1923) claims that Browne is a true mystic; Jeremiah Finch (1940) considers the question but leaves it open-ended; W. P. Dunn (1950) says that Browne is too interested in finding out why grass is green and blood is red to be a true mystic.<sup>1</sup> Nathanson himself flatly rejects the possibility that Browne is a part of the mystical tradition. He does so on the basis that Browne's Religio Medici is neither a confession of salvation nor an exultation in the mysteries of the Christian religion: "His religious experience tends to focus upon the creatures rather than upon the mysteries of divinity, which draw him into religious speculation, or than upon the things of the Cross, which hardly appear at all."<sup>2</sup> Nathanson sees the o altitudo passage as a rare outburst for Browne, not typical of the corpus of Browne's works.

Browne's significance in the meditative tradition is obscured by the ambiguities of the terms "mystical," "devotional," "meditative," and "contemplative." Christian mysticism in Western thought has its roots in the Old and New Testaments, particularly in the writings of the

---

<sup>1</sup>Leonard Nathanson, The Strategy of Truth: A Study of Sir Thomas Browne (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 95.

<sup>2</sup>Nathanson, p. 93.

psalmists, the prophets, and in the writings of St. Paul; it owes much of its impetus to the Confessions of St. Augustine, who fused the Hebrew concepts of direct confrontation with God with Neoplatonic concepts of the impulse toward union with the One God. Evelyn Underhill's studies of mysticism have illuminated Christian mysticism from an historical and psychological perspective.<sup>3</sup> She defines mysticism as "the direct intuition of experience of God" and a mystic as "a person who has, to a greater or less degree, such a direct experience--one whose religion and life are centred, not merely on an accepted belief or practice, but on that which he regards as first-hand personal knowledge."<sup>4</sup> For a Christian mystic, the most important kinds of experiences are those which lead to union with God, a "communion of love." The consciousness of the Reality of God becomes the object of the mystic's life. Underhill briefly sketches the traditional ways of knowing God: natural theology, in which human beings learn of God through a study of the natural world; dogmatic theology, in which men learn of God through divinely revealed Scriptures; and mystical theology, in which men find God "through the soul's secret and direct experience."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Underhill, The Mystics of the Church (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), pp. 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Underhill, pp. 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Underhill, p. 11.

23

Underhill does not see the mystical temperament as one belonging to a selected few but as a characteristic which all human beings possess to some degree: "We cannot say that there is a separate 'mystical sense,' which some men have and some have not, but rather that every human soul has a certain latent capacity for God, and that in some this capacity is realized with an astonishing richness." <sup>6</sup> The great mystics are those who have allowed that capacity for God to be filled in its most creative way; they are "geniuses in the sphere of religion . . . people who see and experience more vividly a Reality which is there for us all. . . ." <sup>7</sup>

David Knowles, in The English Mystical Tradition, defines mysticism similarly, emphasizing that the terms "mystic" and "mystical" should be understood in the sense in which religious writers from the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century understood it--as the secret knowledge of God. Knowles points out that mystical knowledge of God has three main characteristics:

It is recognized by the person concerned as something utterly different from and more real and adequate than all of his previous knowledge and love of God. It is experienced as something at once immanent and received, something moving and filling the powers of the mind and soul. It is felt as taking place at a deeper level of the personality and soul than that on which the normal processes of thought and will

---

<sup>6</sup>Underhill, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup>Underhill, p. 14.

take place, and the mystic is aware, both in himself and in others, of the soul, its qualities and of the divine presence and action within it, as something wholly distinct from the reasoning mind with its powers.<sup>8</sup>

Knowles' study is helpful in that it suggests the necessity for studying mysticism within a particular historical perspective. A study of mysticism is hardly separable from the historical period during which it flourished. Neither is a study of mysticism separable from the particular personality and temperament of the mystic himself. Knowles' study focuses on the Catholic mystical tradition in England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In establishing a context, he traces the significant developments of mysticism from the time of Augustine. Such developments are helpful in understanding the religious atmosphere of seventeenth-century England.

The philosophy of Plato and Aristotle emphasized the importance of cultivation of the intellect for the purpose of the soul's attainment of eternal ideas and the soul's gradual outgrowth of materiality. As Knowles suggests, "Man's highest activity and the goal of his endeavor was a life, either here or hereafter, spent in the life of contemplation."<sup>9</sup> Plato and Aristotle, however, viewed this intellectual activity as the desirable goal of every human

---

<sup>8</sup> David Knowles, The English Mystical Tradition (New York: Harper, 1961), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Knowles, p. 3.



mind and not as a special religious activity. It was not until the teachings of Plotinus and other Neoplatonic philosophers that the life of contemplation became a religious quest. Knowles describes this process: "For Plotinus the universe of spirit, and in particular the individual human soul, yearned to return to Mind from which it had come forth and to contemplate, in union with Mind, Mind itself, the author and exemplar of being, truth, and goodness."<sup>10</sup> Knowles sees the significance of Plotinus in three areas: "The contemplative life as the goal above all other activities for the human soul; the intellectual contemplation of divine truth; and the God-given, ecstatic, ineffable union of love."<sup>11</sup>

Early Church Fathers, influenced by Plotinian thought, assimilated these ideas into the Christian's experience of the knowledge of God. Origen and Clement of Alexandria, not mystics themselves, made the distinction between the active life of good works and the life of contemplation. St. Gregory of Nyssa, often called "the father of Christian mysticism," elaborates on the distinctness of these two kinds of Christian dedication and emphasizes the mind going out of itself to the unknowable.<sup>12</sup>

Alexandrian monks eventually made specific the processes involved in the contemplative life. Knowles

---

<sup>10</sup> Knowles, pp. 21-22.

<sup>11</sup> Knowles, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Knowles, p. 24.

summarizes these as follows:

The active pursuit of the virtues accompanied by abnegation of all kinds; the progress towards recollection and the transcendence of things pleasurable and painful; the gradual attainment of purity of heart; an insistence on the intimate connection between the growth in virtues, particularly those of charity and faith, and the advance in purity and facility in prayer; and, finally, the all-important recognition of a direct, experienced divine assistance making possible a kind of prayer and a mode of virtuous living and acting of which human nature, even when trained and purified and assisted by "ordinary grace," must remain incapable.<sup>13</sup>

It was from the Alexandrians that Augustine received the most benefit in his contemplative life. However, instead of designing a model program of the contemplative way, Augustine described his own spiritual life. Perhaps the chief contribution of Augustine to the Western mystical tradition was the personal, confessional mode of his writings, and the sophistication with which he imbued these writings by the process of his own mind, disciplined as it was by his study of Greek philosophy.

According to Knowles, Augustine initiated one of two major strands of mystical tradition. Augustine's writings have caused debate, since some religious writers do not consider him fully mystical because of the absence of hallucinatory phases of his religious life, visions, ecstasies, and the conspicuous presence of the supernatural.

---

<sup>13</sup> Knowles, p. 24.

Knowles says it is possible that Augustine was describing "the occasional intellectual enlightenment regarding God Himself and other truths given to the mind in an experiential, but not a strictly mystical way."<sup>14</sup> Later mystical writers who follow the Augustinian pattern write experientially of the knowledge of God, reflectively considering the relationship of God and the world and the self, but without elements of the visionary writers. It is in this sense that some of the writers of the seventeenth century may reflect the contemplative tradition, and Browne fits well in this tradition.

The other major trend in Christian mystical tradition originated with Dionysius the Areopagite, about a century after Augustine.<sup>15</sup> To him later mystical writers owe the Neoplatonic concept of the attempt to know an ultimately unknowable God. Knowles says, "For him God is above all that can be attributed to him of perfections and is even above being itself. He is the One, ineffable, inexpressible, unknowable, and Dionysius expounds on the one hand the Plotinian circle of the outgoing of all being from God, followed by its return. . . ."<sup>16</sup> Thus, Dionysius initiated a mystical tradition which eventuated in such English works as The Cloud of Unknowing. Those who subscribe to this

---

<sup>14</sup>Knowles, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup>Knowles, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup>Knowles, p. 27.

mystical tradition emphasize the ecstasy of the mystical experience, the inability to express the perception of God. Whereas Augustine perceived God to be the substance of the whole created order, able to be known by those who allow God to fill them with Himself, the Dionysian tradition perceived God as ultimately beyond the knowledge of man.

It cannot be overemphasized that mystical theology, rather than systematic or natural theology, from the time of Augustine through the sixteenth century, preserved for all of Western culture the knowledge of personal, direct experience with God. The Catholic mystical tradition nourished the Christian faith as no other single force had. The ravages of the Reformation left doubts which systematic theology, both Catholic and Protestant, could not readily resolve by reference to tradition. Personal religious experience became the means for restoration of faith.

The Reformation brought great divisiveness in religion. Rufus M. Jones says, "One of the greatest tragedies in Christian history is the division of forces which occurred in the Reformation movements of the sixteenth century."<sup>17</sup> One of the great impulses toward wholeness in religion came from the mystics. Jones mentions Nicholas of Cusa, who lived and wrote shortly

---

<sup>17</sup>Rufus M. Jones, Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Boston: Beacon Press, 1914), p. 1.

before Luther was born. Jones emphasizes the importance of the mystics for the healing quality they brought to religion:

There was abroad at the opening of the Reformation a deep yearning among serious people for a religion of inward experience, a religion based not on proof-texts nor on external authority of any kind, but on the native capacity of the soul to seek, to find and to enjoy the living God who is the Root and Sap of every twig and branch of the great tree of life. The general trend of this mystical tendency, as also of the Humanistic movement, was in the direction of lay-religion, and both movements alike emphasized the inherent and native capacity of man, whose destiny by his free choice is in his own hands.<sup>18</sup>

The humanism of the seventeenth century, also a restorative force, received vitality from an experiential form of religion rather than a traditional form of religion. As Jones points out, the humanists were concerned with rediscovering the nature of man as a creature of reason, rather than as an abstract soul:

Man, the Humanists say, is possessed in his own right of great powers of reason. He is a creative and autonomous being, he has vast capacities for life and enjoyment to which the Church had failed to minister. They stood amazed at the artistic and literary culture, the political and intellectual freedom and the great richness of life which the newly discovered classical literature revealed as having existed in the pre-Christian world, and at the wonderful comprehension on life revealed in the Gospels.<sup>19</sup>

It is helpful, when examining the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in English religious history, to

---

<sup>18</sup>Jones, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup>Jones, p. 2.

keep in mind three distinctions which Jones makes regarding the spiritual movements of this age: the Mystical tendency, the Humanistic or Rational tendency, and the distinctive Faith-tendency of the Reformation. Jones describes mysticism in ways similar to those previously mentioned:

"Mysticism for the mystic himself is characterized by a personal experience through which the ordinary limitations of life and the passionate pursuits of the soul are transcended, and a self-evident conviction is attained that he is in communion, or even in union, with some self-transcending Reality that absolutely satisfies and is what he has always sought."<sup>20</sup> Like Evelyn Underhill, he concludes that "the great mystics are religious geniuses."<sup>21</sup>

But Jones concentrates on the second kind of spiritualist, in whom the influences of humanism are most evident. Jones explains that these religious writers embrace a wider scope of devotion and knowledge: "They all read and loved the mystics and they themselves enjoyed times of direct refreshment from an inward Source of Life, but they were, most of them, at the same time, devoted Humanists. They shared with enthusiasm the rediscovery of those treasures which human Reason had produced, and they rose to a more virile confidence in the sphere and capacity of Reason than

---

<sup>20</sup> Jones, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, p. 2.

had prevailed in Christian circles since the days of the early Greek Fathers."<sup>22</sup>

These spiritualists emphasized that the reason of man does not conflict with the presence of God within man. Jones says, "They took a variety of roads to their conclusion, but in one way or another they all proclaimed that deep in the central nature of man--an inalienable part of Reason--there was a Light, a Word, an Image of God, something permanent, reliable, universal, and unsundered from God himself. They all knew that man is vastly more than 'mere man.'"<sup>23</sup> Quite paradoxically, they discounted reason as a way to God, yet they had great respect for man's rationality. Jones traces the process whereby many of these rational humanists proceeded to the knowledge of God. Essentially, it was the incorporation of direct experience of God into a larger whole of knowledge:

The method of testing and verifying any fact of truth which we have on our hands, is always to organize it and link it into a larger whole of knowledge which we ourselves, or the wider group of persons in which we are organic members, have verified, and to see that it fits in consistently into this larger whole, and in this rational process we always assume and are bound to assume some sort of Reality that transcends the fleeting and temporal, the caprice of the moment, the will of the subject, the here and now.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Jones, p. vi..

<sup>23</sup> Jones, p. xix.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, p. xxx.

This way of approaching spiritual truth involved the mutual respect of the reason of man and of an ultimate Reality which produces some kind of order. Many spiritual leaders of the seventeenth century must be seen in this broader, humanistic context, and Sir Thomas Browne fits into this tradition. At the same time that he attempted a synthesis of knowledge, he was deeply concerned with the inner nature of man and man's inward search for God. Browne very humbly recognized the centuries of Christian tradition which had preceded him, and he sought carefully the manner of his own expressions of religious experience.

Sir Thomas Browne inherited the values of a long tradition of contemplative writers. He represents the best qualities of the Augustinian meditative tradition, tempered by the humanism of the seventeenth century. If "meditation" means the approach to God by means of visions, ecstasies, and emotional outpourings of the spirit, then by no means could Browne be considered as a part of the meditative tradition. But if it means the prolonged dialogue of the soul with God, then Browne must be considered a part of the meditative tradition. The dialogue is readily perceived in the Religio Medici. Although some critics persist in interpreting the Religio as purely philosophical, this work is more accurately viewed as an intense personal dialogue between the persona and God. In the Religio, Browne achieves the ultimate meditative experience of being involved, as a



subject, in a vast realm of experience and of being detached from that experience to reflect upon it. He becomes both subject and object. And without relinquishing his control of faith, he transcends his subjectivity to reflect upon that faith.

The dialogue is intricate, disturbing, and uneven. But it is the profound interaction of one man's mind and spirit with God. Browne's other works reflect the meditative tone set by the Religio. In them Browne views all objects of creation in one vast order. The Being of God stains all creation, and there is no object, no matter how miniscule, which cannot be explained as part of God's own Being. Browne possesses the mystic's optimism that the mind of man is analogous to the mind of God. Doubt is so much a part of Browne's belief that some have termed him skeptic; but Browne's rare achievement is the synchronous portrayal of the light of man's mind (reason) with the darkness of God (faith). The dialectic produced by the interaction of the mind of man with the Spirit of God leads the reader to deeper insight, both of himself and of the external created order. The total impact of Browne's writing is an urgent call to piety, both in the secular world and in the Christian tradition.

In the 1640's, when Browne was writing the Religio, a powerful surge of interest in the art of meditation was sweeping the continent of Europe and of England. Professor Louis L. Martz has successfully demonstrated the tremendous

impact which devotional and meditational writings had on English poets of the seventeenth century.<sup>25</sup> Martz cites a study of A. F. Allison and D. M. Rogers in 1956, "Catalogue of Catholic Books in English Printed Abroad or Secretly in England, 1558-1640," which includes over a thousand books of meditation.<sup>26</sup> Martz's own study, The Poetry of Meditation, deals with only half of these. Martz states very simply, "The Art of Meditation constituted one of the great developments in European culture; its influence penetrates to the center of European consciousness in that period."<sup>27</sup>

Martz's study grew from his careful scrutiny of a comprehensive work on the growth of meditative exercises, Christian Spirituality by Pierre Pourrat.<sup>28</sup> Pourrat traces meditational exercises from the early Fathers to the end of the seventeenth century. According to Pourrat, the mystical tradition begun by Church Fathers never died out during this period of history. A great movement toward religious meditation began in the middle of the sixteenth century when the Pope approved the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola (1548).<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Louis L. Martz, The Poetry of Meditation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).

<sup>26</sup>Martz, p. xvi.

<sup>27</sup>Martz, p. xvi.

<sup>28</sup>Martz, pp. 4-5.

<sup>29</sup>Martz, p. 5.

The Jesuits in the sixteenth century stimulated the study of meditation, and from France, Spain, and Italy came some of the most influential patterns: The Book of Prayer and Meditation (1554) by Fray Luis de Granada, The Spiritual Combat (1589) by Lorenzo Scupoli, and The Introduction to the Devout Life by St. Francois de Sales (1609).<sup>30</sup> These Catholic mystics probably most deeply affected all religious writers, even the Protestant writers of meditation.

Sir Thomas Browne, not usually characterized as a practitioner of the art of meditation, practiced devotion. Frank L. Huntley mentions a family legend that Browne's father would often kiss his sleeping child and pray that the Holy Ghost would inhabit there, a story, Huntley points out, that was also told of Origen's father. Huntley says, "Basking all his life in 'the mercifull disposition, and humane inclination I borrowed from my Parents,' Thomas Browne, the son, was grateful for an 'inbred loyalty unto vertue.'"<sup>31</sup>

Browne's first major work, The Religio Medici, reflects the dialectic of the art of meditation. An assertion that Browne exhibits the mysticism of the Dionysian tradition would be a drastic misinterpretation of the

---

<sup>30</sup>Martz, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup>Frank L. Huntley, Sir Thomas Browne (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1962), p. 1.

Religio. But reading the Religio in light of works generally acknowledged as guides for the art of meditation reveals the meditative nature of the Religio. Browne would almost certainly have read spiritual exercises by continental writers during the four years (1629-1633) which he spent in Montpellier, Padua, and Leiden. He confesses to know well at least six languages and to have a reading knowledge of more. Readers of Browne have, fortunately, a list of books that were in Browne's library when it was sold by his son in 1711.<sup>32</sup> It cannot be known with certainty, however, whether this list is completely accurate, since Browne may have lost or sold books before his son inherited the library. Nevertheless, certain volumes are interesting for the study of Browne's place in the meditative tradition. He owned Ficino's Theologica Platonica, which, as Leonard Nathanson points out, "reproduces the important statements and doctrines of Plato, Plotinus, and the other Platonists."<sup>33</sup> He also owned John Henley's translations of The City of God (second ed., 1620), which contained "Augustine's influential discussion of the Platonists in relation to Christian thought." Browne also owned books of Philo and the Christian Fathers, including a book of Dionysius the Areopagite. Most significant for the study of meditation was Bonaventura's Meditationes (1638) and Cardinal Bellarmine's Ascent of the Mind to God.

---

<sup>32</sup>A Catalogue of the Libraries of the Learned Sir Thomas Brown, and Dr. Edward Brown, His Son, London, 1710-11.

<sup>33</sup>Nathanson, p. 49.

(Browne owned at least three copies of Bellarmine's work, one in Latin, one in English, and one in Italian.)<sup>34</sup>

Most convincing, however, for the influence of the art of meditation on Browne is the presence in his library of the works of Bishop Joseph Hall, including Hall's Art of Divine Meditation (1606).<sup>35</sup> Bishop Hall appears to have had the most significant influence on Browne's absorption of the meditative tradition. There can be little doubt that Browne knew him personally. Browne left little direct evidence of his friendship with Hall, as indeed he left little reference to other contemporaries. But Robert Ralston Cawley, in "Sir Thomas Browne and His Reading," indicates the mention of this friendship by John Whitefoot, Browne's close friend and first biographer. Whitefoot acknowledges that Browne was, as Cawley paraphrases Whitefoot, "close friend to Bishop Joseph Hall and to Arthur Dee. . . ."<sup>36</sup> A man of Browne's religious inclination would probably have cultivated the friendship of Hall, a well-read respected leader in the Anglican Church, Bishop of Norwich, where Browne practiced medicine from 1637 to 1682. One has only to read Hall's introduction to his Art of Divine Meditation

---

<sup>34</sup>Catalogue, pp. 11, 38, 45.

<sup>35</sup>Catalogue, p. 45.

<sup>36</sup>Robert Ralston Cawley and George Yost, eds., Studies in Sir Thomas Browne (Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Books, 1965), p. 111.

to appreciate the profound interest on the part of all educated men in meditational exercises.

