

Moralizing Dilation in *Religio Medici*

Ronald Hall

Readers of Browne's *Religio Medici* have tended to emphasize its elements of self-portrayal or spiritual autobiography; yet close stylistic analysis (especially of the 'dilating' method and the rapid variation of pronouns) suggests that—like much of Herbert's *Temple*—its real focus is on moral and spiritual 'universals', with the ostensible self-presentation functioning really as a rhetorical point of departure-and-return rather than as the true subject itself. Browne is essentially a moralizing and (in more senses than one) 'dilating' essayist in this, as in most of his major works other than *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*.

In his preface 'To the Reader', Sir Thomas Browne tells us that *Religio Medici* was

rather a memorial unto me than an example or rule unto any other: and therefore if there be any singularity therein correspondent unto the private conceptions of any man, it doth not advantage them; or if dissentaneous thereunto, it no way overthrows them

—adding the further disclaimer that it does not even pretend to present one man's settled position on religious questions: it represents only the state of his thinking in, presumably, his late twenties,

not an immutable law unto my advancing judgement at all times; and therefore there might be many things therein plausible unto my past apprehension which are not agreeable unto my present self

—this in 1643, when he was already nearly forty and brought out the authorized edition. As if all these disclaimers were not enough, he wishes many things in it 'to be taken in a soft and flexible sense, and not to be called unto the rigid test of reason'. Finally, in an anticipatory retraction, he submits the entire contents 'unto maturer discernments', and 'shall no further father them than the best and learned judgements shall authorize them'. Surely few works on religion (or ostensibly on religion) in the seventeenth century can have appeared with so few claims made for them (or ostensibly made for them) by the author.

Despite widespread modern scepticism about these prefatory remarks, there is no conclusive proof that Browne is being disingenuous here: the

disclaimers are quite in keeping with his statement that this personal ‘memorial’ was authorized for publication only because it had been ‘most imperfectly’ published before (a common enough occurrence); they are also imaginable as a defence against misrepresentation of both his ideas and his intentions. *Religio Medici*, like the youthful ‘errors’ he describes in Part I Section 7, consists of

opinions I never maintained with pertinacity.... Those have not only depraved understandings but diseased affections, which cannot enjoy a singularity without a heresy, or be the author of an opinion without they be of a sect also....

It differs from the youthful errors in one respect, namely that unlike them it was revealed to ‘dearest friends’, or at any rate (this is all the preface tells us) ‘communicated unto one’.

In seeking a pointer to Browne’s own intentions, perhaps we ought not to dismiss that twice-used phrase in the preface, *private exercise*. It suggests that the *Religio* was not intended for a public, yet at the same time the word *exercise* covers the obvious fact that, no matter how private, it is far from simply a series of jottings. Rather it is an elaborately wrought work, designed to reflect the writer’s own convictions with a dignity and yet relaxation together appropriate to the elevation of the subject as well as the privacy of its airing. These are personal statements and personal meditations like Herbert’s poems, shaped with a like care and artistry, but they also go well beyond the personal: they involve a similar constant creation of the writer’s *persona* in order to direct the reader’s attention (if readers there should be) towards other matters to which the created *persona* is as a window-pane.

This need not, of course, be regarded as odd: our most intimate interior monologues cannot escape some degree of self-objectifying—even of self-dramatization—and it is not surprising that we should tend, in circumstances of self-contemplation, to see ourselves as to some extent representative men or women. Moreover, presentation of oneself and one’s ideas can never be truly divorced from the urge to persuade others—an imagined audience, if necessary—to share them.

But personal self-revelation is only a relative affair: especially, perhaps, in this work. The Browne of *Religio Medici* clearly is a *persona* and does imply an audience (and a self and a *persona* are not quite the same thing). I suspect that we heirs of the Romantics have fallen into the habit of valuing the book too exclusively for the supposed individual self it reveals. And although more attention has recently been paid to the rhetorically created *persona* than to that ‘individual self’, it is arguable that, either way, not enough has yet been paid to the moralizing essayist for whom even the creation of that *persona* was more a point of departure than an end.

