Jonathan Tooke

HAUNTED SPACES SCRIPT

Intro:

VO: These broadcasts are best heard while recovering from mild illnesses, at night, in beds or on low couches, far away from the material realities of the actual city. The statue of Thomas Browne, that stands in Hay Hill, is Norwich’s most prominent work of public art. Unlike sculptures in other city centres, of soldiers, politicians, belligerent men, women, and animals in attitudes of action, will, and triumph, the figure of Browne is seated, dreaming over an object. The Dreamer’s Guides celebrate this image of unashamed public contemplation, and seek to explore the city in a similar spirit. In one of Browne’s less well known works, the *Museum Clausum* (Imaginary Museum), item number 15. is a non-existent book by the famous dream interpreter of antiquity, Artemidorus. It is called the *Oneirocitici Geographica*; the interpretation of dream topographies. It is the intention of The *Dreamer’s Guides* to form the possible content of some footnotes in a forgotten appendix to the *Oneirocitici*; to explore these oneiric landscapes, and identify possible sites where dream cities, and the real city coincide.

CONCLUDES WITH CLOCK MECHANISM NOISES

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HAUNTED SPACES: A DREAMER’S GUIDE

VO:

In this melancholy season, amongst the useless hours of autumn evenings, they draw a map of crimes with a key of pale faces, framed in those ink black windows, and stare out onto empty lamp lit streets.

They are enterprising individuals, the ghost tour operators, and their trade is to force a selection of the city’s dead inhabitants in to a parody of life.

They are co-opted in to the economic life of the city, their actions, often criminal acts of mutilation, of passion, or of grotesque inhumanity, are listed and repeated in the locations where they were acted out. The promise of money brings the dead back to life.

Everything must have its uses, and whether they resent this intrusion or not, the departed whether victim or perpetrator, become equal contributors to the pot. Their actions, minute and tragic sequences of their existence, become commodities like any other, packaged up and sold.

The participants leave sated. They have listened to the guides’ inventory of eviscerations, the posthumous itineraries of limbs. Although they have not seen the promised apparitions themselves (they did not expect this when they handed over their payment) they have experienced what they paid to see-an absence, a lack, a rumour of a rumour, lost moments, something vanished, and yet, improbably, still present.

The answer to the question ‘do ghosts exist?’ seems, given the evidence of literature, film, ghost walks, television shows and the sale of electronic devices that claim to detect the presence of spirits, to be yes they do. The afterlife is big business, and as an economic reality, is difficult to dispute. Of course, it is the repeated sale of an idea, a question. The content of these dubious books, programmes and so on nearly always at the end restate the initial question in the absence of an actual answer.

Such a question may have troubled the 17C Norwich polymath, Sir Thomas Browne. He had a keen scientific mind, and this rational strain of his thinking he put to dispelling what he termed vulgar errors, or common misconceptions, in his work of 1646 *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. He was also a Christian, to which faith a belief in an afterlife is central to their dogma. He didn’t put the possibility that witchcraft was a reality out of the question either, as his noncommittal answer to that question at the 1666 assizes witch trial in Lowestoft records.

It is in the twin works of *Hydriotaphia: Urne Burial* and The *Garden of Cyrus*, published together in 1658, that we might formulate an answer to the question of hauntings. *Hydriotaphia* is Browne’s rumination on death inspired by Bronze Age burial urns uncovered in Walsingham and Brampton. In it, he talks of funerary rites of many different cultures, from all around the world, both from classical and contemporary sources. It is a dense, dark, subterranean book. *The Garden of Cyrus* is its counterpoint, the absolute opposite. Whereas *Urn Burial* takes us down deep beneath the earth, with remnants, fragments and ashes, *Cyrus* is a light and expansive discussion of the importance of the number five (the quincunx) in agriculture, art, nature and the universe. It’s a book very much alive.

The issue of ghosts seems to fall neatly between these two extremes, in the overlapping area between *Hydriotaphia* and *Cyrus*. Ghosts are assuredly dead, although they have a semblance of life.

It is in the spirit of Sir Thomas Browne’s scientific and metaphysical curiosity that the following exploration Hay Hill in Norwich will be conducted.

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HAY HILL- A haunted space

Just as it was in his lifetime, Hay Hill is haunted by Thomas Browne. Before examining why, it is helpful to determine some common characteristics of hauntings if only in outline:

The Oxford English Dictionary states that to haunt means to frequent, to inhabit. It is usually associated with apparitions, but can also be applied to the living, and to thoughts of regret over some past event (as in “she was haunted by her past actions”). Thomas Browne lived, worked and worshipped in Hay Hill. His house, demolished in 1961, stood on the site now occupied by Pret-a-Manger, he went to services at St Peter Mancroft, and is Buried there. It is a common feature of ghost stories, that the spirit haunts a location important when they were alive or at the moment of their deaths. They are tied to the boundaries of a location. An example of this is Anne Boleyn’s ghost visiting Blickling Hall each year in May, or the brown lady of Mannington with her staircase. So it is with Thomas Browne; his presence permeates Hay Hill. Even when shopping for items that fray and fade so rapidly in Primark, there’s a sense that he’s there, the ephemeral and the eternal sharing the same space.