Professor Martz traces the significance of Bishop Hall in the meditative tradition. His Art of Divine Meditation, published in 1606, grew out of the method of meditation set forth originally by Johan Wessell Gansfort in the fifteenth century, The Scala Meditatoria or Scala Meditationis, popularized in the Rosetum of Joannes Mauburnus (1494).<sup>37</sup> Most directly influential for Hall was the work of Jean le Charlier de Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris (1363-1429). Martz says, "His masterpiece, On the Mountain of Contemplation, exerted germinal influence upon all the most important meditative and mystical treatises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: in England, the treatise is cited as an authoritative work on meditation both by the future Bishop Hall and by the Puritan Richard Baxter."<sup>38</sup>

There were thirteen editions of Hall's Art of Divine Meditation by 1650.<sup>39</sup> Hall acknowledges his debt to "one obscure nameless monk, which wrote some hundred and twelve years ago," who was probably, according to Martz, Johan Wessel Gansfort. Hall's dedication expresses the desire for his own work to be among those religious writings that

---

<sup>37</sup> Martz, p. 332.

<sup>38</sup> Martz, p. 332.

<sup>39</sup> Martz, p. 332.

allay strife rather than breed it. His main purpose is to induce devotion and piety; at the close of the treatise he reiterates his main theme: "It is not more impossible to live without an heart, than to be devout without meditation."<sup>40</sup> Hall's purpose is not, noticeably, to induce spiritual states leading to ecstasies or visions. And although he lists the scale of meditation, he does not advocate strict adherence to it as a method. Hall describes, in Chapter I of his treatise, the benefits of meditation. He says that meditation is for all Christians, not only for the clergy or those limited to certain professions. By making the art of meditation the proper exercise of all Christians, he provides incentive for a physician like Browne to write down his own devout thoughts "in his solitary and retired imagination," at a place where he had not "the assistance of any good book," and at various snatches of time from the performance of his own profession.<sup>41</sup>

In Chapter II, Hall defines meditation as "nothing else but a bending of the mind upon some spiritual object through divers forms of discourse, until our thoughts come to an issue. . . ."<sup>42</sup> The phrase "divers forms of discourse" is especially significant, for Hall is not prescribing a kind

---

<sup>40</sup> Joseph Hall, "The Art of Divine Meditation, In The Works of the Right Reverend Joseph Hall, ed. Philip Wynter (London, 1606, rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1969), p. 79.

<sup>41</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, The Works of Sir Thomas Browne, vol. I, Ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> Hall, p. 48.

of meditation which proceeds by the use of concrete images, or even the presence of concrete objects. He advocates a kind of meditation which proceeds by orderly discourse, a process which seems to begin with abstraction and issue in concrete forms.

Hall distinguishes between two kinds of meditation: one extemporal, "occasioned by outward occurrences offered to the mind," the other "deliberate and wrought out of our own heart."<sup>43</sup> The former consists mainly in the use of reason to discover hidden truths in knowledge, the latter consists in kindling the affections towards God. Hall establishes, by defining these two kinds of meditation, a pattern which Browne employs with facility and grace. The first of these types of meditation does not derive exclusively from Hall, but is the type of meditation practiced by those Christians who meditate from "The Book of the Creatures."<sup>44</sup> This type of meditation, first popularized by the German mystic, Jacob Boehme in the sixteenth century, is more personal than natural theology, and celebrates the created order as the divine art of God. Hall explains this type of meditation in more detail:

Man is placed in this stage of the world, to view the several natures and actions of the creature; to view them, not idly, without his use, as they do him. God made all these for

---

<sup>43</sup>Hall, p. 48.

<sup>44</sup>For a fuller discussion of this type of meditation, see Evelyn Underhill, The Mystics of the Church (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), pp. 213 ff.



man and man for his own sake. Both these purposes were lost, if man should let the creatures pass carelessly by him; only seen, not thought upon. . . . Whence it is that wise Solomon putteth the sluggard to school unto the ant, and our Savior sendeth the distrustful to the lily of the field. In this kind was that meditation of the divine Psalmist; which, upon the view of the glorious frame of the heavens, was led to wonder at the merciful respect<sup>45</sup> God hath to so poor a creature as man. . . .

Hall calls the world "this great volume of the creatures," and says that meditation on the creatures of God is not only lawful but necessary: "The thoughts of this nature are not only lawful, but so behoveful, that we cannot omit them without neglect of God, his creatures, ourselves. The creatures are half lost, if we only employ them, not learn something of them. . . ." <sup>46</sup>

Browne's own preference for an approach to devotion is through God's creatures. Browne says that "in this masse of nature there is a set of things which carry in their front, though not in capitall letters, yet in steno-graphy, and short Characters, something of Divinitie, which to wiser reasons serve as Luminaries in the abysse of knowledge, and to judicious beliefes as scales and roundles to mount the pinnacles and highest pieces of Divinity." <sup>47</sup>

Browne boldly describes his method of knowing God: "My humble speculations have another Method and are content to trace and discover those impressions hee hath left on his

---

<sup>45</sup>Hall, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup>Hall, p. 49.

<sup>47</sup>Browne, p. 21.

creatures, and the obvious effects of nature; there is no danger to profound these mysteries, no Sanctum sanctorum in Philosophy: The world was made to be inhabited by beasts, but studied and contemplated by man: 'tis the debt of our reason we owe unto God, and the homage we pay for not being beasts."<sup>48</sup>

Browne says that those who inquire into the natural acts of God and into God's creatures only return "the duty of a devout and learned admiration."<sup>49</sup> Browne follows the tradition of religious writers who teach that all the products of God's creativity glorify him by fulfilling their natures. A tree glorifies God by blossoming, growing strong, maturing and dying. But man, of all God's creations, cannot glorify God by simply fulfilling the biological potential in his body. Man alone was given the gift of reason, and by use of man's reason, rightly ordered and administered, man fulfills the purpose for which he was created.

Browne's method is not the casual remark of the curious scientist; it is the subscribing to a tradition of Christian meditation, as Browne knew it from Bishop Hall and others. The impelling force behind the meditations on the "Book of the Creatures" is the quest for the Being of God through the indirect signs of His creation. Boehme perceived that the essence of the created order was a mysterious

---

<sup>48</sup>Browne, p. 22.

<sup>49</sup>Browne, p. 22.

13

fire, and he spoke obliquely of this fire as the light of God. Evelyn Underhill places Sir Thomas Browne, along with Boehme, in the category of those mystics who speak of the essence of God as fire.<sup>50</sup> Browne speaks of the "pure flame of life" and "the invisible sun" within us. But the biological metaphor is more suitable for Browne's quest. Through his intricate study of life forms, Browne was obsessed with the very nature of life. The Being of God, to him, is mysteriously present in the seeds of weeds; in the seeds of all life forms are the potential discoveries of the nature of God Himself. It is accurate to state that the vibrant search of Browne's meditative writing is the search for the mystery of God's ingress and egress in visible life forms. The whole of life, to Browne, is like a vast texture of Being. The process of explaining this Being is the poetry of Urne Buriall and the Garden of Cyrus.

The second of Hall's types of meditation, that which is "deliberate and wrought out of our own heart," originates from the darkness of the mind. The more complicated form of meditation interests Hall more than the "Book of the Creatures." He devotes most of his effort to the explanation of the Stair of Meditation. Hall's interpretation shifts the emphasis from regimentation to "art." His subtle renaming of the various stages of meditation causes him to speak of this scale as a kind of dialectical, rhetorical

---

<sup>50</sup>Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930), pp. 143-148.

process in which the reason of man suffuses light into the abysses of spiritual mysteries. Hall's emphasis is on the bringing of order out of chaos--the ability of man to use language to evoke meaningful creations, much as God spoke at the creation of the world to produce order out of chaos. This fascinating concern with the use of man's reason to cooperate with man's emotional response to God is a new translation of both rhetoric and spiritual exercises. And Sir Thomas Browne seizes upon this new interpretation of both language and devotion to be the means of practicing his own literary art. The stair of meditation articulated by Hall may be traced vividly in the Religio Medici to form the thought structure of this apparently diffuse work.

The influence of meditation of Browne seems to work in these two broad ways. All his works, with the possible exception of the Vulgar Errors, are meditations of "The Book of the Creatures." All his works utilize the dialectic of the stair of meditation, although the Religio is the most notable example. For purposes of illustrating the influence of meditation on Browne, it seems appropriate to examine first the dialectical, rhetorical processes at work in the art of meditation, and to show the evolution of these processes from the arts of rhetoric and logic. Then Browne's symbolism becomes more explainable.

## CHAPTER II

### SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY AESTHETIC AND THE ART OF MEDITATION

Sir Thomas Browne's imagination was nourished by the art of meditation, but in order to appreciate fully the influence of meditation on Browne, it is necessary to show the intricate relationships between meditational writings and the development of an aesthetic theory in English literature in the seventeenth century. Browne's imagination, in a particular sense, was profoundly affected by the art of meditation; but the whole concept of imagination, in a general sense, was also affected by meditation.

The Renaissance shared with the medieval period some common assumptions about rhetoric, logic, and poetry. Richard McKeon's "Rhetoric in the Middle Ages" provides the most exhaustive study of the interrelationship of these disciplines.<sup>1</sup> Concepts of rhetoric in the Renaissance were generally founded on the writings of Cicero, the De Inventione, and the Ad Herennium (ascribed to Cicero but perhaps

---

<sup>1</sup>Richard McKeon, "Rhetoric in the Middle Ages," Speculum, 17 (January, 1942), 1-32.

anonymous), and the writings of Quintilian.<sup>2</sup> According to McKeon, theories of rhetoric derived from the trivium of the medieval curriculum: rhetoric, grammar, and dialectic. Rhetoric as a science progressed through several stages--it was, at the same time, the art of speaking well in oratory, the practical training in the writing of letters and documents, and the "practical discipline applied to preaching and prayer." Grammar was the study of the essential structure of language. And dialectic was the basis for logic, the end of which was persuasion by means of argument from syllogisms. But rhetoric, grammar, and logic tended to merge together. Various theoreticians drew fine and distinct lines between these disciplines in various periods of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. One common element in all their discussion was the purpose of rhetoric: its end was persuasion through eloquence and its medium was reason. No philosophic discipline could be expressed without due concern for rhetorical principles. Christianity grew, nourished by rhetoricians. Augustine depended heavily on Cicero, with the modification that there was a language to describe worldly things and a language to describe heavenly things. But the significant concept is that rhetoric and logic were intended to be reflections of the mind, and no scholarly endeavor could succeed without a proper use of them. The rhetoric and logic expounded was that of Cicero, Quintilian, Aristotle, Augustine, Boethius.

---

<sup>2</sup>McKeon, pp. 2, 3.

The effect of the dominance of rhetoric in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance is expressed in several works by English scholars of the sixteenth century. Sister Miriam Joseph's study of these rhetoricians provides clear insight into the dominance of the discipline of rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> Her work, Rhetoric in Shakespeare's Time, divides English rhetoricians into three categories: the traditionalists, who followed slavishly the principles of Cicero and Quintilian; the Ramists, who followed the leadership of Petrus Ramus in subordinating rhetoric and grammar to logic; and the Figurists, who concerned themselves with the tropes of rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> Representatives of the Traditionalists include Philip Melanchthon, Leonard Cox, and Thomas Wilson; representatives of the Ramists include (besides Ramus himself) Dudley Fenner and Abraham Fraunce; the Figurists include Richard Sherry, Henry Peacham, and George Puttenham. To emphasize the magnitude of the influence of these rhetoricians, Joseph says:

These English works had in Tudor times a popularity, a vitality, and an importance astonishing to us today, due in part to the use of illustrations from matter of intense interest to the readers for whom the books were designed. The Latin works were school texts, but the English books circulated among adults, especially among those of the court and of the upper and middle classes. From 1551 to 1595 there were at least seven editions of Wilson's Rule of Reason and eight of his Arte of Rhetorique which was written, so the title

---

<sup>3</sup>Sister Miriam Joseph, C.S.C., Rhetoric in Shakespeare's Time (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947).

<sup>4</sup>Joseph, pp. 13-18.

page informs us, "for the use of all such as are studious of Eloquence"--as who in intellectual circles in Tudor England was not? Puttenham explicitly stated that he wrote his Arte for courtiers, and particularly for ladies, to assist them in composing and in appreciating polite verse.

The five traditional parts of rhetoric were invention, disposition, elocution, memory, and delivery. Joseph demonstrates how each of the three types of rhetoricians includes significant exposition for all five of these parts, though some emphasize one part over the others. Joseph further emphasizes the dependence of English rhetoricians on the classical theories of Cicero and Aristotle, while, at the same time they drew their examples of rhetoric from English poets--Spenser, Sidney, Wyatt, and Surrey.

English rhetoricians, however, were beginning to be more concerned with the structures of language in poetry and creative prose rather than with the structures of oratory or literature written for political purposes. The publication in English of Aristotle's Poetics began to attract more English writers than Aristotle's Rhetoric. English critics also became more conscious of the structures of English rather than Latin. For the first time, they began to formulate a poetic for the vernacular--their own poetry. They began a defense of English as a literary language. The most vocal English critics who defended the structures of the English language--Sidney, Spenser, Wilson, and Puttenham--emphasized a new concept in poetics: the

---

<sup>5</sup>Joseph, p. 18.



psychology or state of mind of the individual writer. Cicero, Aristotle, Quintilian had excluded such matters, for this was not important for their main concern, the objective of persuasion through eloquence. A particular writer's psychological state was of little consequence.

With the advent of aestheticians like George Puttenham and Sir Philip Sidney, however, a subtle turn to the disposition of the writer himself occurred. Murray W. Bundy's study of the distinction between the medieval rhetorical concept of "invention" and the Renaissance concept of "imagination" provides a most helpful insight into the shift of emphasis from the end product of rhetoric to the processes involved in the writer's mind.<sup>6</sup> Bundy explains that the first stage was the appropriation by the Renaissance of the psychology of the Middle Ages: "The brain was divided into three cells or ventricles: in the foremost were common sense and imagination; in the middle, fantasy and judgment; and at the rear was memory."<sup>7</sup> Bundy is careful to point out that, along with this understanding of the psychology of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance also inherited the distrust of imagination as an indication of insanity. Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream confirms this view when Theseus says that the lunatic, the lover, and the poet are of imagination all compact. (V,i) A third inheritance

---

<sup>6</sup>Murray W. Bundy, "'Invention' and 'Imagination' in the Renaissance," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, (1930), 535-545.

<sup>7</sup>Bundy, p. 537.

from the Middle Ages was a mystical view of imagination deriving from Plato and Plotinus and the medieval mystics' interpretations of these powers of the soul, and the vision of Dante, which in its breadth and profundity validated the mystical powers of the imagination.<sup>8</sup>

Bundy proceeds to clarify the Renaissance treatment of the three major rhetorical processes--invention, disposition and elocution. He emphasizes that Renaissance writers modified the principle of invention, so that it seldom meant what medieval and classical rhetoricians meant by it. Bundy quotes from George Gascoigne:

The first and most necessarie poynt that euer  
I founde meete to be considered in making of  
a delectable poeme is this, to grounde it  
upon some fine inuention. For it is not  
inough to roll in pleasant woordes . . . un-  
lesse the Inuention have in it also alquis  
salis I meane some good and fine duise<sup>9</sup>, shew-  
ing the quicke capacitie of a writer.

This description reveals invention as the source of original concepts. Bundy's most significant example comes from Stephen Hawes' The Pastime of Pleasure, in which "imagina-  
tion" is seen as the help-mate of invention:

And secondly/ by ymagynacyon  
To drawe a mater/ full facundyous  
Full meruaylous/ is the operacyon  
To make of nought/ reason sentencyous  
Clokyng a trouthe/ with colour tenebrous  
For often under a fayre fayned fable  
A trouthe appereth gretely profytable. . . .<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Bundy, pp. 537, 538.

<sup>9</sup>Bundy, p. 539.

<sup>10</sup>Bundy, p. 539.

Hawes explains that if a poet is inventive and he does not apply his fantasy "to the best kind of cunning," his work will fall short of its purpose. Fantasy (imagination) exemplifies invention, and causes a writer "With hold desyre/to brynge it [his work] to an ende. . . ." <sup>11</sup>

Bundy explains that Hawes is interpreting invention in terms of the medieval conception of the five inward wits: "common sense, imagination, fantasy, judgment, memory." Bundy concludes: "He thus achieved a marriage of rhetoric and psychology which had important consequences for the history of the poetic imagination." <sup>12</sup> And, further, he states that one is justified in assuming that "inventio was first explained in terms of mental powers not earlier than the beginning of the sixteenth century." <sup>13</sup> Invention thus marries poetic inspiration with imagination and fantasy. Imagination for Hawes is "the poet's capacity for fiction, resulting in the 'far-feigned fable.'" <sup>14</sup>

In Bundy's evaluation, Ronsard completes the marriage of invention and imagination. He quotes from Ronsard's treatise on poetry: "Invention is nothing else but the natural good of an imagination, conceiving the ideas and

---

<sup>11</sup>Bundy, p. 540.

<sup>12</sup>Bundy, p. 540.

<sup>13</sup>Bundy, p. 541.

<sup>14</sup>Bundy, p. 541.

forms of everything that can be imagined, heavenly as well as earthly. . . ."15

Bundy's most effective examples, however, are George Puttenham and Sir Philip Sidney. (I have taken the liberty of adding to Bundy's examples from these works.) Puttenham's treatise, The Art of English Poesie, published in 1589, is one of the first to ascribe dignity to the aesthetics of the English language. He places the powers of the poet among the divine powers given to man by His Creator. He interprets God as Creator in a slightly different manner than the Platonists, because he asserts that God did not create the world out of a pre-existing Idea, as the Platonists claim, but out of nothing. Even so, "The poet makes and contrives out of his owne braine both the verse and matter of his poem and not by any foreign example."16 Such a view confers a sublime dignity upon the powers of the poet, and it makes invention a capacity for originality of thought and design. The poet's perfection, says Puttenham, grows by some divine instinct.

Puttenham gives poetry a place of divine importance in the history of every culture, suggesting that it has ever been the first means of giving order to man's experience.. It predates a culture's consciousness of its own history. Contrary to the view that a poet is a

---

<sup>15</sup>Bundy, p. 541.

<sup>16</sup>George Puttenham, "The Arte of English Poesie," In Elizabethan Critical Essays, II, ed. Gregory Smith (London: Oxford, 1904), p. 19.

"phantasticall," the poet is the source of creation for all aspects of a culture:

For the mind of man, being well affected and formed, can be so uniform and well proportioned and clear that by it, as by a glass or mirror are represented unto the soul all manner of beautiful visions, whereby the inventive part of the mind is so much holpen as without it no man could devise any new or rare thing: and where it is not excellent in his kind, there could be no politique capitaine, nor any witty engineer or cunning artificer, nor yet any law maker or counsellor of deep discourse. . . . And this phantasie may be resembled to a glasse, as hath bene sayd, whereof there by many tempers and manner of makings, as the perspectives doe acknowledge. . . . Even so it is the phantasticall part of man (if it be not disordered) a representer of the best, most comely, and beautifull images or appearances of things to the<sup>17</sup> soul and according to their very truth. . . .

Puttenham's inclusion of all creative activity imbues the quality of imagination with a significance never articulated by medieval or classical rhetoricians.

Sir Philip Sidney's Apology for Poetry, published in 1595, reiterates the poet's divine calling. The poet is "the first light-giver to ignorance"; and even the first philosophers, notably Plato, depended on poetry as the medium of thought. Sidney recalls that the Romans called a poet "diviner, foreseer, prophet." The Greeks called a poet a "maker." The poet's gift is that faculty of mind which allows him to immerse himself in the works of Nature and present them as his own mind sees fit: "Only the poet,

---

<sup>17</sup>Puttenham, pp. 20, 21.

disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature. . . ."<sup>18</sup>

It will readily be seen that, in the defense of poetry (creative use of language), the critical writers of the English language in the sixteenth century were more concerned with the rhetorical device of invention than with other rhetorical devices, and they interpreted invention as the source of "imagination." Invention allows a poet the freedom to make his own design of order and beauty. It allows him to participate in the divine nature of God. It gives him the ability to "rival" nature with the workings of his own mind.