I think we can fruitfully take Browne more seriously as a moralist than we are accustomed to do, and that we can emphasise how often he appears as a representative man—N.J. Endicott was right to suspect a ‘dramatic hypostasizing of the human condition’ (101). This would mean, after all, learning to value the work not primarily as a portrait of Dr Browne at all.

Joan Webber, in her fine analysis of the *Religio*, long ago remarked that for Browne, as for Whitman, ‘celebration of self is celebration of humanity’, and went on to quote Huntington Brown’s comment that the motive is oracular despite the deviousness of the style (163, 169). What I should like to do in the rest of this paper is to develop this line of thought, but showing that Browne’s moralizing rhetoric operates in ways that involve some modification of Webber’s findings—especially her use of the term ‘spiritual autobiography’ and her assessment of the emphasis on Browne’s own personality.

Writing a few years after her, Stanley Fish complained that Browne ‘draws attention not away from, but to, himself’ (372); and this sounds not unlike Webber’s comment (not a complaint, however, in her case) that Browne’s rhetoric ‘always makes us attend to him even when the emphasis seems to be least personal’ (167). In the sense that the author’s presence is throughout a strong one, this may be so; but I suggest that virtually the opposite is the more direct result of the rhetoric: namely, that however ostensibly self-revelatory Browne may be, the organization of his discourse constantly forces our minds to move ‘outward’ to the contemplation of humanity at large. Section after section that begins as self-revelation ends in the voice of the moralist, until the author’s personal confessions begin to look merely like starting-points for a series of essays on ‘man’ (in the generic sense) and on his search for truth.

A particularly revealing feature of the work (noticed perhaps too briefly by Webber) is the rapid switching and alternating of pronouns. The *I* is constantly moving into *we*, implied *you* and *they*, and back again to *I*. This is so frequent that it necessarily affects the meaning of the *I* as we continue to read. What begins ostensibly as a self-confessing *I* becomes, though never exclusively yet more and more strongly, the representative *I* of the moralist.

A close examination of Part I Section 6 will help to illustrate some of these points.

Browne begins with—to modern ears—a rather quaint claim to cautious tolerance.

I could never divide myself from any man upon the difference of an opinion, or be angry with his judgement for not agreeing with me in that from which, perhaps, within a few days, I should dissent myself. I have no genius to disputes in religion, and have often thought it wisdom to decline them—especially upon a disadvantage, or when the cause of truth might suffer in the weakness of my patronage. Where we desire to be informed, 'tis good to contest with men above ourselves; but to confirm and establish our opinions, 'tis best to argue with judgements below our own, that the frequent spoils and victories over their reasons may settle in ourselves an esteem and confirmed opinion of our own.

He starts with the personal *I*: he, Browne, cannot quarrel about differences of opinion. After the word 'myself' those differences become more specifically disputes in religion, for which, says he, 'I [still the personal *I*] have no genius'. He has therefore thought it wisdom to decline them, especially (we may smile at this) when he risks bringing a good cause into disrepute by bad argument. Meanwhile we notice how the scope of his attention has quietly broadened from differences of opinion to 'the cause of truth'. And after the word 'patronage', his personal declining of disputes slides into a fairly authoritative generalization, introduced by the generic *we* and constructed around the balancing formulas 'tis good' and 'tis best'. We have already left the individual Browne behind, although a few lines back the tone was one of intimate personal confession. And when we arrive at the next sentence, the subject is 'Every man'.

Every man is not a proper champion for truth, nor fit to take up the gauntlet in the cause of verity. Many, from the ignorance of these maxims, and an inconsiderate zeal unto truth, have too rashly charged the troops of error, and remain as trophies unto the enemies of truth.

