

Giordano Bruno, a Protester with a Troubled Life

Filippo Bruno Nolano was born, as his own name says, in Nola, in the Kingdom of Naples, in January or February 1548, son of Giovanni Bruno, a soldier by profession, and from Fraulis(s) to Savolino. His name was chosen in honor of the then heir to the Spanish throne, Philip II. He learned very early to read and write with a priest of Nola, Giandomenico de Iannello. In 1562, at the age of 14, he was taken to Naples to study there the so-called beautiful letters and philosophy, especially logic and dialectics, under the care of Giovan Colle, known as Il Sarnese, a philosopher of averroistic tendencies, and of Friar Teofilo of Vairano, whose memory Bruno always kept in a grateful and admiring way.

Three years later he entered the convent of San Domenico Maggiore, only then to take the name Giordano. From an early age he despised (under Lutheran influence?) the cult of Mary and the saints, incurring a first offence between the years 1566 and 1567. Ordained a subdeacon in 1570 (condition in which he assumed the first of the sacred orders), and deacon the following year, he consecrated himself as a priest at the beginning of 1572, celebrating his first Mass in the Dominican convent of St. Bartholomew near Salerno. He returned to the convent of St. Dominic in mid 1572 as a theology student. These studies were concluded in 1575, with two theses: *Verum est quicquid dicit D. Thomas in Summa against Gentiles* and *Verum est quicquid dicit Magister Sententiarum*. At the same time, in a discussion about Arianism, Bruno expressed doubts about the dogma of the Trinity, which earned him a second trial by the provincial superior as a suspect of heresy.

For this reason Bruno left the city and the convent at the beginning of 1576, going to Rome, where he stayed in the convent of Santa Maria. But already in April, he abandoned the habit and left for Genoa and the following year for Noli, where he taught grammar to the sons of the local nobility. From Noli he went to Savona and then to Turin, where he found nothing that he could "do with satisfaction". He continued his search in Venice, where he published a certain booklet entitled *About the signals of time* (missing work). Having gone to Padua, he was convinced there by some Dominicans to readjust the habit, even though he did not want to return to order, which Bruno in fact accepted. In 1578, he left Italy on the border with Savoia, heading for Lyons and then for Geneva, where there was an evangelical Italian community.

In Switzerland, he again abandoned the habit and joined Calvinism (1579), but having suffered a defamation suit, opened by the philosophy professor Antoine de la Faye, he pleaded guilty, a fact that coerced him from Geneva, going to settle in Toulouse, France. There, he renounced Calvinism and went so far as to ask his absolution from apostate Catholicism to a Jesuit priest, without success. But he started to give philosophy lessons to schoolchildren, obtaining, through a competition, the post of "ordinary reader of philosophy", including lessons in physics, mathematics and mnemonic techniques, based on the teachings of Raimundo Lúlio (or Ramón Llull, in Catalan spelling). However, when the struggles between Catholics and Calvinists (Huguenots) resumed in the city, Bruno decided to move to Paris where he obtained the right to give "extraordinary lessons", as an apostate he was not allowed to practice an ordinary reader. With his lessons he obtained a reputation, enough to be invited to the presence of King Henry III. In the words of Bruno himself, "the king

made me call one day, trying to find out if the memory he had and what he professed was natural or by magic art; I gave him satisfaction, and with what he said and proved to himself, I knew that it was not by magic art, but by science ”(Veneto Documents, IX).

Perhaps due to the fact that French royalty was frequented by several intellectuals and writers, many of whom remained equidistant from religious struggles, such as Du Perron and Pontus de Tyard, Bruno was welcomed with courtesy, becoming still a provisioned reader, that is, accepted as an exhibitor at court, besides being able to publish the first works that came to us: *Deumbris idearum*, *Arsmemoriae* (dedicated to the king), *Cantus circaeus*, *De compendiosa architectura et complement Artis Lullii* (dedicated to the ambassador of Venice, Giovanni Moro). And in the beginning of the second half of 1582, Bruno finished his only theatrical text, the comedy *Il Candelaio*, whose events and characters are all Neapolitan.

But as early as the following year, Bruno decided to leave for England, most likely because of Catholic reactions in France, and he did so with a letter of recommendation from King Henry himself to his ambassador to the United Kingdom, Michel de Castelnau, and to whom two works translated here, also written in Italian, will be dedicated as *Il Candelaio*, *The Ash Wednesday Supper* and *Concerning Cause, Principle and Unity*. In June 1583, he made a first visit to Oxford, as a participant in the entourage of the Polish count Albert Laski, seizing the opportunity for a debate with doctors at the university, especially John Underhill. Returning to London, he wrote to the university (*Oxioniensis Academiae*), requesting a reading chair, since he did not obtain it, although he gave there at least two lectures (or public readings), one on the immortality of the soul and the other on the fivefold sphere, in addition to starting a course on Copernican

theory, interrupted in the third class, by interferences from New College and Christ Church officials.