It is the imaginative capacity of the mind which is most like the quality of mind in meditation. In The Art of Divine Meditation, Joseph Hall describes a process of the mind in which reason, which he recognized as the gift of God, gives way to a faculty of the mind beyond reason. This faculty he names variously as the "affective" part of man, "the enkindling of our love to God," "deliberate meditation," "divine opticks."<sup>19</sup> In The Remedy of Profaneness, he

---

<sup>18</sup>Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry," In Criticism: The Major Texts, ed. Walter Jackson Bate (New York: Harcourt, 1952), p. 97.

<sup>19</sup>Hall, p. 335.

elaborates on "divine opticks," or the ability of man to see the invisible God: "There must be an exaltation and a fortification of our sight, for our visive beams are at our best so weak, that they are not able to look upon a sight so spiritually glorious."<sup>20</sup> This appears to be a description in religious terms of the same capacity of mind described in aesthetic terms by sixteenth-century English rhetoricians. Hall continues: "There must be a trajection of the visual beams of the soul, through all earthly occurrences, terminating them only in God. When this occurs, there will remain a certain divine irradiation of the mind. . . ." <sup>21</sup>

The irradiation of the mind prepares the mind for new insights. This illumination does not render the perceiver speechless or hypnotized; it produces in the perceiver the calmness of order and the excitement of new discovery. The person meditating becomes capable of adding new creations to the realm of knowledge. The vision of God is stunning but not blinding; it enables the meditator to see the things of this world in new perspectives. In religious terms the "irradiation of the mind" is the interaction between the mind of man and the mind of God; in aesthetic terms this power is the generative principle for creativity.

---

<sup>20</sup>Hall, p. 335.

<sup>21</sup>Hall, p. 335.

Hall praises the virtual meditation of God, which may occur in man when he is at work or is least suspicious of God's presence: "when, by the power of an heavenly disposition wrought in the mind, we are so affected, as that divine thoughts are become the constant, though insensible guests of the soul; while the virtue of that original illumination sticks still by us, and is, in a sort, derived into all our subsequent cogitations; leaving in them perpetual remainders of the holy effects of the deeply wrought and well grounded apprehension of God."<sup>22</sup>

It is in the context of Hall's description of the soul's capacity to see God that Browne's statements about the perceptions of faith must be read: "Me thinkes there be not impossibilities enough in Religion for an active faith; the deepest mysteries our containes, have not only been illustrated, but maintained by syllogisme, and the rule of reason: I love to lose by selfe in a mystery, to pursue my reason to an o altitudo!"<sup>23</sup> Browne appears to be following the way of meditation prescribed by Hall. Browne's method begins with mysteries. In the Religio, the mysteries are the greatest mysteries of the Christian religion. Browne pushes his reason to the limits of logic; frequently this insistence for knowledge rewards him with the "divine irradiation" of the mind--an o altitudo, the movement of perception beyond reason. Browne is convinced

---

<sup>22</sup>Hall, p. 336.

<sup>23</sup>Browne, p. 18.



that the light of man's reason may only reveal the shadow of God: "Where there is an obscurity too deepe for our reason, 'tis good to sit down with a description, periphrasis, or adumbration; for by acquainting our reason how unable it is to display the visible and obvious effects of nature, it becomes more humble and submissive unto the subtilities of faith; and thus I teach my haggard and unreclaimed reason to stoope unto the lure of faith."<sup>24</sup>

Both Hall and Browne attempt to describe the capacity of the mind to perceive Divine matter; it is a mysterious and marvelous quality, the gift of God no less than reason. But both Hall and Browne are not willing to lose themselves completely in a mystery. Both emphasize the cooperation of reason and faith, or reason and imagination; and both insist that the purpose of meditation is to produce a new ordering of experience, a "new creation" of the mind which arranges the perceptions of the heart and the intellect into meaningful patterns. Hall instructs that the subject matter of meditation be chosen with care "that all distractions may be avoided, our judgment enlightened, our inventions quickened, our wills rectified, our affections whetted to heavnely things, our hearts enlarged to God-ward, our devotion enkindled: so that we may find our corruptions abated, our graces thriven, our souls and lives every way

---

<sup>24</sup>Browne, p. 19

30

bettered by this exercise." The process of selectivity is a very disciplined effort "which is done by an inward inquisition made into our heart of what we both do and should think upon, rejecting what is unexpedient and unprofitable. In both which the soul, like unto some noble hawk, lets pass the crows and larks, and such other worthless birds that cross her way, and stoopeth upon a fowl of price, worthy of her flight. . . ."25

The most remarkable aspect of Hall's prescription of a method of meditation is his instruction that the mind proceed with extreme orderliness. Even though the perception of God is received through "a divine irradiation of the mind," the resulting meditation is fashioned with a due concern for order and propriety: "After which, our meditation must proceed in due order, not troubledly, not preposterously. It begins in the understanding, endeth in the affection; it begins in the brain, descends to the heart; begins on earth, ascends to heaven; not suddenly, but by certain stairs and degrees, till we come to the highest."26

Hall's transcription of the "stair of meditation," as he had learned it from "a nameless monk," is the heart of his essay on meditation. That transcription is as follows:<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Hall, p. 60.

<sup>26</sup>Hall, p. 61.

<sup>27</sup>Hall, p. 61.

1. Question           What I     think  
                                          should think.
2. Excussion.       A repelling of what I should not  
                                          think.
3. Choice,  
   or  
   Election.           Of what most     necessary.  
                                                          expedient.  
                                                          comely.
4. Commemoration. An actual thinking upon the matter  
                                          elected.
5. Consideration. A redoubled commemoration of the  
                                          same till it be fully known.
6. Attention.       A fixed and earnest consideration,  
                                          whereby it is fastened in the mind.
7. Explanation.    A clearing of the thing considered  
                                          by similitudes.
8. Tractation       An extending the thing considered  
                                          to other points, where all questions  
                                          of doubts are discussed.
9. Dijudication.   An estimation of the worth of the  
                                          things thus handled.
10. Causation.       A confirmation of the estimation  
                                          thus made.
11. Rumination.     A sad and serious meditation of  
                                          all the former, till it may work  
                                          upon the affections.

From hence to the degrees of affection.

Following Hall's transcription of this stair of meditation as he had received it, he simplifies the scale and reinterprets it as follows:<sup>28</sup>

1. Voluntary division of the matter.
2. Causes
3. Consequences, or fruits or effects.

---

<sup>28</sup>Hall, p. 61.

4. Definition.
5. Appendances and qualities of the subject.
6. Contraries.
7. Comparisons or similitudes.
8. Testimonies of Scripture.

What is extremely significant about Hall's reinterpretation of the scale of meditation is that it is essentially a reinterpretation of the classical rhetorical principle of dispositio. Dispositio in the formal rhetoric of Cicero was an acutely analytical method of discourse, by which a subject was divided into arguable points. Sister Miriam Joseph describes the basic processes of disposition:<sup>29</sup>

1. Use of testimony and witnesses.
2. Definition.
3. Division: Genus and Species, Whole and Parts.
4. Subject and Adjuncts.
5. Contraries and Contradictories.
6. Similarity and Dissimilarity.
7. Comparison: Greater, Equal, Less
8. Cause and Effect, Antecedent and Consequent.

The question arises as to whether Hall distorted the stages of meditation passed down by "a nameless monk," or whether the ancient practices of Western meditation coalesced with the studies of formal logic and rhetoric. Such an

---

<sup>29</sup>See Part II of Joseph's book, Rhetoric in Shakespeare's Time (New York: Harcourt), 1947.

investigation is not pertinent to this study, although the temptation exists to suggest that treatises on meditation were passed down by the learned clergy, who would have been disciplined in the arts of rhetoric, logic, and grammar. The more relevant question to this study is the way in which Hall reinterpreted dispositio for the purpose of meditation. He reinterpreted it, essentially, as a process of mind in which the reason cooperates with divine illumination, or the Spirit of God within man, to formulate new perceptions of God.

Hall recasts the scale of meditation as a series of processes alternating between the "understanding" and the "affections." Hall's clarification of this basic alternation process is extremely significant, because at the same time that it draws attention to the two broad divisions of the scale of meditation, it illuminates the basic dialectic involved in this type of meditation. Meditation begins with the mental activities of analysis, division, logical orderliness; it ends in feeling, or a sense of intuitive grasp of the meaning derived from analysis. It begins with the processes of abstraction; it ends in personal appropriation of concepts, often with the result of discovering personal symbols that aid in the intuitive apprehension. It begins with the mind's limited attempt to proscribe infinite concepts; it ends with a sense of expansiveness.

Hall's pointed emphasis on the rational understanding in the course of meditation seems to diverge from other writers' emphases on the intuitive stages of meditation. His effort was commendable, because it attempted to isolate the processes of a religious practice that has always been obscured in mystery. His purpose was to make the practice of meditation accessible to everyone, not only those who devote their entire lives to religion. His struggle to analyze the processes of meditation may be comparable to the efforts of Sidney and Puttenham to describe the creative processes of the poetic mind.

It may be helpful to give a rhetorical interpretation of Hall's stages of meditation. He divides Stage One ("Voluntary division of the matter") into two aspects: "a serious consideration of the subejct," and "an easy and voluntary division of the matter meditated." In rhetorical terms, this step is the exordium, or entrance, into the subject; it is the selecting, focusing process of limiting the scope of consideration. Stages Two and Three are processes that work in conjunction with each other; the search for causes naturally leads to consideration of effects. Stage Four, "definition," works in cooperation with "appendances or qualities of the subject." Likewise, Stages Six and Seven work together; a consideration of "contraries" leads to consideration of similitudes.

It is clear that Hall deliberately constructs a rather sophisticated form of analytical processes. The most obvious characteristic is the use of antithesis by the pairing of apparently diverse processes. Such pairing produces a continuing dialectic in the course of the meditation, a dialectic that allows pause, synthesis, renewed energy for the next stage of the process. But the whole process produces the effect of ever-widening attention to the subject and never-ending consciousness of it. In short, it is a "stair" of meditation. The process, once begun, renews itself constantly by the inner energy exerted in the dialectic. The large, overall bipartite structure of the whole meditation allows for the larger dialectic of understanding and affection working together, or a dynamic interaction between the reason and the emotions. It also allows for the tension between partial understanding and the surrender of reason when the understanding can penetrate no more. This dialectic allows for the going out of the individual self into the otherness it has the ability to perceive and the return to the self for tranquil, restorative, eidetic resolution.

In Hall's interpretation, the meditation does not end at white heat; there is no drastic fall from heaven to earth. And reason and emotion (or imagination) have an equal harmonious contribution to the meditative process. There does remain a sense of ambiguity at the conclusion, partly because the primary aim of the meditation has not been

emergence into new definitive boundaries of the subject but emergence into a new satisfactory level of awareness. For anyone else but the individual meditator, the meditation may indeed appear inconclusive, obscure, dark, or mysterious.

Joseph Hall is a significant writer, indicating the intricate relationships that exist between the arts of rhetoric, logic, aesthetic, and meditation in the seventeenth century. His greatest significance, perhaps, is that he illustrates the importance which meditation held as the means for translating classical theories of rhetoric into a viable aesthetic for the seventeenth century. Hall enunciates a theory of mental activity which is similar to the aesthetic theories of Sidney and Puttenham. It is significant that aestheticians and religious leaders alike were preoccupied with the state of mind preceding creative activity. Hall retains elements of the classical rhetorical tradition of dispositio, but he emphasizes the intense subjectivity of meditation. The result of Hall's combined respect for logic and rhetoric and for the unknown powers of subjectivity is the practice of an aesthetic that is visible in Sir Thomas Browne. Browne respects classical rhetoric, but at the same time he escapes the static forms of classical rhetoric to allow the uneven movements of his mind to play with inner, spiritual realities.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE RELIGIO MEDICI AND

#### THE STAIR OF MEDITATION

The Religio Medici may be read as a series of meditations, each of which conforms to the structure of the stair of meditation which Joseph Hall describes in The Art of Divine Meditation. Even the most casual reader of Browne cannot help observing the impulse toward piety in his works, an impulse perhaps best characterized as an attempt to cultivate an inner life of devotion, a kind of contemplation that made the various areas of his study form a cohesive whole. It is almost certain that Browne owed this attitude toward his inner life to Hall and other writers of the art of meditation. Some readers of Browne de-emphasize the meditational quality of the Religio. Perhaps the hesitancy to label it confessional or devotional is due to the absence of long passages of Browne's direct address to his own soul or to God. Absence of petitions, prayers, penitent longings may be due to Browne's own temperament; he was a modest man in all respects, unpretentious, in his own words, devoid of "the first and father sin, not only of man, but

of the devil Pride. . . ."<sup>1</sup> He did not assume authority in religious controversies. He was by nature melancholy, sober, not given to outbursts of emotions.

The reader of the Religio is struck with Browne's descriptions of his silent feelings in religious moments, rather than with his verbalizations of his emotions: his compulsion to pray for a departed friend while watching the funeral procession, rather than his prayer; his tendency to bow in devotions rather than expression of the devotions themselves; his elevation at the sound of the Ave Marie bell, rather than his lyrical outbursts at the sound. But there can be no doubt that the Religio is a dialogue between the soul of an individual man and the God he adores. It is, in the tradition of Bishop Hall, a labored attempt to practice the art of devotion by exercising the understanding and the will as these are directed toward the mysteries of religious faith.

The dialectic of the meditational process allowed Browne the freedom to exercise in his prose the surges of the mind toward ultimate Reality. Browne's prose exemplifies so well the quality which Morris Croll ascribes to Anti-Ciceronian prose. The rhythm and pause of the Religio suggest that Browne was more concerned with revealing his mind at work than with the polished resolutions of his thought. The dialectic of meditation also allowed Browne to be both subject and object, to enter his

---

<sup>1</sup>Browne, p. 70.

57

meditation as the "I" of a man struggling for the reconciliation of reason and faith, and to withdraw from his meditation to consider the mystery in question from the several perspectives of the scientist, scholar, antiquarian. Finally, the dialectic of meditation allowed Browne the possibility of exercising the mind in paradox. Browne's paradoxes are peculiarly meditational, as they are asymmetrical in quality, the antithesis posed being unequal, and all contradiction being subsumed in God.

Browne's Religio conforms in its external structure to the structure of meditation which Hall expounds. It is divided into two main portions, corresponding to the two main divisions of meditation which Hall prescribes: 1) Meditation from the Understanding; and 2) Meditation from the Affections. The Religio is concerned in its first portion with the attempts of reason to understand the mysteries of the Christian faith; it is concerned in the second portion with a meditation on Charity, a meditation which leads Browne to utter his most personal, emotional thoughts on religion.

In Part I of the Religio, Hall's stair of meditation may be traced as follows:

- |                 |                                                                  |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sections 1-10.  | A method of religious devotion.                                  |
| Sections 11-22. | The Being of God.                                                |
| Sections 23-32. | The products of religion--Scripture, martyrs, miracles, oracles. |

- |                 |                                                            |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sections 33-39. | The relation of the spiritual world to the material world. |
| Sections 40-53. | Death, the Judgement, Heaven and Hell.                     |
| Sections 54-60. | Christ and salvation.                                      |

Part II, likewise, conforms to the stair of meditation which Hall prescribes:

- |                 |                                                                             |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sections 1-2.   | A taste and relish of the subject.                                          |
| Sections 3-4.   | A complaint of unfitness.                                                   |
| Sections 5-6.   | An hearty wish of the soul for what it wants.                               |
| Sections 7-8.   | An humble confession of the soul's disability.                              |
| Sections 9-10.  | An earnest petition.                                                        |
| Sections 11-12. | A vehement enforcement of our petition.                                     |
| Sections 13-14. | A cheerful confidence of obtaining what the soul requests and thanksgiving. |

To illustrate the influence of Hall's method of meditation on Browne's Religio, the sections dealing with the Being of God conform almost exactly to the scale of meditation as it unfolds the "understanding" part of the meditative process. Sections 11-22 proceed by an analysis of the nature of God similar to analytical processes in the stair of meditation.

Stage One: A serious consideration of the subject. In Section 11, Part I, of the Religio, Browne begins his consideration of the nature of God. He says, "In my

solitary and retired imagination I remember I am not alone, and therefore forget not to contemplate him and his attributes who is ever with me. . . ." <sup>2</sup> In the first ten sections of the Religio, Browne has described his particular method of devotion; the first serious subject of his meditation is the Being of God. Like other writers of meditation, Browne considers this inquiry as the entrance and necessary prerequisite to all other subjects of contemplation. Browne is brief and terse in the proposal of this subject of "serious consideration," but it is the subject which comprehends all other major concepts in the Religio. Browne says quite simply that God has not made a creature that can comprehend Him in full, because God alone can say I am that I am. <sup>3</sup> God's self-sufficient nature and man's dependent nature ("I remember I am not alone") are the foundational concepts in all of the Religio.

Stage Two. An "easy and voluntary" division of the matter meditated. In Section 11, Browne proposes to treat of two qualities of God--his wisdom and his eternity. Why Browne made this division is not patently clear, but in the course of his other meditations, he returns to these centripetal points. With the wisdom of God, Browne says he "recreates" his understanding, and the meaning is both

---

<sup>2</sup>Browne, pp. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup>Browne, p. 20.

senses of recreational--renewal of his own mind and delight in the perception of God's wisdom. With God's eternity, Browne says he "confounds" his understanding.<sup>4</sup>

Stage Three. A consideration of the causes. Without being presumptuous, Browne attempts to account for the cause of God's Being, and he does it largely in Aristotelian terms: "There is but one first cause, and foure second causes of all things; some are without efficient, as God, others without, matter, as Angles, some without forme, as the first matter; but every Essence, created or uncreated, hath its finall cause, and some positive end both of its Essence and operation. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Browne is careful throughout the Religio to maintain the distinction between the Being of God as the only uncreated substance in the universe and the beings of his creatures.

Stage Four. A consideration of the fruits and effects. The effects of God's wisdom and eternity are visible in the whole created order. Browne believes that the whole universe is of perfect design from the wisdom of God: "There are no Grotesques in nature; nor any thing framed to fill up empty cantons, and unnecessary spaces; in the most imperfect creatures, and such as were not preserved in the Arke, but having their seeds and principles in the wombe of nature, are every-where the power of the Sun is; in these is the wisdom of his

---

<sup>4</sup>Browne, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup>Browne, p. 23.

hand discovered. . . ." <sup>6</sup> Browne's personal preference is not for the larger designs of God's created order, but for the tiny bits of nature that reflect, rather than magnify, the significance of God's creative power.