'Every man is not a proper champion for truth, nor fit to take up the gauntlet in the cause of verity.' The parallelism gives this the force of an aphorism out of the book of Proverbs (and much of Browne's writing reminds one of the parallelism characteristic of Hebrew poetry). The next grammatical subject is 'Many', the many whose ignorance of these 'maxims'—for so they have now become!—has made them unhappy exemplars of the truth of the aphorism. Browne himself has, of course—though only indirectly—

become a happy exemplar by his wise personal avoidance of disputes. We are being assured that in religious disputes, as elsewhere, fools rush in where angels fear to tread. This is the thought that commands our attention at this stage: it is only by a kind of double-take that we become aware of Browne himself standing modestly on the side of the angels. The real topic of discussion is certainly no longer his own personal propensities; it is the eternal battle between truth and error. And the tropes he uses have quietly built up into a cluster of military and chivalric connotations: *spoils, victories, champion, gauntlet, charged, troops, trophies, enemies*.

By now it is clear, of course, that the personal confession of the opening did not by any means reflect mere weakness of mind in Browne the individual. He claims the right to change his mind, he affirms tolerance not as a form of spiritual laziness but as a matter of consistency and caution. And he is apparently, after all, quite clear about the identity of the ‘enemies of truth’. But most of the time he is not really talking about himself.

The subject of the next sentence, ‘A man’, is any and every man, including Browne himself if he should be incautious.

A man may be in as just possession of truth as of a city, and yet be forced to surrender; ‘tis therefore far better to enjoy her with peace than to hazard her on a battle.

So the author is presenting himself as himself, yet can at any point of his discourse slide effortlessly into the position of example, of everyman, of everyman reasonably wise, or (occasionally) of everyman foolhardy and mistaken.

To review the development of the section up to this point: we started with the *I* of personal revelation, moved through what he has ‘often thought it wisdom’ to do, then into the *we* of implicitly shared insight, then through ‘tis best’ to the maxims affecting ‘Every man’ and ‘Many’. This leads up to the authoritative statement—its tone by now presupposing agreement—‘tis therefore far better to enjoy her [that is, truth] with peace than to hazard her on a battle’. What began as an aspect of Browne’s own eirenic personality has been turned into a moral value judgement, without offensive prescriptiveness and yet with a quietly climactic finality.

At this point Browne slips back comfortably into the first person of self-revelation, lubricating the transition with ‘If, therefore’.

If, therefore, there rise any doubts in my way, I do forget them, or at least defer them till my better settled judgement and more manly reason be able to resolve them; for I perceive every man’s own reason is his best Oedipus, and will, upon a reasonable truce, find a way to loose those bonds wherewith the subtleties of error have

enchained our more flexible and tender judgements.

He recognizes in himself the existence of a 'more manly reason' which does not operate all the time, but which is reliable if allowed to work at its own pace and on its own occasions. Then, with no more than a semicolon (this one in the original punctuation), he makes the transition again from his to 'every man's own reason'—Browne once again fading effortlessly into humanity in general. And this reason becomes the Oedipus, our more tender judgements become Thebes, and error with its subtleties becomes the Sphinx, in a miniature allegory of the eternal contest between truth and error, good and evil, in the experience of the human race. Into one sentence Browne has fitted, without any incongruity, 'my...judgement', 'every man's own reason', and 'our...judgements'.

This characteristic movement into moral generality is even more striking in the second half of Section 6, though it begins with an ostensible return to self-revelation.

In philosophy, where truth seems double-faced, there is no man more paradoxical than myself; but in divinity I love to keep the road, and though not in an implicit, yet an humble faith follow the great wheel of the Church, by which I move, not reserving any proper poles or motion from the epicycle of my own brain. By this means I leave no gap for heresies, schisms, or errors, of which at present (I hope I shall not injure truth to say), I have no taint or tincture.

Even the first sentence mingles self-confession with generalization: while Browne is contrasting his 'paradoxical' daring in philosophical speculation with his preference for the traditional in religious belief, two more general comments are slipped in by the way: that truth seems double-faced in philosophy, and that the Church is a 'great wheel'. What follows is by no means pure self-revelation, since Browne is really, after all, presenting himself as an example worth emulating: 'By this means [which, be it understood, I therefore commend to you] I leave no gap for heresies, schisms, or errors...'.

When he introduces the subject of his youthful errors, we see Browne as individual melting in a particularly interesting way into Browne as representative man.

