

**Applied Imagination:**

**Giordano Bruno and the Creation of Magical Images**

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**Faculty of Religious Studies McGill University, Montreal**

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**For my Sue**

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Michael Storch

Montreal 2006

## Abstract

# **Applied Imagination: Giordano Bruno and the Creation of Magical Images.**

The creation and manipulation of infinite images is central to Bruno's thought, but to the best of my knowledge, this has never been properly treated before. This project is a departure from much of the current scholarship on Bruno which has focused on his contribution to scientific thought, and downplayed or ignored the Hermetic and magical elements which pervade his work. Each chapter deals with different works of Bruno, and different aspects of his philosophy, and each is rooted in the larger project of uncovering the role, meaning, and application of images in Bruno's thought.

The general arc of the thesis is from the interior and personal to the cosmological and metaphysical. Chapter 1 begins with a study of the faculty of phantasy and the role of images on human cognition. This is Bruno's epistemology and anthropology as expressed in *Imaginum*. Chapter 2 covers the ethical and social applications of images, and how the control of images manipulates reality. This concept is represented in the reconstruction of the universe in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*. Chapter 3 deals with the physics – or mechanics – of his philosophy, with its roots in Hermetic magic as described in *Vinculis* and *Magia*, wherein images are used to create bonds. Chapter 4 addresses Bruno's cosmology, which adopts the Copernican model and reinterprets that model as a hieroglyph. It is

the heuristic key in *Ash Wednesday Supper*, the image of which exists in the faculty of phantasy and becomes embedded on to the universe. The two become indistinguishable and work in union. Through the coincidence of opposites, matter becomes form and God becomes man. The image of the infinite cosmos becomes re-embedded in the single instance of an image in the faculty of Phantasy.

The conclusion will bring together these epistemological, ethical, mechanical, cosmological, and metaphysical strains of Bruno's philosophy into a statement on the Brunian reformation as he saw it, and on the contemporary relevance of his theory and application of images.



## Résumé

### **Applied Imagination: Giordano Bruno and the Creation of Magical Images.**

La création et la manipulation d'images infinies sont centrales à la pensée de Bruno, mais n'ont jamais été examinées avec justesse, selon moi. Ce projet se distingue de la plupart des études consacrées à Bruno, qui se concentrent sur sa contribution à la pensée scientifique et ignorent les éléments hermétiques et magiques dont son oeuvre regorge – ou en minimisent l'importance. Chaque chapitre est consacré à un texte de Bruno et à un aspect de sa philosophie, chacun fournissant des éclaircissements à la problématique générale, qui est de découvrir le rôle, la signification, et l'application des images dans la pensée de Bruno.

Le mouvement général de la thèse se fait de l'intérieur et du personnel au cosmologique et au métaphysique. Le premier chapitre débute avec une étude de la faculté d'imagination et du rôle des images dans la connaissance humaine. Il s'agit ici de l'épistémologie et de l'anthropologie de Bruno, telles qu'il les décrit dans *De Imaginum*. Le deuxième chapitre examine les applications éthiques et sociales des images et montre comment on peut manipuler la réalité en contrôlant des images. La reconstruction de l'univers dans *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* illustre ce concept. Le troisième chapitre étudie la physique - ou la mécanique - de sa philosophie, dont les origines dans la magie hermétique sont décrites dans *De Vinculis* et *De Magia*, où des images sont utilisées pour créer des liens. Le quatrième chapitre examine la cosmologie de Bruno, qui adopte le modèle de Copernic mais qui y voit un hiéroglyphe. C'est la clé heuristique dans *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, dont l'image existe dans la faculté d'imagination et s'incorpore à l'univers. Les deux deviennent indifférenciables et travaillent à l'unisson. Quand ces contraires

coïncident, la matière devient forme et Dieu devient homme. L'image du cosmos infini se réincorpore en une seule image dans la faculté d'imagination.

La conclusion reliera les aspects épistémologiques, éthiques, mécaniques, cosmologiques, et métaphysiques de la philosophie de Bruno en une formulation de la Réformation telle qu'il l'a imaginée et de la pertinence contemporaine de sa théorie et de l'application des images.

## Table of Abbreviations

### Works by Bruno

<i>Causa</i>	<i>De la Causa, principio e uno.</i> (Cause, Principle, and Unity)
<i>Cena</i>	<i>La Cena de la Ceneri.</i> (Ash Wednesday Supper)
<i>Eroici</i>	<i>Eroici furori.</i> (The Heroic Frenzies)
<i>Imaginum</i>	<i>De imaginum, signorum et idearum compositione.</i> (On the Composition of Images, Signs, and Ideas)
<i>Magia</i>	<i>De magia.</i> (On Magic)
<i>Spaccio</i>	<i>Lo Spaccio de la bestia trionfante.</i> (The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast)
<i>Umbris</i>	<i>De umbris idearum.</i> (The Shadow of Ideas)
<i>Universo</i>	<i>De l'infinito, universo e mondi.</i> (On the Infinite Universe and Worlds)
<i>Vinculis</i>	<i>De vinculis in genere.</i> (A General Account of Bonding)

### Works by other authors

<i>CH</i>	<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i>
<i>De memoria</i>	<i>Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Aristotle's De memoria et reminiscencia.</i> (On memory and recollection)

*De Docta*

Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* (On Learned Ignorance)

*Triplico*

Marsilio Ficino, *Triplico libri de vita* (*Three Books of Life*),

## Introduction

Giordano Bruno is a complex and enigmatic character. His life, which took him to royal courts as well as to prison and a horrific death, and his work is as problematic today as they were in his own time. His legacy is still very much open to debate. Was he a modern thinker and champion of a new scientific worldview<sup>1</sup>, or “in no way a modern thinker”?<sup>2</sup> The answer lays somewhere in between. Bruno lived on the cusp of the modern era, and had feet in both worlds. We too live on a cusp, and he gives us a very unique insight into understanding our relationship with the world around us.

It is the intention of this work to argue that underlying Bruno’s thought there is a theory of the creation of images. Creating images is fundamentally an act of magic. This theory is essential to understanding the work of Bruno. Our relationship with God and the universe is, ultimately, a relationship of images as they act on the faculty of phantasy. To control the images is to control reality. Bruno presents a comprehensive program to both create and manipulate infinite images in order not only to understand and explain the cosmos, but to change it.

This work argues that the creation and manipulation of infinite images is central to Bruno’s thought. This project is a departure from much of the current scholarship on Bruno which has focused on his contribution to scientific thought and downplayed or ignored the Hermetic and magical elements which pervade his work. Each chapter deals with different works of Bruno, and different aspects of his philosophy, and each is rooted in the larger project of uncovering the role, meaning, and application of images in Bruno’s thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Gatti, 1999 x; 2002 xv-xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Koyré, 54

The general arc of the project is from the interior and personal to the cosmological and metaphysical. Chapter 1 begins with a study of the faculty of phantasy and the role of images on human cognition. This is Bruno's epistemology and anthropology as expressed in *Imaginum*. Chapter 2 deals with the physics – or mechanics – of his philosophy, with its roots in Hermetic magic as described in *Vinculis* and *Magia*, wherein images are used to create bonds. Chapter 3 covers the ethical and social applications of images, and how the control of images manipulates reality. This concept is represented in the reconstruction of the universe in *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*. Chapter 4 addresses Bruno's cosmology, which adopts the Copernican model and reinterprets that model as a hieroglyph. It is the heuristic key in *Ash Wednesday Supper*, the image of which exists in the faculty of phantasy and becomes embedded on to the universe. The two become indistinguishable and work in union. Through the coincidence of opposites, matter becomes form and God becomes man. The image of the infinite cosmos becomes re-embedded in the single instance of an image in the faculty of Phantasy.

The order of this inquiry is thematic. It does not represent a chronological development of Bruno's thought. Each chapter examines one or more of Bruno's writings which best exemplify these different facets of Bruno's insights and philosophy of images. Progressing from the internal and singular to the infinite (or vice versa) was a technique that Bruno himself was fond of<sup>3</sup>. The constant flux between the absolute minimum and absolute maximum, and their reconciliation in the coincidence of opposites, is integral to the philosophy of Bruno. The conclusion will bring together these epistemological, mechanical, ethical, cosmological, and metaphysical strains of Bruno's philosophy into a statement on the

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the subtitles of *Spaccio* and *Cena*, or the introductory poem of *Causa*.

Brunian reformation as he saw it, and on the contemporary relevance of his theory and application of images.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Applied Imagination: Giordano Bruno and the Creation of Magical Images in *On the Composition of Images, Signs and Ideas***

“Where there is soul, spirit, life, there is everything” (*Causa*, 49).

The creation and application of magical images in the work of Giordano Bruno is integral to Bruno’s philosophy, but it is neither simple nor well understood, and many modern scholars have chosen to ignore the elements of magic in Bruno. Unfortunately this means ignoring the majority of his writings. There is no definitive work by Bruno that outlines this aspect of his philosophy. Rather it has to be cobbled together from across his manifold and various works. Bruno’s process can best be understood by taking three steps: the first is an inquiry into how magical images work. In this I will focus on his anthropology (in the broadest sense of the word), psychology, and cosmology, to describe a world view which can allow for the efficaciousness of magical images. Secondly what are the actual mechanics of creating a magical image? In this we need to delve into his probably most perplexing work *On the Composition of Images, Signs and Ideas*<sup>4</sup>. The final stage requires an explanation of the implications and applications of Bruno’s account of the actual use of magical images. This is the culmination of Bruno’s true project, his own distinctive reformation, a reformation that takes place on the level of the image.

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<sup>4</sup> (*De Imaginum signorum et idearum compositione* here after *Imaginum*) Published in Frankfurt by J Wechel and P. Fischer in 1591.



Bruno's theory of image creation both arises from, and illuminates, his Hermetic philosophy, his radical cosmology, and his unique approach to psychology. For Aristotle, to think (at least at a rudimentary level) is to speculate with images<sup>5</sup>; for Bruno the creation and manipulation of images focuses rather upon the 'control' of reality. The process begins with the imaginative faculty of phantasy exercised through a complex method of creation, and has repercussions in both the human and divine worlds through the bonds which organically interconnect all things from highest to lowest and which come together in a coincidence of opposites<sup>6</sup>.

Bruno is seldom thought of as representative of the Radical Reformation, but that is exactly where he belongs. His revolutionary religious and social reforms were designed to overcome religious divisions and to create a new, Hermetic religious reality. Indeed, throughout his work, he creates an epistemology of imagination. Understanding Bruno's prime instrument, magical images, is consequently essential to understanding the thoughts and program of this influential philosopher.

## **1.1 How Magical Images Work.**

### **1.1.1 Phantasy and Memory**

The concept of the imaginative faculty, or the faculty of phantasy, dates back to pre-classical Greek sources.<sup>7</sup> The imagination (*phantasia*) is the mental faculty which communicates between the body and its corporeal sense and the soul with phantasms. This mental faculty addresses a fundamental problem: the body and the soul speak two different languages. The

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<sup>5</sup> *De anima* 432b 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Magia*, 108.

<sup>7</sup> See especially Yates *The Art*, chapter 2.

language of the soul is composed of phantasms, images. So everything the body experiences, from sense data to language, needed to be translated into phantasmic sequences. Since the soul is understood to have absolute primacy over the body, it follows that the phantasm has a corresponding primacy over the word<sup>8</sup>. Although we gain knowledge of the world through the impressions on the senses, these impressions must be transformed into phantasms by the imaginative faculty in order that they may reach, and be processed and experienced by, the mind/soul. It is the imaginative faculty that allows the higher process of thought to be possible. For, as Aristotle writes, "The soul never thinks without a mental picture"<sup>9</sup>, or "to comprehend is to observe phantasms"<sup>10</sup>.

Memory and imagination are thus closely linked and Aristotle locates them in the same part of the soul. The images themselves "are like sense data but without matter"<sup>11</sup>. This interpretation was perpetuated by Aquinas, who maintained that "the soul cannot know without phantasms" and "it is manifest . . . to what part of the soul does memory belongs, that is to say the same (part) as phantasy"<sup>12</sup>. Memory, we might recall, was St Augustine's answer to the question: "My good and gentle source of reassurance, where shall I find you?"<sup>13</sup> The close association of phantasy and memory becomes extremely important for the development of the art of memory, of which Bruno was one of the last great proponents; yet Bruno transforms both the art and the mental faculties into something radically different.

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<sup>8</sup> Couliano, 5

<sup>9</sup> *De anima* 432a7.

<sup>10</sup> Couliano, 66.

<sup>11</sup> Colvino, 32.

<sup>12</sup> *De memoria* 93. Aquinas, Thomas. *In Aristotelis libros De sensu et sensato, De memoria et reminiscencia commentarium. Commentaries on Aristotle's "On sense and what is sensed" and "On memory and recollection"*. Trans. Kevin White and Edward M. Macierowski. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press. 2005.

<sup>13</sup> *Confessions*, X. xvii [26].

The classical art of memory as a technique to manipulate phantasms relies on the Aristotelian principle of the primacy of phantasms over speech<sup>14</sup>. Because perception is intrinsically phantasmic, images are easier to remember than concepts. By superimposing ideas, narratives, speeches, formulae, words, etc. on an image, one could put its phantasmic quality to use as a mnemonic device. This was an extremely useful tool at a time when literacy rates were low and literacy itself somewhat inconvenient being the property of a small elite. As was expressed in the early memory texts such as *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* (wrongly attributed to Cicero), striking images (grotesque, startling, or beautiful) should be employed because their phantasmic character is easier to remember than abstract concepts, sequences of words, or common images. The *Ad Herennium* advises that "nature . . . is not aroused by the common ordinary event, but is moved by a striking new occurrence"<sup>15</sup>. Note that it is nature and not the mind or memory which is moved.

Raymond Lull (c. 1233-1315) turned the art of memory into a contemplative and mystical technique, combining it with a Christianized Cabbala and perhaps elements of Sufism, whose goal is union with the divine<sup>16</sup>. Lull's work had a lasting impact, not always a welcome one, on the Christian world<sup>17</sup>. There was, in fact, a Lullian chair at the University of Paris for several centuries. But by Bruno's day, the art was being condemned in Protestant circles as a form of idolatry<sup>18</sup>.

Bruno was one of history's last great champions and practitioners of the Art of Memory. But he took the Lullian mystical memory and transformed it into a magical

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<sup>14</sup> Yates, 1966, 6 ff.

<sup>15</sup> III, xxii

<sup>16</sup> On Lull, see Calcagno 28 ff, Yates, *Art, Yates, Lull and Bruno*.

<sup>17</sup> Yates, 1966, 173 ff.