Stage Five. A consideration of the whereabouts of the subject. In Section 15, Browne focuses on the revelations of God. He acknowledges Scriptures as the most open revelation, but Browne himself prefers the more mystical revelation of God within nature. Rather unconventionally, he intimates that the heathen might have known God better, because they could read the letters of nature, unlike Christians, "who cast a more careless eye on these common Hieroglyphicks, and disdain to suck Divinity from the flowers of nature." <sup>7</sup>

Stage Six. Appendances and qualities of the subject. The "appendances" of the revelation of God are elaborated in Section 16; these are the infinite workings of the providence of God. Browne calls God's providence "that streight and regular line, that settled and constant course the wisdom of God hath ordained the actions of his creatures, according to their severall kinds." <sup>8</sup> Knowledge of God proceeds through the working out of God's providence in His creation. The "effects of nature" are the works of God, and there is nothing irregular or

---

<sup>6</sup>Browne, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup>Browne, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup>Browne, p. 24.

or ugly in these. Browne says there was never anything completely misshapen or deformed but the Chaos, before the creative power of God impregnated it.<sup>9</sup> In Section 17 Browne discusses the more secular or common way of tracing the providence of God through Fortune or astrology. He calls this a "cryptick and involved method of his providence," but he does not dismiss its importance for understanding the workings of God.<sup>10</sup> In Section 18 he says, "'Tis we that are blind, not fortune," because we do not understand that even the chance occurrences of human lives are part of the larger design of God's providence.<sup>11</sup> Astrology is a negative, but sure, acknowledgement of God's providence: "The Romans, that erected a Temple to Fortune, acknowledged therein, though in a blinder way, somewhat of Divinity; for in a wise supputation of all thing begin and end in the Almighty."<sup>12</sup>

Stage Seven. A consideration of what is diverse or contrary to the subject. In this stage, Browne considers major objections to a belief in God, or the nature of atheism. He believes the tendency to atheism is first a failure to understand the forces at work in man's intellect: "For there is in our soule a kind of Triumvirate, or Triple government of three competitors,

---

<sup>9</sup>Browne, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup>Browne, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup>Browne, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup>Browne, p. 29.



which distract the peace of this our Commonwealth, not lesse than did that other the State of Rome. As Reason is a rebell unto Faith, so passion unto Reason: As the propositions of Faith seeme absurd unto Reason, so the Theorems of Reason unto passion, and both unto Faith. . . ."<sup>13</sup>

A proper balance is possible, and, when achieved, allow room for a belief in God. Browne insists that there is no true atheism:

That doctrine of Epicurus, that denied the providence of God, was not Atheism, but a magnificent and high-strained conceit of his Majesty, which hee deemed to sublime to minde the trivial actions of those inferior creatures: That fatall necessitie of the Stoickes, is nothing but the immutable law of his will. Those that heretofore denied the Divinitie of the holy Ghost, have been condemned but as Heretickes; and those that now deny our Savior, (though more than Hereticks) are not so much as Atheists: for though they deny two persons in the Trinity, they hold as we do, there is but one God.<sup>14</sup>

One cause of atheism is the tendency to dwell on insignificant problems in the Scripture or in the consideration of God, such as whether Adam was an hermaphrodite or who will rise with Adam's rib at the resurrection. Browne's admonition is to refuse to yield to unreasoned beliefs, to practice the "libertie of reason." He says, "I confesse

---

<sup>13</sup>Browne, p. 29.

<sup>14</sup>Browne, p. 30.

<sup>15</sup>Browne, p. 31.

I have perused them all, and can discover nothing that may startle a discreet beliefe. . . ."15

Stages Eight, Nine, and Ten--consideration of comparisons and similitudes, titles and names of the subject, and fit testimonies of Scripture--appear to have been incorporated into the preceding stages. For example, in explaining the providence of God, Browne compares God to "an excellent Artist" and to "a skillful Geometrician."<sup>16</sup> The providence of God is the art of God that He has so contrived that even His obscurest designs are completed. The providence of God is so perfectly schemed that the "forelaid principles" of God's compass are discernible in nature. Browne cites few testimonies of Scripture except as the use of his reason may make the Scripture more believable. For example, in Section 22 he cites commonly accepted beliefs which Scripture does not really verify--that Methusela was the longest-lived man, or that Judas perished by hanging, or that the Tower of Babel was erected to prevent another flood. These are points of dispute on which the reason of man may work without detracting from the validity of Scripture and with the end product of making the Scripture more believable. But the bulk of Browne's meditation on God is

---

<sup>15</sup>Browne, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup>Browne, p. 25.

from the use of his own reason after he has absorbed the major concepts of God given in the Scripture.

Thus, Sections 11-22 follow the structure of the scale of meditation proposed by Bishop Hall in The Art of Divine Meditation. The other major areas of contemplation in the Religio follow this same pattern. If they do not adhere to it rigidly, they nonetheless follow the general design set forth by Hall. The conclusion of one major subject of meditation leads naturally, almost imperceptibly, to the other. Meditation on the Being of God leads to meditation on Scripture and miracles; that leads to meditation on the relation between the spiritual world and the material; that leads to a consideration of death, heaven, and hell; that leads to meditation on Christ and salvation; that leads to meditation on the greatest Christian virtue, Charity. The whole effect is of a vast linked chain, in which the subjects of meditation join each other, in due and proper course. If there is a logic that unites these subjects and urges one meditation to the next, it is the logic employed by the soul as its attention is directed from the object of contemplation, God, to the soul's readiness or worthiness to contemplate God. There is always an unfinished quality to each meditation, although there is always a satisfactory pause. The Religio pushes relentlessly from one subject of contemplation to the

other, almost in digressive fashion, as if one subject simply prodded Browne to think of another as an afterthought. But in light of the structure of meditation, which is really a kind of rhetoric, the loose, linked quality only confirms that, to Browne, contemplation on the mysteries of God proceeds by a stair, or scale, of meditation.

According to Hall's treatise on meditation, the practice is divided into two major activities--those directed toward an understanding of the subject and those directed toward the affective appropriation of the subject. The eleventh stage listed in the scale of meditation which Hall reproduces is termed "Rumination," or "A sad and serious meditation of all the former, till it may work upon the affections."<sup>17</sup> Hall takes this stage as comprising the whole part of the second major activity of meditation, "Affection." This stage unfolds yet another scale. The first part of the Affection stage is "a taste and relish of what we have thought upon." This part is presumably the resting stage of the meditative process in which the mind feels at ease; it is also the stage in which personal feelings assimilate the concepts and attitudes shaped in the first part of the meditative process, that part in which the understanding, or reason, gave form to the subject. Hall says,

---

<sup>17</sup>Hall, p. 70.

"We cannot know aright, but we must needs be affected. Let the heart, therefore, first conceive and feel in itself the sweetness or bitterness of the matter meditated; which is never done without some passion, nor expressed without some hearty exclamation."<sup>18</sup>

The second part of the Religio is remarkably different in temper from the first part. It deals with only one subject, Charity, the virtue which Browne considered the most desirable personal virtue that issued from the Christian religion. In this part of the Religio, Browne is noticeably more personal and reflective. He is not so much concerned with the knotty problems of the Christian faith as he is concerned with the effect that the major concepts of Christianity have on individual, personal behavior. The result of meditations on the Being of God, the nature of man, the nature of the created order, Christ and salvation--all the theological enigmas with which Browne struggled in Part I--find a resolution in the personal virtue of Charity. In broader terms, God's wisdom and eternity are incomplete without his love and man's response to it.

The external structure of Part II of the Religio conforms to the scale of meditation for the second major division of meditation according to Bishop Hall. Sections 1 and 2 correspond to Stage One, "A taste and relish of

---

<sup>18</sup>Hall, p. 73.

the subject." Browne says quite simply that faith in God is only a concept without the virtue of Charity. All the "wingy mysteries" that make faith rich and absorbing are incomplete without personal virtue. In these two sections, Browne reveals more about his own individual habits of virtue. He says he was disposed to charity by his childhood and parents and by his own temperament: "For I am of a constitution so generall, that it consorts and sympathizeth with all things; I have no antipathy, or rather Idiosyncrasie, in dyet, humour, ayre, any thing."<sup>19</sup> He is not disturbed by differences in climate, customs, food, eccentricities. He feels no malice toward those of different race or nationality. He is at home anywhere: "In briefe, I am averse from nothing, (neither Plant, Animall, nor Spirit); my conscience would give mee the lie if I should say I absolutely detest or hate any essence but the Devill, or so at least abhorre any thing but that wee might come to composition."<sup>20</sup> But, Browne continues, being disposed to Charity is not enough. He that is kind and generous may respond out of the passion of a moment and not out of a reasoned belief in the virtue of charity.

In Sections 3 and 4, Browne offers a kind of complaint of unfitness. He is not guilty of niggardliness

---

<sup>19</sup>Browne, p. 70.

<sup>20</sup>Browne, p. 71.

in any aspect of his life, especially in that part which constitutes his vocation as a scholar; "I intend no Monopoly, but a Community in learning; I study not for my own sake onely, but for theirs that study not for themselves. I envy no man that knowes more than my selfe; but pity them that know lesse."<sup>21</sup> He is not contentious nor condemnatory: "I cannot fall out or contemne a man for an errour, or conceive why a difference in opinion should divide an affection. . . ." He is not given to point out the weaknesses of whole peoples, for the vices of people are necessary for virtues to flourish: "They that endeavour to abolish vice destroy also vertue, for contraries, though they destroy one another, are yet the life of one another."<sup>22</sup> Again, "No man can justly censure or condenme another, because indeed no man truely knowes another." Browne's personal shortcoming, as he sees it, is lack of knowledge of himself. He says that his closest friends do not really know him; he frequently seems remote or obscure from them: "This I perceive in my selfe, for I am in the darke to all the world, and my nearest friends behold mee but in a cloud; those that know mee but superficially, thinke lesse of me than I doe of my selfe; those of my neere acquaintance thinke more; God who truely knowes mee, knowes that I am nothing, for hee

---

<sup>21</sup>Browne, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup>Browne, p. 76.

onely beholds me. . . ."23 Browne asks, "How can we direct charity towards others, if we are uncharitable to ourselves?" He concludes that man is his own worst enemy and even "his owne executioner."24

Sections 5 and 6 correspond to Hall's third stage, "an hearty wish of the soul." In these sections Browne admires the mystical relationship that exists between two friends: "I never yet cast a true affection on a Woman, but I have loved my Friend as I do vertue, my soule, my God."25 In the union of souls, Browne perceives a metaphor of God's love: "Omitting all other, there are three most mysticall unions: Two natures in one person; three persons in one nature; one soule in two bodies."26

Stage Four, "An humble confession of our disability," occurs in Sections 7 and 8. To do no injury to any and to love himself as he ought become the paralyzing conflict that obstructs charity:

I were unjust unto mine own conscience, if I should say I am at variance with any thing like my selfe; I finde there are many pieces in this one fabricke of man; this frame is raised upon a masse of Antipathies; I am one mee thinkes, but as the world; wherein notwithstanding there are a swarme of distinct

---

<sup>23</sup>Browne, p. 77.

<sup>24</sup>Browne, p. 77.

<sup>25</sup>Browne, p. 78.

<sup>26</sup>Browne, p. 78.



essences, and in them another world of contrarieties; wee carry private and domesticke enemies within, publike and more hostile adversaries without. The Devill, that did but buffet Saint Paul, playes mee thinkes at sharpe with me: Let mee be nothing if within the compasse of my selfe I doe not find the battell of Lepanto, passion against reason, reason against faith, faith against the Devill, and my conscience against all.<sup>27</sup>

In section 8, Browne professes that he has escaped the father sin of all, pride. He enumerates his accomplishments--understanding the jargon and patois of several provinces and knowing no less than six languages, travelling in several countries and becoming acquainted with their customs, knowing the names of stars, plants, being familiar with the major philosophies of the world--but he is unperturbed that he does not know everything.

Stage Five, "An earnest petition," may be found in Sections 9 and 10. Browne believes the soul to be "Harmonicall" and a reflection of the harmony of the spheres. He desires harmony and wholesomeness in the world: "I desire everything in its proper season, that neither men nor the times bee out of temper. Le me bee sicke my selfe, if sometimes the malady of my patient be not a disease unto me. . . ." <sup>28</sup> His conversation is the same with all men. He belives no man bad and the worst man the best. But all these desires for goodness

---

<sup>27</sup>Browne, p. 80.

<sup>28</sup>Browne, p. 85.

do not deflect his fears that he needs to be delivered not from other men but from himself.

Sections 11 and 12 conform to Stage Six, "A vehement enforcement of our petition." Browne's concentration in this segment is on the transitional state of man; if he is to be delivered from himself, it is because he (and all men are) is made in the image of God. The present world is but a pause in the final destination of man:

"For the world, I count it not an Inne, but an Hospitall, and a place, not to live, but to die in."<sup>29</sup> To be delivered from himself is to be delivered from this present earth. The mass of materiality in the universe shrinks in significance when compared to the magnitude of a man's soul: "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 persuade me I have any; I take my circle to be above three hundred and sixty; though the number of the Arke do measure my body, it comprehendeth not my minde."<sup>30</sup>

Sections 13 and 14 correspond to Stage Seven, "A cheerful confidence of obtaining our request." In these sections, Browne returns to the simple assertion at the

---

<sup>29</sup>Browne, p. 87.

<sup>30</sup>Browne, p. 87.

beginning of Part II that Charity is the second half of the knowledge of God. If knowledge of God's wisdom and eternity nourishes the understanding of man, Charity nourishes the will of man in order that he may respond to the power and will of God. Charity is another way of describing God: "For this I thinke charity, to love God for himselfe, and our neighbor for God."<sup>31</sup> To love is to recognize one's existence in God: "All that is truly amiable is God, or as it were a divided piece of him, that retains a reflex or shadow of himselfe."<sup>32</sup> Loving God and his creatures is another way of penetrating the invisible world, which to Browne, is more real than the visible world.

Section 15 is the conclusion to part II of the Religio and the conclusion to Browne's whole meditation. Browne's "thanksgiving" is moderate: like the writer of Ecclesiastes, he finds little substance under the sun and therefore little happiness; but where God is, is happiness. Browne's gratitude is included in the commendation of his soul to God: "Blesse mee in this life with but the peace of my conscience, command of my affections, the love of thy selfe and my dearest friends, and I shall be happy enough to pity Caesar. These are O Lord the humble desires of my most reasonable ambition and all

---

<sup>31</sup>Browne, p. 92.

<sup>32</sup>Browne, p. 92.

I dare call happinesse on earth: wherein I set no rule or limit to thy hand or providence. Dispose of me according to the wisdom of thy pleasure. Thy will bee done, though in my owne undoing."<sup>33</sup>

The external form of the stair of meditation may be traced in every argument of the Religio, but this perceptible form is not enough to demonstrate the strength of the dialectic produced by the stair of meditation. It is necessary, however, to recognize that the form of the Religio is not so haphazard as it may appear at first reading. If the Religio is read as a series of meditations, the sudden bursts of insight, preceded by somewhat less exciting discussions, are more intelligible. The real power of the form of meditation lies in the evident struggle in Browne's mind between logic and faith, and that struggle produces an elasticity of perception which appears to dissolve the arguments of the Religio. The struggle of mind which Browne portrays is an uncomfortable but, quite paradoxically, very comforting activity.

## CHAPTER IV

### IMAGINATION IN THE RELIGIO MEDICI

The structures of the scale of meditation offered to Browne a genre or mode for his own contemplations.<sup>1</sup> Browne may not be so easily categorized, however. The stair of meditation provided an external form as a kind of discipline for Browne's thoughts, but Browne often escaped the confining nature of any form. The elusive structure of the Religio Medici becomes more comprehensible when it is perceived as a stair of meditation in the manner in which Joseph Hall describes. The external form of the Religio conforms unmistakably to the formal design suggested by Hall for the art of meditation. To confine the Religio, however, to the exact stages of the scale of meditation would be only to partially understand the significance of meditational writing for Browne. Browne has never been

---

<sup>1</sup>For a different kind of study of the influence of meditational writing on Browne, see Anne Drury Hall, "Epistle, Meditation, and Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici," PMLA, 94 (March, 1979), 234-246. This study of Browne also connects the writings of Hall with the Religio, but the emphasis is on the familiar genre of the epistle which evokes piety in a gentle, personal manner. The article quite accurately assesses the importance of meditation for placing Browne in a tradition.

easily categorized, and his conceptual design, as well as the individual tropes of his rhetoric, changes shape even while it is being perceived in a meaningful pattern. Joan Webber calls this quality of Browne's writing his trompe l'oeil effect.<sup>2</sup> Even the most discernible pattern in Browne shifts before one's eyes, because Browne seemed to delight in imbuing any mode of writing with potentialities that even the most skilled of writers had missed.

Beyond the influence of formal design and meaningful structure, which provided Browne with the tradition of writing that he needed, which encouraged the dialectic of his thought processes, and to which his art yielded itself with ease. The influence of rhetorical patterns within meditational writing is unmistakable in Browne. These are varied, and range from the sense of self that Browne portrays in the Religio, the dialogical nature of this work, the uses of rhetoric for synthetic effect, and most importantly, the uses of language for relational purposes--the use of language to draw the reader into relationship with the writer and with the world he creates and the use of language to show the essential relatedness of matter and form, symbol and reality, the writer and the ever-moving shape of concepts, abstractions and their embodiments in human beings. Browne's imagination is a synthetic imagination. He constantly invites the reader to draw relationships. And

---

<sup>2</sup>Joan Webber, The Eloquent "I," (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), p. 112.

active participation in the world of Browne's creation is a celebration of the essential Unity of all things.

The Religio Medici is a dialogue. Although it is not as sharply defined a dialogue as Augustine's Confessions, the feeling of dialogue is generated in a number of ways. Joan Webber's distinction between the persona of the Religio and the individual "I" which is Sir Thomas Browne suggests the dialogical nature of the work.<sup>3</sup> She argues that the "I" in the Religio is almost always a cosmic personality, one man speaking for all of mankind, an individual who uses the concept of man as a microcosm to make personal the thoughts of seventeenth century men in general. An instance is Browne's comment on marriage, in which he expresses disgust for the sex act and the desire that men could propagate like trees.<sup>4</sup> She points out that the writer of the passage did marry soon thereafter and had twelve children. And it was not a question of one individual's changing his mind, because the Religio was edited and published long after Browne's marriage. The point is that Browne's comment on marriage was necessary for the stance he was taking on the purity of the union of love between two friends.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Webber, pp. 121-125.

<sup>4</sup>Webber, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup>Webber, p. 122.

Another example of Browne's "I" as created persona is in his stated conviction, on numerous occasions throughout the Religio, that man's soul is immortal and that man as he exists on earth is but a transitional being whose death will be his entrance into an eternal existence with God. In Section 9, Part II, Browne reiterates Plato's belief that the soul is in epitome the harmony of the spheres: "I will not say with Plato, the Soule is an Harmony, but harmonicall, and hath its neerest sympathy unto musicke. . . ." <sup>6</sup> In Section 11, Part II, he says, "There is surely a peece of Divinity in us, something that was before the Elements, and owes no homage unto the Sun. Nature tells me I am the Image of God, as well as Scripture; he that understands not thus much, hath not his introduction or first lesson, and is yet to begin the Alphabet of man." <sup>7</sup> In Section 34, Part I, Browne crystallizes this concept in his famous metaphor of man as an amphibian: "Thus is man that great and true Amphibium, whose nature is disposed to live not onely like other creatures in divers elements, but in divided and distinguished worlds; for though there bee but one world to sense, there are two to reason; the visible, the other invisible. . . ." <sup>8</sup> Original though Browne's cast is, his conviction is essentially that of the

---

<sup>6</sup>Browne, p. 84.

<sup>7</sup>Browne, p. 87.

<sup>8</sup>Browne, p. 45.



majority of Christians in the seventeenth century. Thus, his "I" on these occasions is not so much a subjective point of view as it is the expression of one man speaking for all men.

In contrast with this persona are the occasional lapses in which Browne does speak with a great deal of subjectivity. In Section 36, Part I, Browne allows the voice of his own doubt to speak when, convinced of the immortal nature of man by his faith, he confesses that as an anatomist, he has never been able to locate the source of the soul in the body: "For in the braine, which wee tearme the seate of reason, there is not anything of moment more than I can discover in the cranie of a beast. . . ." His conclusion of this section, which is also the conclusion of his meditation on the nature of man, he simply observes, "Thus we are men, and we know not how. . . ."<sup>9</sup> The ambiguity which this subjectivity presents is disconcerting in the light of Browne's repeated affirmations of the immortality of man's soul.

Thus, throughout the Religio, there is a kind of dialogue suggested by the alternation of the "I" of Browne's created persona and the "I" of his historical identity. The result is not damaging to the texture of the whole, but rather confirms Browne's perception of man as a product and servant of time and man as a symbol of

---

<sup>9</sup>Browne, p. 47.