I must confess, my greener studies have been polluted with two or three [errors]—not any begotten in the latter centuries, but old and obsolete, such as could never have been revived but by such extravagant and irregular heads as mine. For, indeed, heresies

perish not with their authors, but, like the River Arethusa, though they lose their currents in one place, they rise up again in another. One general council is not able to extirpate one single heresy: it may be cancelled for the present; but revolution of time, and the like aspects from heaven, will restore it; when it will flourish till it be condemned again.

His ‘heresies’ were old ones, which could never have been revived ‘but by such extravagant and irregular heads as mine’; he appears here as gently self-mocking, and we feel—just for the moment—that we are looking simply at him and the strangeness of his mental quirks. But a moment later we discover that the topic is no longer his extravagance of thought: it is, quite firmly, heresy and the revival of heresy. Its revival is in fact now established, not as an accident subject to the quirks of ‘irregular heads’, but as a law of nature. The form of the sentence is that of authoritative generalization: ‘heresies perish not with their authors’. (The transition has been eased by the little formula ‘For, indeed’, hinting at a causal connection where there is really only an associative one; Browne’s *for* is often like the Latin *enim* or the Greek *γάρ*.) Heresies, like the river Arethusa, emerge again in other places. And the resilience of heresy, rather like the stubbornness of weeds, is emphasised by the cycle of its revivals in spite of all the authority of general councils of the Church.

Browne continues this theme, broadening it out into further generalization: what is true of heresies is in fact true of all opinions, and this is comparable in the certainty of its operation to any supposed natural law like that of metempsychosis.

For as though there were a metempsychosis, and the soul of one man passed into another, opinions do find, after certain revolutions, men and minds like those that first begat them. To see ourselves again, we need not look for Plato’s year; every man is not only himself; there have been many Diogenes, and as many Timons, though but few of that name; men are lived over again; the world is now as it was in ages past—there was none then, but there hath been someone since that parallels him, and is, as it were, his revived self.

By the time we read ‘opinions do find, after certain revolutions, men and minds like those that first begat them’, we have entered into the sweeping view of patterns of history—the ‘extravagant and irregular’ head of Browne belongs to the distant world of eight lines ago, and we have forgotten it. It has served its rhetorical purpose by leading us smoothly into the generalizations which, after all, seem to interest him so much more than

the contemplation of his own individuality. (Perhaps he differs a little in this respect from Montaigne, but has something in common with Burton.)

The transitions that have led to the recurring ‘men and minds’ in the sweep of history, make possible too the further step with which the next sentence begins: we have moved from Browne to mankind, we now move from mankind in general to the more manageable and sociable ‘ourselves’— ‘To see ourselves again, we need not look for Plato’s year’. This anchors the general point already made. We are not simply contemplating the rhythms of history, we are involved in them. The main idea firmly established, Browne moves off again into the generality of ‘every man’, particularizing immediately with the antonomasia of ‘Diogenes’ and ‘Timons’; then after a brief pause the meditation soars into the rhythm of the sublimely aphoristic: ‘men are lived over again; the world is now as it was in ages past’. The previous sentences and clauses have fed into this climax the richness of its meaning. The thought could have been trite; but the lead-up to it, and the unexpected power of that rhetorical passive (‘men are lived over again’) show the kind of artistry we associate with the closing paragraphs of *Urn Burial*. The last few clauses of this section gently, through quiet expansive repetition, let us down from the momentary climax. We are ready to turn back from the patterns of history to the topic of heresy, and of Browne’s errors in particular.

The overall movement of Section 6 has been from differences of opinion to questions of heresy and error, all ostensibly part of Browne’s revelation of his own temperament, views and practice. (In Section 5 he had specified the nature of his Anglicanism, in Section 7 he discusses his early heterodoxies.) What is noticeable from the analysis I have offered is the repeated expansion of his discourse beyond himself as individual into moralizing comment on the nature of humanity and the complexities of his relationships with truth. In this expansion Browne figures often—though only implicitly—as a representative man, and aspects of his deliberately created *persona* lend themselves very aptly to these processes of dilation.