<sup>18</sup> Yates, 1966, 368.

technique. Bruno's talent as a memory artist garnered him audiences with the likes of Pope Pius V and King Henri III of France as well as ultimately contributing to his death at the stake. Bruno emphasized the pre-eminence of the imagination and its creative ability above all other faculties, and, as Yates writes, "nowhere is his overwhelming preoccupation with the imagination more apparent than in his last work [*Composition of Images*]"<sup>19</sup>. Bruno stepped radically beyond the Aristotelian and Thomistic understanding of phantasy as the translation faculty between the body and the soul and the art of memory as a mnemonic tool of oration or an aid to Christian piety. Rather, all mental faculties for Bruno are subsumed under a deified faculty of phantasy so that in fact, what was once simply the translator between body and soul now allows access to, and participation with, the 'World Soul'<sup>20</sup>. For Bruno, phantasms are no longer passive mental images or sense data without matter. He goes far beyond Aristotle's "to think is to speculate with images". Through the vehicle of images, the knowing creator of images communicates with the divine and by means of this communication is fundamentally enabled to shape the world. This shaping is performed in the first instance by phantastic images within memory.

Phantasy is for Bruno the "sense of senses"; it is prior to all other mental faculties. He writes that the other powers of the soul, memory, reason, experience, intellect and mind, are of lesser consequence "because the acts of these powers do not flow over into the body and change it. Rather, all physical changes originate from the powers which are prior to thought and which are its principal and efficient causes", that is the operations of phantasy<sup>21</sup>. Keeping in mind his Hermeticism, Bruno envisioned imagination not only as the route

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<sup>19</sup> Yates, 1966, 298.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, *Vinculis* 154-155.

<sup>21</sup> *Magia*, 142.

directly into the soul, but also the soul's path outward through which its will could be imposed on the world, both human and divine.

### 1.1.2 Bruno's Cosmology

Bruno is probably most well known for his cosmology<sup>22</sup>, though it is often misunderstood. Scholars such as Koyré<sup>23</sup> and Gatti<sup>24</sup> have emphasized Bruno's Copernican position as he expressed it in *Cena*<sup>25</sup>. It is true that he was one of the first philosophers to champion, very vociferously, the Copernican model of the solar system<sup>26</sup>. He was also credited as one of the first to make the intellectual leap that Copernicus did not: that the sun was a star, like all the others, and they too must have inhabited planets revolving around them<sup>27</sup>. He went even further and postulated that the universe is infinite. This is what made him of interest to Bacon<sup>28</sup>, Descartes<sup>29</sup>, Newton, and others. More than any other reason, this is why Bruno is often considered by many recent historians to be one of the first modern scientific thinkers<sup>30</sup>. Bruno's Copernican claims also led to the most serious charges brought against him by the Inquisition. Bruno championed Copernicus not because of the latter's physics, but because this new model fit so well into Bruno's philosophy. Bruno never thought that this was a new, revolutionary idea; rather it was the rediscovery of something very ancient and it conformed with, and reinforced, his Hermeticism. Lucretius is clearly a precedent for Bruno. Yet Bruno thought he was reaching back further than the Greek Atomists, who only glimpsed a

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<sup>22</sup> I will deal with Bruno's cosmology in greater depth in Chapter 4.

<sup>23</sup> See especially pages 44 ff.

<sup>24</sup> See especially 1999, pages 198 ff.

<sup>25</sup> *La Cena de le Ceneri*. Published in London by J. Charlewood in 1584.

<sup>26</sup> Gosslin, 24.

<sup>27</sup> *Cena*, 90.

<sup>28</sup> Yates, 1964, 451.

<sup>29</sup> Yates, 1966, 379.

<sup>30</sup> Gatti, 1999, 1.

shadow of the truth. Bruno was looking for the original revelation. The universe, for Bruno, is a single, living, interconnected organism<sup>31</sup>. The planets and stars are alive, ensouled animals<sup>32</sup>. What fills the vast space and allows for the influence of the most distant regions to be felt is Eros<sup>33</sup>.

Bruno's cosmology is derived from various sources: Neo-Platonism, Hermeticism, and Nicolas of Cusa to name just a few. But in Bruno's hands these become radically reinterpreted. Beginning, as he does, with the premise that the universe is infinite and homogenous a number of things happen. There is no longer the separation of the heavenly and sub-lunar worlds. The Neo-Platonic hierarchical structure is no longer necessary, as there no longer needs to be a fixed point or route for the proper ascent and descent from heaven to the center: Earth. Bruno does not eliminate the hierarchy of beings, as he is sometimes accused of doing, but instead he reinterprets it to conform to his own cosmological principles. As opposed to the rigid divisions of Iamblichus<sup>34</sup>, for example, the lines between the corporeal and spiritual worlds and all its inhabitants become very fluid and porous. Bruno is, of course, referencing Lucretius and the Greek Atomists Democritus, Leucippus, and Epicurus. In fact, Koyré writes that "the first man to take Lucretian cosmology seriously was Giordano Bruno"<sup>35</sup>. Nonetheless, Bruno could not abide the emptiness of the universe as Lucretius imagined it.

He explains this through two important concepts: the infinite active potency, or world soul, and the infinite passive potency, or matter<sup>36</sup>. These two potencies are constantly

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<sup>31</sup> *Cena*, 91.

<sup>32</sup> *Cena*, 156.

<sup>33</sup> *Vinculis*, 171.

<sup>34</sup> See especially *De Mysterii*, Book II.

<sup>35</sup> Koyré, 6.

<sup>36</sup> *Causa*, 55 ff.

changing into each other through what Bruno calls a “coincidence of opposites”. Everything, material and spiritual, is continuously metamorphosing into everything else. This metamorphosis underlines the unity and homogeneity he sees in the universe. He even held the remarkably modern insight that the atoms which make up every individual body are constantly leaving and forming new bodies<sup>37</sup>. Modern science tells us that every molecule in our body is replaced every 7-10 years, that molecules do not “die” and simply move on. Or, conversely, modern science has remembered something very old.

Bruno’s cosmology allows him to reinterpret both spirit and matter. The world soul is able to shape matter from within as it contains all forms. Yet, so also does matter. Following the principles of Epicurean atomism, Bruno claims that “matter and substance is incorruptible and every part of it must be the subject of every form, so that every part can become everything . . . since annihilation is impossible to nature itself”<sup>38</sup>. Since matter and spirit are on equal footing, coincidence, we must conclude, is the actual permanent substance of the world<sup>39</sup>. Since world soul and matter are present in each other, matter can be formed and affected in infinite ways if the principles of nature are understood. His understanding of the nature of the universe reinforces Bruno’s theory of the workings of magic. Mutation is the natural state of nature, and magic is the exploitation of that state.

With this new materialist physics, based on what Bruno believed was a very ancient cosmology, comes not only a new astrology and astronomy, but also a new magic. The new cosmology is in fact a key to Bruno’s understanding of the physics of magic<sup>40</sup>. Viewed in a cosmological light, Bruno’s magic consists of drawing the world soul into matter, which has

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<sup>37</sup> *Cena*, 213.

<sup>38</sup> *Cena*, 213.

<sup>39</sup> *Causa*, xix.

<sup>40</sup> This will be explored in detail in chapter 2.

been prepared to accept it, in order to enact some kind of change in the physical world. As there is no special spiritual realm separate from the corporeal, they exist in a state of necessary reciprocity such that to affect the one is to affect the other. According to Bruno's psychology, the phantasmic *pneuma* is our immediate link to the world soul: "Every soul and spirit has some degree of continuity with the world soul, which is recognized to be located not only where the soul lives and perceives, but also to be spread out everywhere in its essence and substance"<sup>41</sup>. Bruno postulates a three-fold universe with a constant flow among its parts: the archetypal, the physical, and the umbral (literally "the shadowy", the locus of the phantasmic *pneuma*). Through this connection we have access to all the forms or archetypes<sup>42</sup>. Material existence, including our corporeal beings, also contains all the forms as infinite passive potency and is thus receptive to them. More specifically, images, forms, archetypes, are drawn from the world soul through the faculty of phantasy and their presence in the soul—any soul—will affect its materiality. The art of magic is to know how to access and utilize the images. This is done by controlling the sets of factors which compose the images themselves<sup>43</sup>. In a sense, as everything is naturally changing into everything anyway, Bruno's magic is simply a controlled and intentional means to direct a natural process. His psychology and cosmology thus mirror and reinforce each other.

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<sup>41</sup> *De Magia*, 112.

<sup>42</sup> *De Magia*, 112.

<sup>43</sup> *Imaginum*, 8.



## 1.2 The Creation of Magical Images

### 1.2.1 History and Description of *Imaginum*

*Imaginum* was Bruno's final work and the last on which he was able to assist with publication. Bruno himself even made some of the wood cut illustrations. It was written while Bruno resided near Zurich and was submitted to a publisher in Frankfurt in 1591<sup>44</sup>. Bruno was arrested by the Inquisition the following year in Venice, just as he was about to leave for Frankfurt to revise the proofs for publication. In the foreword of *Imaginum*, Manfredi Piccolomini writes that this work should not be read as a book but "should be explored, searched, perused with the same amazement and wonder with which one would walk through a labyrinth or inside a pyramid"<sup>45</sup>. With a more critical eye, Frances Yates calls it "incoherently jumbled"<sup>46</sup>. Dorothy Singer dismisses it and openly laments its existence. "Why should this man, occupied with the formation of a lofty philosophy, have turned aside and spent so much time on the idle elaboration of logic and mnemonics devised by Raymond Lull?"<sup>47</sup> Many others simply list it as one of Bruno's works and leave it without explanation or exploration. *Imaginum* is a long, complex and poorly understood work, and an understudied one. Yet, as it is his final work, it may arguably contain some of his most developed thinking. It has been classified as a mnemonic text<sup>48</sup>, a scientific text<sup>49</sup>, and a text of poetics<sup>50</sup>. Higgins and Doria seem to view Bruno as a modern or even post-modern thinker. They appreciate in this treatise the achievement of a glorified and creative imagination. They also down play the role of mnemonics and magic and instead highlight

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<sup>44</sup> Higgins xxxii-xxxiii.

<sup>45</sup> Piccolomini, xi

<sup>46</sup> Yates, 1964, 326.

<sup>47</sup> Singer, 151.

<sup>48</sup> Yates, 1964, 326, Singer, 151.

<sup>49</sup> Gatti, 1999, 178.

<sup>50</sup> Higgins, xi.

the psychological and semiotic aspects of the text. They suggest that the heirs of Bruno are Jung (who was influenced by Bruno's gods as archetypes) and Saussure (inspired by Bruno's thoughts on signification<sup>51</sup>). The book's title itself has yet to be fully confronted: *On the Composition of Images*. This work is key to understanding Bruno's composition of magical images, although by itself it would seem to be almost gibberish. One of the problems facing the reader of Bruno is to realize that he had a tendency to write in images. Though when *De Imaginum* is put into dialogue with his other writings, especially his later works, it begins to appear more clearly in focus. What emerges is a fearfully complex theory and method for creating infinite phantasmic, magical images.

*Imaginum* is a multi-media piece. It is made up of philosophical prose, poetry, images, icons, symbols, mathematical diagrams, as well as descriptions of images. One chapter, for instance, appears to be merely a list of attributes of which the purpose is altogether unclear (Book One, Part Two, Chapter Nineteen). It lists, for example, under separate columns "a baptizer, with a ewer of holy water, baptizes. A soldier, with a banner, leaps. A workman with an axe, levels a tree"<sup>52</sup>. Then, without explanation, Bruno begins another bizarre list:

"Here ABC	yields	Ba ba ba
DEF	yields	Mi mi mi
GHI	yields	Fa fa fa" Etc. <sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> pp. xx, xxviii.

<sup>52</sup> *Imaginum*, 125.

<sup>53</sup> *Imaginum*, 126.

The entire structure of *Imaginum* is based on complex numerological and musical metaphors. This is common throughout his writings. His book *Cena* is subtitled "Five dialogues, by four interlocutors, with three reflections, on two subjects"; the final step, i.e. "the one", he leaves for the reader to infer. The book covers such topics as cosmology, the Christian Cabbala, the nature of matter, the universal soul, even grammar, as well as those matters which concern us most here: viz. imagination, memory, and composition of images.

The second half of book one constitutes Bruno's attempt to create a practical application of his theory of the composition of images outlined in the first part. Both parts contain diagrams and charts often with no explanation. The final book subtitled "Which Is About The Images of The Thirty Seals", is a collection of mnemonic materials. One chapter is a poem called "Proteus in the House of Mnemosyne" where Bruno demonstrates his technique for creating images with universal connections by using the first line of Virgil's *Aeneid*. By giving each word of the line a new association, the words "change by metamorphosis into the same number of middle terms" from which he is able "to demonstrate the eternal universe" which, indeed, he proceeds to do<sup>54</sup>. Bruno's philosophy is a philosophy of analogy. Any one place can lead to any other place. All things in Bruno's universe are perpetually turning into everything else. Gods are becoming human and humans are becoming gods. Constant mutation is the natural order of the universe<sup>55</sup>. Magic, for Bruno, is the ability to control that mutation<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> *Imaginum*, 238.

<sup>55</sup> Bruno's theory of mutation we be explored further in chapter 3.

<sup>56</sup> See for example, *Spaccio* 75 and chapter 3.

On opening the book, it seems that one has entered a labyrinth without a map, or alternatively a mad house of unexplained images heaped onto each other. Yet even in the bizarre rhetorical structure of *Imaginum*, Bruno is trying to encapsulate his understanding of the relationship of the creation of images to divine communication. He realizes the failure of language to capture the infinite. As a consequence he tried to go beyond language and to incorporate geometry, mathematics, images, music, and poetry, the sum of which would be greater than the parts, to capture and explore the fullness of infinity<sup>57</sup>. This explains something of the multidimensional, multimedia, nature of *Imaginum*. As Saiber notes, Bruno's need to discuss the infinite requires that he cabalistically combine all these diverse disciplines to create a new language<sup>58</sup>.

Concerning his own methodology, Bruno states in the opening chapter of *Imaginum* that "we are deliberately proposing a method which by no means concerns things but which treat, rather, the significance of things"<sup>59</sup>. There is a movement which takes place in his work, a shift from the analysis of physical reality to the analysis of a mental and spiritual reality. But Bruno does not dismiss or belittle matter or nature, as he considers these to be in a relationship of necessary reciprocity with the spiritual world. He writes from the point of view of the artist, his hands sticky with paint or clay. He states

For true philosophy, music or poetry is also painting, and true painting is also music and philosophy; and true poetry or music a kind of divine wisdom and painting . . . elsewhere I have discussed how a painter is naturally an

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<sup>57</sup> In an online periodical, *Mediamatic*, Josophia Grieve wrote an article encouraging computer programmers to read Bruno. The article argued that Bruno had invented hypertext. What he is doing is not so dissimilar.

<sup>58</sup> Saiber, 6.

<sup>59</sup> *Imaginum*, 8.

establisher of *infinite* images who, by his image forming power constructs from sights and sounds by combining in a multiplicity of ways<sup>60</sup>

And

the idea, the imagination, the shape, the designation, the notation, is the universe of God, the work of nature and reason, and is controlled by analogy with them [i.e. God, the work of nature and reason], so that nature may admirably reflect divine creation, and then innate human ability rivals (as if reaching towards even higher things) nature's operation . . . To do this is to do everything; to say this is to say all; to imagine, signify and shape this makes all things objects to apprehend, to understand once apprehended, remembered when understood<sup>61</sup>.