Back in London, with the French ambassador, he dedicated himself to debates at court and writing books, the first of which was *Ars reminiscendi*, and soon afterwards *The Ashes Wednesday Supper*, after a conversation, on February 14, 1584, with Sir Fulke Greville's guests, about the movement of the Earth, the heliocentric theory and its own cosmological conception. The violent criticism of English society and the University of Oxford there provoked an angry reaction from the London people against the employees and residents of the French Embassy, causing Bruno to lose the sympathy of a few English intellectuals whom he had previously won. For this reason, in the following book, *Concerning Cause, Principle and Unity*, he introduced a first dialogue in which, attenuating previous criticisms, he proceeded with a restrained apology for British culture.

In the same year, he finished and obtained the publication of two other texts: *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*, still in the field of cosmology, and the *Dispatch (or Expulsion) of the Triumphant Beast*, of an ethical nature and moral reform. Finally, in 1585, *The Cabal of the Horse Pegasus*, a moralistic satire, and *The Heroic Furores*, a set of ten dialogues about, on the one hand, the need and the joy of the conscience of the soul's union with the One (this effort intellectual for "elevated love" consists precisely of "heroic furore") and, on the other, on Renaissance poetics, with criticisms of Aristotelian normativity.

At the end of 1585, Bruno returned to Paris together with Ambassador Castelnau, meeting other Italians living there, but two events that well demonstrate the philosopher's acidity made his stay in Paris difficult. The first was the publication of a booklet on the public demonstration carried out by the geometer Fabrizio Mordente with his

“reduction compass”, *Dialogi duo de Fabricii Mordentis Salernitani prope divina adinventione*, apparently laudatory work, but in fact satirical, in view of the conception mechanical nature exposed by Mordente. There followed a verbal controversy with the author, protected by the Count of Guise (head of the anti-Protestant Sainte Union), and Bruno released two other leaflets about it: *Idiot triumphans* and *De somnii interpretatione*. At about the same time, Bruno became involved in a dispute with real readers of the Collège de Cambrai, attacking Aristotelian physics, but through a young man, J. Hennequin. Replied by one of those present, the lawyer R. Callier, Bruno did not take the defense of the disciple, remaining strangely silent for an innate polemicist.

Having left Paris in mid-1586, Bruno went to Germany, enrolling at the University of Marburg as *theologiae doctor romanensis*. But due to his unmistakable anti-Aristotelianism, he was denied permission for public readings, causing the philosopher to move to Wittenberg, at whose university he was accepted as a *doctor italicus*, staying there for about two years. During his stay in Wittenberg, he published works in Latin, such as *De lampade combinatoria Iluliana*, *De progressu et lampade venatoria logicorum* and the theses previously presented by Hennequin in Paris, *Centum et viginti articuli de natura et mundo adversus peripateticos*, preceded by an article praising the French disciple. In March 1588, Bruno said goodbye to the university shortly after the new Duke of Wittenberg, Christian I, banned attacks or polemics against Aristotelian doctrines.

The moderating attitude of King Rodolfo II of Czechoslovakia seems to have contributed to the curiosity of Bruno, who went to Prague, where he remained until the beginning of autumn. During his stay, he published some booklets, among them *Articuli centum et*

sexaginta adversus huius tempestatis mathematicos atque philosophos, dedicated to the emperor, which earned him an imperial donation of three hundred talares. From Prague he went to Helmstedt, in Germany, where a Lulian Academy had just been founded, in which he registered in January 1589, remaining in the city until April of the following year. In the meantime, he wrote the so-called “magic” works, meaning that natural forces still hidden and to be unveiled for practical use: *De magia, Theses de magia, De magia mathematica, De rerum principiis et elementis et causis*.

In June 1590 he was already in Frankfurt with the intention of publishing his works of Latin poetics on natural philosophy and atomistic conception. Although the city senate rejected his request to stay with the printer Wechel, he managed to settle in a Carmelite convent. The three works were published in 1591: *Detriplici minimo et mensura, De monade, numero et imagem, De innumerabilibus, immenso et infigurabili*. In the same year, Bruno left for Zurich, where he taught scholastic philosophy and, for a brief period, returned to Frankfurt to print *De imaginum, signorum et idearum compositione ad omnia inventionum*, book dedicated to a friend from Zurich, J.H. Heinzl. During his second stay in Frankfurt, Bruno received a letter from his friend Giovanni Mocenigo, inviting him to come to Italy in order to teach “the art of memory and inventiveness”. Whatever the reasons for accepting the invitation, recklessness proved to be completely disastrous.

