Geometries of Perception

in Sir Thomas Browne’s *Hydriotaphia* and *The Garden of Cyrus*

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Abstract

This paper explores the structural embedding of the figures of the circle and the quincunx in Sir Thomas Browne’s *The Garden of Cyrus* and *Urne-Buriall*. I argue that Browne transposes the geometric figures of circle and quincunx from the subject of these texts to a tropological level, in which they act as formal devices. In a performative manner, the objects of study become the instruments of the study as Browne models the structure of the books on their respective themes. In the second part of my essay, I argue that Browne’s united figures of circle and quincunx relate to Leibniz’s monad and, further, that they exemplify the monadical structure as discussed by Gilles Deleuze in *The Fold*. As Browne employs the figures of the circle and quincunx as descriptive tropes or models for his own theories of perception and apperception, he elucidates Leibniz and Deleuze’s theories of the monad.

Keywords

Monad, quincunx, baroque, Sir Thomas Browne, Deleuze, Leibniz

In the epistle dedicatory to his 1658 joint publication of *The Garden of Cyrus* and *Hydriotaphia or Urne-Buriall*, Sir Thomas Browne begs excuse for marrying two uncertainly related subjects in a diptych: “That we conjoyne these parts of different Subjects, or that this should succeed the other; Your judgment will admit without impute of incongruity; Since the delightfull world comes after death, and Paradise succeeds the Grave.” Browne apologetically links...
Hydriotaphia to The Garden of Cyrus through a metaphorical conceit: the arboreal subject of The Garden of Cyrus follows the funeral thematic of Urne-Buriall just as man attains paradise through death, or as spring supplants winter. In keeping with the literary conventions of the time, Browne’s epistle dedicatory abounds in false modesty. His apologetic tone ostensibly functions to mitigate the aesthetic defects of the volume, but the lengthy excuse for the violent yoking of these incongruent subjects only focuses our attention on their juncture. What the reader may have overlooked as an incidental companionship, she must now note as a motivated connection—motivated, at the very least, through analogy to theological and biological life cycles. Once invited by the apology to observe the structural compatibility of The Garden of Cyrus and Urne-Buriall, the reader begins to search out further connections.

The Garden of Cyrus and Urne-Buriall are roughly equivalent in length and, in keeping with the significance accorded the quincunx and the number five in The Garden of Cyrus, we find that Browne performatively decussates both books into five chapters and then ties them through the figure of the “circle and the right-lined intersection” in the last chapter of the first book and the first chapter of the last. In Chapter Five of Urne-Buriall we have: “Circles and right lines limit and close all bodies, and the mortall right-lined circle must conclude and shut up all,” while in the first chapter of The Garden of Cyrus we find that: “Since however they first began, the Aegyptians thereby expressed the processe and motion of the spirit of the world, and the diffusion thereof upon the Celestiall and Elementall nature; implied by a circle and right-lined intersection.” With his characteristic propensity for chiasmic inversion, Browne uses these passages to create a reflection across the seam of the two books, and the figures of the circle and quincunx are mirrored in the earth and heavens. Through their reflection, the quincunx and circle form a sort of hinge between Urne-Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus. At the same time, we find here a doubled-reflection; the repetition of circle and quincunx echos both across and within the works. Breaking apart the figures, we discover that Urne-Buriall takes as its reigning trope the circle, while The Garden of Cyrus (more obviously) takes the quincunx (fig. 1).

It seems then, that the importance of these two geometric figures is not merely incidental to Browne’s subject matter in The Garden of Cyrus (where they show up most explicitly) but is, rather, endemic to his thought. The structural significance of the figures becomes more apparent in a later passage, wherein Browne writes:

Fig. 1. Quincunx. Image source.
Of this Figure *Plato* made choice to illustrate the motion of the soul, both of the world and man... By the circle implying the uniform motion of the first Orb, and by the right lines, the planetical and various motions within it. 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 itself. The circular declaring the motion of the indivisible soul, simple, according to the divinity of its nature, and returning into it self; the right lines respecting the motion pertaining unto sense, and vegetation, and the central decussation, the wonderous connexion of the several faculties conjointly in one substance.4

To state this more briefly, the figure of the circle corresponds to the movement of an innate, apperceptive and self-reflexive knowledge, whereas the figure of the quincunx corresponds to an empirical mode of knowing through sensation that moves proprioceptively from the body into the world and back into the body along orthogonal axes.