What I have said of Section 6 is true by and large of the rest of *Religio Medici*. Naturally I have chosen a section that illustrates the point especially clearly, but we can see the same process taking place on virtually any page of the work. In the immediately following section (7), Browne is concerned with his youthful errors and we might not expect much in the way of generalities. Yet even here Browne the individual becomes an implied example: he did not try to convert any man to his errors:

Therefore, these opinions, though condemned by lawful councils, were not heresies in me, but bare errors and single lapses of my understanding, without a joint depravity of my will. Those have not only depraved understandings but diseased affections, which

cannot enjoy a singularity without a heresy, or be the author of an opinion without they be of a sect also....

Notice the switch from ‘my will’ to ‘Those’: Browne, without directly praising his reticence, is nevertheless presenting his behaviour as the right sort under the circumstances. His generalization about sect-founders leads him further still, for he continues immediately:

...this was the villainy of the first schism of Lucifer, who was not content to err alone, but drew into his faction many legions of spirits; and upon this experience he tempted only Eve, as well understanding the communicable nature of sin, and that to deceive but one, was tacitly and upon consequence to delude them both.

The topic of communicating—or of not communicating—heresy has broadened into another topic: the communicating of sin itself.

What strikes one here is not only the elasticity of the discourse, accommodating itself to remarkably sudden switches of topic, but also the compression made possible by juxtaposition of topics. Browne has presented the Fall in a new imaginative light by leaping from himself to Satan via the general nature of mankind.

I turn now to Part II of *Religio Medici* for some further analysis of the functioning of Browne’s *persona* in the work. Section 11 begins squarely and specifically with his ostensible subject, himself.

Now, for my life, it is a miracle of thirty years, which to relate were not a history but a piece of poetry, and would sound to common ears like a fable. For the world, I count it, not an inn, but an hospital, and a place not to live but to die in. The world that I regard is myself; it is the microcosm of mine own frame that I cast mine eye on; for the other, I use it but like my globe, and turn it round sometimes for my recreation. Men that look upon my outside, perusing only my condition and fortunes, do err in my altitude, for I am above Atlas his shoulders....

The significant juxtaposition, ‘for my life’ and ‘For the world’, points to the unhurried yet rapid and free movement of his mind. We notice also that he moves from the subject of his individual life to the general death of mankind: the world is a place to die in. Then he moves quickly back to himself from the world (‘The world that I regard is myself’)—it is as if we are seeing the dilating-and-contracting process speeded up here, where the stated subject itself is precisely the microcosm-macrocosm relationship that so much of the work implies. What looks like a conceited (in both

senses) dismissal of the world in favour of self-contemplation, allows for a neat twist into presenting himself as, once again, representative man: 'Men that look upon my outside [that is, upon man's outside]...do err in my altitude, for I am above Atlas his shoulders'. This suggestive image, the culmination of the conceits about the world and the globe, leads on (in a passage inserted for the first time in the 1643 edition) to a fine miniature essay on the stature of man, where first person singular and plural pronouns alternate without the slightest incongruity. The microcosm has now become greater than the macrocosm—a paradox Browne obviously relishes:

...the earth is a point not only in respect of the heavens above us, but of that heavenly and celestial part within us. That mass 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 arc do measure my body, it comprehendeth not my mind—whilst I study to find how I am a microcosm or little world, I find myself something more than the great.

There is surely a piece 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.

Joan Webber in her discussion points out Browne's role in this passage as representative man (162), and goes on to speak of the 'cosmic personality' he creates, which is both 'a way of maintaining his solidarity with other men, and of celebrating his new sense of selfhood' ('new', that is, to the seventeenth-century consciousness). It is true that Browne is here celebrating the dignity and stature of the individual: but what I want to emphasise is that he is deliberately, and as if to an immediate audience, asserting this dignity in the manner of the moralist whose monologue is designed for edification. The *I/me* here is not self-revelatory at all (except for the detail of being thirty years old): it is purely rhetorical, alternating with *us* in a highly persuasive manner by presenting opinion in the guise of personal experience—he finds or is told things. The alternation of singular and plural pronouns makes possible an extended, cumulative, virtually parallelistic rhetoric at this point: 'that heavenly and celestial part within us.... I find myself something more than the great [world]'. There is surely a piece of divinity in us.... Nature tells me I am the image of God...'. The didactic tendency is clearest in the last clauses of the quoted passage: 'he that understands not thus much, hath not his introduction or

first lesson, and is yet to begin the alphabet of man’.