The north transept of St Peter Mancroft has a display of some Browne ephemera, including a portrait by an unknown artist. Browne’s pale face gazes sadly out of the darkness that surrounds it, he looks you in the eye, directly out of the past. There is also a medallion in bronze, and a frontispiece image of him from one of his books, and another portrait that can be viewed on application to the vicar. In his work on the uncanny, in a discussion of the double or doppelganger, Freud states that “the appearance of the double is always a herald of death”. The multiplication of images of an individual represents the separation of the body and soul. With the apparition, there is the appearance of a likeness of a deceased person, something visible to the living, the persistence of an image after death. It can’t be denied that Hay Hill is haunted by his images. Along with his statue, there is also the strange proliferation of his remains. “Who knows how many times our mortal remains are to be disturbed?”, Browne asks in Urn Burial, as though he had a glimpse into the future posthumous itinerary of his own skull.

His coffin was damaged during the digging of a fresh grave in 1840. His skull was removed, spending five years out of public life before being presented to the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital Museum in 1845, where it enjoyed a limited existence beneath a bell jar. In 1922, eighty-two years after its release, it was returned to its resting place. Before reinterral, it undertook one final journey to London for examination by the Royal College of Surgeons. Five casts were made of his skull (in reference to the quincunxial figure in The *Garden of Cyrus*), and these faint emanations of Browne now haunt diverse locations. One can be seen in the New Norfolk and Norwich hospital library, another is amongst the phrenology collections of the Castle Museum.

The film and literary of genres of horror and the ghost story are often confused. In contrast to the ghost story, the horror genre usually works around social, cultural, and ideological issues. Horror is also visceral; it is about the body. The classic ghost story explores the mental states of isolation; it is concerned with the internal psychology of an individual apart from and outside of social networks. In compensation for a lack of others, the hero of the ghost story experiences the natural phenomena of their environments, the wind, the swell and flap of curtains, movements, noises, as a terrifying parody of life. The trees surrounding Thomas Browne’s statue are sometimes, in these wind-blown days of autumn, cluttered with snagged carrier bags. The movements of these, caught out of the corner of an eye, are reminiscent of the mysterious movement of ragged shrouds, the improbable animation of apparently dead matter by invisible forces. They attend to the apparent isolation of the figure of Browne. There is in the statue a compelling sense of loneliness. He does not engage with the world around him. His entire focus is on the internal effort of the act of thinking. Unlike Nelson’s statue in the cathedral close that looks outwards to far horizons, Thomas Browne is inward looking, intent on its subject.

Thomas Browne’s statue transforms Hay Hill into a theatrical space. Just as in the theatre, film and photography, actions, words, and gestures are perpetually repeated. The art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto notes that “one can murder the actor who plays Banquo, but you can never murder Banquo himself”. The character of Banquo can only be murdered in the duration of the show itself and by characters within the limits of the play. The text of the play is outside the normal flow of time, they are anachronistic. Hauntings and plays share the element of repeated time, used up time, the circular time of eternity. It is the feature that all recorded materials possess; the capacity for playback. Ghosts too, work in this way. They nearly always follow a set of actions, again within a specific boundary or location, often limited to certain times or sequences of behaviour like Anne Boleyn again and again riding in her carriage up the drive to Blickling, or the revenant skater of Hickling Broad forever setting out on his ill-fated trip across the ice to visit his lover. Thinking behaviours that an autonomous living being is capable of, ghosts appear to be limited to the confines of a role, the playing out of archetypal characters. Thomas Browne plays the perpetual role of a character; the image of the philosopher deep in thought, contemplating his sherd of urn.

The communication of ghosts is limited, reduced to phrases, quotes, single words and fragments. They are mysterious, suggestive, removed from their original context they are frequently jumbled. Thomas Browne’s works have been filtered by successive generations. The poet Edith Sitwell, modernist Jorge Borges, and W.G. Sebald and many others, have cited his influence in their work. He is often described as a writers’ writer, an unseen shade in the background, a vague presence. Over time, Browne’s works have become dispersed, he is read in snatches, gobbets, samples extensively anthologised. Full works are seldom received. Even with Urn Burial and Cyrus, the unity of a single work is split, we get the deathly without the life. The Poitier Stones of Sir Thomas Browne in Hay Hill, the eye, brain, seats, and seed like ovular shapes, Browne’s works are hinted at by single words, outlines, images. Vulgar Errors, Memorabilia, Eternitie, Brampton Urns, Hydriotaphia. Mysterious invocations indeed.

The living go about their business around the statue. They are busy eating, talking, working, shopping, passing through. The statue does not look up from his reveries. He is all but invisible, transparent maybe. Like all ghosts, he is both present and absent simultaneously. In the transference of his likeness in to more durable substances, he occupies that strange borderland in between life and death. His thoughts are about the sherd of burial urn, a marker of another absent being. After all the conjuring of the faint essence of Thomas Browne from traces, fragments, communications from beyond the grave, we are left with the image of his statue contemplating deep time and the vanity of human endeavours; the ghost contemplates the ghost.

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