Browne’s division of epistemology into the circular and self-reflexive, and the quincuncial and extensive, finds its analogy in Deleuze’s figure of the “Baroque House” in *The Fold*. In this investigation of a “Baroque” metaphysics, Deleuze posits the concepts of “pleats of matter” and “folds of the soul” as the two components of the Baroque House (the lower and upper levels, respectively), which functions as a “blueprint” of the Leibnizian monad.5 Reinterpreting Deleuze’s architecture, Browne’s Baroque House could be minimally drafted thus6:

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Or, taking our cue from actual Baroque architecture, we might invoke the images of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, or Les Invalides in Paris, each with their impressive domes (fig. 2). Deleuze leads the way to the association of the “upper level” of the Baroque House with the structure of the dome when he relates the “folds of the soul” to the shape of the ogive. As with Deleuze’s Baroque House and Leibniz’s monad, Browne envisions the human soul as split into two functional areas wherein one part is “windowless” and the other “open air.” As with
Leibniz and Deleuze, these distinct areas do not communicate directly, and the sensory impressions we receive from our quincuncial extension (or from the lower level of the Baroque House) cannot penetrate our elliptical souls (or the upper level of the Baroque House).

In fact, as Browne asserts, his ability to perceive and meditate upon the figures of the circle and the quincunx as he finds them in nature and in the record of human history is predicated upon their innate pre-existence and inscription within his body. “It is no wonder that this Quincunciall order was first and [is] still affected gratefull unto the Eye,” he writes. “For all things are seen Quincuncially; For at the eye the Pyramidal rayes from the object receive a decussation, and so strike a second base upon the Retina or hinder coat, the proper organ of Vision.” Browne perceives the quincunx because the figure is already structurally in place within his own anatomy—as the lens of the eye refracts or decussates light before that light is focused by the retina. But the quincunx invades more sensory organs than that of sight. He continues: “And this is also the law of reflexion in moved bodies and sounds, which... observe the rule of equality between incidence and reflexion... And this not only is verified in the way of sence, but in animall and intellectuall receptions. Things entering upon the intellect by a Pyramid from without, and thence into the memory by another from within.” If we understand this passage to have a wider application than the quincunx—that is, if we understand Browne’s assertion of the correspondence between the quincunx on the retina and the quincunx in nature as a means of figuring the way in which he understood our apprehension and comprehension of things—then we approach a Baroque epistemology that has much in common with Leibniz’s metaphysics, with Deleuze’s interpretation of the Leibnizian monad, and with Foucault’s understanding of the Renaissance épistémè.

As Leibniz asserts, nothing enters the mind from outside. “[W]e have a bad habit of thinking of our soul as if it received certain species as messengers and as if it has doors and windows,” he writes, whereas in fact, “[w]e have all these forms in our mind... And nothing can be taught to us whose idea we do not already have in our mind, an idea which is like the matter of which that thought is formed.” Nothing penetrates the windowless soul, which is sufficient unto itself, but as Deleuze notes, things do resonate and translate between soul and world; they carry on a sort of oblique communication that would be better called a correspondence.
Sensory impressions enter the lower level of the Baroque House along the orthogonal axis of the quincunx, but these impressions do not enter the upper level of the house, which is a closed circle (or a dome). The impressions may be translated to the upper level or the “indivisible divine” soul through a camera obscura technique or by means of a sort of internal sensory organ that projects material sensations to the immaterial part of the soul, as in Browne’s description of “Things entering upon the intellect by a Pyramid from without, and thence into the memory by another from within.” Regardless, though, of how the levels communicate, the important point to note is that the sensory impressions do not so much inform as confirm. Perceptions do not generate new ideas, but simply correspond to pre-existing ones.

In the same way, as the impression of the quincunx enters the Baroque House via sensation, Browne finds that its significance is already intuited. He knows what the sign signifies without ever having to read it because it is already indelibly stamped upon and within him. He himself is made in the shape of the quincunx: the quincunx is “observable... in the whole body of man, which upon the extension of arms and legges, doth make out a square, whose intersection is at the genitals.” Our arms and legs intersect at the groin to make of us one giant X like Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man (fig. 3). Our retina is etched with quincunx so that all we visually perceive we perceive quincuncially. In sum, these signs may enter our area of perception from the “outside” but we already contain the corresponding ciphers within us. We read them first by apperception.

As Foucault explains, throughout the Renaissance and up to the early seventeenth century, epistemology consisted of decoding the “book of Nature,” of uncovering the divine signature scrawled upon the world which manifested itself as a resemblance among things and between things and Man. “The universe was folded in upon itself,” Foucault writes. Cognition occurred through recognition, or through a “semantic web of resemblance” of which the four principle figures were convenientia (adjacency), aemulatio (reflection), analogy, and sympathy. Amongst these figures, Man stood at the crux definitively, because the human body served as the focal point of all resembling (“Man’s body is always the possible half of a universal atlas”), and abstractly, because resemblances could only be understood as signs by a reasoning being, Man.