Where the Browne of *Religio Medici* perhaps differs from other moralists is in his comparative indirection. It is interesting to notice that Frank J. Warnke, while approaching the subject from a very different angle in his rejoinder to Fish’s attack, also stresses this indirection, as does C.A. Patrides. (Later in Browne’s career we find something of a contrast to this in the repeated imperatives of the *Christian Morals*.) In Part II Section 6 of the *Religio* appears a fair amount of ostensibly personal information which, on a closer look, can be recognized as dilating as usual into implicit moralizing. Here Browne talks of his experience of intimate friendship, but ends the first sentence generalizing about the infinitude of ideal love: ‘united souls are not satisfied with embraces, but desire to be truly each other, which being impossible, their desires are infinite, and must proceed without a possibility of satisfaction’. True, this kind of love, he tells us, is experienced only by ‘such as are marked for virtue’; but it is beside the point to remark that Browne includes himself among the virtuous, since he himself is no longer the object of his attention, having been simply a point of departure for the excursion. Within a few lines he has dilated and ascended from his own friendships to the subject of salvation:

Now if we can bring our affections to look beyond the body and cast an eye upon the soul, we have found out the true object not only of friendship but charity; and the greatest happiness that we can bequeath the soul is that wherein we all do place our last felicity, salvation....

When he returns to *I*, it is to present himself as a convenient example of charitable impulses to intercessory prayer; and he then passes back within a couple of lines to ‘the practice of our daily and ordinary devotions’. Joan Webber says of this passage about intercession that its emphasis lies on Browne’s own charity and ‘his wonderful assurance that his prayers fall like dew on their fortunate recipients’ (167). I believe that, reading the passage in its context and putting aside twentieth-century presuppositions about personal reticence on such subjects, we find exactly the opposite to be true: that Browne’s own impulses, for which he claims no personal credit, appear simply as the most immediate and useful illustrations of his remarks about charity. Any supposed self-revelation or self-praise is neutralized by the far broader moralizing context in which it occurs.

Throughout *Religio Medici* the ostensible subject and regular point of departure is Browne’s account of himself and his beliefs; but in section after section we find him taking off and circling in the air of religious and moral universals before dropping back to his next point of departure. He constantly soars upward and outward from the immediate particularity of

his subject. The impulse to digress and moralize is in fact so strong that the initial subject, himself, tends increasingly to become simply a starting-point for richly elaborated excursions.

The same thing happens in most of his other works. In *Urn Burial* (*Hydriotaphia*) the ostensible subject is the group of urns found at Walsingham, yet the dedicatory letter is itself sufficient warning that we cannot expect an archaeological monograph or indeed any treatment along one consistent line. Browne circles around for a while before moving in on his stated topic, the urns. Chapter 1 is on a wide variety of burial customs. Then in Chapter 2 he introduces the urns themselves, and attempts (wrongly, as it turned out) to establish their date and provenance. In Chapter 3 he sets out to give a fairly detailed description of the findings: size, shape, colour, substance and covering of the urns are noted in order, then he moves on to their contents. Chapters 2 and 3 are mainly concerned with the urns themselves, but Chapter 4 returns to funeral customs and related rites, ceremonies and beliefs, together with a variety of ideas about the after-life which lead to meditations upon martyrdom and upon the fates of the virtuous heathen. Chapter 5, touching the urns briefly and then leaving them entirely, soars up into a majestic incantation on the vanity of human wishes for 'diuturnity', and the Christian answer to them. The main movement of *Urn Burial* is from the particular topic to the great generality, the one, in retrospect, clearly pointing to and anchoring the other. So we move from the Walsingham urn discovery to 'the most magnanimous resolution' of the Christian religion.