Here we have a very bold statement about the relationship between art, the artist, and the sacred. The philosopher-artist is being cast in the role of the prophet who combines sight and sound to create "infinite images". Moreover, humans' abilities rival nature's operation; indeed they rival even the divine operations themselves. For if nature reflects divine action, and humans rival nature, by consequence humans must also mirror the divine activity. It is the human ability to create imaginatively, phantastically, which renders humanity divine.

Bruno recognizes two kinds of people: those who actively and voluntarily use the imagination (poets, artists, philosophers, etc.); "as for the rest of them, the realm of imagination is settled by external causes"<sup>62</sup> they are passive and unknowing recipients of images<sup>63</sup>. These external sources could be natural, demonic, or artificially created. So accordingly, man is "endowed with a hyper-complex brain that has no special capacity to analyze stimuli according to their provenance: in short, he is not capable of differentiating

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<sup>60</sup> *Imaginum* 129. My emphasis.

<sup>61</sup> *Imaginum*, 3-4.

<sup>62</sup> Couliano, 92.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, *Vinculis* 148.

directly between dreamlike data and those transmitted by the senses, between the imaginary and tangible"<sup>64</sup>. This is perfectly logical given the premise that all thought data are phantasmic.

### 1.2.2 Images and Shadows and Internal Reception of Images

The word image holds a unique status in Bruno's vocabulary. An image differs from a sign, character, mark, or similitude "because it embraces a greater energy, emphasis and universality for there is more being for image"<sup>65</sup>. Images are nothing less than the original language of nature and the divine. These could be found, he believed, in Egyptian hieroglyphics. This claim is consistent with the foundational myth of the Hermetic philosophy<sup>66</sup>. Bruno bemoaned the use of Latin and Greek alphabets. He states that the loss of hieroglyphics led to the loss of original memory, divine science, and magic<sup>67</sup>. These archetypical images were also celestial, as well as pantheistic images of gods, and certain ordinary earthly images. It is important to recall here that for Bruno images, like planets and stars, were alive and ensouled; hence, given his Epicurean atomistic assumptions, they could act upon souls and consequently upon matter.

Bruno gives primacy, among the senses, to the visual, for "the genera of all perceptible species are finally limited to the visible ... since sight is the most spiritual of all the senses"<sup>68</sup>. Sight is superior, he reasons, because when we recall from memory we most

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<sup>64</sup> Couliano, 93.

<sup>65</sup> *Imaginum*, 14.

<sup>66</sup> *Spaccio* 247.

<sup>67</sup> *De Magia*, 114-5.

<sup>68</sup> *De Imaginum*, 15.

often do so with images<sup>69</sup>. Yet we also see by another light, common to Neo-Platonic thought, namely that of the intellect (*nous*): "for (the sun) rises and sets, and as often as we turn ourselves towards it, it is not there. But that other magical light is no less present to us than to itself for us, so present in the mind it is even in the mind itself"<sup>70</sup>. He relates this intellectual light metaphorically to the light of the first day of creation in Genesis, created before the sun on the fourth day, as well as to the light of the Hermetic Poimander<sup>71</sup>.

In the chapter with the telling title "Of Light, The Vehicles of Images", Bruno goes on to explain the nature of this intellectual light further. He defines light as "some sort of substance, in fact it is the prime substance; as Moses explained (i.e. Gen. 1:3) and Poimander" and compares it "with that light which is some sort of spiritual substance, with no sun or fire providing light, no object from without instructing our sense's faculty, soul was given, not just ours, but a universal one spreading through the immense cosmos"<sup>72</sup>. The light is the world soul in which we participate. This light provides us with access to absent things, and teaches us as we dream; the instruction is accomplished by means of images.

Here Bruno makes a strikingly bold move. He identifies a strong link between the world soul and the human mind: "so present in the mind it is even in the mind itself" and "soul was given, not just ours, but a universal one spreading through the immense cosmos". Bruno, in fact, lowers the status of the world soul and raises the status of humanity, so that the two in fact coincide. The world soul possesses intellect within itself, and consequently does not stand in need of a superior principle<sup>73</sup>. Unlike Plotinus for whom the primal

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<sup>69</sup> *De Imaginum*, 15; cf Aristotle, *De Anima*, 432a7.

<sup>70</sup> *Imaginum*, 4.

<sup>71</sup> *Imaginum*, 36

<sup>72</sup> *De Imaginum*, 36-37.

<sup>73</sup> *Ingegno*, xvi.

hypostases of universal intellect and world soul were distinct, the latter subordinate to the former, for Bruno they are one in the same<sup>74</sup>.

The images from without appear in the mind as "the shadows of ideas" ("*umbris idearum*"): "since only things can cast shadows or images, anything which can cast a shadow or image in the mind must exist, be it a physical or abstract entity"<sup>75</sup>. The images, through their vehicle of the world soul come to us as shadows of ideas which are perceived, not by eyes or ears or even by mind or memory, but by the "sense of senses": namely by phantasy<sup>76</sup>. Hearing and sight are weaker senses, and they act as "gate keepers or porters"<sup>77</sup> to the highest sense of phantasy.

Bruno reveals the cornerstone of his philosophy in his concept of the coincidence of opposites. The sensual and the intelligible coincide: if anything can cast an image onto the faculty of phantasy it must exist, it must contain matter. The distinction is a logical one not a real one. Active potency and passive potency coincide: they are just two ways of explaining a single genus. Bruno writes "there is nothing without being without the possibility of being"<sup>78</sup>. Contrary to Aristotle he claims that the passive and active must exist together. Form and matter coincide: "matter is act . . . matter and form do not differ in absolute potency and absolute act because it is all absolutely pure and simple . . . everything which comprises all geneses is identical"<sup>79</sup>. All things are changing into each other in a grand cosmic process of metamorphosis. There is no separation, no distinction between celestial and sublunary spheres: just a single, organic, and infinite unity in which human and divine

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<sup>74</sup> Greenberg, 26.

<sup>75</sup> *Imaginum*, 282, n. 6.

<sup>76</sup> *Imaginum*, 40.

<sup>77</sup> *Imaginum*, 40.

<sup>78</sup> *Causa*, 65.

<sup>79</sup> *Causa*, 79.



coincide. Images as they are received in the imagination have the power to effect changes on the soul—and therefore on the body—while both provide information and alter mental and physical states.

### **1.2.3 Creation of Images and Radiation**

It has been noted that Bruno sees a threefold cosmos as a vehicle which carries images from the archetypal, to the physical, to the phantasmic or umbrel. The inner sense (phantasy) "radiates and casts innumerable lines—from a single centre . . . lines which go out from there as if from a common root, and go back into it as if participating in the eternal, where for the most part we live"<sup>80</sup>. Bruno reminds us again of our own connection to the world soul ("where for the most part we live"). Our doorway into this connection is the faculty of phantasy by which we receive phantasmic images. Through a creative process, he suggests, we also have the ability to transmit or radiate images as well as receive them. The most important ways of organizing phantasmic images is through memory.

### **1.2.4 Memory Systems**

Traditional memory systems often used real buildings, churches, and theatres as templates on which to attach items to be remembered. Bruno creates a generic architectural space which is based on a diagram which he calls an atrium<sup>81</sup>. The Atrium is an image of a circle, within a square, within a circle. There are 24 places around the square that are letters of the Latin alphabet (the v is used twice for the u). The innermost circle contains a wheel of letters that

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<sup>80</sup> *Imaginum*, 41.

<sup>81</sup> See Appendix 1.

are not explained. Higgins reads them as "Alta Risa" or "deep laugh"<sup>82</sup>, Yates as "Alta Astra" (using the second A in alta twice) a reference to astral religion and the Olympian planetary gods in book two. Then Bruno provides a list of twenty-four mostly ordinary items: altar, basilica, prison, house, colt, fountain, sword, horoscope, fire, yoke, and a few puzzling items, i.e. Pythagorean fork, key of jealousy<sup>83</sup>. What follows next are twenty-four atria, one for each item on the list which appears in the middle and is surrounded by twenty-four other items or "adjectives"<sup>84</sup>. Some of these assignments seem logical. Prison, for instance, contains noose, handcuffs, stake, but also contains frogs and winnowing fan. These adjectives "resonate" with the image. Around the atria are twelve "cubicles" some of which "accompany" while others "harmonize". These are named after occupations such as guard, stonecutter, gambler, etc. These seem to be based on vowel sounds<sup>85</sup>. There are a further thirty chambers surrounding these cubicles which seem to be based on consonant combinations. And around these are "fields" or "campuses" each with fifty-four adjectives. Briefly, within the field lie the chambers within which lie the cubicles, within which resides the atrium. This gigantic image is also a musical instrument. Bruno keeps referring back to harmonies, resonance and dissonance. Again, the failure of language to incorporate the infinite means, for Bruno, that other modes of communication must be used simultaneously<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>82</sup> *Imaginum*, 49. note 2.

<sup>83</sup> *Imaginum*, 50.

<sup>84</sup> *Imaginum*, 53.

<sup>85</sup> *Imaginum*, 295 n.2.

<sup>86</sup> Given Bruno's infatuation with numerology, see for example his subtitles for *Cena* and *Spaccio*, which move from the multiple to the singular, and back again; and the careful arrangement of his books along astrological principles. It is interesting to note that he introduced the atrium, this central tool to his program of image creation, in Book One, Part Two, Chapter Three. As if to show us that this is the entry point to the study of the infinite. One is reminded of the *Tao Te Ching*: "The one begets the two, the two begets the three, the three begets the myriad of things".

By adding to and rearranging these images they come to life "like a wild beast goring with his horns"<sup>87</sup>. Again, images piled on images seemingly spiraling out of control. By continuing in this manner, and creating combination after combination, Bruno presents a potentially infinite amount of sets. Thus he allows the creator of images a near infinite palate to create meaning. He is making talismans out of memory images and infusing mnemonics into talismans. As mentioned, memory images must be striking in appearance to affect the phantasy; talismanic images must be able to draw down the forces of cosmic powers. "Images are not named", he writes, "for those things that they signify in intention but for those things from which they have been gathered"<sup>88</sup>. Meaning is generated by association; it changes whenever it belongs to a new set. Thus meaning is created by those who change the set; or more accurately, those who have the power to control the set. Since all experience, linguistic and otherwise, must be transformed into phantasmic images, the creator of images is the creator of meaning at the most fundamental level.

### **1.2.5 The Application and Implication of the Creation of Images**

The question that arises now is "what is Bruno doing" with this construct? He has created an engine to generate, in his own words, infinite images, but to what purpose? Hilary Gatti presents a very different reading of *De Imaginum* than Yates and Higgins. Gatti wants to find a logic which is relevant to a scientific endeavor, and sees the Atrium as a logic of images which "developed as a function of [Bruno's] atomic theory of matter"<sup>89</sup>. To do this she must rid the work of significance on the level of mnemonics and magic. She does this in

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<sup>87</sup> *Imaginum*, 90.

<sup>88</sup> *Imaginum*, 31.

<sup>89</sup> Gatti, 1999, 195.

two ways, first by claiming that having accepted the Copernican Universe (and indeed expanding on it to make it infinite) Bruno necessarily had to abandon the Neo-Platonic concept of hierarchy. She argues that Yates' reading in which "through the influence of these 'superior agents' the Magus could learn about the nature of things in the lower world"<sup>90</sup> must therefore be wrong. "What use", she asks, "did he contemplate for the classic and renaissance art of memory within the newly infinite space of the post-Copernican universe he was gradually coming to understand"<sup>91</sup>?

The Copernican revolution, for Bruno, was not properly a triumph of "reason" over "superstition"; it was rather the triumph of an ancient, Hermetic, philosophy over Christianity and Aristotle (see chapter four). The use, for Bruno, of the Copernican model is to justify the incorporation of the infinite within the faculty of phantasy. The most perfect human is the one who could absorb, incorporate and use the infinite by magical means. For Bruno, the study of the revolution of the planets is not meant for our accurate predictions of their comings and goings, but much more significantly to situate ourselves in relation to God, who is the world soul, who is the physical universe, and who ultimately is ourselves. "We have the knowledge not to search for divinity removed from us if we have it near; it is within us more than we ourselves are"<sup>92</sup>.

Gatti's second argument is based on the work of Rita Sturlese who has found that memory places in *De Imaginum* "are designed in very complex way so that they function similarly to calculatory tables"<sup>93</sup>. Consequently all of the zodiacal or magical imagery is

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<sup>90</sup> Gatti, 1999, 178.

<sup>91</sup> Gatti, 1999, 179.

<sup>92</sup> *Cena*, 91.

<sup>93</sup> Gatti, 1999, 179.

“clearly not functioning within their usual meaning, either explicit or occult”<sup>94</sup>. She explains that these images must have been familiar to any educated person of his day merely as teaching tools rather than images which had substantive power. Although, she writes, “Sturlese admits that to obtain this surprising result in her reading of these texts, she altered some of the ciphers in Bruno's work which the printer seems to have mistaken”<sup>95</sup>. Her conclusion is that this “leaves little room for doubt that Bruno's memory wheels and tables were indeed merely technical instruments intended for practical use: What exactly were they for? “Sturlese has been unable to answer this question”<sup>96</sup>. Nonetheless, throughout his writings, Bruno speaks very positively of magic. *De Magia, Vinculis, and De Imaginum* are very clearly and overtly instruction manuals on the correct use of magic. Gatti's attempt to strip away the importance of this magical aspect of Bruno's writings distorts their primary significance within his thought.

Finally, although Gatti's critique of Sturlese's creative editing of the text is understandable, nonetheless coming to such an implausible interpretation of Bruno's appreciation of magic is disappointing. Gatti clearly wants to argue for Bruno as an enlightened scientific thinker, while Yates wishes Bruno to remain squarely within the Hermetic Tradition of the Renaissance. Yet the two authors argue from a similar point of view. Both present Bruno's work as a personal, internal process. For Yates, his purpose is magical and mnemonic, drawing down the astral powers. Nevertheless she concludes that Bruno wrote *Imaginum* to address "a problem which he believes to be more important than any other, the problem of how to organize the psyche through the imagination"<sup>97</sup>. Gatti

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<sup>94</sup> Gatti, 1999,179.

<sup>95</sup> Gatti, 1999, 179.

<sup>96</sup> Gatti, 1999, 179.

<sup>97</sup> Yates, 1966, 299.

concludes that Bruno's purpose "is to formulate an account of the processes of thought which is different from an abstract logic. He attempts to illustrate the ways in which the primal chaos of impressions is reduced to order by principles innate in the mind . . ."98

Without denying its existence, several scholars<sup>99</sup> have recently criticized Yates for overemphasizing the Hermetic influence on, and magical nature of, Bruno's work. In this instance they are wrong. *Imaginum* weaves together a great deal of Bruno's thought, but in this work has a particularly occult focus. It is important to appreciate not only the title of the work, but Bruno's own statements about *Imaginum*<sup>100</sup>. Bruno is clear that he is talking about a way to create and manipulate reality, can there be a greater act of magic?