God's eternity. Joan Webber comments: "The sense of time's discontinuity (and hence of man's), so common in the age, is constantly present in Browne's thought and style. But sometimes he is able to see beyond this condition simply by imagining eternity, and the God of eternity, to whom human time is less than a moment."<sup>10</sup> Of Browne's persona, she says, "The persona, then, is a trompe l'oeil partly because 'Browne' is both changeable and changeless. This basic fact only opens the way to the patterned ambiguities of that temporal timeless 'I'."<sup>11</sup>

The active working of Browne's own reason provides another kind of dialogue in the Religio, because there is the constant sense of Browne's interaction with the learned authorities whom he mentions. Browne's stance is such that it is almost as if he is arguing in the bodily presence of those whom he cites. His differences with Catholics he mentions in Section 3, Part I. He refers to Catholics obliquely, never calling them by name, but referring to those Catholics who pose occasions of dissension for Anglicans as "they" or them." Browne assumes for the moment the position of orator speaking to a group of Anglicans, and his separation of "their" cause and "our" cause lends a feeling of "presentness" to his discussion:

---

<sup>10</sup>Webber, p. 125.

<sup>11</sup>Webber, p. 125.

Yet have I not so shaken hands with those desperate Resolutions, who had rather venture at large their decayed bottoms, then bring her in to be new trim'd in the dock; and had rather promiscuously retain all, then abridge any, and obstinately be what they are then what they have been, as to stand in diameter and swords point with them. . . .<sup>12</sup>

The physical act of shaking hands or standing at sword-point with them reinforces his position of bringing these Catholics into the actual presence of the reader. He continues:

We have reformed from them, not against them, for omitting those impropriation and termes of scurrility betwixt us, which onely difference our affections, and not our cause, there is between us one common name and appellation, one faith, and necessary<sup>13</sup> body of principles common to us both. . . .

Browne's conciliatory remarks that follow give the sense of dialogue not only with the Catholics or the Anglicans but in a very real sense with the reader. He says he has never been scrupulous about entering Catholic churches; he has never objected to their ceremonies; even if he hasn't believed their dogma, he has allowed it. Then, abruptly, as if he is making an aside to his audience, he makes a disarmingly honest, bare confession: "I am, I confesse, naturally inclined to that, which misguided zeale termes supersition; my common conversation I do acknowledge austere, my behavior full of rigour, sometimes not without morosity; yet at my devotion I love to use the

---

<sup>12</sup>Browne, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup>Browne, p. 12.

civility of my knee, my hat, and hand, with all those outward and sensible motions, which may expresse, or promote my invisible devotion."<sup>14</sup> Browne's stance is a dramatic one, in that he presented an "I" for at least three audiences that he addresses, and the sense of dialogue is quite clear.

In Section 21, Part I, he mentions a "Doctor in Physick of Italy, who could not perfectly believe the immortality of the soule, because Galen seemed to make a doubt thereof." Another man who professed atheism because of three lines of Seneca was a French divine with whom Browne was acquainted in France. These men Browne uses as examples of those whose religious belief is shaken because of insignificant distractions. Browne's personal knowledge of these men lends vitality to Browne's argument that there really are no atoms in divinity; but more than that, his description of his own dispute with them allows him to assume a very personal stance and confess some of the details that have come to him personally in disputes about God or the Scriptures. He says, "I confesse there are in Scripture stories that doe exceed the fables of Poets, and to a captious Reader sound like Garagantua or Bevis. . . ." His stance, again, is that of the actor in a drama who stops the drama for an aside.

Browne's mention of learned writers of the past gives the effect of bringing them into a dialogue with him.

---

<sup>14</sup>Browne, p. 34.

His praise of Scripture is mainly from the point of view of a humanist scholar than a Christian; and he says, "Were I a Pagan, I should not refraine the Lecture of it; and cannot but commend the judgment of Ptolemy, that thought not his library compleate without it. . . ." <sup>15</sup> In Section 14, Part i, Browne first states his belief that God as the First Cause may be discerned in the secondary causes of his works. He says, "Therefore sometimes, and in some things, there appeares to mee as much divinity in Galen his Books De usu partium, as in Suarez Metaphysicks: Had Aristotle beene as curious in the enquiry of this cause as he was of the other, hee had not left behinde him an imperfect piece of Philosophy, but an absolute tract of Divinity." <sup>16</sup> It seems as if Browne had actually talked with Aristotle--and presumes to make a judgment on him, not to Aristotle's discredit but for Aristotle's instruction! Later, Browne cites Plato's belief that the soul is an harmony, and, as if he were present with Plato, modifies Plato's belief to say that the soul is not a complete harmony, but it is harmonical.

In short, Browne's stances that he assumes in the Religio are dramatic, and in being so, increase the sense of dialogue throughout the work. The principle area, however, in which the sense of dialogue is traced is in

---

<sup>15</sup>Browne, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup>Browne, p. 24.

the traditional sense in which all meditations are dialogues. In most meditations the dialogue of the self with God is quite marked, with the one who stands at the center of his own meditations looking inward at himself and outward toward God, in alternate sequences. With Browne, this dialogue is much more complicated. His own direct addresses to God are few; yet it is quite clear that the products of Browne's intellect in the Religio are directed toward his conception of Infinite Intelligence. Perhaps a better way of stating the confrontation is to say that the Religio is the undeniable dialogue of one man's finite consciousness with his ideal of eternity. Or, Browne's contemplations are alternately directed toward the source of all being, his concept of God.

Browne states it several ways: one way is his metaphor of the "cosmography of the self." The vastness of nature, which to Browne is part of the sacredness of God's being, is, in epitome, in the self: "Wee carry with us the wonders we seeke without us: There is all Africa and her prodigies in us; we are that bold and adventurous piece of nature, which he that studies wisely learns in a compendium, what others labour at in a divided piece and endlesse volume."<sup>17</sup> Another way is Browne's perception of the unifying Spirit of the universe as the essential part of man: "However, I am sure there is a common Spirit that playes within us, yet makes no part of us; and that is the

---

<sup>17</sup>Browne, p. 42.

Spirit of God, the fire and scintillation of that noble and mighty Essence, which is the life and radicall heat of spirits, and those essences that know not the vertue of the Sunne; a fire quite contrary to the fire of Hell: This is that gentle heate that brooded on the waters, and in six dayes hatched the world; this is that irradiation that dispells the mists of Hell, the clouds of horreur, feare, sorrow, despaire; and preserves the region of the mind in serenity; whosoever feels not the warme gale and gentle ventilation of this Spirit, (though I feele his pulse) I dare not say he lives; for truely without this, to mee there is no heat under the Tropick; nor any light, though I dwelt in the body of the Sunne."<sup>18</sup>

Browne's mystical belief that the Spirit of God is a fire and that it is the Essence from which all beings come is at the heart of his meditations. If man would know his own being, he must find it in this mysterious fire and Spirit. And the Spirit of God is in man to the same degree that it fills all the rest of existence.

In another paradox, Browne views the Essence of all creatures in terms of organism and growth. The invisible world, as it suffuses itself into material form contracts or shrinks; it becomes as a seed or potential form that goes through the process of development. The transformation of the visible world into the invisible is an expansion or

---

<sup>18</sup>Browne, p. 62.

dilation of being. For man to truly know himself, he must see himself and the whole created order from the "eyes" of God. Browne speaks of the annihilation of the earth:

Now need we fear this term "annihilation", or wonder that God will destroy the workes of his Creation: for man subsisting, who is, and will then truly appeare a Microcosme, the world cannot bee said to be destroyed. For the eyes of God, and perhaps also of our glorified selves, shall as really behold and contemplate the world in its Epitome or contracted essence, as now they doe at large and in its dilated substance. In the seed of a plant to the eyes of God, and to the understanding of man, there exists, though in an invisible way, the perfect leaves, flowers, and fruit thereof: (for things that are in posse to the sense, are actually existent to the understanding). Thus God beholds all things, who contemplates as fully his workes in their Epitome, as in their full volume, and beheld as amply the whole world in that little compendium of the sixth day, as in the scattered and dilated pieces of those five before.<sup>19</sup>

Man, who is the microcosm in his earthly existence, will become the Macrocosm after death. Then the material order will look to the eyes of man as a microcosm.

It is in Browne's attempt to find the nature of the self that he is directed to the Essence or Being of God. And thus the Religio is a relentless pursuit of the self; it is a dialogue of the self with its source of Being. And, as is true in all great meditations, the discovery of the self is simultaneous with the discovery of Infinite Being.

The rhetorical devices in the Religio are part of the careful working out of this dialogue of consciousnesses. Dialectic and synthesis are most characteristic in this

---

<sup>19</sup>Browne, p. 18.



dialogue. Various dialectical patterns are afforded by the structural design of meditation as a scale or ladder of mental processes. Apart from the structure of the Religio as interpreted in Chapter One (above), the Religio may be seen as a series of tensions that control the work--there is the tension between the invisible, spiritual world and the visible, material world; there is the tension between time and eternity; most pervasive in all of Browne's works is the struggle evidenced in the tension between death for man and man's immortal nature; there is the tension between the wisdom of God and the knowledge of man; and finally, there is the tension between nature as the art of God and man himself as artist.

Before examining the significance of these paradoxes, it is necessary to examine the kind of mental process which Browne considered himself to be using in the Religio. Some critics have mentioned the o altitudo in passing, as if Browne got caught up momentarily with a mystical flash of insight but did not take seriously the kind of mystical process suggested by this passage. It is a mistake to take the o altitudo passage lightly; for the process Browne describes as the particular method of his own devotion is precisely the method of inquiry his mind pursues.

In "The Art of Divine Meditation," Bishop Hall suggests that the primary movement in meditation is from

the understanding to the affections; this apparently simple division is full of significance, because it hides within it a conflict of opposing mental forces which produce new creations. If the movement in meditation is from the understanding to the affections, then the key for the whole meditative process may be described as the use of reason countered with its opposite, the use of "unreason"--whatever that might be, perhaps emotion, perhaps imagination, perhaps intuition. There is a curious opposition of mental forces in meditation: the use of reason or discursive processes which lead to the point of mystery; at the point where mystery begins, reason falls, and that part of the mind which, to the mystics, complements reason assumes control. To many contemplative thinkers, this part of meditation is the activity of the Holy Spirit working upon the mind of man. To the practitioners of the art of meditation in the seventeenth century, reason and imagination were inseparable in the meditative process. The surges of reason were not reprimanded but encouraged by God, only to be met by His own Spirit, where, according to the mystics, there was a fusion of human and divine knowledge.

It is in this perspective that Browne's own comments on the processes of his mind must be seen. The o altitudo passage is definitive: "I love to lost myselfe in a mystery, to pursue my Reason to an o altitudo." This passage must not be seen as casual remark of Browne, a digressive comment.

The process he describes characterizes the major impulses of the Religio. He says it is his "solitary recreation" to consider, with his reason, the greatest enigmas of the Christian religion, and then, with another part of his mind (unnamed at this point), he loves to answer those questions.<sup>20</sup> The questions are not resolved for all time, but in the restful unrest of the Christian thinker are resolved in their very uncertainty. Browne says he adheres to the "odde resolution of Tertullian, Certum est quia impossibile est."<sup>21</sup> (Certainty is what is impossible.) He says, "I desire to exercise my faith in the difficultest points, for to credit ordinary and visible objects is not faith, but persuasion."<sup>22</sup> The quality of faith of which Browne speaks is no unquestioning acceptance of the articles of the Christian religion. It is a dynamic, ever-moving, active inquiry into the mysteries of religion. It is the curious method of the Christian contemplative, with the dialogue in his soul of reason and imagination.

An example of Browne's synthesis of reason and imagination may be found in part of his discussion of death and the nature of man as a transitional creature. Browne discusses the reality of death as a man of science. He says, Section 38, Part I, that he is not insensible of the horrors

---

<sup>20</sup>Browne, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup>Browne, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup>Browne, pp. 50, 51.

of death, "or by raking into the bowels of the deceased, continuall sight of Anatomies, Skeletons, or Cadaverous reliques, like Vespilloes, or Grave-makers, I am become stupid, or have forgot the apprehension of mortality. . . ."

Browne's reason clearly tells him this: that if death is the end of the existence of man, then certainly it would have been better to have never lived. His reason aids him in the next step of his thoughts. He hypothesizes that man lives in three distinct worlds--the microcosm of the womb, the microcosm of the material world, and the last world, "that ineffable place of Paul, that proper ubi of spirits." And then, in a curious play of his imagination, he posits one of his own unique ideas on the transmutation of man's being. Upon observation of the life cycle of silkworms, he says he has framed "an hermeticall way" for the transformation of man. Man is but "a digestion or a preparative way into that last and glorious Elixar which lies imprison'd in the chaines of flesh. . . ." <sup>23</sup>

Browne approaches apparently unanswerable questions with the distinctive method of one who practices the art of meditation, the method of holding contraries in the mind at once, the method of the understanding working in creative tension with the imagination and will. He says, "Since I was of understanding to know we know nothing, my reason hath beene more pliable to the will of faith; I am now

---

<sup>23</sup>Browne, p. 18.

content to understand a mystery without a rigid definition, in an easie and Platonick description."<sup>24</sup> In a statement comparable to other contemplatives, he says, "Where I cannot satisfie my reason, I love to humour my fancy. . . ."<sup>25</sup>

Browne loved a mystery as much as any of his contemporaries. The peculiar working of his mind is the movement from reason to unreason. He simply will not surrender his search for knowledge. Browne's labor is not the forbidden quest for knowledge that is too deep for him; it is the struggle of Jacob who will not give up until God has blessed him with the answer to his question.

Like other contemplatives in the tradition of Bishop Hall, Browne was eager to use reason, but not to use it proudly as if the human mind were the only source of knowledge; he used it as one voice speaking to another voice, the voice of uncertainty and obscurity, the voice of God. In The Remedy of Profaneness, Hall speaks of reason in almost the same words as Browne when he speaks of "the captivation of the understanding to the obedience of faith."<sup>26</sup> Hall cites Gerson, a fourteenth-century mystic, who was beset with many temptations of doubt, and who, after struggling with doubt, came into "so clear a light of truth and certitude, that there remained no relics at all of dubitation,

---

<sup>24</sup>Browne, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup>Browne, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup>Browne, p. 18.

nothing but confidence and serenity. . . ." <sup>27</sup> Hall commends this method of the captivation of the intellect by faith.

But Browne, like Hall, offers the efforts of his reason as a part of religious devotion. He says, in Section 13 of the Religio: "The world was made to be inhabited by beasts, but studied and contemplated may: 'tis the debt of our reason wee owe unto God, and the homage we pay for not being beasts. . . ." <sup>28</sup> The Christian's great sacrifice is "the duty of a devout and learned admiration." These convictions came out of the tradition of religious writers like Hall who affirmed that God made all creatures for man, and God made them for man's reflection, which, if man neglects, he is no more than a beast. <sup>29</sup> The brute creatures see God's world, but without the eyes of spiritual understanding which man is capable of. <sup>30</sup>

Like Hall, Browne believes that there are three main ways of apprehending knowledge: with the eyes of the senses, as other animals possess, with the eyes of reason, the particular earthly reason given to human beings, and with the eyes of the spirit, characteristic of angels, perception that is secured only with the aid of the Holy Spirit.

---

<sup>27</sup>Hall, p. 55.

<sup>28</sup>Browne, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup>Hall, p. 49.

<sup>30</sup>Hall, p. 50.

Browne believes that angels and other spirits have "extemporary knowledge" and may apprehend immediately with the vexation of human reason. Spirits know by instantly perceiving the essences of forms of things, whereas man must deliberate, study, and pursue cause and effect--in a word, man must work to understand. The effort to understand spiritual realities is aided by the Spirit of God, and thus the Spirit of God perfects the reason of man. In "The Remedy of Profaneness," Hall expounds at length on the result of man's efforts to apprehend things invisible. The efforts move by the Spirit of God to enable man "both to the faculty and exercise of seeing the Invisible."<sup>31</sup> Man's part must involve "a trajection of the visual beams of the soul, through all earthly occurrences, terminating them only in God. . . ."<sup>32</sup> Browne's remarks on the eye in The Garden of Cyrus provide a parallel. He suggests that all things (earthly materials) are seen quincuncially, the image in the eye being a decussation or crossing of the object seen; that is a visual trajection of the earthly object to the sense of man. But Browne goes further to apply this to the soul of man; decussation in the soul of man provides the nexus for the corporeal and divine aspects of man, the visible and the invisible.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup>Hall, p. 336.

<sup>32</sup>Hall, p. 336.

<sup>33</sup>Browne, p. 22.

Hall says that to attain to a pure sight of God, or invisible things, there must be "a certain divine irradiation of the mind" in which God illuminates the mind. He admonishes: "Let the mind labour to apprehend an intellectual light, which may be so to our understanding as this bodily light is to our sense, purely spiritual and transcendently glorious; and let it desire to wonder at that which it can never conceive."<sup>34</sup>

Thus, Browne's o altitudo passage is of the greatest significance for his own method, particularly in the Religio. Reason and intuition work together to obtain sight of invisible things of God. Browne tends to favor reason; but in almost all the meditations of the Religio, reason is subsumed by other mental processes characteristic of Christian contemplatives.

The influence of meditational writers on Browne is evidenced in the use he makes of the synthesis of reason and imagination, in the structure of meditation as a scale or stair, in the very topics he chooses. The rhetoric of meditation allows for paradox and antithesis, for the dialectical movement that emerges in the juxtaposition of contrary ideas. It tends to produce loosely connected patterns and it allows for patterns of intuitional awareness. It moves in the form of dialogue. All of these appealed to the imagination of Browne.

---

<sup>34</sup>Hall, p. 336.



To search for the artistry of the Religio Medici in formal design alone would be to attribute to it a static quality which it does not possess, although it is profitable to note the striking similarities of structural design between the Religio and other meditational writings. But the artistic nature of the Religio can only be satisfactorily discerned when the reader perceives that formal design emerges from the various potentialities that arise in Browne's thought, push themselves forward toward development, resolve temporarily only to arise again. The Religio is best described as a series of rhythms, full of constant movement, defying any static formalization. Browne was thoroughly Aristotelian in his science, and his work with generation and reproduction fascinated him more than all his scientific research. His own creativity in prose appears to be an imitation of his perception of the creative process he observed in life forms. Although the invisible world of pure form, in the Platonic sense, was the aspiration of his thoughts, Browne, the Aristotelian, delighted in the manifestations in material forms of the invisible Creator. It is no overstatement to say that the relationship of the material to the spiritual, visible to the invisible, was the obsession of his life. So, even in the own creation of his writing, Browne appears to have recognized it as another material form of the spiritual realm, and appears to have been pleased to acknowledge his own creativity as an imitation of God's creativity. His own creation

occupied space, represented time, grew and developed. And although it may seem to "pleasant a trope of Rhetorick" to describe his writing, especially the Religio, in terms of life forms, this metaphor is appropriate. The Religio is filled with various "seeds" of Browne's imagination. If it never quite seems to come to completion, it nevertheless gives the sense of development and growth. To press the Religio towards a "finished" quality is to misunderstand its substance: It is the constantly renewed exertion of a mind directed towards ultimate knowledge. The Religio may, indeed, be considered the most excellent piece of English prose that portrays in art form the most basic of all human mental processes--the urgency of the mind's directedness toward infinity. The object is not really of major significance; the significance lies in the numerous manifestations of the mind's directedness.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup>The dialectic of the Religio, as I am interpreting it, is similar to the dialectic described by Stanley Fish in Self-Consuming Artifacts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). Fish argues that the dialectic produced between discursive reasoning processes and anti-discursive processes risks the loss of the power of reasoning altogether in the search for truth. The vehicle of dialectic becomes consumed in the process of attaining new insights. The good dialectician (seeker of truth) is willing to take the risk, because the discipline produced by the dialectic is more important than settled and certain "truth." Fish describes what happens to the reader of the Religio: "His reason is exercised (and teased) to the point where its insufficiency becomes self-evident, and ratiocination gives way to faith professing assertion; and in the process, of course, the working of reason--linguistic, logical, rhetorical--becomes the vehicle of its own abandonment. . . ." (p. 353.) Browne's apparently logical distinctions are suggested so that the reader can forget logic. As

If the Religio is considered as a series of meditations, it may well be asked what constitutes the wholeness of the Religio. Why doesn't the progression of impulses in thought end in confusion, uncertainty, digressive inefficiency? The most significant cohesive force is the sense of union achieved in the imaginative fusion of unlike forces or ideas. This sense of union, reinforced repeatedly throughout the Religio, describes the superior achievement of Browne's imagination. Browne's meditation on the nature of God provides both the center and circumference of the whole of the Religio, because it reveals that Browne's passion for knowledge is focused on Being. Like most Christian contemplatives, Browne was content to begin and end his search for truth with God, as the First Cause, or Creator of all life.