Two strange inversions occur in this system. The first is that resemblances need signatures in order to be recognized as resemblances, while the signature is never anything more than the
resemblance itself. The second is that insofar as resemblance functions as a divine signature, it functions only because the signature is a buried or partially obscured sign.\textsuperscript{21} As Foucault writes: “The system of signatures reverses the relation of the visible to the invisible.”\textsuperscript{22} Or as Browne expresses it: “Light that makes things seen, makes some things invisible.”\textsuperscript{23} To restate things, we would assert that in this particular [Baroque or Renaissance] epistemology, God creates resemblances amongst things in the world and these resemblances function as his divine mark, or his signature (e.g. the sign of the quincunx). Resemblance, however, only attains the status of a signature in the act of reading; resemblance is a sign because it can be read by an intelligent agent, Man. But what then does resemblance signify? It signifies its status as signifier. Resemblance is the sign of a sign. Furthermore, resemblance functions as a sign because it is first hidden; we know it as a cipher because it must be deciphered. Baroque epistemology is governed by a tautological riddle which is a sort of secret, recursive language between Man and God.

To discover the signs of the quincunx and the circle throughout the natural and artificial worlds is not so much to discover anything about Nature, or Man as a historical being, but is to shore up data against an innate and transcendent knowledge. As Deleuze asserts, “A ‘cryptographer’ is needed, someone who can at once account for nature and decipher the soul, who can peer into the crannies of matter and read into the folds of the soul.”\textsuperscript{24} In a Brownian model, this cryptographer would peer into the folds of the soul along a circular trajectory and would read the pleats of matter along a quincuncial trajectory. In a similar geometrical division of epistemology, Foucault conceives of this system as one that “superimposed hermeneutics and semiology in the form of similitude.”\textsuperscript{25} In the hermeneutics of similitude (marked by a circular movement) Man discovers only himself as an intellect, while in the semiology of similitude (marked by a rectilinear movement) Man discovers nothing but a chain of resemblance or an endless chain of significations.

Sensation, then, is an act of pure duplication. Knowledge is severed and sequestered between the upper and lower levels of the Baroque House and “Nature’ is trapped in the thin layer that holds semiology and hermeneutics one above the other.”\textsuperscript{26} Knowledge appears to be condemned to the perceptual and repetitious or to the apperceptive and recursive, to the circular or the quincuncial. Baroque epistemology appears hermetic, recursive, tautological and closed, but then, this closure ensures its liveliness. As Deleuze asserts, “Closure is the condition of being for
the world. The condition of closure holds for the infinite opening of the finite.” Browne echoes this sentiment when he writes: “Circles and right lines limit and close all bodies, and the mortall right-lined circle must conclude and shut up all.” For Browne, the insular encapsulation of circle and quincunx ensures the endless movement that is both the repetition and displacement of resemblance. It ensures that the urn finds its reflection in the womb, and that the quincunx and the circle mirror themselves across multiple axes. So through these figures do Hydriotaphia and The Garden of Cyrus fold in on one another and upon themselves. As Foucault writes: “Like envelops like, which in turn surrounds the other, perhaps to be enveloped once more in a duplication which can continue ad infinitum...

“And so the circle is closed.”

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Endnotes

2 Ibid. 281.
3 Ibid. 298.
4 Ibid. 337.
5 Leibniz borrowed the philosophical concept of the “monad” (a singular being or unit, i.e. as opposed to a dyad) from Greek philosophy, making it the basis of his metaphysical system in his Discourse on Metaphysics (1686) and The Monadology (1714). In the Discourse on Metaphysics, Leibniz explains that isolate entities compounded of matter and spirit—called monads—comprise the “universe” as a sort of aggregate or multiplicity of singular universes. The monad that encompasses the totality of these monads is God.
6 Deleuze gives a similar notation for the monad as 1 over an infinity sign. See: Gilles Deleuze, The Fold, trans. Tom Conley
Bracketed word not mine.


Ibid. 336-337.


Browne also employs the distinction of the “indivisible or divine” and the “divisible or corporeal” aspects of the soul (as well as a third aspect of the soul which is their synthesis, their “Systasis or harmony”) that correspond to Deleuze’s “upper” and “lower” levels of the Baroque House. See: Browne, 337.


Browne, *The Prose of Sir Thomas Browne*, 337.

Ibid. 321.

An arbitrary temporal division, as we still encounter philosophers and scientific thinkers understanding nature by way of analogy and similitude, and discovering divine signatures on things at much later times, as in Linneaus' *Nemesis Divina*.


Ibid.

Ibid. 25.

Ibid. 22.

Reversing the relationship of the invisible to the visible, Browne asserts that buried signs make better, more-indelible signs, as in *Urne-Buriall*, wherein he writes: “In vain we hope to be known by open and visible conservatories, when to be unknown was the means of their continuation and obscurity was their protection.” See Browne, 279.


Ibid.


Professor Richard Halpern reminded me here of Browne’s quincuncial “lozenge” figure which opens *The Garden of Cyrus* (see the first image, entitled “Quincunx”), in which Brown ties several quincunx together at their endpoints to form a kind of netting: another type of enclosure.

Works Cited