To make *Imaginum* clearer, we need to look at his other late works, in particular "Of Bonds in General" (*Vinculis*) and "On Magic" (*Magia*). Bruno is seldom thought of as representative of the Radical Reformation, but he clearly has a place there, albeit it might be an odd place. He was not a Protestant nor, arguably, even a Catholic though he was without doubt caught up in the religious spirit of the age. The reformation he sought was a Hermetic one. He was a reformer though not one with a reformed theology, but rather one who contemplates reform through magical means, in particular through the control of images.

Bruno believes that images affected the soul once they enter it. The recipients, unless they understand the process, are unaware of what happens. Magic works indirectly through sounds and images which pass through the senses and impress themselves on the imagination. Those who have the ability to create the correct images and sounds therefore have the ability to control the mental states of the recipient. This creates a bond between the

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<sup>98</sup> Gatti, 1999, 200.

<sup>99</sup> Notably Gatti 1999, Clucas 2002

<sup>100</sup> See especially *Imaginum* 31; 129, discussed below.

image and the recipient. This term bond (*vinculum*) has a special meaning for Bruno: it constitutes a sustained and malleable connection between the faculty of phantasy of the recipient and the magus who enters it through images. Bruno describes bonds as “a joyful sorrow, a sorrowful joy”<sup>101</sup>, though Couliano is probably clearer describing them as “beauty in the wildest sense”<sup>102</sup>. For Bruno these bonds can be either natural or artificial. There are many different kinds of bonds all working at once. Some bonds are so strong that they can blind you or make you immune to pain such as the martyrs’ bond to faith which allows them to endure torture<sup>103</sup>. Our reality is dictated by the bonds that we have. Bonds are both “natural” and open to manipulation. It is natural to have bonds to one’s family, country, values, worldview, and so on<sup>104</sup>. Yet, as Bruno realizes, these are all abstract concepts; and in knowing hands these bonds can be manipulated. Nonetheless, establishing and maintaining the bonds is a difficult process. And this is the genius of *Imaginum*, Bruno is outlining the very process for creating and manipulation of the bonds which dictate such basic responses.

An initial problem is that there are so many types of people: rich, poor, ambitious, lazy, reptilian, porcine, asinine, philosophical, and so on, and each are susceptible only to certain bonds<sup>105</sup>. To understand them all requires access to the ability to generate infinite lists to generate infinite categories. “When certain symbols are arranged in different ways, they represent certain things . . . These symbols do not have a fixed and definite form, rather each person by dictate of his own inspiration or by impulse of his own spirit, determines his

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<sup>101</sup> *Vinculis*, 169.

<sup>102</sup> Couliano, 94.

<sup>103</sup> *Vinculis*, 167.

<sup>104</sup> *Vinculis*, 167.

<sup>105</sup> *Magia*, 114.

own reaction of desiring or rejecting something”<sup>106</sup>. In order to achieve the bonding of many individuals, many bonds are needed. Bruno gives us an idea of the variety of available bonds:

Consider the friendship and enmity among animals, their sympathy and hostility, their similarity and diversity, and the circumstances of such things. Then arrange in an order and in an analogy all the particularities and the separate individuals in the human species, then all the individuals and all the species of the other animals, and finally the species of all other things. You have now collected before you in a convenient order the diversity of bonds<sup>107</sup>.

That is a convenient collection of the infinite. These bonds structure matter, make seeds grow, they attract and inflame and repel.

Another problem with binding is that the bonds change from moment to moment. Therefore the manipulator of bonds must constantly be making refinements to the bond. The one who bonds “must have an understanding of all things, or at least of the nature, inclination, habits, uses and purposes of the thing they are to bind”<sup>108</sup>. The more skilled you are, the more you can bind. Bonds are not just in the mind, they also exist in the body; they are physical bonds. These bonds are both material and non-material because of the complex, and dual nature of humanity. The faculty of phantasy must translate all stimuli to the soul. Whether they be actions or language they must be translated into a medium that the soul understands: images. What Bruno is suggesting is a process which bypasses the medium and

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<sup>106</sup> *Magia*, 114.

<sup>107</sup> *Vinculis*, 159-60.

<sup>108</sup> *Vinculis*, 148.



creates, through the manipulation of images, a direct conduit to the soul. His twist, though, is the reciprocal, pantheistic, nature of the universe. If the human soul can change based on outside stimuli, so can God also change.

*Vinculis* takes on a dark tone in some passages. Bruno calls those who bind “Hunters of souls”. And he extends this metaphor of hunting: “the movement of bonding must be predicted ahead of time . . . the opportunity must be quickly seized when it presents itself, such that he who can bind will act and bind as soon as possible”<sup>109</sup>. And “you can’t capture a fortress easily unless you have a traitor who lets you in. The fortress is handed over when the goblets are full. Watch the changing of the guards and the custodians. Never hesitate”<sup>110</sup>. The art of bonding must always remain unknown to those being bound. Bruno envisioned this manipulation with bonds on a mass scale. Indeed “it is easier to manipulate several people than one only”<sup>111</sup>. Bruno sees organized religions as an example of this manipulation. The founders and prophets were able to create bonds with the imagination of the masses by arousing feelings and beliefs they would not have had naturally.

Remarkably, the bonds themselves do not have to be real: “A real bond is not required, that is, a bond which is found in things. An apparent bond is enough, for the imagination of what is not true can truly bond . . . for fantasy [with an ‘f’] has its own type of truth”<sup>112</sup>. And further, “Fantasy and opinion bind more than reason, the former are stronger than the latter”<sup>113</sup>. And finally, “it is not true that . . . the power of bonding is derived from

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<sup>109</sup> *Vinculis*, 154.

<sup>110</sup> *Vinculis*, 154.

<sup>111</sup> *Vinculis*, 168.

<sup>112</sup> *Vinculis*, 164-5.

<sup>113</sup> *Vinculis*, 152.

what is good rather than from an opinion of what is good; nor is it derived from a known rather than a hidden cause”<sup>114</sup>.

Although the types of bonds are infinite, they are all ultimately reducible to Eros: "all bonds are either reduced to the bond of love, depend on the bond of love, or are based on the bond of love"<sup>115</sup>. In another coincidence of opposites Bruno demonstrates both the coincidence of love and intellect and between love and hate: "love, like all emotions, is a practical form of knowledge. Reason is no greater than love"<sup>116</sup>. Bruno summarizes the whole binding process as follows:

The bonding agent does not unite a soul to himself unless he has captured it; it is not captured unless it has been bound; he does not bind it unless he joins himself to it; he does not join it unless he has approached it; he has not approached it unless he has moved; he has not moved unless he is attracted; he is not attracted until he has been inclined towards or turned away; he is not inclined towards until he desires or wants; he does not desire unless he knows; he does not know unless the object contained in a species or an *image* is presented to the eyes or the ears or the gaze of the internal senses<sup>117</sup>.

In order to create and manipulate bonds one must do two things. First, one must rid oneself of emotion; one must become almost inhuman, otherwise one is susceptible to enchainment oneself. If the subject of manipulation has no desire it cannot be bound. Second, the manipulator must have perfect knowledge of the subject, their wishes, desires, etc. The

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<sup>114</sup> *Vinculis*, 153.

<sup>115</sup> *Vinculis*, 165.

<sup>116</sup> *Vinculis*, 163.

<sup>117</sup> *Vinculis*, 154-155. My emphasis.

magician must have on hand all the possible reactions and emotions of their targeted subject and be able and ready instantly to create new bonds.

In sum, Bruno's magic works indirectly through sounds and images that pass through the senses and impress themselves directly on to the imagination (*phantasia*). Those who have the ability to create the desired images and sounds therefore have the concomitant ability to control the mental states of the recipients or even their subjective reality. The key to successful binding is to have a vast and perfect knowledge and be keenly aware of when new and different bonds need to be cast. This magical power of manipulation is the key to the interpretation of Bruno's 'atrium' and his treatise *On the Composition of Images, Signs and Ideas*. The atrium is an engine which, if mastered, can instantly churn out new images and hence new bonds. The engine provides a systematic process for generating infinite combinations which in turn creates the ability to generate the indices by which to classify all the possible relations or states of the subject of the bond. Bruno thus combined the classical art of memory with talismanic magic and hermetic anthropology and thereby created not only an epistemology of the imagination, but also the mechanism to fulfill it through the power of magic. Bruno had the remarkable insight that whoever controlled the images controlled reality.

Bruno clearly saw himself as a reformer, yet not of the sort of Luther, Calvin, or Ignatius Loyola. Bruno seemed to be attempting reform of an altogether different order. In his dialogue *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast (Spaccio)*<sup>118</sup>, he depicts the celestial gods coming together to rid the zodiac of certain influences, ideas, and images and create new ones in their place. Because of the ultimate importance Bruno placed on the faculty of

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<sup>118</sup> See chapter 3.

phantasy and the images which were their language and which spoke directly to the soul, the reformation Bruno imagined had to take place on the level of images. The one who had the ability to create the images had, in his view, the capacity quite literally to take control of reality; for reality, as Bruno conceived of it in his own distinctive physics and cosmology, was purely phantasmic. There is even a further, more audacious step. He writes:

“God acts on gods, the gods act on celestial or astral bodies . . . These act on the spirits who reside in and control the stars, one of which is the Earth; the spirit acts on the elements, the elements on compounds, the compounds on the senses, the senses on the soul, and the soul on the whole animal”<sup>119</sup>. This is the descent of power from the infinite-active to infinite-passive potency. Yet, through this coincidence of opposites, the ascent follows back on the same route as the descent. Bruno is proposing nothing less than the reformation of God.

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<sup>119</sup> *Magia*, 108.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Physics of Magic

“The ladder through which we rise to the principle is composed of seven steps (to which we add two further steps); of these the first is the purgation of the soul, the second is attention, the third intention, the fourth the contemplation of order, the fifth the proportional comparison [of things] from that order, the sixth the negation or separation, the seventh prayer, the eighth the transformation of oneself into the thing, the ninth, the transformation of the thing into oneself” (*De Umbris Idearum*, 56)

“One sees that that philosopher who has arrived at the theory of the coincidence of contraries has not found out little, and the magician who knows how to look for it where it exists is not an imbecile practitioner”  
(*Spaccio*, 90)

Like virtually everyone in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, from peasant farmer to Pope, Bruno believed in magic. Magic is a current which underpins all of his thought and permeates all of his writings. It is foundational to his program of societal reform. Bruno spent considerable

time both exploring the phenomenon of magic and describing its application. The purpose here is to investigate the “physics” of Bruno’s magic. By the “physics,” I mean the operative understanding of magic in Bruno’s thought. Bruno attempted to explain how and why it worked. In his writings, he associates magic very closely with medicine, rhetoric, politics and preaching. This chapter will focus primarily on two of his later works on magic: *De Magia*<sup>120</sup> and *De Vinculis in Genere*<sup>121</sup> (A General Account of Bonding), both written in Latin around 1590 which focus his thought on the workings of magic. Surprisingly, these writings are very poorly represented in the current scholarship on Bruno; indeed, they are almost completely overlooked. One reason for this may be a reaction to Francis Yates’s heavy emphasis on the “Hermetic Bruno”<sup>122</sup>. Yet there is undeniably a strong magical component which runs through all of Bruno’s thought and writings<sup>123</sup>.

Bruno draws on traditional sources of magic: Hermetic, Neoplatonic, Stoic, Islamic, Cabbalistic, and looks in particular to the writings of Iamblichus, Ficino, and Agrippa. His radical syncretism brings all these sources together, and yet he develops a remarkably original and unique explanation for magic, particularly in *De Vinculis in Genere*, which involves the creation of bonds and the manipulation of Eros. But before we can come to Bruno’s definition, we must examine our own position towards the concept of a magical world.

In his book *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*, Tom Driver introduces the subject of magic, only half jokingly by saying “we must come

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<sup>120</sup> Published in Helmstedt, 1590.

<sup>121</sup> Published in Frankfurt, 1590.

<sup>122</sup> See Clucas, 2001, 202.

<sup>123</sup> On Bruno’s magic see Couliano 1987; Yates 1964 and 1966; Singer 1950; Clucas 2002; Kristeller 1964; Thorndike 1929.

straight out with the M-word and face the question of magic”<sup>124</sup>. The M-word is embarrassing to many modern scholars of philosophy and religion. The modern West is unique in its denial of the ontological status of magic. We do not believe in magic, yet we depend on it to install governments, enact laws, name children, choose lottery tickets, confront illness, and overcome the fear of flying. Whenever there are intangibles, wherever power is confronted, people act magically and ritually.

For example, in Canada, when a new parliament is elected, a ceremony must occur before it can be sworn in and considered a fully functional government. At the ceremony, the “Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod” must call Members of Parliament into the presence of the Governor General, who will empower the new Parliament to lead the country. The usher, wearing period costume, knocks on the door three times using the black rod. However, he is not allowed to enter until he is invited by the Sergeant-at-Arms. Once that happens, members of the lower house physically move to the Senate chamber in order to have their power authenticated. This ceremony at the opening of a new Parliament is infused with archaic ritual, and is necessary to the government’s claim to constitutional authority. They must ritualize their ascent to power or it is not recognized as illegitimate.

On May 19<sup>th</sup> 2004, the Calgary Flames won the Stanley Cup semi-final over the San Jose Sharks on home ice. Neither team had been able to win on home ice in that series. So the night before the game, despite being in the same city as their homes and families, the Flames slept in a hotel, as they do when they are “away”. This was intended to ritually transform the following day’s match into an away game. They won. This is an act of magic. What they attempted to do was to “exert power through actions which are believed to have a

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<sup>124</sup> Driver, 167.

direct and automatic influence on man, nature, and the divine”<sup>125</sup>. Magic is part of our everyday experience, but the phenomenon is seldom studied nor is its power even acknowledged.

A magical worldview is a highly synthetic one. The world seen magically—that is, subjectively and holistically—is a space of interconnection, which is ordered ritually. Consequently, our place in it is embodied, enacted, and interdependent rather than intellectualized and solitary. Rethinking our relationship with magic presents a challenge and an alternative to the way we currently conceive of ourselves as being in the world. It provides a way to reconsider the mythologies that sustain our (post) modern world.

What then is magic? Like both religion and science, it eludes a concrete definition. Instead, we have to look at tendencies within a field which, at times, seem to contradict themselves. Most simply put, magic is the manipulation of, or interaction with, occult forces to affect change in the world. The questions that this simple definition begs are many, but the two most immediate are: what are these unseen forces, and how does one manipulate or interact with them? From this we can further infer a cast of characters, powers, and a performance. Richard Cavendish writes that “magic is an attempt to exert power through actions which are believed to have a direct and automatic influence on man, nature, and the divine”<sup>126</sup>. Claude Levi-Strauss writes that “magic is based on the fundamental belief that humanity can intervene in the order of the natural world to modify or add to its system of determination”<sup>127</sup>. In this instrumental account, magic does not seem to be much different from applied science. But magic takes the order one step further. It is understood by Bruno

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<sup>125</sup> Cavendish, 1.