The basic tension in the Religio Medici, and, at the same time, the basic cohesive force is the audacious quest of the mind of finite man for the Being of Infinite God. Browne makes this juxtaposition clear from time to time. It is an uneasy, and at times inharmonious, togetherness. But Browne had no intention of portraying himself, or any other Christian, as unquestionably comfortable with the knowledge of God. Thus, Browne's meditation on the nature of God raises some of the most perplexing conflicts of man the seeker

---

Fish suggests, the reader does not look for new answers to the mysteries Browne poses; instead, the reader pauses in wonder to observe the process Browne will use to make his point. (p. 336)

after the divine Mind. One of these conflicts is the paradox of the limitations of man's mind as it attempts to understand a Mind without limitations, or a Being that is actually incomprehensible for man.

In Section 11, Part I, Browne begins his meditation on God with the abruptness of one who confesses the limitations of the human mind: "God hath not made a creature that can comprehend him, 'tis the priviledge of his owne nature: I am that I am, was his owne definition unto Moses: and 'twas a short one, to confound mortalitie, that durst question God, or aske him what hee was. . . ." <sup>36</sup> Browne's perception at this early stage of the meditation on God contains the essential understanding of the Being of God, without which Browne's other contemplations on being would not be valid. God alone is the Being who can say "I am." Without this knowledge, Browne's following concepts would lose their vitality and meaning. From this base, Browne is able to deduce ideas about all other beings. He emphasizes that man is a creature who is never completely alone. Man can never assert "I am." Man's existence is contingent upon God: "for he onely is, all others have an existence with dependency. . . ." <sup>37</sup> Browne's juxtaposition of man's existence against the Being of God is at once stark and concise, frightening and consoling: "and to speak more narrowly, there is no such thing as solitude, nor any thing can be said to be alone, and by it selfe, but God, who is his owne

---

<sup>36</sup>Browne, p. 20.

<sup>37</sup>Browne, p. 86.

circle, and can subsist by himselfe. . . ." <sup>38</sup> Again, "A man is never alone, not onely because hee is with himselfe, and his owne thoughts, but because he is with the devil, who ever consorts with our solitude. . . ." <sup>39</sup> Browne's distinction marks a definite distance between the being of man and the Being of God--man is other than God but could not exist without Him. The distance between the Creator and the creature is "infinite and incomprehensible."

This basic tension or antithesis between the being of man and the Being of God comprehends all of Browne's meditations in the Religio. It contains the form and reach of Browne's imagination, for Browne's imaginative impulses emanate from the creative struggle of the reason of man with the mass of uncertainty surrounding man's concept of God. This imaginative effort manifests itself in specific attempts to bring together in a comprehensible union the "contraries" that stretch from man's being to God's Being. The effort is a constantly renewed one, providing the momentary rush and flow and pause of the meditational structure. The effect is of movement of thought interrupted by occasional moments of synthesis, a rush of energy toward the Infinite, or the unknowable, with the necessary interstices of concrete apprehension afforded by the union of opposites.

The antitheses in the Religio, the opposites that produce the flashes of apprehension, are a particular kind of

---

<sup>38</sup>Browne, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup>Browne, p. 86.

paradox. The components are vastly unequal. The posing of one against the other, as the being of man against the Being of God, gives the effect of one greatly overshadowing the other. There is tension, or the conflict of opposites, but more importantly there is the sense of resolution contained within the generation of conflict. In the basic conflict of man's finite reason in quest of the Mind of God, there is the sense of God's movement toward the mind of man in cooperation with man's imagination. The result is one of resurgence of energy, encouragement for man's attempts to reach God, great variety of the concrete apprehensions of God, and a sense of affirmation of man's creativity rather than a frustration of the reach outward toward the Infinite. In a sense, the search is always incomplete but, at the same time, always satisfying.

Within the comprehensive arc of tension between the finite, searching mind of man and the Infinite Being of God, there exist several major nodal points of conflict, which Browne deals with by the method of meditation. One of these conflicts involves the traditional Christian concept of man made in the image of God. In Section 11, Part II, Browne says, "There is surely a peece of Divinity in us, something that was before the Elements, and owes no homage unto the Sun. Nature tells me I am the Image of God, as well as Scripture. . . ." If man's being is wholly different from the Being of God, the question for Browne seems to be, How

can man be like God but different from Him? How can man participate in the nature of God and be a creature wholly distinct from God?

Browne begins to resolve the mystery by starting with a Renaissance commonplace that man is a little world, or microcosm: "That wee are the breath and similitude of God, it is indisputable, and upon record of hold Scripture, but to call our selves a Microcosme, or little world, I thought it onely a pleasant trope of Rhetorick, till my neare judgment and second thoughts told me there was a reall truth therein. . . ." <sup>40</sup> Most seventeenth-century readers would have agreed with both assertions--that man is made in the image of God and that man is a microcosm. Browne's originality gradually reveals itself as he attempts to reconcile these two ideas. He draws from his own scientific experiments and his own thoughts. His first explanation suggests that man moves through five kinds of existences: "First wee are a rude masse, and in the ranke of creatures which only are, and have a dull kinde of being not yet priviledged with life, or preferred to sense or reason; next we live the life of plants, the life of animals, the life of men, and at last the life of spirits, running on in one mysterious nature those five kinds of existences, which comprehend the creatures not onely of the world, but of the Universe. . . ." <sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup>Browne, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup>Browne, p. 44.

Browne's concern is to try to draw some relationship between the nature of man and that of God; he goes beyond the "pleasant trope of Rhetorick," which, perhaps, in its most common use was an attempt to picture the completeness or perfection of man. Browne's object is quite different: he must account for the weaknesses of man while at the same time attempt to show man's kinship to God.

Browne's most memorable comment on the nature of man is in Section 34, Part I: "Thus is man that great and true Amphibium, whose nature is disposed to live not onely like other creatures in divers elements, but in divided and distinguished worlds. . . ." <sup>42</sup> Browne seems at least partially satisfied with this conclusion; no one can deny that man partakes of the flesh-life of animals, but it is harder to justify man's nature as spirit like God. Because of Browne's scientific interests, he cannot completely account for the disparity between flesh and spirit. He says that God created all other beings with the word of his mounth, but man was the product of a different kind of creation, one that necessitated creation of flesh and creation of spirit and union of the two: "But in the frame of man (as the text describes it) he played the sensible operator, and seemed not so much to create, as make him; when hee had separated the materials of other creatures, there consequently resulted a forme and soule, but having raised the

---

<sup>42</sup>Browne, p. 45.



wals of man, he was driven to a second and harder creation of a substance like himselfe, an incorruptible and immortall soule."<sup>43</sup> Browne questions the Augustinian concept of transmission of the soul from Adam because of his own observations of the copulation of beasts with men. He raises the central doubt of this topic by confessing that as an anatomist he has never been able to locate the soul in the brain of man: "For in the braine, which wee tearme the seate of reason, there is not anything of moment more than I can discover in the cranie of a beast. . . ."<sup>44</sup> Browne pauses at this stage of the meditation with ambiguity: "Thus we are men, and we know not how. . . ."<sup>45</sup>

In another attempt to explain man in the image of God, Browne asserts that man lives in three distinct worlds: the womb, the world, and the place of spirits. His experiments with silkworms provide another explanation: "Man seems to bee but a digestion or a preparative way unto that last and glorious Elixar which lies imprison'd in the chaines of flesh, &c."<sup>46</sup> This metaphor once again tries to explain man in terms of change and transformation.

But the full import of man made in the images of God and man described as microcosm lies in Browne's fusion of Aristotelian and Christian thought. Here, his posing

---

<sup>43</sup>Browne, p. 46.

<sup>44</sup>Browne, p. 46.

<sup>45</sup>Browne, p. 47.

<sup>46</sup>Browne, p. 55.

of the conflict seems at its sharpest and the resolution seems most conciliatory. Man made in the image of God becomes truly a microcosm after death in the presence of God. For the idea of man was as a seed in potential in the mind of God; it became invested in the material world for a short time; after death it becomes fulfilled in its nature after the intention of God the Creator. Browne cryptically phrases the curious relationship of man the microcosm with the material world that appears to consume him: "The world that I regard is my selfe; it is the Microcosme of mine owne frame that I cast mine eye on; for the other, I use it but like my Globe, and turne it round sometimes for my recreation."<sup>47</sup> Man suddenly looms larger than the earth. Browne says, "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 I have any; I take my circle to be above three hundred and sixty; though the number of the Arke do measure my body, it comprehendeth not my minde: whilst I study to finde how I am a Microcosme or little world, I finde my selfe something more than the great."<sup>48</sup> Thus, man is more than flesh and greater than the materiality of the whole

---

<sup>47</sup>Browne, p. 87.

<sup>48</sup>Browne, p. 87.

earth. Man made in the image of God and man as a microcosm, when fused in an imaginative perception become a mystical apprehension of the transverse operations of matter becoming spirit and spirit becoming matter. At the last annihilation of the world, materiality will dissolve and man will remain, much greater in his selfhood than the whole earth. In Section 50, Part I, Browne says that after death, man will truly appear a microcosm, and the earth shall appear in its "contracted essence" rather than as it appears to man before death "in its dilated substance." Browne's mystical belief is that the microcosm of man, a manner of speaking about man on earth, is the truest form of defining man, because after death, man in spiritual form will be more substantial than the total material reality that comprises the earth in its present form.

Thus, the various "flashes" of insight, or apprehensions of man made in the image of God, a creature of God dependent on Him, but also a creature like God, move through the Religio like a pulsating rhythm. Each is a valid and a sharp image; each is true, according to Browne's perception. There seems to be a progression of understanding of the concept--a gradual ascension of the "stair," so to speak, until Browne arrives at what he considers to be the ultimate significance of man made in the image of God. Each of the images, or ways of considering this concept, is like the photographic perspective which moves in all directions

in the attempt to comprehend the whole of the reality of the object of consciousness. Each seems to transcend the other, and all transcend the moving consciousness of Browne, in that each is a "frozen" or concrete manifestation of his mental processes. The totality of the reality toward which the mind is directed is the ultimate transcendence.

Another tension operating as part of the internal structure of the meditations in the Religio is the mortality of man opposed to the immortality of God. Meditations on death were perhaps the most prevalent kind of meditation in the seventeenth century. If belief in an eternal God constituted the stability of the seventeenth century belief, the reality of death constituted the reality of their daily existence. One of the most comforting of Christian cures for the painful realization of death was the consolation of life after death. Much Puritan literature was devoted to the beautiful imaginations of the reward of faithful Christians in heaven. Some writers concentrated on imaginations of the after-life to such an extent that these were escapist devices from the real suffering of mortal man.

Browne looks realistically at the mortality of man and allows the sharp contrast of man's mortality and God's immortality to be imagined simultaneously. He employs several methods in drawing the stark lines of contrast. He reinterprets another trope of rhetoric, "All flesh is grass," in literal, scientific terms: "for all those

creatures we behold, are but the hearbs of the field, digested into flesh in them, or more remotely carnified in ourselves."<sup>49</sup> But in the process of the apparently scientific explanation, Browne quickly formulates the concept into another metaphor, one so remote from human respectability that the concept of man's mortality is seen in its most repulsive form. Browne calls men Anthropophagi, or cannibals, because they perpetuate the cycle of the transmutation of flesh to dust to grass to flesh again: "Nay further, we are what we all abhorre, Anthropophagi and Cannibals, devourers not onely of men, but of our selves; and that not in an allegory but a positive truth; for all this masse of flesh which wee behold came in at our mouths: this frame wee looke upon hath been upon our trenchers; In briefe, we have devoured our selves."<sup>50</sup>

Such a grotesque image would seem to be the final word of a scientist who continually observed the processes of decay. But in the same passage, Browne affirms another transmutation of the human body, a transmutation he has never personally seen, but one which harmonizes his contemplations on the nature of man. He states simply, and with as stark a conviction as he proclaimed man a cannibal, that the souls of men never know corruption, or never participate in the cycle of flesh becoming grass. His quiet

---

<sup>49</sup>Browne, p. 48.

<sup>50</sup>Browne, p. 48.

assertion is as striking as his bold metaphor: "I believe that the whole frame of a beast doth perish, and is left in the same estate after death as before it was materialled into life; that the soules of men know neither contrary nor corruption; that they subsist beyond the body, and outlive death by the priviledge of their proper natures, and without a miracle; that the soules of the faithfull, as they leave earth, take possession of Heaven. . . ."51

Another method that Browne employes in bringing together the painful reality of death and the concept of immortality is the disarming honesty of his own personal experiences with death. Perhaps on no other topic of his meditations does Browne allow his own individual experience to surface so readily. He reverses the expected response of a scientist and physician by saying that all his "raking into the bowels of the deceased" and observation of "cadaverous relics" do not daunt his conviction that death is not the end of man. He says, rather, that his constant contact with death only increases his resolve of courage in the event of death.

I finde not any thing therein able to daunt the courage of a man, much lesse a well resolved Christian. And therefore am not angry at the errour of our first parents, or unwilling to beare a part of this common fate, and like the best of them to dye, that is to cease to breathe, to take a farewell of the elements, to be a kinde of nothing for a moment, to be within one instant of a spirit.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup>Browne, p. 59.

<sup>52</sup>Browne, p. 49.

Rather than escape the horrors of death in his meditations and think only of the beauties of an after-life, Browne permits those very horrors to be a real part of his meditations on the mortality of man, because in Browne's view, the experience of death is part of the passage to a new stage of man's existence. He says, "I have so abject a conceit of this common way of existence [mortal life], this retaining to the Sunne and Elements, I cannot think this is to be a man, or to live according to the dignities of humanity; in expectation of a better, I can with patience embrace this life. . . ." <sup>53</sup> The pains of death are a part of the wholeness of man's existence, and to appreciate that wholeness Browne allows the contrast of death to make more vital the concept of life after death.

Browne confesses some very personal attitudes toward death. But even though Browne admires the Stoic philosophers, he comes to the conclusion that suicide is not the consequence of a fear of death but a fear of life and "where life is more terrible than death, it is then the truest valor to live. . . ." <sup>54</sup> For his own individual reaction to death, Browne confesses that he is not so much afraid of it as ashamed of it. <sup>55</sup> And in his observation of the fragile nature of the flesh of man, Browne professes

---

<sup>53</sup>Browne, p. 49.

<sup>54</sup>Browne, p. 49.

<sup>55</sup>Browne, p. 49.

gratitude that we can only die once: "But I that have examined the parts of man, and know upon what tender filaments that Fabrick hangs, doe wonder that we are not always so [sick]; and considering the thousand dores that lead to death doe thank my God that we can die but once."<sup>56</sup>

Browne draws the paradox of the tension between mortality and immortality to its most intense image when he insists that death is a comfort rather than a fear; that it is an object of man's gratitude rather than an object of contempt. The basis for this conclusion is Browne's perception of the being of man as a transitional creature. The conclusion of this meditation on death is not based solely on Scripture or other authority, but on Browne's own attempt to bring into an harmonious whole his concept of man in the whole scheme of his meditation on Being. He says that, even though the weakest arm can take away human life, not even the strongest arm can take away human death. It is only God that can rescue us from death. God gave man life, and likewise, he gave man death. In Browne's view, death is part of the completion of man's existence as God made him. The circle of man's being includes death, but also includes the promise beyond death of immortality: "Certainly there is no happinesse within this circle of flesh, nor is it in the Optics of these eyes to behold felicity; the first day of our Jubilee is

---

<sup>56</sup>Browne, p. 51.



death. . . . Hee forgets that hee can die who complaines of misery; wee are in the power of no calamities while death is in our owne."<sup>57</sup>

Thus, the contraries of mortality and immortality in the mind of the meditative thinker generate hope and not despair, because the concept of immortality subsumes mortality. Mortality, or death, is certain and full of horror; but its very awfulness makes the promise of immortality even more sure. Instead of death negating the being of man, it only fulfills or makes complete the being of man.

A third major conflict of opposites which Browne conceives in one imaginative endeavor is the paradox of time versus eternity. The two attributes of God which Browne proposes to consider in Section 11, Part I, are God's wisdom and his eternity. The mystery of God's Being, for Browne, is most perplexing in the concept of eternity. "Time," he says, "we may comprehend, 'tis but five days elder than our selves . . . but to retire so farre backe as to apprehend a beginning, to give such an infinite start forward, as to conceive an end in an essence that affirme hath neither the one nor the other; it puts my Reason to Saint Pauls Sanctuary; my Philosophy dares not say the Angells can doe it. . . ."<sup>58</sup> The reality of time belongs to man, but as for God, "those continues instants of time

---

<sup>57</sup>Browne, p. 55.

<sup>58</sup>Browne, p. 20.

which flow into a thousand yeares, make not to him one moment; what to us is to come, to his Eternities is present, his whole duration being but one permanent point without succession, parts, flux, or division."<sup>59</sup> The concept of time becomes for man another metaphor for the Being of God. Time is the best approximation that man can experience of the substance of God. The concept of time affords the nearest comprehension man has of the Trinity of God. Although we cannot presume there was any priority, Browne says, of any part of the Trinity, as we conceive of Father and Son and Spirit, nevertheless, our perception of time permits the perception of the Triune nature of God. Browne was most profound at this point, for he apprehended intuitively what modern philosophers have demonstrated in formulae, that the perception of time is also the means for the perception of space. And, without spatial and temporal concepts, we could not begin to perceive God.

Browne commends Aristotle's metaphor of a triangle with a square, which Aristotle had used as a metaphor for eternity: "I wonder how Aristotle could conceive the world eternall, or how hee could make good two Eternities: his similitude of a Triangle, comprehended in a square, doth somewhat illustrate the Trinities of our soules, and that the Triple Unity of God."<sup>60</sup> Again, Browne says,

---

<sup>59</sup>Browne, p. 20.

<sup>60</sup>Browne, p. 21.

the metaphor of the visible effects of the world as "hierorglyphs" of the Invisible. This aspect of Browne's meditative thought might also be described as the anti-thesis of the visible world and the invisible world. As Browne conceives the being of God, His substance holds all creation together; God is everything. The conflict between the visible world and the invisible is no real conflict, because the visible world is a hieroglyphic, a metaphor, an indicator of the invisible essence of God. But apparent conflicts occur because men do not perceive the invisible through the visible. Browne affirms that there are no grotesques or monsters in nature. Like Jacob Boehme and Bishop Hall, Browne sees every creature in nature as a symbol or metaphor of the greater design of the invisible world.

Like Boehme and Hall, Browne views nature and all its effects as the Art of God. Nature becomes a complex and intricate metaphor for the design of the essence of God: "Every Essence, created or uncreated, hath its finall cause, and some positive end both of its Essence and operation; This is the cause I grope after in the workes of nature, on this hangs the providence of God; to raise so beauteous a structure as the world and the creatures thereof, was but his Art, but their sundry and divided operations, with their predestinated ends, are from the treasury of his wisdom. . . ."

Conceive the distinct number of three, not divided nor separated by the intellect, but actually comprehended in its Unity, and that is a perfect Trinity."<sup>61</sup>

Time and space become metaphors for God's own substance. The "mysticall way of Pythagoras," or the magic of numbers, is a way to God. The natural world, with its shapes, materiality, and duration in time, is but a shorthand glimpse of the Being of God. Contrary to common observation, the natural world is not the most substantial existence; it is merely an indication of the most substantial existence. In fact, it exists as a show or mirror image and is therefore unsubstantial. The only real substance is perceived in brief glimpses by means of this unsubstantial shorthand: "The severe Schooles shall never laugh me out of the Philosophy of Hermes, that this visible World is but a picture of the Invisible, wherein, as in a pourtract, things are not truely, but in equivocall shapes, and as they counterfeit some more reale substance in that invisible fabrick."<sup>62</sup>

Browne's concern with changes in the forms of things has been noted; although Browne uses the metaphor of the philosopher's stone and makes reference to alchmical processes, he best expresses the processes of transmutation through reference to the changes in life forms and through

---

<sup>61</sup>Browne, p. 21.

