A NOTE TO THOSE OF YOU LOOKING FOR ANSWERS IN THESE READER’S NOTES: So, yeah, this essay. It was hard. It took me roughly two and a half hours to really read it. I had to mark up each and every paragraph so I could remember what I wanted to say or ask about each section.

But here is why I assigned it. As a genre in the modern era—and I don’t really mean Modern, like the literary era, I mean, really, recent, as in Recent American or Recent British whatever—the essay can feel so approachable, so much like, as one student wrote in her reading journal about “Charade,” like a conversation, that it can mean lazy reading. We can react more than we actually respond. Not everything we read this semester is going to be like a trip to Six Flags. This essay reminds us, as readers, that the essay is a genre of literature. And we have to read the text as we would anything else.

I believe the key to understanding this essay as an essay lies in two places. First, we need to consider why the author would elect to inundate us with the burial and funerial traditions of, well, everyone. In a rather systematic fashion, Browne takes us through practices of where different traditions (both real and imagined) dispose of their dead (interment, cremation, interment at sea, interment in the air); he talks us through the various cultural reasons for these decisions (for instance how some people chose to be buried so that their enemies could not defile the body after they are gone). He talks about what bodies get buried with through the ages and I different cultures.

Eventually, in chapter two, he turns specifically to the urns located in England. From here he goes on to talk, again, fairly systematically, about who these folks might have been, where they might have come from. This is 1689 England, remember, Roman ruins are coming up through the earth all the time, apparently. He reminds me of a lawyer here, trying to lay out the facts of a case—it could be this, but it just as well might be this. It could be the Romans, but it could be the Saxons, or even the Danes. Essentially, we simply can’t know for sure.

Chapter III turns to the way we memorialize the dead—what images, what do the graves look like. What do we do to honor our dead? What do other civilizations do to honor their dead. His knowledge is wide-ranging. He speaks of the Greeks and Romans and Egypt most of all—the great civilizations of the past. He moves on to what remains of the various efforts to memorialize and preserve and begins here to turn to *why* we do this—He talks about resurrection, of course, and how it plays a role or doesn’t play a role in various cultures. There is an important section, I think, on pages 203-205 where he talks about what becomes of our bodies—what remains. He says at one point that very little of us remains—that it’s rather astonishing. There is a turn in and around 206/Chapter IV, where I begin to see that the author is suspect of two practices: of the idea of resurrection and of the practice of memorializing. He turns in IV to the idea of what happens to us after we die. And his conclusion is that we actually don’t know and that it could well be a sorry reason to live a particular life. But he is still tentative here. He is looking at the effects of knowing we will die and be forgotten (oblivion) on the living. It’s V where he really gets going with this.

The intro to this essay suggest that it is Chapter V that makes this an essay. After enduring a great many pages of what seems like a report, it is useful to see how this section is different than the other chapters. It has some similarities with them—his recitation of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian practice. But he goes after Christianity here. He goes after the idea that we should live a modest, humble, good life in this world and wait for the rewards of the next. And we see that this is what he is saying *because* of all that came before it. It is a preponderance of evidence that he has given us that makes us think about why we spend so much time taking care of our dead, memorializing our dead—we remain dead. We remain dead and even our best efforts to preserve our bodies for the possible return of our souls is all for nothing. There is that particular moment when he takes the Egyptian Mummy and talks about how they have become commerce.

So, this how I see the essay unfolding. And I understand it as a personal essay because the author is musing, contemplating life in the reflection of death. The urns are like Proust’s Madeleines. They get him thinking about big and important issues. The stuff of life and death.

I said there were two keys to understanding this essay. The other one, besides looking at structure and argument, is to look at and understand his references. To look up even a few of them makes you understand the essay better. Some you might know. What I would want us to think about as a class, is how the references mark it as an essay of its time: we should understand that Browne was writing for people who would get these references. We can see what references we are supposed to get in “Charade” but we are centuries removed from the references here. That is both the difficulty of this reading and how we begin the study of the essay in earnest—they are products of their times.

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