<sup>126</sup> Cavendish, 1.

<sup>127</sup> Levi-Strauss, 220.



that all things physical and spiritual, humans, the cosmos, and the divine world, are all subject to the same set of rules or powers, and that these powers can be manipulated at either end of the spectrum. Couliano writes that Bruno's magic "is a phantasmic process that makes use of the continuity of the individual pneuma and the universal pneuma"<sup>128</sup>, and later, very tellingly he defines magic as "spiritual manipulation"<sup>129</sup>. We will return to this.

Magic is a force, or a power. It is a technology in the sense that it is an art that does something, performs a task. If magic did not "work", it would be useless. That these physical and spiritual forces can be manipulated to affect change implies that there are connections, or bonds, not only between the practitioner and the forces but also between those forces and the person or thing that is to be affected. A magical worldview sees the cosmos as a vast web of interconnections, indeed as a living organism. As such, to alter one part of it is to affect the whole. The power of magic is premised upon this interconnectedness.

Magic, in its various guises, is an extremely widespread phenomenon. However, there is a paradox in the post-Enlightenment West whereby we actively teach that there is no such thing as magic, and yet we unconsciously rely on it to work. Modernity itself is greatly involved in the presupposition of the separation between humanity and nature, whereas magic is built on integration. It is interesting to consider that in the roughly two centuries that the West has actively denied the ontological status of magic, we have brought ourselves to the brink of our own extinction through environmental catastrophe. There is a correlation: if our worldview were steeped in a consciousness of magical interconnectedness, this would be tantamount to killing ourselves. Magic is not merely a practice; it is a way of being in the world.

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<sup>128</sup> Couliano, 88.

<sup>129</sup> Couliano, 103.

The scientific worldview further separated humans from the cosmos, for the purpose of objective study. It is true that some of the best proponents of modern science have called this principle into question (Einstein's relativity, Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty, Schrödinger's cat, etc.). Regardless of this, however, there remains a strong belief that our subjectivity can be separate from experimentation. With the assumption of religion as private and intellectual, and this concept of humanity as disconnected from the natural world, it is not difficult to see why our belief in magic waned; we hardly feel connected to the world at all.

From early modernity, magic was seen not only as a religious threat but as a social and political one as well. Thomas Hobbes, for example, argued that extinguishing the belief in magic, witches, spirits, and so on would make people become more civilly obedient<sup>130</sup>. Marvin Harris suggests that the witch trials in both the Catholic and Protestant lands reached their height immediately after the Reformation<sup>131</sup>. At this time religious and secular authorities were trying to establish their power, and to wipe out any kind of opposition. They did this by keeping their own populations fearful and divided amongst themselves. It is ironic that only a few centuries before the horrors of the witch trials, the belief in the existence of witches was forbidden by the Catholic Church; and yet that church was the very body which spearheaded the attack on women they deemed to be witches. When the trials began, the category of "witch" needed to be theologically created.

It is not possible to understand Bruno, without understanding the belief in magic. Bruno begins *Magia* by outlining ten meanings of the word magic. First, it is simply the wise. He cites, for example "the Trismegistes among the Egyptians, the druids among the

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<sup>130</sup> Styers, 48.

<sup>131</sup> Harris, 201-204.

Gauls, the gymnosophists among the Indians, the cabalists among the Hebrews . . . “<sup>132</sup>.

Secondly it refers to “someone who does wondrous things merely by manipulating active and passive powers”<sup>133</sup>. This, he says “is commonly called natural magic”<sup>134</sup> which can be

found in medicine. The third type is prestidigitation in which “the actions of nature or of higher intelligence occur in such a way as to incite wonderment”<sup>135</sup>. A fourth type of magic

involves the attraction and repulsion between things. This is “natural magic in the proper sense”<sup>136</sup>. Mathematical magic, the fifth meaning, involves the use of words, chants,

calculations of numbers and times, images, figures, symbols, characters and letters.

Theurgy<sup>137</sup> is the process of invoking higher intelligences with prayers, dedications, incense, sacrifices, and ceremonies<sup>138</sup>. Seventh is the magic of petition and invocation including

necromancy or those who call on the spirits of the dead. Eighth is the magic involves incantations used upon physical objects which can be used for either good or evil purposes.

The ninth definition involves prophecy and attempts to divine the future or see distant events.

The final definition is magic in the pejorative sense, those with power who trick or harm others<sup>139</sup>. These are all part of the field of magic as defined by Bruno. Where he is most

succinct, he describes magic thus:

For actions actually to occur in the world, three conditions are required: (1) an active power in an agent; (2) a passive power or disposition in a subject or a patient, which is an aptitude in it not to resist or to render the action impossible

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<sup>132</sup> *Magia*, 105.

<sup>133</sup> *Magia*, 105.

<sup>134</sup> *Magia*, 105.

<sup>135</sup> *Magia*, 105.

<sup>136</sup> *Magia*, 105.

<sup>137</sup> Theurgy means “acting on god” as opposed to Theology, *De Mysterii* ,60, 101

<sup>138</sup> Interestingly, he calls this “the magic of the hopeless” (*Magia*, 105) because so often its practitioners become possessed by the demons they attempt to invoke.

<sup>139</sup> *Magia*, 105-107.

(which reduces to one phase, namely, the potency of matter); and (3) an appropriate application, which is subject to the circumstances of time, place and condition<sup>140</sup>.

Bruno, for all his rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, loved threes, and it is instructive to note that for him, magic is made up of three elements: an agent, a recipient, and a method. Through these, Bruno could also explain the failure of magic, since if any of the essential elements were disrupted, the magic would not succeed. A poor flute player is a failure of the first element, the agent. A master flutist playing a broken flute is a failure of the second element. A master flutist whose performance is interrupted, say by an earthquake or lunar eclipse, is a failure of the third element, the method<sup>141</sup>. Here we begin to get to the heart of Bruno's conceptual framework of magic: In order to reduce the chances of failure, a magus must be able to fulfill all three elements. In order to do that, he<sup>142</sup> must have perfect knowledge of the subject of the magic, and be able to adjust for all the applicable circumstances.

Bruno's magic is informed by both the Plotinian and the Hermetic frameworks, which, by the 16th Century, were both part of the magical lexicon. Plotinian/Stoic magic, as described in Plotinus' *Enneads*, "On the Problem of the Souls (II)" (IV, 4), is very impersonal. It is based on forces that allow no volition or will on behalf of the powers involved. In this view, magic, or prayer, does not directly affect change in the power to which one appeals. The gods, or external powers, take no notice; they simply follow the extant laws of sympathy and antipathy. In his article "*Simulacra et Signacula: Memory,*

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<sup>140</sup> *Magia*, 132.

<sup>141</sup> *Magia*, 111.

<sup>142</sup> I use the male pronoun here only because in Bruno's time, the paradigm of the magus was generally a man. Indeed, the word magus is itself masculine.

Magic and Metaphysics," Clucas states that Bruno's magic is Plotinian rather than Hermetic<sup>143</sup>. This is a problematic stance. In contrast to the standpoint of Plotinus, the Hermetic view is more personal and acknowledges the external forces as capricious, irrational, needy, and emotional. These forces seek to interact, and therefore they require ritual and sacrifice. Bruno's magic is far more Hermetic/Iamblichan in this respect<sup>144</sup>. In order to demonstrate this claim, I would like to present a brief account of Plotinian magic as well as an appreciation of magic by another strong influence on Bruno, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). Both influence and yet differ from Bruno's own distinctive magical schema. This comparison of Bruno with two key Neoplatonic predecessors in the discourse on magic will help to bring Bruno's unique contribution into sharper focus.

## 2.1 Plotinian Magic

Plotinus accepts human action as a viable inroad to the circuit of being which leads to the One. In his reading of the world soul, Plotinus maintains that the cosmos is a living organism, or "a compound living thing"<sup>145 146</sup>. Everything participates in this living organism; we ourselves are microcosms of the cosmos:

While our souls contain an Intellectual Cosmos, they also contain a subordination of various forms like that of the Cosmic Soul. The World Soul is distributed so as to

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<sup>143</sup> Clucas, 2002, 265.

<sup>144</sup> I recently wrote to Dr. Clucas to ask him to clarify this distinction. He replied that he was commenting on Bruno's earlier work, *De Umbris Idearum* saying "My reason for making this claim for *De umbris* is directly related to Bruno's use of the nine-step 'ladder' of ascent which he takes from Ficino's schematized version of a passage in *Enneads VII*". He agreed that Bruno's larger schema of magic is far more eclectic. (Personal correspondence, Aug. 2006).

<sup>145</sup> *Enneads*, III.3.6, MacKenna's translation.

<sup>146</sup> Or, for example, V.9.9

produce the fixed spheres and the planetary circuits corresponding to the graded powers: so with our souls; they must have their provinces according to their different powers, parallel to those of the World Soul<sup>147</sup>.

Throughout Plotinus' philosophy, there is a deep and complex interconnectedness of all things which traverses and influences the entirety of existents. "Here conspires with There and There with Here, elaborating together the consistency and eternity of a Cosmos and by their correspondences revealing the sequence of things to the trained observer – for every form of divination turns upon correspondences"<sup>148</sup>.

According to Wallis it is not unusual that Plotinus should believe in magic; many great minds in the third century did. What is unusual is that he should try to explain its existence and its workings through his highly rationalist philosophy<sup>149</sup>. He reconciles these two things, magic and rational philosophy, by incorporating and interpreting the Stoic understanding of sympathy and antipathy within a magical context. In the *Ennead*, "Problems of the Soul (II)" (IV.4), Plotinus develops an understanding of how and why magic works. He begins with the question "How do magic spells work?" and answers "By the reigning sympathy and by the fact that in nature there is an agreement of like forces and an opposition of the unlike and by diversity of those multitudinous powers which converge in the living universe"<sup>150</sup>. Plotinus' explanation of magic depends upon the principle of sympathy and antipathy and upon the ultimate sameness of all existents in an interconnected, living cosmos.

Plotinus continues:

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<sup>147</sup> *Enneads*, III.4.6.

<sup>148</sup> *Enneads*, III.3.6.

<sup>149</sup> Wallis, 70.

<sup>150</sup> *Enneads* IV.4.40.

There is much drawing and spell-binding dependent on no interfering machination; the true magic is internal to The All, its attractions and, no less, its repulsions. Here is the primal magic and sorcerer – discovered by men who thenceforth turn those same ensorcerations and magic arts upon one another<sup>151</sup>.

Magic on this account is a natural and automatic process internal to “the All” and dependent upon “the All”, which was to be learned and copied by mortals. For Iamblichus, on the other hand, rituals, language, prayers, and spells were revealed by the gods to mortals in trance states and dreams<sup>152</sup>. They were not part of the given natural order, or natural law, but part of a supernatural order; they could not simply be read through observation, but had to be learned directly from higher powers.

Plotinus presents a vision of the universe permeated by the power of magic derived from the All. He explains that magic happens by accident through the “mere play of natural forces”<sup>153</sup> which triggers events because of the cosmic interconnectedness. Similarly, he states that an act of magic, by a doctor or magician, will have other repercussions because of these innate connections. Plotinus gives a similar explanation for the efficacy of prayer. Prayer works because we are connected with those whom we address. He uses the example of a stringed instrument: a string plucked at one end will vibrate at the other; it may also cause other strings to vibrate<sup>154</sup>. In other words, simply performing certain actions results in cosmic resonances. In Plotinus’ understanding of magic and prayer, no voluntary will is attributed to the higher powers. Neither they nor the One are affected or changed in any way by the prayer, or by the attainment of what is prayed for: “some influence falls from the

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<sup>151</sup> *Enneads* IV.4.40.

<sup>152</sup> *De mysterii*, 101; 114-115.

<sup>153</sup> *Enneads* IV.4.42.

<sup>154</sup> *Enneads* IV.4.40.

being addressed upon the practitioner – or upon something else – but that being itself, sun or stars perceives nothing at all”<sup>155</sup>. The effects of prayer and magic are thus purely automatic. The results they garner are purely due to the natural order of things. Again we can see the strong parallels to Iamblichus’ understanding of theurgy. Plotinus is careful to assure the reader that neither reason, nor the higher soul of the sage, nor the One can be affected by magic. Only the body and the lower soul (and the unreasoning side of gods and daemons) can be influenced by magic. Though, he suggests all the same that counter-spells against evil magic may be appropriate under certain circumstances<sup>156</sup>.

Magic, for Plotinus, has no influence on the higher powers or higher elements of the soul. It does not involve volition; it is an automatic process learned by the observance of nature. It is not revealed as it is for Iamblichus<sup>157</sup>. The Plotinian understanding of magic had some influence on Bruno. However, there are some clear distinctions between Plotinian magic and the way that Bruno viewed the interconnectedness of the world.

## 2.2 Ficino’s Magic

Marsilio Ficino worked for Cosimo de’ Medici in Florence as a translator and together they established there a new Platonic Academy<sup>158</sup>. Ficino translated Plato, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and the *Corpus Hermetica*, reintroducing it into Western Europe<sup>159</sup>. All of these sources

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<sup>155</sup> *Enneads* IV.4.40.

<sup>156</sup> *Enneads* IV.4.40.

<sup>157</sup> *De Mysteriis*, 114-115.

<sup>158</sup> On Ficino and the Platonic Academy see Yates 1964, 11 ff; White 107. On Bruno and the Palace Academy, a similar institution established in Paris, see Gosselin, 18.

<sup>159</sup> Iamblichus *De mysteriis Ægyptiorum, Chaldæorum, Assyriorum*. Proclus in *Platonicum Alcibiadem de anima, atque dæmone. De sacrificio & magia*. Porphyrius *De divinis atque dæmonibus*; Synesius *de somniis*. Psellus *De dæmonibus ... Mercurii Trismegisti Pimander. Ejusdem Asclepius. Venetiis : In aedibus Aldi, et Andreae Soceri, 1516.*



influenced Ficino's thoughts on magic. Ficino's magic is best outlined in the third book of his *Triplico libri de vita* (*Three Books of Life*), entitled *De vita coelitus comparanda* ("To Draw Down Life from the Heavens"), published in 1498. His magic is steeped in a piety and he presents it as a form of medicine. It is based on spirit, astral influences, and sympathetic forces which can be collected with talismans. He understands a threefold makeup of the cosmos: *Intellectus*, *Spiritus*, and *Materia*. The world (universe) has a soul<sup>160</sup>. Between the world soul and the world body is the world spirit which translates between the two. Between our soul and our body is our spirit, a fine subtle substance, with a fine heat<sup>161</sup>. The world spirit (*Spiritus Mundi*) pervades the universe, through it, stellar influences come to our spirit. Ficino's magic is based on *Spiritus* and consists of guiding or controlling the influx of *Spiritus* into *Materia*, the most important way was the use of talismans, material objects into which the *Spiritus* of a star (planet) had been introduced and which stores *Spiritus*<sup>162</sup>, as well as with song and music, such as the *Orphic Hymns*. These, like Iamblichus, he understood to be divinely inspired utterances.