<sup>62</sup>Browne, p. 21.

wisdom."<sup>63</sup> Thus, time and space, nature and all the created order are visible embodiments of God's eternity and wisdom.

What appears to occupy space and proceed in motion and time is really the eternal point, or as Browne says, "that streight and regular line, that settled and constant course the wisdom of God hath ordained the actions of his creatures. . . ." God is both artist and scientist: "Now this course of Nature God seldome alters or perverts, but like an excellent Artist hath so contrived his worke, that the selfe same instrument, without a new creation he may effect his obscurest designes."<sup>64</sup> Quite basic for Browne was the belief that "all things are artificiall, for nature is the Art of God."<sup>65</sup>

Another major antithesis posed by Browne is that of the reason of man versus the wisdom of God. Browne says, "Wisdom is his [God's] most beauteous attribute. . . . Hee is wise because hee knowes all things; and hee knoweth all things because he made them all; but his greatest knowledge is in comprehending that he made not, that is himselfe. And this is also the greatest knowledge in man"<sup>66</sup> In a sense, then, God's wisdom and eternity

---

<sup>63</sup>Browne, p. 23.

<sup>64</sup>Browne, p. 25.

<sup>65</sup>Browne, p. 25.

<sup>66</sup>Browne, p. 21.

coalesce, for the wisdom of God is unfolded in the great public manuscript of his creatures. Browne describes the wisdom of God in the particular way of discussing the providence of God. In this sense, all of history and events of individual lives are a working out of the wisdom of God. God's wisdom Browne equates with his power. For God, there is no separation of these attributes; God's wisdom is God's will and power.

Browne's discussion of man's reason in relation to God's wisdom is perhaps his most labored intellectual endeavor in the Religio Medici. In contrast to the wisdom of God, man's reason can never be complete. Man cannot know himself in full; neither can he know God in full. Browne suggests that man's happiness consists in the recognition of the incompleteness of his knowledge. Man's use of reason in the struggle toward the fulfillment of his being is commendable, but man's awareness of the limitations of reason is equally important. Of the difference between God's wisdom and man's reason, Browne says, "I know he [God] is wise in all, wonderfull in what we conceive, but far more in what we comprehend not; for we behold him but asquint upon reflex or shadow; our understanding is dimmer than Moses Eye; we are ignorant of the back parts, or lower side of his Divinity. . . ." <sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, awareness of limitation

---

<sup>67</sup>Browne, pp. 21-22.

is no real constriction of man's search for God with his intellect. Hence, Browne's continued penetration into the mysteries of God bears no taint of shame or remorse: "Where there is an obscurity too deepe for our reason, 'tis good to sit downe with a description, periphrasis, or adumbration; for by acquainting our reason how unable it is to display the visible and obvious effects of nature, it becomes more humble and submissive unto the subtilties of faith. . . ." <sup>68</sup>

Browne's meditation of God's mysteries works through "adumbration," or abbreviated flashes of insight; through periphrasis, circular focusing on the center of God's being, content with the perspective that approaches nearer complete knowledge. Browne says he is not bothered with the idea Lux est umbra Dei, "Light is the shadow of God." Paradox, or antithesis, may be the most revealing way to the knowledge of God. What man knows not only reaffirms the completeness of God's being, and that, to Browne, is curiously pleasurable, not frustrating for man.

The working of man's reason is most profitable for understanding the Being of God when it applies itself to understanding the creation of God. It is in the exertion of man's reason in the respect for the creatures of God that man best gives to God "the duty

---

<sup>68</sup>Browne, p. 19.

of a devout and learned admiration." Man's reason may be thwarted by his own lack of curiosity, his own sloth, as it were, in attempting to follow the "streight and regular line of God" through his creation. Man's reason may be affected by doubts, temptation, and the presence of evil spirits. Browne confesses himself that his own contemplations of God have been hampered by the Devil; on one occasion, he says, "Thus the Devill played at Chesse with mee, and yeelding a pawne, thought to gaine of me, taking advantage of my honest endeavours. . . ." <sup>69</sup>

Man's reason may also be diverted from its proper course by the constant tendency of the mind toward divisiveness and disintegration of knowledge. Browne discourages this use of reason, because, he says, "I cannot heare of Atoms in Divinity." It is impossible he continues, that doubts and conflicts should not arise; but they are all "of an easie possibility, if we conceive a divine concourse or an influence but from the little finger of the Almighty."

Man's reason finds its true course when it reflects upon God by reflecting upon the ladder, or scale, of God's creatures. Browne, like Boehme, Bellarmine, and Hall, believed that a right knowledge of the scale of Being would lead to a right knowledge of God. Browne reveals

---

<sup>69</sup> Browne, p. 30.



this conviction through his adamant belief in spirits. Browne is often cited as a curiosity because of his belief in witches and guardian angels, and he himself seems perplexed by his own tendencies toward prayer for the dead. But within the appearances of these beliefs is Browne's much more profound belief in a ladder of Being, a belief so central to his mystical approach to God that the Religio Medici may be said to revolve around this belief. Browne's description of the scale of Being is as follows:

. . . for there is in this Universe a Staire, or manifest Scale of creatures, rising not disorderly, or in confusion, but with a comely method and proportion: betweene creatures of meere existence and things of life, there is a large disproportion of nature; betweene plants and animals or creatures of sense, a wider difference; between them and man, a farre greater: and if the proportion hold, betweene man<sup>70</sup> and Angels there should bee yet a greater.

The whole character and quality of man's knowledge becomes defined in this belief of Browne's. Spirits approximate the wisdom of God because they possess the ability for "extemporary knowledge," or intuitive knowledge. That is, they know all things instantaneously, without obstruction of the obstacles presented by space or time. Browne says,

I beleeeve they have an extemporary knowledge, and upon the first motion of their reason doe what we cannot without study or deliberation; that they know things by their formes, and define by specificall differences what we

---

<sup>70</sup>Browne, p. 43.

describe by accidents and properties; and therefore probabilities to us may bee demonstrations unto them: that they have knowledge not onely of the specificall, but numerical formes of individualls, and understand by what reserved difference each single Hypostasis (besides the relation to its species) becomes its numericall selfe. That as the Soule hath a power to move the body it informes, so there's Faculty to move any, though informe none; ours upon restraint of time, place and distance. . . .<sup>71</sup>

The ultimate operation of man's knowledge comes through his mystical union with Christ:

Before Abraham was, I am, is the saying of Christ, yet is it true in some sense if I say it of my selfe, for I was not onely before my selfe, but Adam, that is, in the Idea of God, and the decree of that Synod held from all Eternity. And in this sense, I say, the world was before the Creation, and at an end before it had a beginning; and thus was I dead before I was alive; though my grave be England, my dying place was Paradise; and Eve miscarried of mee before she conceiv'd of Cain.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, the antithesis of the wisdom of God and the reason of man leads back, almost in circular fashion, to the basic antithesis of the Being of God and the being of man. Browne's most pervasive and most profound theme is the nature of the relationship between idea and form. Nature, as the hieroglyphics of God, provides symbolic information to this mystery. The creature man suggests in epitome the beauty of God's creative union of matter and form. The driving impulse of Browne's Religio is the

---

<sup>71</sup>Browne, p. 43.

<sup>72</sup>Browne, p. 68.

attempt to know God's being by understanding the relationship between the Ideas of God and their emergence in form. The unity of the Religio is an intense one, not easily perceptible through the somewhat irregular rhythms of Browne's thought, but it is nonetheless a unity characteristic of the mystic. The intense search for the Being of God constitutes the unity of the Religio. To trace the mysterious relationship between Being and Becoming, between Essence and Matter, between Pure Knowledge and its manifestations in space and time--these constitute the Oneness of the Religio.

The structure of the Religio is so important to the perception of its value as a literary form. The external structure conforms quite visibly to a meditative tradition common in the seventeenth century, and understandable in the whole history of Christian meditation. This structure is strengthened by the internal workings of the various antitheses posed by Browne. But on further inspection, the internal tensions, which work in circular fashion, or dialectic, are no real antitheses--they are too unequally balanced to be real paradoxes. The being of man is not really antithetical to the Being of God; mortality is not really the enemy of immortality; time is not actually in opposition to eternity; and the art of God is not in opposition to its Creator. The weaker part of each set antitheses becomes subsumed by the other, not to be obliterated

or nullified, but to be magnified in its incompleteness and to be perfected in the completeness of God. The antitheses, then, serve as capsules of the energy of the Religio, momentary pauses in the intense rush of Browne's thought. Each drives the other onward, with the effect of energy frozen temporarily but always rushing outward toward infinity.

The rhythm of the Religio is the basic rhythm of one man's dialogue with God, and the meditational structure allows Browne's Religio to be one of the greatest pieces of prose dialogue in English literary history. Because it is a dialogue of the soul with God, the Religio affords a structure for English prose that did not die with seventeenth century prose patterns. It is the structure of meditation. It is characterized by the directedness of the mind. The object in Browne's case was the Christian God, but the object may assume any form. Browne's confession will be remembered for the beauty of its devotion to God, but it is also a master work of the process of the directedness of the mind towards the unknowable. It remains, in its superiority, incomplete--and necessarily so, for this is the paradigm of the working of the mind as it reaches outward.

The antitheses are perspectives of the mind of finite man as it is directed towards the Infinity of God. They are all part of the same Reality. And thus, the accomplishment of Browne was to demonstrate superbly that the human

mind does not work straightforward towards completeness but in a series of transcendent perspectives. The antitheses Browne poses reveal not the disparateness of Reality, but the interrelatedness of all the realities which the mind can conceive.

## CHAPTER V

### URNE BURIALL AND THE GARDEN OF CYRUS:

#### THE MEDITATIONS COMPLETED

The Religio Medici was written in 1634-35 when Browne was just beginning to practice medicine. It was written before he married and before he became preoccupied with the establishment of his home and his profession in Norwich. He spent much time alone and had the leisure to be the reflective person which the Religio depicts. Urne Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus were written some twenty years later, after Browne's marriage and after most of his children were born. These two works, so noticeably different in external form and internal unity from the patterns of the Religio, seem to express another aspect of Browne. If Browne is studied, however, as a writer who absorbed meditative processes into his thought, these two works are not radically different from the Religio. Browne's writings are all of a piece, unified not only in subject matter (the nature of man, the nature of God, and man's obligations to society), but in the process of writing. It is my conviction that the art

of meditation refined the products of Browne's imagination. Urne Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus are the clearest, most brilliant products of the contemplative imagination.

In these two works, the dialectical rhythms of paradox are subdued, although the element of paradox is still present. The persona is inconspicuous if not altogether missing. These writings are controlled, as the Religio is not, by a unity and intensity of purpose. Urne Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus portray not a mind thinking but a mind at ease with the truths already accomplished by the struggle of meditation. Browne appears to have discovered the value of the struggle for order involved in the meditational process. Hall's instruction that meditation is nothing more than "a bending of the mind upon some subject until our thoughts come to an issue" appears to have more relevance for these companion works than for the Religio. The most observable difference between the processes of the Religio and the latter two works is the starting point for the mind's activity. In the Religio, Browne begins with the enigmas of the Christian faith, the invisible, airy theories of theology. The movement of the Religio is the working out of these theories in Browne's mind until he comes to a resolution of the mysteries. In Urne Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus, Browne begins with the vivid images--old urns found in a field near Walsingham and the pattern of the quincuncial lozenge discernible in the gardens of King Xerxes.

The Religio portrays a mind in the athletic struggle for truth, and the reader is urged along with Browne to struggle with the mysteries. In Urne Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus, the reader is teased with image after image which conforms to the main symbols of the urn and the quicunx. In these works, Browne has apparently already resolved the mysteries inherent in these symbols, and he offers more assistance to the reader as the reader struggles for the meaning of these symbols. In some ways, these works are more cryptic, because their design is similar to a large jigsaw puzzle. Browne appears to have the answer from the beginning; the reader is tantalized into following Browne's arguments.

The art of meditation, as Joseph Hall describes it, demands that the mind begin in abstraction and struggle, using the combined aids of man's reason and the divine light of God's Spirit, until a sense of order has been reached. This type of meditation may be compared to a different kind of meditation which begins with sense perceptions of physical objects--the fixing of the eyes on the Crucifix or a beam of light, the concentration of the mind on the ringing of a bell, the discipline of mind begun with knees on a cold, bare floor. This type of meditation apparently works by allowing physical sensations to direct the mind toward transcendence of the earthly to the spiritual. The type of meditation most familiar to Browne, however, is that type which begins with the



struggle of the mind in abstraction--it begins in a frustration for order, a kind of helplessness which the human mind feels when confronted with concepts too complex for immediate comprehension.

This kind of meditation prefers the frustration of limits because it assumes that it is impossible to represent God, even to the inward mind, with any kind of imagery. Hall's directions are pertinent: "We may not think to see God by any fancied representation. He will admit of no image of himself; no, not in thought. All possibly conceivable ideas and similitudes, as they are infinitely too low, so they are clean contrary to his spiritual nature and his express charge; and the very entertainment of any of them is no other than a mental idolatry. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

The thoughts of God must not begin with the physical objects familiar to man, nor with the images of these within the mind; they must instead begin in the deepest recesses of abstraction. One very important effect of this kind of meditation for aesthetics is what might be termed the "cryptogram effect." The mind is teased with a multiplicity of enigmas. It is instructive to note how many times Browne uses the words "riddle," "puzzle," "enigma," "mystery," "hieroglyph" in the Religio:

"those wingy mysteries in Divinity"

"impossibilities"

---

<sup>1</sup>Hall, p. 330.

"It is a riddle to me"

"The whole Creation is a mystery"

"There are mystically in our faces certain characters"

"There are wonders in true affection, it is a body of aenigmaes, mysteries, and riddles"

to name a few. The progress of the Religio is Browne's confrontation of the great mysteries of the Christian faith, one after the other: the nature of miracles, the divinity of the Scripture, the nature of eternity, the Trinity, life after death, existence of spirits, the nature of heaven and hell. He raises all these problematic questions with the confidence that "there be not impossibilities enough for an active faith." Browne's mind is the contemplative mind at work in the meditation of abstraction; it is the mind at work in the confrontation of limits.

Hall and Browne were not alone in operating by these mental processes. Seventeenth-century thinkers were fond of the riddle, in the most sophisticated sense of the word. They loved to pose enigmas for which there was no apparent answer so that the mind could play at will with these mysteries. The element of "play" is essential in this concept. The mind is teased with the very impossibility that appears to inhibit it. Many seventeenth-century writers (Hall is a good example) envied the angels because they could think day and night, without weariness, on matters for which the human mind

felt limitation. In The Art of Meditation, he acknowledges the extreme difficulty of the meditative process: "Not that we call for a perpetuity of this labour of meditation; human frailty could never bear so great a toil. Nothing under heaven is capable of a continual motion without complaint; it is enough for the glorified spirits above to be ever thinking and never weary."<sup>2</sup> But he admonishes persistence: "Persist til thou hast prevailed; so that which thou begannest with difficulty shall end in comfort."<sup>3</sup>

This struggle of the mind for order became a mode of discovery for Browne the artist. Browne's struggle with enigmas usually eventuated in meaningful metaphors and symbols. The Religio is dotted with these symbols as Browne's flashes of insight pose momentary resolutions to the enigma. His struggle to describe the peculiar mixture in man of matter and spirit eventuates in the famous metaphor of man as "that great and true amphibian," caught between the worlds of matter and spirit. His insight into the providence of God eventuates in the beautiful metaphor of God as "a skillful Geometrician." The problem of life after death becomes more acceptable to the mind with Browne's comparison of man's mortal state as only one stage in his progression toward spiritual

---

<sup>2</sup>Hall, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup>Hall, p. 55.

maturity, much like the transmigration of silkworms. The miseries of human life are comprehended in that unsettling metaphor of the world "not as an Inne, but a Hospitall," for people to die in. The necessity of Christ's intervention for man's salvation is described in a particularly cryptic metaphor: "The world was before the Creation, and at an end before it had a beginning; and at an end before it had a beginning; and thus was I dead before I was alive; though my grave be England, my dying place was Paradise, and Eve miscarried of mee before she conceiv'd of Cain." Of the limited vision of man and the prospect of a greater existence than earth affords, Browne compares the earth to a seed; man will see it as such when his vision becomes like that of God.

These cryptic metaphors and symbols, so characteristic of Browne, may be attributable to the influence of meditation. Browne utilized the artistic potential of this struggle of the mind. The meditative thinker is a kind of alchemist--a good and wholesome alchemist--who transmutes spiritual insight into understandable and pleasing symbols. The transmutation is largely a matter of rearrangement of the materials at man's disposal--the physical world, man's perceptions of that world, the relationships of man to the rest of the created order. The rearrangement has infinite possibilities because of God's plenitude.

The results of this alchemy are the metaphors, symbols, paradoxes, and analogies which emanate from the mind's frustration for order. In no way does this alchemy misrepresent God or His creation, because, for Browne (as well as for his audience), there is nothing without order but the Chaos, and that is a realm outside the presence of God, a realm inaccessible to man because man exists in God: "There was never any thing ugly, or misshapen, but the Chaos; wherein notwithstanding, to speake strictly, there was no deformity, because no forme, nor was it yet impregnate by the voyce of God. . . ." <sup>4</sup>

For Browne in particular, this alchemy results in the kind of metaphors and symbols which resemble cryptograms, or as Browne might term them, hieroglyphs. The hieroglyph, to Browne, was the most powerful kind of symbol. It "pictured forth," or represented an orderly interpretation of experience, but it retained elements of the mystery it represented, so that the hieroglyph was incomplete in itself but a clue to the mystery. It was, to use one of Browne's favorite expressions, "Janus-faced." It was concrete, apprehensible, beautiful; it was also cryptic, enigmatic, and to some extent, undecipherable.

In Browne's view of the vitality of the whole created order, everything is hieroglyphic--weeds, flowers

---

<sup>4</sup>Browne, p. 36.

animals, and man himself.<sup>5</sup> The responsibility for interpreting the hieroglyphs of the world lies with man. Gordon Keith Chalmers, in "Hieroglyphs and Sir Thomas Browne," emphasizes the potency of this concept of symbol for Browne.<sup>6</sup> His article reveals that Browne's concept of hieroglyph was a mistaken concept of the Egyptian hieroglyph. He points out that Browne thought of Hieroglyphs as pictographs and ideographs--a "language of things."<sup>7</sup> To most of the scholars of Browne's day, "Hieroglyphs were enigmas; consequently to all they seemed to contain the secreta secretorum. Ancient legend taught that the mysterious signs were purposely obscure to the uninitiated. Browne believed, Chalmers says, that "the hieroglyphs represented the inner origins of things, their intentions and Ideas. . . ."<sup>8</sup>

What appears to fascinate Browne in his later writings is the power of man's symbols to draw human beings together in an appreciation of the mysteries of life. Urne Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus lack the

---

<sup>5</sup>Rosemary Freeman, in English Emblem Books (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), suggests that Browne's interest in hieroglyphs is related to the seventeenth-century interest in emblem books. While this observation is a valid one, I feel that Browne's imagination was more concerned with the dialectical processes of logic and rhetoric than with visual representation. His fascination for hieroglyphs was the interest in this form of compressed meaning.

<sup>6</sup>Gordon K. Chalmers, "Hieroglyphs and Sir Thomas Browne," Virginia Quarterly Review, 11 (1935), 547-560.

<sup>7</sup>Chalmers, p. 555.