The same process, on a scale closer to that of *Religio Medici*, is seen in the *Letter to a Friend* where the ostensible subject, the young man who died of phthisis, is raised to the status of a symbol by the elaborate mesh of detail and comment woven around the circumstances of his illness and death. Each specific detail about the patient leads Browne off into associated comment on human mortality—comment which extends itself through a paragraph until he circles back to pick up another individual detail, which in turn invites a whole new set of reminiscences or moral generalities.

We know from the dedication to *The Garden of Cyrus* that Browne was perfectly well aware of his love for 'excursions' and 'collateral truths', and deliberately took a wide liberty in his excursions. True it is that whatever the subject on which he embarks, unexpected transitions and sublime generalities are never far off, and usually take over in the end (the place of sublimity occasionally, but not often, taken by rather pedestrian moralizing). Basil Willey remarked that for Browne a fact was something that 'lay in glory in his mind' (44). Facts were indeed for him more dynamic than that: they were constantly rippling and sometimes exploding into significances beyond themselves.

As is the patient in the *Letter to a Friend*, so are the urns in *Urn Burial*, and so is Browne himself in *Religio Medici*. Each is the initial and, throughout, the ostensible subject of the work, but each in fact becomes the unifying nucleus around which a host of various, usually moralistic, meditations accumulate. *Christian Morals* is in this respect the logical conclusion of Browne's work. Perhaps it suffers from the reduced tension caused by the lack of a particular object or figure as its point of departure; yet even there we can see the characteristic habit of dilation at work, as one paragraph after another regularly begins in the imperative mood and then modulates into the indicative, as the initial moral aphorisms (a little like something out of the book of Proverbs) expand into miniature essays.

Browne's habits of dilation persuade me that self-revelation was never the exclusive or even the major purpose of *Religio Medici*—indeed, no more than it was of Herbert's poems in *The Temple*. The phrase 'spiritual autobiography' is nearly as ill-suited to this work as the phrase 'archaeological monograph' to *Urn Burial* or 'medical report' to the *Letter to a Friend*. That the *Religio* does reveal many aspects of Browne is without question; but that this is simply what he wrote it for, or what the seventeenth century valued it for, is surely impossible to believe.

Only in *Vulgar Errors (Pseudodoxia Epidemica)* did he write deliberately as a natural philosopher and therefore as a participant in scientific controversy; the rest of his works are—granted their largely unclassifiable nature—the output of a moralist and essayist. In his commonplace books Browne can be seen treasuring and polishing *sententiae*, some of which grew to the length of short essays without finding their way into print in his day. It is not, after all, really difficult to imagine him perfecting the moralizing rhetoric of *Religio Medici* without initially intending it for any audience outside an immediate circle of friends.

WORKS CITED

- Browne, Sir Thomas. *Religio Medici, Hydriotaphia and The Garden of Cyrus*. Ed. R.H. Robbins. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Endicott, N.J. 'Some Aspects of Self-Revelation and Self-Portraiture in *Religio Medici*'. *Essays in English Literature from the Renaissance to the Victorian Age*, ed. Millar Maclure and F.W. Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964) 25-102.
- Fish, Stanley E. *Self-Consuming Artifacts*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972.
- Patrides, C.A. "'The Best Part of Nothing": Sir Thomas Browne and the Strategy of Indirection'. *Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne: The Ann*

S.A. JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES

Arbor Tercentenary Lectures and Essays, ed. C.A. Patrides (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 1982) 31-48.

Warnke, F.J. 'A Hook for Amphibium: Some Reflections on Fish'.
Approaches to Sir Thomas Browne, ed. Patrides, 49-59.

Webber, Joan. *The Eloquent 'T'*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968.

Willey, Basil. *The Seventeenth Century Background*. 1934; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962.

Dr Ronald Hall
Department of English
Rhodes University
P O Box 94
Grahamstown 6140