Health, for Ficino, meant a careful balance of all the astral forces within the body. The maintenance of health requires a complex use of personal horoscopes. In practice, this meant drawing down the influence of the planets with images and music. The creation of the images must themselves correspond to the movement of the heavens<sup>163</sup>. For example, he gives instructions on how to create the image of the universe<sup>164</sup> and claims that the

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<sup>160</sup> See especially Chapter XVII of *De vita Coelitus* and Walker 1-24.

<sup>161</sup> *Triplico*, III. i, 3

<sup>162</sup> Yates GBHT, 69

<sup>163</sup> *Triplico*, 337.

<sup>164</sup> *Triplico* 343-354.

construction must begin on the birthday of the universe: i.e. the first minute of Aries<sup>165</sup>. In the chapter entitled “What Sorts of Figures of the Celestials the Ancients Engraved in Images” (Chapter XVIII), he explains that the older the image the more powerful it is. He cites particularly Egyptian, Chaldean, and Arabic images. Ancient images could have within them reflections of the original idea. An ancient image of Justice could actually contain some taste or echo of the divine Idea of justice<sup>166</sup>.

Ficino writes, “Create the image but fashion a better image within yourself”<sup>167</sup>. The images are not just to be looked at but carried inside us. They are remembered; they fundamentally alter us and our perception of the world. The ultimate goal which, it must be stressed, he links only to medicine and health, is a personal transformation based on the creation and interaction with ancient images to draw down the positive affects of astral influences via the *Spiritus Mundi*<sup>168</sup>.

Ficino’s piety cannot be doubted, but he was a very cautious man. He was wise enough, as Bruno was not, to know the possible ramifications of his writings on magic, even in the employment of such a powerful patron, and he did write an apology for *Triplico libri de vita*<sup>169</sup>. Though in this work he continually relies, though without drawing attention to it, on some of the most feared magical texts; most notably the *Picatrix*<sup>170</sup>. At one point Ficino

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<sup>165</sup> *Triplico* 345.

<sup>166</sup> Yates, GBHT, 66.

<sup>167</sup> *Triplico*, 347.

<sup>168</sup> *Triplico* 351, Walker 6 ff.

<sup>169</sup> Florentiae : Impressit ex archetypo Antonius Mischominus, 1489

<sup>170</sup> Attributed to Ghâyat Al-Hakim. Originally an Arabic text, circa 12<sup>th</sup> century, which was thought to contain many dark, demonic secrets. The book was so feared, though well circulated, it was not published until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. When someone was accused of practicing “black magic”, certain texts would be tried with the accused. If the accused was found guilty the texts would be burned with them. Owning the *Picatrix* was almost an admission of guilt. See Peterson, xvii ff, (Yates, GBHT, 49 ff. Kaske (translator and editor of *Triplico*).

warns his reader that stones and metals should be struck and heated, *not* engraved<sup>171</sup>, that is, in order not to violate the second commandment. Then he proceeds to give instruction on engraving metal. Clearly he is aware that he is walking a fine line.

In the progression from the Plotinian/Stoic account to Ficino, magic takes on a greater astrological aspect, as well as a Christian aspect, which Bruno will seek to exorcize, and becomes for Ficino chiefly a form of medicine. Ficino, for example, does not deal directly with prayer as Plotinus did. Ficino is more interested in curing disease.<sup>172</sup> Bruno absorbed these two traditions and ran wild with them. He shares the idea that there is a principle which connects all things in the universe, and that all things are responsive to natural sympathies and antipathies. He absorbs Ficino and Iamblichus' use of images. Yet, he rejects Plotinus' "natural law" approach, Iamblichus' revelations, and Ficino's dependence on the *Spiritus Mundi*. For Bruno, all of these approaches are too passive, he proposes something far more daring.

### 2.3 Bruno's Magic

Although Bruno inherits much from the Platonic/Neo-Platonic tradition, he also sets his own philosophy apart from it. In his typically acerbic manner, he does this by insulting that tradition. He refers to "those who have not studied the matter too deeply, like the Platonists"<sup>173</sup>; later, he simply dismisses them as "the stupid"<sup>174</sup>. Yet, he certainly accepts the Plotinian claims of the organic interconnection of the universe, the notion of a universe

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<sup>171</sup> *Triplico*, 343. There is also, clearly, an alchemical aspect to this art.

<sup>172</sup> He even proposes a cure for the fear of thunder with the appropriate image (337).

<sup>173</sup> *Vinculis*, 150.

<sup>174</sup> *Vinculis*, 166.

permeated with Eros, the concepts of sympathy and antipathy, and action at a distance, and the fact that magic is a natural process embedded in the laws of the universe. Nonetheless, he also considerably veers away from the Plotinian and Ficinian models.

The beginnings of Bruno's magic lay in his assertion of the fundamental coincidence of form and matter. Because the world soul, the "form of forms", is in everything in its entirety, it is possible for anything to become anything else. This is performed by a "spherical" motion by which a body either gains or loses atoms or particles of matter<sup>175</sup>. The act of the magus is to prepare matter to make it susceptible to the desired influence. Bruno's magic involves the directed metamorphosis of all things on an operational level; or, as Ingegno writes, "to transform potency into act, and act into potency"<sup>176</sup>. Everything is included within this realm of controlled mutation and manipulation: "Nothing", Bruno states, "is so insignificant that it could not be the source of great events"<sup>177</sup>.

Bruno does not reject the platonic hierarchies<sup>178</sup> but rather transforms them to fit his radical Copernican cosmology:

God acts on gods, the gods act on celestial or astral bodies .  
.. These act on the spirits who reside in and control the  
stars, one of which is the Earth; the spirits act on the  
elements, the elements on compounds, the compounds on  
the senses, the senses on the soul, and the soul on the whole  
animal<sup>179</sup>.

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<sup>175</sup> *Magia*, 118-119.

<sup>176</sup> *Causa*, xxix.

<sup>177</sup> *Magia*, 111. This appears to be an anticipation of one of the key claims of contemporary "chaos theory".

<sup>178</sup> *contra* Gatti, 1999, 178.

<sup>179</sup> *Magia*, 108.

This is the descending motion of power and action; but it also has a parallel ascending motion:

By contrast, the ascending scale is from the animal through the soul to the senses, through the senses to compounds, through the compounds to elements, through these to spirits, through the spirits in the elements to those in the stars, through these to the incorporeal gods who have an ethereal substance or body, through them to the soul of the world or the spirit of the universe; and through that to the contemplation of the one, most simple, best greatest, incorporeal, absolute and self-sufficient being<sup>180</sup>.

Bruno's language here sounds very Plotinian because it seems to be talking about a hierarchy of ascent and descent. However, Bruno's infinite universe has done away with an important component of the Platonic universe: there is no distinction between celestial and sub-lunary spheres. Like Cusanus, Bruno sees the earth as a "noble star"<sup>181</sup>. He goes beyond Cusanus in his assertion that humans participate in creation as fully as does the divine itself. For Plotinus, contemplation is the highest form of human action, and the magical ascent and descent takes place in a wholly contemplative way; whereas for Bruno contemplation is very emphatically not enough. Bruno's magic is not a model for contemplation. Rather, it is a model for action. By eliminating the subordination of the sub-lunary<sup>182</sup> sphere and equating the divine with the human, Bruno makes action the very consummation of contemplation.

Rather than relegating humans and the earth to an inferior position, Bruno insists that we are part of the continuous spectrum of the cosmos: "At the bottom of the scale is matter, darkness and pure passive potency, which can become all things from the bottom, just as He

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<sup>180</sup> *Magia*, 108.

<sup>181</sup> *De Docta*, 118.

<sup>182</sup> Chapter 4 will deal with Bruno's cosmology, and its consequences, in depth.

can make all things from the top”<sup>183</sup>. Bruno’s philosophy and theory of magic is permeated with the notions of mutation and infinity. Everything is perpetually turning into everything else. God is turning into humans and humans are turning into God. There is no longer any clear division of terrestrial and celestial natures. Mortals appeal to the divine, of course, but the divine also appeals to mortals. The ontological top relies upon the bottom just as much as the bottom relies upon the top.

In *Causa*, Bruno repeatedly states that the distinction between form and matter is a logical one, not an ontologically real one; they are in fact two ways of talking about the same reality<sup>184</sup>. Similarly with cause and principle, being and non-being, divine being and material being. These are merely verbal distinctions<sup>185</sup>: “there is something divine in material [and] something material in the divine”<sup>186</sup>. Matter and form do not differ in absolute potency and absolute act (as Aristotelian science claimed), because reality, for Bruno, is all a simple, singular unity: Matter *is* act<sup>187</sup>. Matter produces forms from inside itself, not from without<sup>188</sup>.

As he does so often, Bruno returns to the coincidence of opposites to inform his philosophy. In *Spaccio*, the coincidence of opposites is given exclusively to Bruno as a gift from the gods, while to Cusanus they bequeath only the solution to the square of the circle<sup>189190</sup>. Despite this symbolic assertion that he is superior to his predecessor, Bruno relies much on Cusanus’ insight, while significantly building upon it. This departure is

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<sup>183</sup> *Magia*, 108.

<sup>184</sup> *Causa*, 36.

<sup>185</sup> *Causa*, 76.

<sup>186</sup> *Causa*, 76.

<sup>187</sup> *Causa*, 79.

<sup>188</sup> *Causa*, 81.

<sup>189</sup> See Chapter three.

<sup>190</sup> *Spaccio*, 221.

important in his theory of magic. For Cusanus, The distance between God and the universe is an impassable, infinite, chasm. It can only be breached by one perfect man: Christ<sup>191</sup>. Thus, Cusanus rejects the world soul of the Platonists as a mediator. Bruno rejects this Christology in turn and restores the world soul, and to the coincidence of matter co-eternal with God. "There is nothing outside of matter or without matter. . . God is matter"<sup>192</sup>. Bruno starts with the absolute primacy of matter which, through its coincidence with the world soul, no longer requires Christ as an intermediary: "[he] no longer required an ontological superior principle to prepare exemplary models to inspire with its action. He thus discovered divinity in their coincidence, a unity which preceded the distinction between the corporeal and the spiritual"<sup>193</sup>. Therefore Cusanus' Christology is replaced in Bruno's schema, by universal animism and Hermeticism. He demonstrates that God needs us as much as we need God. It is the world soul, not Christ, which gives us access to everything else<sup>194</sup>.

Thus, because all humans are incorporated within the world soul, everyone has the potential to manipulate this magical schema. However, in order to achieve this, one must be able to absorb and control the infinite. The perfect magus has achieved this control, and thus epitomizes the perfect human. Bruno summarizes the steps whereby this control of the infinite is attained:

The ladder through which we rise to the principle is composed of seven steps (to which we add two further steps); of these the first is the purgation of the soul, the second is attention, the third intention, the fourth the contemplation of order, the fifth the proportional comparison [of things] from that order, the sixth the negation or separation, the seventh prayer, the eighth the

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<sup>191</sup> *De Docta*, II, ch. viii.

<sup>192</sup> *Vinculus*. 173.

<sup>193</sup> *Ingegno*, xix.

<sup>194</sup> *De Magia*, 130.

transformation of oneself into the thing, the ninth, the transformation of the thing into oneself<sup>195</sup>.

Here, Bruno explains the process of movement from the singular to the infinite and from plurality to perfect unity. This process is simultaneously contemplative and ritualistic; through the cognitive process, the magus is able to transform himself into all things, and all things into himself. This radical metamorphosis is the ultimate goal of Bruno's magic. Ingegno states, quite rightly, that Bruno developed a process to "actualize the infinite" internally; if one can achieve this, then one is the perfect human, and is therefore eligible for access to the infinite<sup>196</sup>.

*Magia* and *Vinculis* both begin with the premise of infinite plurality: "some humans are like fish, others like birds, others like snakes, and still others like reptiles. . . different people have different functions, habits, purposes, inclinations, understandings and eras. . . [some] of moderate station, or noble, or rich, or powerful, or happy, or, indeed even envious or ambitious; or being a soldier or a merchant. . ." <sup>197</sup> In other words, every being in the universe has the potential to be something else. His theory of magic must incorporate every possibility to be effective. Because there are an infinite variety of people, the magus needs an infinite number of bonds in order to be able to bind them all. In this sense, Bruno's philosophy is a philosophy of infinity, and he reiterates this at every stage.

The magus is the ultimate creator. He is a poet, an artist, and a rhetorician of the infinite. We see this concept elucidated in *Imaginum*, where he states that "images are not named for the things that they signify in intention, but for those things from which they have

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<sup>195</sup> *Umbris*, 56.

<sup>196</sup> *Ingegno*, xxviii.

<sup>197</sup> *Vinculis*, 145.



been gathered”<sup>198</sup>. He reinforces this assertion in *Magia*: “these symbols do not have fixed and definite form. Rather, each person, by dictate of his own inspiration or by the impulse of his own spirit, determines his own reactions of desiring or rejecting something”<sup>199</sup>. In the *Spaccio*, Bruno literally rewrites the heavens, not only to create a new meaning, but also to create a new reality<sup>200</sup>. Meaning comes from association and changes when it belongs to a new set. As such, meaning is created by those who create the set or image. This is emphasized again in *Magia*; the magus is the one who can gather the material that gives meaning to the image. And it is the image, the visual, to which he gives primacy<sup>201</sup>. The confusion and misunderstanding of the *Imaginum* can be clarified by understanding Bruno’s theory of magic, as put forth in *Magia*. The magus needs infinite bonds, the *Atria* that he presents in *Imaginum* is a mechanism for generating infinite images, and infinite bonds<sup>202</sup>. The *Atria* are one tool for organizing and creating new images by compiling different sets of parameters. This is key to Bruno’s operative magic.

His treatment of volition or will is one area where Bruno differs from Stoic/Plotinian magic. Magic, as described in “Problems of the Soul (II)” (IV.4), or Ficino’s *Three Books on Life* (though for different reasons), stresses that magic is part of natural law. In this view, magic is a learned behavior obtained from watching natural processes, and so it has no effect on the powers it invokes: it is simply the way of things. In contradiction to this, Bruno makes a distinction between “natural” motions and “preternatural” motions. The former are intrinsic and in harmony with nature, and the later extrinsic and not in harmony with nature.

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<sup>198</sup> *Imaginum*, 31.

<sup>199</sup> *Magia*, 114.

<sup>200</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>201</sup> *Magia*, 168.

<sup>202</sup> See chapter one.

He further divides preternatural into the “structured” (that which is not contrary to nature, yet not natural) and the “violent” (that which is against nature)<sup>203</sup>.