<sup>8</sup>Chalmers, p. 555.

numerous and varied metaphors of the Religio, but they reveal Browne's discovery of the power of one unifying symbol. They are "secularized" meditations; gone is the obvious concern for religious enigmas. But these two works are intensely mystical. Urne Buriall contains the quintessence of Browne's thought on the nature of life, Being, existence; The Garden of Cyrus contains his most profound thought on the germination of life, or ingress and egress from the material world.

The main symbol, or hieroglyph, in Urne Buriall is the urn. It is the unifying force in the meditation and the enigma. It poses the relevant question for Browne and answers it at the same time. Unlike the thought processes at work in the Religio, the thought processes in Urne Buriall move from one concrete image to the other--burial customs of Romans and Greeks, containers of the dead, minute observations of the contents of urns found in a field near Walsingham. The missing persona is the symbol of the urn itself, from which Browne can turn in any direction, speak from any perspective, in his most sophisticated, disinterested fashion. The urn as a symbol draws together all the observations of Browne the scientist; the mind of the scientist directs itself to the visible phenomena which present problems to be resolved. Like a camera, invisible and silent, but reflecting what is observable, this persona is situated in an invulnerable position. The scientist's mind, in its directedness

toward these visible objects, transcends them to reflect upon them. The reader, without realizing it, is prepared with Browne's persona to make the value judgments along with him concerning life and death, time and eternity.

The urn as symbol-persona unites all the random observations of Urne-Buriall. What Browne discovers is the power of symbol to evoke responses at the discursive level of understanding and, at the same time, to evoke responses at a more primitive level (in psychological terms, an unconscious level) of awareness. The shape of the urn is always in the reader's consciousness. The reflections upon burial by water, fire, or inhumation come and go through the reader's mind; the persistent question in the reader's mind is the significance of the urn itself.

What Browne also discovers is the power of symbol to engage the reader's mind in his own imaginative activity of drawing relationships. The reader struggles to conform the symbol of the urn to his own experience and thus participates with Browne in formulating meaningful final statements about the urn.

There is a different kind of dialectic in Urne Buriall, in which the narrative moves in an ever-widening circle of comprehension as the symbol of the urn, ever present in the reader's mind, is considered "artificially, naturally, mystically." Artificially, it represents man's best efforts to preserve what he knows as his own being:



"But these are sad and sepulchral Pitchers, which have no joyful voices; silently expressing old mortality, the ruins of forgotten times, and can only speak with life, how long in this corruptible frame, some parts may be uncorrupted; yet able to out-last bones long unborn, and noblest pyle among us."<sup>9</sup> All the burial customs of civilized peoples are attempts to preserve the remnants of human life. The burial receptacle symbolizes man's perception of himself, and the urn is a special effort to contain what is preservable in man.

Naturally, the urn suggests birth, the shape of the body, sleep, death: "But the common form with necks was a proper figure, making out last bed like our first; nor much unlike the Urnes of our Nativity, while we lay in the nether part of the Earth, and inward vault of our Microsome."<sup>10</sup> In its attempt to preserve man and remind him of life, quite paradoxically it can only remind him of death. Even in death, the materiality of man's existence on earth haunts him: "Dantes Characters are to be found in skulls as well as faces. . . . Physiognomy outlives our selves, and ends not in our graves."<sup>11</sup>

Mystically, the urn suggests the "salving" of man's identity through the immortality of his soul. The urn with its blatant reminder of death forces the mind to

---

<sup>9</sup>Browne, p. 131.

<sup>10</sup>Browne, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup>Browne, p. 220.

meditate on Being. This enigma--not the urns found in a field near Walsingham--is the real enigma of Urne Buriall. The realization of Browne's thought processes comes only at the conclusion. Unlike the Religio, in which the enigma is presented in its abstract form at the beginning of the meditation, the slow realization of the problem which Browne is working through dawns on the reader. The problem with which Browne's mind is struggling is the nature of Being, in an ultimate sense, and the way in which human nature is related to Being.

Browne refuses the concept of annihilation: "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 seemes progressionall, and otherwise made in vaine. . . ." The urn, in its most literal sense, is a false testimony: "But to subsist in bones, and be but Pyramidally extant, is a fallacy in duration. Vain ashes, which in the oblivion of names, persons, times, and sexes, have found unto themselves a fruitlesse continuation, and only arise unto late posterity, as Emblemes of mortall vanities. . . ."

The urn, as a reminder of mortality, directs the mind to the nature of true Being: "There is nothing strictly immortall, but immortality; whatever hath no beginning may be confident of no end. All others have a dependent being, and within the reach of destruction, which is the peculiar of that necessary essence that

cannot destroy it self. . . .God who can only destroy our souls, and hath assured our resurrection, either of our bodies or names hath directly promised no duration."

Typical of Browne, the reassurance needed to counteract the coldness of the urns is missing; the urn, hieroglyphic, reveals a truth but remains mysterious as to the whole truth. God is the only Being; man exists in Him; whether or not man lives, here or hereafter, is of God's choosing.

Thus, at the end of Urne Buriall, Browne's dialectic seems to have lost itself in the very struggle it presents. The urn is primary in the reader's mind as an image which suggests the answer to the question to the nature of human existence. Its shape suggests birth, the form of the human body; the bones suggest a continuation of human life after death. The whole argument of the Urne Buriall seems directed toward Browne's Christian faith of life after death. But suddenly, at the conclusion, Browne's argument takes a peculiar twist: the urns suggest mortality as much as immortality, and the hope of eternal life is only one man's wish.

The Garden of Cyrus, a companion piece to Urne Buriall, is constructed in a similar way. Again, Browne utilizes the power of symbol as a persona, as a means of appealing to both the discursive and primitive levels of awareness simultaneously. The quincunx is presented to the reader immediately. Artificially, the quincunx can be discerned in gardens (from the Garden of Eden to the

present day), armies, temples, surgical procedures, houses, furniture, chess-boards, and precious stones. The quincunx appears to be the most prevalent geometric form in art, whether by conscious practice or unconscious imitation. Naturally, the quincunx is discernible in seeds, the "squameous heads of weeds," trees, leaves, spiders' webs, rock formations, "the house of the solitary maggot," the testacles of plants. In Browne's enumeration of examples, the quincunx becomes an obsessive symbol in the reader's mind; it propels the reader to imagine this symbol in virtually every configuration of nature.

Mystically, the quincunx is symbolic of the germinal principle of life. For Browne as a scientist, the theories of generation absorbed his serious study. He conducted thousands of experiments with the tiny duckweed seed, in the attempt to determine the exact process of germination. But, characteristically of Browne, his science was not divorced from his deepest religious beliefs. Mystically, the quincunx was the most exact representation to the human mind of the entrance of life into materiality.

Browne's poetic expression of the search for the formation of life into materiality reminds the reader of the mysterious Garden of Adonis in Spenser's Faerie Queene in which the whole creative process is viewed from the perspective of one who can glimpse the invisible world:

113

All things from thence doe their first being fetch,  
And borrow matter whereof they are made;  
Which, whenas forme and feature it does ketch,  
Becomes a body, and doth then invade  
The state of life out of the griesly shade.  
That substaunce is eterne, and bideth so;  
Ne when the life decayes and forme does fade,  
But chaunged is, and often altred to and froe.  
(FQ, III, vii)

Like Spenser, Browne pursued his search for the source of life both by reflections on the invisible insemination of life by a Divine Source, and by minute study of observable phenomena. Browne expresses himself ambiguously about the relative importance of each of these dimensions of the creative experience. But he was convinced that the continuum of Being was ever active, always surging in infinite informations of life; and the process of creation, begun with God's creation out of nothing, has never ceased. To observe this process of creation is to know God in His most basic activity; and to know God is to be moved with the love that surges from Him in His creative activity.

Gardens provide the first subject of contemplation for creative activity, perhaps because they symbolize both Nature and Art. They are the best expression of the "verdant state" of God's creation, and they are the most observable attempts at artifice. The basic enigma, for Browne, in The Garden of Cyrus, is the creative act of life coming into existence. Again, as in Urne Buriall, this enigma slowly dawns on the reader. Browne's answer is, once again, ambiguous, as mysterious as the symbol of the quincunx. The soul itself takes the form of the

quincunx: "And this also with application unto the soul of man, which hath a double aspect, one right, whereby it beholdeth the body, and objects without; another circular and reciprocal, whereby it beholdeth it self. The circle declaring the motion of the indivisible soul. . . the central decussation, the wondrous connexion of the severall faculties conjointly in one substance. . . ." The harmony of the soul is maintained by the central decussation of the quincunx, uniting the material and the spiritual substances of man.

Thus, the work which began with the quincuncial lozenge in the garden of Cyrus ends with the nature of the soul. In a curious kind of dialectic, Browne reflects the symbol of the quincunx from the objects of nature and art to the subjectiveness of the self which is considering this symbol. The reader becomes aware that the pattern of the quincunx may not, in fact, be so readily discernible in the objects of nature; the pattern of the quincunx is in the eye of the perceiver and, most importantly, in his soul.

Urne Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus portray the directedness of the mind toward God through symbols which every reader can utilize in an imaginative-religious act of comprehension. The digressiveness which characterized the Religio is suppressed so that the symbols of imagination can efficaciously propel the reader toward the enigmas of Ultimate Reality. The urn constitutes the symbolic grasp of both the mystery and the significance of

human life; human life is a participation in the grand scheme of Being emanating from God, and it is mortal, definite, short of the grandeur it can envision. The quincuncial lozenge constitutes the symbolic grasp of the ingress and egress of all life forms in the vast texture of God's Being. It represents the secret but discernible pattern of life being born into visible reality, but it also suggests the mysterious, unexplainable resolution and finality of material forms. Browne uses these two symbols to unify the mind's directedness toward God. They persist in the narratives as touchstones, or mirrors, for the reflections of the self. These symbols are the refinement of those processes of mind most discernible in the art of meditation. The discipline of the rhetorical processes of the stair of meditation allow Browne the expansiveness to refine his perceptions of the created order. Browne preferred to meditate on his own being and the relation of man to God by way of reflecting on God's created order. In Urne Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus, Browne's imaginative processes are complete; the dialectic of the stair of meditation allows him to come to his most comfortable artistic expression.

## CONCLUSION

This study of Sir Thomas Browne has sought the circumference of Browne's productivity from the center of his imagination. His synthetic imagination produced a variety of creative endeavors--scientific experiments, philosophical treatises, religious apologetics, lyrical expressions. Browne's most fascinating quality is the imagination which produced such a variety of manifestations. His imagination is at work in his science as well as his poetry.

The remarkable aspect of Browne's imagination is the self-consciousness of it. Browne's prose reflects a delight with the prospect of the capacities of the reflective mind. Browne seems aware that he is experimenting with mysterious and wonderful powers of the mind. He is not afraid to lose himself in a mystery. Such excitement about the mind's creative capacities is present, if only in subtle ways, in all his writings.

Another way of emphasizing Browne's self-awareness is to say that he is not afraid of subjectivity. For one who revered classical models with fervor, Browne displays



an unusual preoccupation with subjective processes. This fascination for subjectivity marks Browne as a transitional figure in the history of English prose.

Browne would like to retain the classical and medieval belief that poetry and religion have a common divine source. Like Sir Philip Sidney, he agrees that the Greek and Latin words for "poet" denote a divine calling. Like George Puttenham, he believes the poet is a creator in the same way that the Christian God is Creator. But Browne experiments with his self-consciousness as a writer, or, as it may be termed, his subjectivity. Browne prefigures contemporary writers in his concern with consciousness. In a very real sense, Browne was as much concerned as contemporary writers with the structures of the mind in its interaction with its environment. Browne's preoccupation with the tenets of the Christian faith, more real to him than the "squeamous heads of weeds," should not lead readers to believe that he was just another moralist.

The Religio does not contribute new theological insights nor even new practical ways of living by faith. Urne Buriall and The Gardens of Cyrus contribute little that is new to the knowledge of God or Being. But all three of these works present entirely new perspectives from which the mind operates. The structures of mind exhibited by Browne's persona in the Religio reveal the discipline of a dialectic that proceeds in a rigorous pattern from subject to object, only to keep transcending

itself to incorporate more perspectives--and more doubts. Urne Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus reveal the power of this dialectic when it is submerged in vivid symbols. The inner-outer discipline is still at work, engaging other minds in the constantly transcending perceptions.

I believe the subjectivity of Browne was aided, for the most part, by the art of meditation, specifically the "stair of meditation." The kind of meditation which incorporates the patterns of rhetoric and logic allows for a kind of subjectivity most prominent in modern literary forms. It is the dialectic of discursive reasoning with the unconscious powers of the mind. It is the specific kind of meditation which allows the discursive mind to withdraw from the object of contemplation and allow the processes of symbol to give emotional acceptance or rejection of the discursive pattern.

Browne is thus a precursor of the "reflective imagination" as opposed to the "pictorial imagination." Browne's love for hieroglyphs would seem to cast him with the lot of seventeenth-century writers and artists who produced emblem books. But the hieroglyph for Browne was not pictorial; it was the fusion of rational processes and emotional responses. It was the dialectic of the inner mind with the <sup>/</sup>données of the reasoning process.

Unlike Dante and Spenser (and perhaps Milton), who might be called the champions of the pictorial imagination Browne is unable to immerse himself completely in the realm

of symbol. His own profession and scientific mind will not allow it, just as his audience will not allow it. But Browne is not willing that the realm of symbol should be discarded for the strictly utilitarian purposes of science.

The result for Browne is a curious mixture of logic and symbol which would seem unpretentious to Dante or Spenser or Milton. It is a happy result, however, not only for Browne, but for a modern scientific environment. Browne affirms the possibility of symbol for relating people to each other through the means of the reflective imagination. The structures of thought processes and not the evocation of vivid images assumes a tremendous significance. What matters is not the satisfaction of questions answered or truth contained but the discipline of the mind in its search for fresh perspectives to truth. If such a struggle should lead to stunning symbols, so much the better. If such a struggle should end in ambiguity, the search is still worth the while.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

- Browne, Sir Thomas. A Catalogue of the Libraries of the Learned Sir Thomas Brown, and Dr. Edward Brown, His Son. London, 1710-11.
- . The Letters of Sir Thomas Browne. Ed. Geoffrey Keynes. London: Faber and Faber, 1931.
- . The Prose of Sir Thomas Browne. Ed. Norman Endicott, New York: New York University Press, 1968.
- . The Works of Sir Thomas Browne. 4 vols. Ed. Geoffrey Keynes. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.

### Secondary Sources

- Baumgardt, David. Great Western Mystics: Their Lasting Significance. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.
- Bennett, Joan. Sir Thomas Browne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962.
- Boswell, James. Boswell's Life of Johnson. London: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Bundy, Murray W. "'Invention' and 'Imagination' in the Renaissance." Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 29 (1930), 535-545.
- Bush, Douglas. English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century. London: Oxford University Press, 1946.

- Butler, Dom Cuthbert. Western Mysticism. New York: Harper and Row, 1922.
- Cassirer, Ernst. The Platonic Renaissance in England. Trans. James P. Pettegrove. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1953.
- Cawley, Robert Ralston, and George Yost, eds. Studies in Sir Thomas Browne. Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Books, 1965.
- Chalmers, Gordon K. "Hieroglyphs and Sir Thomas Browne." Virginia Quarterly Review, 11 (1935), 547-560.
- . "Sir Thomas Browne, True Scientist." Osiris, 2 (1936), 28-79.
- Clark, Donald Lemen. Rhetoric and Poetry in the Renaissance. New York: Russell and Russell, 1963.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. 3 vols. Ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge. London: 1836; rpt. New York, AMS Press, 1967.
- Colie, Rosalie L. "Some Paradoxes in the Language of Things." In Reason and the Imagination. Ed. Joseph Anthony Mazzeo. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 93-105.
- Croll, Morris W. Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm: Essays by Morris Croll. Ed. J. Max Patrick and Robert O. Evans. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966.
- Denonain, Jean-Jacques, ed. Introduction. Religio Medici: A New Edition with Biographical and Critical Introduction. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955.
- Dunn, William P. Sir Thomas Browne; A Study in Religious Philosophy. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1950.
- Endicott, Norman. "Some Aspects of Self-Revelation and Self-Portraiture in Religio Medici." In Essays in English Literature from the Renaissance to the Victorian Age Presented to A. S. P. Woodhouse. Ed. Millar MacLure and F. W. Watt. University of Toronto Press, 1964, pp. 85-102.
- Finch, Jeremiah S. Sir Thomas Browne: A Doctor's Life of Science and Faith. New York: Henry Schuman, 1950.

- Fisch, Harold. "Bishop's Hall's Meditations." Review of English Studies, 25 (1949), 210-221.
- Fish, Stanley. Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.
- Freeman, Rosemary. English Emblem Books. London: Chatto and Windus, 1948.
- Gilson, Etienne. The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine. Trans. L. E. M. Lynch. New York: Random House, 1960.
- Gosse, Edmund. Sir Thomas Browne. London: MacMillan, 1905.
- Hall, Anne Drury. "Epistle, Meditation, and Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici." PMLA, 94 (March, 1979), 234-246.
- Hall, Joseph. "The Art of Divine Meditation." In The Works of the Right Reverend Joseph Hall. London, 1606. rpt. New York, AMS Press, 1969. Ed. Philip Wynter.
- Huntley, Frank Livingstone. Sir Thomas Browne. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1962.
- Jones, Richard Foster. The Seventeenth Century: Studies in the History of English Thought and Literature from Bacon to Pope. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1951.
- Jones, Rufus M. Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Boston: Beacon Press, 1914.
- Knowles, David. The English Mystical Tradition. New York: Harper, 1961.
- Joseph, Sister Miriam, C.S.C. Rhetoric in Shakespeare's Time. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947.
- Kocher, Paul H. Science and Religion in Elizabethan England. New York: Octagon Books, 1953.
- Lanham, Richard A. The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.
- McKeon, Richard. "Rhetoric in the Middle Ages." Speculum, 17, (January, 1942), 1-32.
- Martz, Louis L. The Poetry of Meditation. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954.

- Mazzeo, Joseph Anthony, ed. Reason and the Imagination: Studies in the History of Ideas, 1600-1800. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962.
- . "Saint Augustine's Rhetoric of Silence: Truth vs. Eloquence and Things vs. Signs." In Renaissance and Seventeenth-Century Studies. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1-28.
- Melville, Herman. The Letters of Herman Melville. Ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960.
- Moloney, Michael F. "Metre and Cursus in Sir Thomas Browne's Prose." Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 58 (1959), 60-67.
- Merton, Egon Stephen. Science and Imagination in Sir Thomas Browne. New York: Octagon Books, 1949.
- Nathanson, Leonard. The Strategy of Truth: A Study of Sir Thomas Browne. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- Nicolson, Marjorie. "The Early Stage of Cartesianism in England." Studies in Philology, 26 (1929), 356-369.
- Osgood, Charles G. Boccaccio on Poetry. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1930.
- Puttenham, George. "The Arte of English Poesie." In Elizabethan Critical Essays. Ed. Gregory Smith. 2 vols. London: Oxford, 1904, pp. 1-66.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. "An Apology for Poetry." In Criticism: The Major Texts. Ed. Walter Jackson Bate. New York: Harcourt, 1952. pp. 82-106.
- Southern, A. C. Elizabethan Recusant Prose, 1559-1582. London: Sands, 1950.
- Steadman, John. The Lamb and the Elephant: Ideal Imitation and Context of Renaissance Allegory. San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1974.
- Tuve, Rosemund. Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947.
- Underhill, Evelyn. Mysticism; or a Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930.
- . The Mystics of the Church. New York: Schocken Books, 1964.

- Wallerstein, Ruth. Studies in Seventeenth-Century Poetic.  
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966.
- Warren, Austin. "The Style of Sir Thomas Browne." Kenyon Review, 13 (1951), 674-687.
- Weaver, R. M. Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic. New York: George H. Doran, 1921.
- Webber, Joan. The Eloquent "I": Style and Seventeenth Century Prose. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968.
- White, Helen C. English Devotional Literature (Prose), 1600-1640. University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and literature, No. 29. Madison, 1931.
- . The Tudor Books of Private Devotion. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951.