Having passed through Venice quickly, Bruno went to Padua where he gave some lessons to German students, returning three months later to Venice. In mid-May 1592, he confided to the Dominican friar Domenico da Nocera the desire to remain in Italy and write a book dedicated to the new Pope Clement VIII, with a view to

transferring to Rome. But on the night of the 22nd, Mocenigo detained Bruno on his own initiative and the next day denounced him for heresy to the inquisitor of the province of Veneto, Fr. Gabriele da Saluzzo. Nine months later, he was transferred to Rome, subsequently receiving further complaints from his inquisitors. On February 8, 1600, the final sentence came, with the charges of "unrepentant, tenacious and obstinate heretic". On the 17th, he was taken to Campo dei Fiori, naked, tied to a stick and burned alive.

For the philosopher, human knowledge of natural causes inevitably faces an intrinsic impediment or obstacle, *un intoppo*. It is that it can only happen through "shadows", "traces" or "vestiges". Nature would initially be endowed with a "soul of the world", whose main faculty would be that of a universal intellect, the formal principle of what the universe can contain - the power to do, to produce and create; at the same time, it would be constituted by matter, that is, the power to be made, produced and created. Both of these principles, the formal and the material, do not separate, since "the whole is one". Hence a conclusion with which Spinoza certainly agreed: God is not outside matter, but within it, within things and, therefore, within us. Ontologically, Bruno's God does not transcend nature, as it is immanent; but gnoseologically, as an object of knowledge. But in this domain, God is practically inexplicable to understanding. In one of the last dialogues of *The Heroic Furores*, among several other passages, one can read: "... the highest cognition of divine things is by denial and not by affirmation, knowing that divine beauty and goodness do not they can submit and do not fall under our concept; but what is far beyond our comprehension and maximally in the state called by the philosopher 'ghost speculation' and the theologian 'vision by specular resemblance and enigma'. For, in truth, we do not see the effects or

the true species of the thing, nor the substance of the ideas, but its shadows, traces and simulacra, like those that are inside the cave and have, since their birth, their backs turned towards the entrance of the light and the opposite face to the bottom, so that they do not see what is truly outside the cave”.

Another constant concern of the philosopher was the need for a moral reform so that human coexistence, submitted to Wisdom and its daughters, who are the Truth and the Law, was exercised in a free, productive and peaceful way. Hence the content of his exordinations in works such as *Dispatch of the Triumphant Beast* and *The Heroic Furores*. Embarrassed by the conduct of the human race, “worse than that of our satyrs and fauns”, “which corrupts and annihilates everything”, Jupiter decrees the reform of the constellations, which would govern the action of men, and demands from Wisdom: “that be strict with the things that, as the first and main cause, were ordered to him, that is, concerning the communion of men and civil conversation, so that the powerful are supported by the weak, the weak are not oppressed by stronger, tyrants be deposed, just rulers recognized and confirmed, republics are favored, violence does not inculcate reason, ignorance does not disparage science, the poor are helped by the rich, that virtues and studies are useful and necessary to common good be promoted and advanced, and still exalted those who make good profits of them, and that the devious, the avaricious and selfish are considered vile and despised. May fear and worship be maintained for the invisible powers, honor, respect and fear for those who govern; that no one is proposed to sovereignty if he is not recognized as superior in merits, by virtue and ingenuity, with which he prevails, or already by himself, which is rare and almost

impossible, or with the help and advice of others, which is more common and necessary”.

According to Nuccio Ordine (*O Umbral da Sombra – The Threshold of the Shadow*, portuguese version, Perspectiva Ed., 2003), one of the greatest specialists of the Brunian work, “Jupiter understands that the desecration of altars and the degradation of cults pushes men into the abyss of the *feritas*.¹ Losing their natural function, the divine statutes (the highest thing that man can establish) will no longer serve to create heroes, but will end up encouraging bestial behavior and attitudes. Stopping this degradation means, first of all, restoring lost virtues instead of widespread vices” (pg. 103). For over five hundred years, the need for such a reform has remained essential and, most likely, impossible to be carried out, whether by religion or science, art or politics.

¹ Fierce or cruelty.