The magus can impose his will on the universe and God because they are of the same nature and composition. Because matter is act, to act is to transform matter. Because Bruno conflates God and the world soul, which exists in its entirety in all things, to act is to fundamentally alter all things, even God. Preternatural magic is in conflict with nature, but not out of reach of the magus, and not inherently wrong or evil. These ideas in particular brought Bruno in conflict with governments, churches, universities, and ultimately the Inquisition<sup>204</sup>. In this respect, his writings were themselves an act of magic, an attempt to influence the reality around him, for by his own definition, the world was itself a structured preternatural act. He saw himself in a battle of magical wills, fighting against a violent preternatural magic. He defends the structured magical system, writing, “whoever is aware of this indissoluble continuity of the soul and its necessary connection to the body will possess an important principle both to control natural things and to understand them better”<sup>205</sup>. His writings on magic are not merely theoretical; they are intended finally to serve as a practice. They have a social, religious, cosmic dimension: they are meant to be acted on<sup>206</sup>.

There is a strong ritual aspect to the theoretical underpinnings of *Magia*. “It is no easier for us to be able to communicate with the spirits than it is for an eagle to converse with a human...” Therefore, entry points such as “signs, signals, figures, symbols, gestures, and

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<sup>203</sup> *Magia*, 118.

<sup>204</sup> Michael White’s *The Pope and the Heretic* provides an excellent account of Bruno’s conflict with the church and the Inquisition.

<sup>205</sup> *Magia*, 116.

<sup>206</sup> Clucas, 2001, 96.

other ceremonies” are needed<sup>207</sup>. This concept can also be found in *Spaccio*, where Isis says that ceremonies are not vain fantasies, but live words that touch the ears of the gods<sup>208</sup>. What are these ceremonies? Songs and rhythms are a powerful form of bonding. In a nod to Pythagoras, Bruno states that harmonies are effective bonds for all beings, including humans. Musical bonds are especially tenacious because, like images, they enter the senses and impress themselves directly on to the soul<sup>209</sup>. Secondly, the effect of songs and rhythms “is brought to completion by an occult murmur which, analogously to the relations between spirits, did not originally come from the binder to the bound for the purpose of bonding”<sup>210</sup>. Those who are enchanted by this method are not always aware of the sounds, and so their senses are not immediately affected (as in the case of the “white noise” that surrounds us every day, to which we pay no attention.) The sounds can also be generated internally through the manipulation of phantasy<sup>211</sup>.

Bruno ties this back into the intrinsic sympathy and antipathy of the universe. The harmonies and rhythms have their power to bind, but so do the instruments themselves. Bruno claims that if a drum made of a deerskin is played next to the drum made of a wolf skin, the former will be silenced, following the natural antipathy of the creatures when alive.<sup>212</sup> The interconnectedness of Bruno’s magical universe extends beyond the ritual level. In the most unlikely places, the laws of interrelatedness still apply; the skins of animals, even after they are dead, still respond to the natural laws that governed them in life. Prayers and petitions work in the same way, in Bruno’s magic, as harmony and rhythm do. This operates

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<sup>207</sup> *Magia*, 115.

<sup>208</sup> *Spaccio*, 237.

<sup>209</sup> *Magia*, 135.

<sup>210</sup> *Magia*, 135.

<sup>211</sup> *Magia*, 135.

<sup>212</sup> In vudun practice, drums are baptized before being played.

on the level of entreaties to the divine, as well as rhetoric. People and gods respond to things that correspond to their disposition<sup>213</sup>.

There is reciprocity in this type of magic which often – or ideally – goes on without the knowledge of those being affected. Binding and being bound form a natural process and every living being is constantly involved in this process. Bruno realizes this is a largely unconscious process for most people. For example, “there are those we dislike without reason as soon as we see them, and also others we love without cause”<sup>214</sup>. Our character, our tendencies, our composition (being equine, porcine, asinine, rich, poor, happy, melancholy, etc.) dictates our own and the gods’ attraction and repulsion to things. The magus exploits these bonds. The key to doing this is by knowing what will affect the person or the power one desires to influence<sup>215</sup>.

Vision is another important entry point into the soul. Images enter through the eyes and act directly on the phantasmic faculty: “there are many things which stealthily pass through the eyes and capture and continuously intrude upon the spirit up to the point of death of the soul, even though they do not cause as much awareness as do less significant things”<sup>216</sup>. Of special significance for Bruno are Egyptian images, particularly hieroglyphics. “Egyptians used these symbols and sounds to converse with the gods to accomplish extraordinary results”<sup>217</sup>. When other forms of writing were developed, he tells us, this led to a tragic loss of memory, of the divine sciences, and of magic<sup>218</sup>, but the Egyptians were capable of using writing systems without compromising their connection to these realms. As

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<sup>213</sup> *Magia*, 135.

<sup>214</sup> *Magia*, 136

<sup>215</sup> *Magia*, 136.

<sup>216</sup> *Magia*, 138.

<sup>217</sup> *Magia*, 114.

<sup>218</sup> *Magia*, 115.

in the *Spaccio*, he tells us that the Egyptians could penetrate divinity, whereas their descendents (Greeks, Catholics, etc.) could only stand in awe of the trappings of God<sup>219</sup>. Bruno's insistence on the sacredness of the Egyptian language and hieroglyphics<sup>220</sup> is reminiscent of the *Asclepius* and the lament of Hermes<sup>221</sup>. What Bruno found so significant about hieroglyphics was primarily their ancient heritage but also that they were representations of natural objects: plants, animals, and so on. This, he believed, was the natural timeless language of the gods: "You know that animals and plants are living effects of Nature; this Nature (as you must know) is none other than God in things . . . diverse living things represent diverse divinities and diverse powers . . . whence all of God is in all things"<sup>222</sup>. The Egyptian writing system was superior because it depicted those "things," and the permeation of the gods through them. The magus employs these images, symbols, ceremonies, and sounds to make his desires known to the gods: "there can be communication between us and certain types of spirits only by the use of certain signs, signals, figures, symbols, and other ceremonies. The magician, especially when using the kind of magic which is called 'theurgy', can hardly accomplish anything without such sounds and symbols"<sup>223</sup>. This is what allows symbols to be effective. They are not random, but rather the actual language of the gods and the world spirit.

We have seen how Bruno views the senses of hearing and vision. But we must remember that in his psychology of magic, imagination is the "sense of senses." The

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<sup>219</sup> *Spaccio*, 247.

<sup>220</sup> The fascination with hieroglyphics was something of a craze around Bruno's time. The early 17<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit polymath, Athanasius Kircher, felt that he could intuit their meanings and made several "translations" of Egyptian obelisks in Rome. One wonders whether he may have been inspired by Bruno.

<sup>221</sup> *Hermetica*. Trans. Brian P. Copenhaver. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992.

<sup>222</sup> CH, 235.

<sup>223</sup> *Magia*, 115.

imagination can be bound in two ways: first, through free creative choice, as by a poet, painter, musician, storyteller or those who combine images; secondly, without conscious choice such as by an outside agent. These agents can be human, and may use images to manipulate the imagination, or a spirit or demon that acts on the imagination while the person is sleeping<sup>224</sup>.

This agency is not merely medical or material, he writes, nor demonic, but rather a cooperation all three. The results are mutual: “certain souls bring certain bodies into existence, and certain bodies bring certain souls into existence”<sup>225</sup>. Here we begin to see the key to Bruno’s magic, which he will develop more fully in *Vinculis*:

Since the senses happen to be bound and obligated in all these ways, magic and medicine must pay very special attention to the workings of imagination. For this is the doorway and the entrance for all actions and passions and feelings of animals. And to that linkage is tied the more profound power of thought<sup>226</sup>.

By thought, Bruno literally means reality: how we experience the world. Through accessing the imagination – or phantasy – belief is created. This is how we compose our reality: “all practitioners of magic, medicine and prophecy produce no results without pre-given faith, and unless they act according to the rules of faith”<sup>227</sup>. This insistence of Bruno on the power of belief or persuasion is found to be increasingly relevant to modern western medicine.

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<sup>224</sup> *Magia*, 139.

<sup>225</sup> *Magia*, 140.

<sup>226</sup> *Vinculis*, 141.

<sup>227</sup> *Vinculis*, 141.

Physicians still regularly rely on faith in the form of the so-called “placebo effect”;<sup>228</sup> if a patient does not believe she will get better, she will not.

Thus, the primary tool of the physician—the magus, the priest, and even Christ—is faith<sup>229</sup>. They are all powerless to act without it. “All physical changes originate from the powers which are prior to thought and which are its principal and efficient causes”<sup>230</sup>. Those “powers” which are “prior to thought” are contained within the faculty of phantasy. Those who fail at medicine, magic, prophecy, or miracles, do so because they have the inability to affect phantasy: “The reason for their lack of power lies in the imagination they cannot bind”<sup>231</sup>. This is not a cynical, secular humanist view of religion. Nor is it an anachronistic sociological view of the phenomenon of religion. Bruno, rather, sees religion as a means of social control (as he does magic as well) but not in the same way that Marx did. Bruno was a very religious individual, but he writes about religion from the standpoint of the magus. Bruno realized that fundamentally, everything depends upon an act of faith – and that faith is inherently manipulable. Furthermore, because gods are part of the spectrum of faith, in Bruno’s magical logic, gods can also be manipulated. For Bruno, everything in the universe is connected by the World Soul – it exists in every single part of the universe, in its entirety – and as such, God is in everything because God is world soul<sup>232</sup>. This, in a nutshell, is Bruno’s hermeticism. He insists repeatedly that God is the fullness of all things, and God

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<sup>228</sup> See for example Anne Harrington *The Placebo Effect: an Interdisciplinary Exploration*, David B. Morris “Placebo, Pain, and Belief: a Biocultural Model”, et al.

<sup>229</sup> *De Magia Mathematica*, 8; Matt 17:19-20.

<sup>230</sup> *Vinculis*, 142.

<sup>231</sup> *Vinculis*, 141.

<sup>232</sup> *Causa*, 38 ff.

exists in all things<sup>233</sup>. God is not a hypostasis inferior to the world soul; God does not participate in the world soul, as claimed by Plotinus. The infinite, material universe is God.

Where God and humans differ in the hermetic logic, is in the faculty of choice; God cannot choose to be less than God, but what makes humans amazing is that they have the ability to be greater, or lesser, than themselves<sup>234</sup>. Bruno takes that hermetic idea a step further, and in a unique point of difference, he insists that gods are subject to humans, even more so than humans are subject to gods. Humans need gods, but humans are the ones who are capable of acting, while gods are not capable of acting. So, Gods need humans more. In the *Spaccio*, Gods are subject to the moral laws of humans (and ultimately, it being Bruno's text, they are subject to the laws of Bruno.) Likewise, in *Vinculis* and *Magia*, the gods are not to be honored as much as they are to be pitied, because they are essentially limited by those laws<sup>235</sup>. This is a key concept, which clearly links Bruno to the hermetic tradition. The human function can play with the laws, and as such, for Bruno and the hermeticists, humans have the potential to be gods. Bruno's magic has some basis in Plotinus', but also expands on that earlier system. For Plotinus and Ficino, magic is subject to natural law; for Bruno, the magus is co-creator of the law.

Here is Bruno's most biting critique of Luther's doctrine of *sola fides*. In Luther's mind, the only means of salvation is through grace which is grasped by faith. Bruno turns this on its head by claiming that anyone – doctor, magus, or prophet – can create faith. It is not an unadulterated, direct link between the believer and God: it is a tool for manipulating reality by those who know how. It is simply a means of creating bonds. That is certainly an

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<sup>233</sup> E.g. *Causa* 42, 44, 63.

<sup>234</sup> Cf. Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni. *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, 3.

<sup>235</sup> *Spaccio* 25, see also *Asclepius* 69.



important act, "indeed, great results are produced by those bonds which come from the words of men of eloquence, by which a certain disposition arises and flourishes in the imagination, which is the only entrance for all internal feelings and is the bond of bonds"<sup>236</sup>. In Bruno's reformation, faith is not a rarefied and passive connection with God; it is rather an active human creation, and a very positive one.

Demons, too, have direct access to the faculty of phantasy. The demonology laid out by Bruno in *De Magia* owes a debt to both Iamblichus' *De Mysterii*, and to Agrippa, especially his *De occulta philosophia*<sup>237</sup>. He defines various types and characteristics of these different layers of life which populate the infinite universe.<sup>238</sup> Bruno ties his demonology back into his theory of the faculty of phantasy, which is the primary human faculty, "the sense of senses"<sup>239</sup>. Like images and songs, demons have the ability to impress themselves directly onto our imagination. Just as in *Imaginum*, Bruno quotes Synesius the Platonist: "while awake, a human being is wise, but God Himself makes him a participant of Himself while the man is asleep, which opinion we adopt for demonstrating the worth of the phantastic or imaginative life"<sup>240</sup>.

At this point, we can introduce a clearer definition of Bruno's magic: our experience of reality is found in our thoughts. Thought is buttressed by faith; thought is predicated by phantasy; phantasy is accessed through the senses with ritual, songs, rhythms, and most importantly, images. Gods, demons, spirits and humans, all of which are interlinked, are bound together by phantasy.

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<sup>236</sup> *Magia*, 141.

<sup>237</sup> Yates, 1964, 200-201.

<sup>238</sup> Bruno also assumed that the universe was filled with planets populated with life. Cusanus also assumed that there were sun people and moon people etc.

<sup>239</sup> *Imaginum*, 40.

<sup>240</sup> *Magia*, 44-5.

In the *Asclepius*, humans are linked to the gods because we create. He uses this Hermetic structure and takes it one step further: for Bruno, we are linked to the gods because we imagine. The greatest act of imagination is the control of reality, and this is what Bruno intends. And now we must turn to *De Vinculis* to see how this is accomplished.

## 2.4 Of Bonds in General

*De Vinculis in Genere* is Bruno's most complete and succinct theory of magic. Stylistically, it is unlike most of Bruno's work; it is clear and concise. Still, there is no doubt about the authorship: like all his work, it is unedited, and in fact, ends in mid-sentence. This is one of Bruno's last works, and remarkably there has been little study of it. The only published version of the work translated into English<sup>241</sup> is accompanied by two other writings by Bruno; and in the introduction to that volume, Ingegno deals with *De Vinculis* only briefly. Couliano gives the book its most extensive treatment<sup>242</sup>. Yates does surprisingly little with it; De Leon-Jones makes a single reference to it<sup>243</sup>; and Saiber and Calcagno ignore it completely. The list of scholarly neglect goes on. And yet, as Couliano puts it, *De Vinculis* "is one of those little known works whose importance in the history of ideas far outstrips that of more famous ones"<sup>244</sup>.

The work is quite short; it runs only 31 pages in its English translation, and it reads almost like an instruction manual, or a user's guide to an appliance. Higgins said of *Imaginum* that it read like lecture notes<sup>245</sup>, but his comment would be much more appropriate

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<sup>241</sup> Translated by Blackwell.

<sup>242</sup> Couliano, 87, ff.

<sup>243</sup> De Leon-Jones, 154.

