Claire Preston. *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xiv, 250.

In 1681, the King of Fez and Morocco gave Charles II a flock of ostriches as a token of his esteem. Charles apparently ended up with more ostriches than he could handle, for one of his physicians, Edward Browne, obtained an ostrich and shipped it to Norwich, where it took up residence in the garden of his father, Sir Thomas Browne. The elder Browne, a physician and natural history buff, raptly observed the exotic creature's omnivorous feeding habits:

When it first came into my garden it soone eat up all the gilliflowers, Tulip leaves, & fed greedily upon what was green, as Lettuce, Endive, Sorrell: it would feed upon oates, barley, pease, beanes, swallowe onyons, eat sheepes lights and livers.

... When it tooke downe a large onyon it stuck awhile in the *Gula* & did not descend directly, butt wound backward behind the neck whereby I might perceave that the Gullett turned much, butt this is not peculiar unto the oestridge, butt the same hath been observed in the stork when it swallowes downe frogs & prettie bigg bitts. It made sometimes a strange noyse, had a very odde note especially in the morning & perhaps when hungry. (188–9)

When the bird died—choked by an oversized onion, perhaps—it became, as Thomas Browne proudly recorded, “the first oestridge dissected in England” (189).

Such was the weird and wonderful career of Thomas Browne. Endlessly intrigued by natural history and plugged into cultural networks that extended far beyond Norwich, Browne was an avid yet pious polymath, a “great and true *Amphibium*” who inhabited “divided and distinguished worlds ... the one visible, the other invisible” (*Religio Medici* 1:34). In her erudite new book, Claire Preston portrays Browne as engaged in a “redemptive project of curiosity” (162). Contextualizing his writings within seventeenth-century practices of natural philosophy and antiquarianism, Preston finds Browne's works marked by “impulses of collecting and encyclopaedic assemblage” (8). She argues that by striving to gather together the fragments of knowledge dispersed at the Fall, Browne seeks to restore the intellectual wholeness of mankind. Through a comprehensive examination of Browne's œuvre, Preston analyzes how Browne grows increasingly skeptical about humanity's ability to recover the divinely instituted order of the cosmos, even as he gathers together the scattered traces of a paradise lost.

Preston devotes her opening two chapters to *Religio Medici*. In the first, she analyzes the concept of civility which she finds central to the themes and structure of *Religio Medici*. Preston argues that Browne exemplifies a historically specific mode of scientific sociability. By exploring Browne's relationship to Stoic, Baconian, and Hobbesian ideas about civil behaviour, Preston demonstrates the importance of orderly social exchange within Browne's thought. Preston then builds on her discussion of Browne's civility to analyze the tone and structure of *Religio Medici*, focusing on the disjunction between the body of the text—which had been written in

the 1630s and first published, without Browne's consent, in 1642—and the preface and other passages Browne added to the authorized edition of 1643.

Whereas the piracy of the text had violated standards of civil discourse, Preston argues, Browne reestablishes norms of learned sociability by creating a dialogue between the immature voice of the original text and the older, more sober speaker of 1643. Preston then devotes individual chapters to Browne's other major works. She analyzes the participation of *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* in early modern practices of collecting, demonstrating how ideals of devotional piety and civil cooperation underwrite both early modern cabinets of curiosities and Browne's assemblage of texts. Preston finds, however, an increasing tension in *Pseudodoxia* between the optimism of the collector who seeks to recover a prelapsarian order and the catalogue of human ignorance which Browne compiles. Rather than instilling confidence in the restorative power of civil, scientific inquiry, *Pseudodoxia* finally leads the reader to recognize the futility of such an endeavour.

Preston discovers even greater skepticism structuring Browne's attempts to reassemble the fragmented past in *Urne-Buriall*. Although Browne initially works within the tradition of antiquarians such as Camden and Aubrey, Preston argues, he comes to abandon the evidentiary project of antiquarianism altogether. Rather than restoring lost knowledge, Browne finds that antiquarianism can only emphasize the irrevocability of the past, and thus *Urne-Buriall* ends with speculation unanchored to artefacts, nullifying the work's conceptual foundation.

In a virtuoso reading of *Musæum Clausum*, Browne's parodic catalogue of curiosities, Preston shows that this infrequently analyzed work also helps us to understand Browne's increasingly skeptical sensibility. An inventory of fantastical objects that never existed or cannot be recovered, Browne's fictitious catalogue both celebrates and denies the material basis of knowledge. And in her analysis of *The Garden of Cyrus*, Preston explores how Browne, searching for God's "signatures" in botany and embryology, finds nature permeated by the figure of the quincunx. Preston argues that in *The Garden of Cyrus*, Browne discards the norms of scientific civility that appear in his other works and instead solely focuses on finding the mystical patterns which underwrite the visible world. Preston's rich, sympathetic account of Browne's struggle for knowledge allows us to appreciate both Browne's participation in the intellectual trends of his time and his fascinating idiosyncrasies.

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