<sup>244</sup> Couliano, 89.

<sup>245</sup> *Imaginum*, 284 n.1.

in describing *De Vinculis*. It is written in carefully numbered bullet points, and is one of the clearest articulations of Bruno's theory of magic. The questions of this work are, "what is bond?" "Who binds?" and "who – or what – is bound?" At the beginning of both *Magia* and *Vinculis*, many kinds of people are described: rich, poor, reptilian, fishy, happy, ambitious, and so on. Likewise, there are many kinds of bonding agents: gods, demons, souls, animals, nature, chance, luck and fate<sup>246</sup>. The bonds exist because a certain force resides in them and emanates from them; this is "the hand which binds"<sup>247</sup>. These bonds perform a number of functions. They structure matter; they make seeds grow; they attract and influence all things. Art, for example, binds "the dimwitted" who see only the object, not the craft (Ovid, "Keep the art secret"<sup>248</sup>). There is no single, absolute bond; and many bonds work at once. Some bonds are so strong that they can blind one from pain, such as the martyrs' bond to faith, which makes them immune to torture<sup>249</sup>. However, the same bond does not work on all people. Everyone is attracted to beauty and goodness, but these concepts are different for everyone, and therefore the magus must adapt the bonds for each individual and each separate occasion.

The one who bonds must have an understanding of all things: the nature, inclinations, habits, uses and purposes of the things they are to bind. As pointed out previously, Bruno creates the *atria* in *Imaginum*, for the purpose of generating infinite bonds that will tap into all these things. The more skilled one is, the more bonds one can create, and the more one can bind. So the bonds must tap into things such as inclinations and nature, which are inner qualities. These bonds, however, are not merely in the mind; they also exist in the body.

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<sup>246</sup> *Vinculis*, 145.

<sup>247</sup> *Vinculis*, 146.

<sup>248</sup> *Art of Love*, Book II, xvi

<sup>249</sup> *Vinculis*, 147.

They are physical in nature, and as such, they involve desire: “The complete nature of the bond is not just in the object itself, but also in an equally important place: the one who is bound”<sup>250</sup>. Yet, just as Bruno, through the coincidence of opposites, collapses the distinctions between form and matter, cause and principle, etc.; the bonds are both physical, which act on the body, and non-physical both, ultimately act upon phantasy. The divine cannot be separated from its own manifestation; matter cannot be separated from act. The bonds are “real”, physical, and tangible, but Bruno sees no separation between the physical and non-physical; they are two ways of describing the same thing and they operate simultaneously on both aspects of reality, because the dichotomy of form and matter is ultimately merely an illusion.

The strongest bonds are forged toward things we desire, and that desire is both intrinsic in the attractive aspects of the object, and also created by the one who desires. This desire does not always lead to action. For example, a hungry person desires her favorite dish; the goodness is inherent in the food itself, if it is of quality, but it is also contingent upon the condition of the person. If she is not hungry, she will not be bound by that food. The magus must be aware of the condition in order to bind.

Bruno is unusually practical in *Vinculis*, in that he actually explains the physical attributes of bonds. They have to have certain colours, qualities, quantities; much like a good recipe. In a clear nod towards Pythagoras, for example, Bruno notes that in the bonding of sounds, order equals the rising and falling of notes; the measure equals the thirds, the fifths, the fourths, the tones and semitones; the type equals the harmony, the softness and the

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<sup>250</sup> *Vinculis*, 151.

clarity<sup>251</sup>. The soul, through its bonding agents, reaches out to the enjoyment of other souls, to which it becomes attached and united. The soul reaches out to everything, and as such, everything is “ensouled”.

However, the bonds that attract us to things are, for the most part, unknown to us. “It is not true that...the power of bonding is derived from what is good rather than from the opinion of what is good; nor is it derived from a known rather than a hidden cause”<sup>252</sup>. Bonds are partly determined by our nature (he includes here, such aspects as gender, species, and age), and partly by disposition or accidents (social status, wealth, education, and arts). These bonding agents are internal. There are also external bonding agents (such as chance, good fortune, opportunity, arbitrary or planned encounters,) and so on<sup>253</sup>. We are bound both by the “real” and the “imaginary. We love things of which we have no experience, or which we know only through hearsay. In other words, we have profound attachments to abstract notions, for example a nation or a people, since “fantasy and opinion bind more than reason. The former are stronger than the latter”<sup>254</sup>. A solid object is not a prerequisite for bonding, nor is it even desirable, since bonds of the imagination are much more potent.

Bruno uses the analogy of capturing a fortress to describe the act of bonding. It is much easier to accomplish with the aid of a traitor inside. Creating bonds relies on such treachery. As with any successful military campaign, the movement of bonding must be predicted ahead of time. “The opportunity must be quickly seized when it presents itself,

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<sup>251</sup> *Vinculis*, 151.

<sup>252</sup> *Vinculis*, 153.

<sup>253</sup> *Vinculis*, 153.

<sup>254</sup> *Vinculis*, 152.

such that he who can bind will act and bind as soon as possible”<sup>255</sup>. The “invader” must act quickly. “Never hesitate”, he maintains, when the opportunity arises to bind.

The step-by-step process of bonding, as outlined in *De Vinculis*, is described by Bruno as follows:

The bonding agent does not unite a soul to himself unless he has captured it; it is not captured unless it has been bound; he does not bind it unless he joins himself to it; he does not join it unless he has approached it; he has not approached it unless he has moved; he has not moved unless he is attracted; he is not attracted until he has been inclined towards or turned away; he is not inclined towards until he desires or wants; he does not desire unless he knows; he does not know unless the object contained in a species or an *image* is presented to the eyes or the ears or the gaze of the internal senses<sup>256</sup>.

It is helpful to read this quote backwards to follow its logic. The reverse process is as follows: the image is presented to the senses. The image creates desire. There is no inclination towards want until the image is presented. The inclination towards desire causes the object to turn towards or away. This causes the object to be moved and to approach. This causes the person who is bound to be joined, and then to be captured, and then to be united to the soul itself. As in *De Umbris*, Bruno outlines a very specific process for the performance of magic; the magus transforms himself into all things with the ultimate goal of transforming all things into himself<sup>257</sup>.

The bonding agent does not have to be human. This process goes on continuously in nature. Bruno is adamant that everything is ensouled, even inanimate objects. A soul is

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<sup>255</sup> *Vinculis*, 154.

<sup>256</sup> *Vinculis*, 154-155; my emphasis.

<sup>257</sup> *Umbris*, 56.

required to maintain their continued being<sup>258</sup>. Consequently, any existent has the power to bind. In *Vinculis*, however, Bruno is concerned principally with the human operation of binding.

In order to effect a transformation, the magus must be able to penetrate the phantasy of those whom he wishes to bind. This brings us to the three points of access to the soul: hearing, vision and imagination or phantasy<sup>259</sup> which enable the magus to enter, join and bind. As the “hunter of souls”<sup>260</sup> the magus must be admitted through one of these three “gates.” Through suitable sounds (such as music or words,) gestures, or images, the magus is able to bind. Once inside, the magus is able to join, then to bond, and finally to attract. Bruno uses sexual images again and again, since sexuality is such a powerful bond. The magus and the wooing lover are essentially involved in the same process. Bruno is fully aware, however, that if the sexual union is consummated, the bond is broken. Think of the earlier example of the hungry person: if the person is sated, then there is no desire, and without desire, there is no bond<sup>261</sup>. Therefore an erotic tension must be maintained:

Ejaculation of semen releases the bonds, whereas its retention strengthens them. He who wishes to enchain is obliged to develop the same emotions as he who must be bound. That is why, when we are over-heated at banquets or after banquets, Cupid invades us. Look: continence is the beginning of bondage, abstinence precedes hunger, and hunger leads to victuals<sup>262</sup>.

Eros, for Bruno is the strongest bond. Since desire is such an integral part of binding, the magus must be able to understand with the desires and inclinations of his subjects, but at the

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<sup>258</sup> *Causa*, 44.

<sup>259</sup> *Vinculis*, 155.

<sup>260</sup> *Vinculis*, 153.

<sup>261</sup> *Vinculis*, 164.

<sup>262</sup> *Op Lat.* 645 Couliano's translation. This is clearer than Blackwell's translation of 171.

same time, if he should fall victim to these desires, he himself will be bound. Therefore, the magus must empathize, but also be without desire. Walker adds that Bruno made a remarkable attempt to evolve a technique, explicitly based on sexual attraction, for global emotional control<sup>263</sup>. In Bruno's magic, he who understands the logic of love can manipulate others with great ease, for "love, like all emotions, is a practical form of knowledge . . . reason is no greater than love"<sup>264</sup>.

Bruno calls love the "great demon, for this bond is indeed the entire substance, constitution, and (if I may say so) hypostasis of things. We come to know the greatest and most important bond when we turn our eyes to the order of the universe"<sup>265</sup>. The most powerful bond is of Eros: "all bonds are either reduced to the bond of love, depend on the bond of love, or are based on the bond of love"<sup>266</sup>. It is a powerful statement to claim that Eros is the entire "hypostasis of things". Bruno's magic is, ultimately, a rejection of transcendence. There is a radical immanence present in Bruno's pantheism. The key to that immanence, and thus the ultimate power of the magus, is not Cusanus' mediating Christology, nor Plotinus' impersonal laws of influence, nor Ficino's talismanic magic. For Bruno, the key is seduction.

By the bond of seduction, "higher things take care of lower things, lower things are turned towards higher ones, equals associate with each other and lastly, the perfection of the universe is revealed in the knowledge of its form"<sup>267</sup>. In other words, the universe is essentially erotic. Since the universe is defined by its interconnected nature, for Bruno, our

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<sup>263</sup> Walker, 82-83.

<sup>264</sup> *Vinculis*, 163.

<sup>265</sup> *Vinculis*, 171.

<sup>266</sup> *Vinculis*, 165.

<sup>267</sup> *Vinculis*, 170-171.



social experience is a group phenomenon infused with Eros. This is why he states that it is easier to bond several people than to bond only one<sup>268</sup>. Erotic bonds infuse public affairs, but by the same token, without Eros, there can be no bond; therefore bonding is most naturally a public affair, involving masses of people. For example, the founders of religions were able to create bonds with the imagination of the masses to arouse in them feelings and beliefs they would not have had naturally. So, the bond must pass through the senses. But keep in mind, these are merely gateways to the main conduit for all magical processes, which, as we have seen, is phantasy.

As we have noted, if an existent has no desire, it cannot be bound, and Bruno advises the magi to lose all their desire in order to escape the possibility of being bound themselves. However, there is an ethical dimension at work here as well. If he is freed of desire, the manipulator, i.e. the magus, will not abuse his power; rather than simply taking advantage of people, he will move naturally toward the good.<sup>269</sup> To accomplish this state, the Magus must first perform magic on himself. The bond enters the mind, then transforms the soul, and from there transforms nature and matter. "Thus, it is said that Jupiter was transformed into a bull, Apollo into a shepherd, Saturn into a horse, and the other gods into other forms. Likewise the soul is transformed by the motion or disturbance of its feelings from one form and type of bond to another"<sup>270</sup>. Once again, Bruno makes the Hermetic parallel that humans are like the gods. As such, even the gods are subject to metamorphosis. Rather than being a sign of corruption, mutation is the natural order of things – from the highest to the lowest levels of existence.

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<sup>268</sup> *Vinculis*, 168.

<sup>269</sup> This is how Bruno differs from Machiavelli, who created a schema of mass control designed to accomplish one's own goals.

<sup>270</sup> *Vinculis*, 175.

The bond, Bruno tells us, “consists of a mutual orientation between captor and captive”<sup>271</sup>, since the magus creates and manipulates Eros. Once again, the nature of the bond is overtly erotic. Eros plays a key role in the evolution of Bruno’s pneumatic magic from Ficino’s astral magic:

Though aware of the syndrome *amor heroes* and its fatal consequences and of the physician’s importance in curing it, Ficino neglects the aspect of the production of Eros, whose cause he considers transcendental. On the other hand, Bruno concerns himself particularly with the possibility of erotic manipulation of the individual and the masses. Ficino describes a phenomenon of hypnosis that occurs spontaneously during the *natural* manifestation of the emotion of love; Bruno concerns himself particularly with *directed* hypnosis, active and voluntary, *upon* an individual or collective subject – hypnosis whose rules of production trace to those of spontaneous love<sup>272</sup>.

Couliano’s account is persuasive. For him Bruno represents a giant leap forward in the chain of magical thought; he is influenced by Ficino and Plotinus, but does not simply copy their ideas, and instead uses them as starting points to build his own physics of magic. Whereas his predecessors saw magic as a manipulation of natural processes, Bruno extends that idea in saying that humans can manipulate, but can also create those processes themselves.

Thus in Bruno’s magic absolutely everything contains the fullness of the world soul and thus, contains everything *in potentia*. Since every thing is potentially everything else, metamorphosis is not merely a possibility; it is in fact the natural order of things. Nothing can escape the inter-subjective nature of the universe. The magus, “the hunter of souls,” enters through the gates, and then manipulates phantasy through sounds, images, gestures

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<sup>271</sup> *Vinculis*, 166.

<sup>272</sup> Couliano, 107.

and arts to create a new reality. Behind all magical acts, faith is required, and this must be fostered to have success in any magical, religious, or medical act. The magi must rid themselves of desire in order to become the master of Eros, and in order to escape being bound themselves. The key to magical action is the understanding and manipulation of erotic bonds. This is done through the creation and manipulation of images which control the faculty of phantasy.

Now that we have established a more thorough account of Bruno's physics of magic, we have the necessary tools to approach such writings as *Spaccio*, which can be seen in this context as itself a grand act of magic. Making use of the control of images to manipulate phantasy as described in *Magia* and *Vinculis*, *Spaccio* suggests that reality can be controlled on a mass scale. In order to enter the phantasy of as many people as possible, and as effectively as possible, Bruno maintains that it is necessary to create and control an infinite number of images. The perfect human, the perfect magus, is the one who can raise himself to incorporate this infinity. At this level Bruno's theory of magic is intricately linked with his theory of ethics and a social program<sup>273</sup>. Magic for Bruno comes to fruition in social reform. The program was essentially elitist and involuntary since only the select few, the magi, among whom Bruno numbered himself, could be expected to create a reality for the people. Those who have rid themselves of desire, and therefore the capability of being themselves bound and corrupted, should take upon them the task of shepherding the rest through the creation of bonds leading towards the good.

One of the most amazing aspects of *Vinculis* is its tone. The object of the book is to provide a completely amoral guide to manipulate masses of people. It does contain

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<sup>273</sup> See Chapter 3 for Bruno's ethics.

something of an ethical dimension, in that the manipulator should have pure intentions, by ridding themselves of desire, but beyond that it is a handbook of control for those who have the power to do so. Couliano makes a useful comparison between *De Vinculis* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*<sup>274</sup>; the latter being a heavy handed attempt to create a police state based on fear, and the former being a more subtle form of control using Eros. Bruno's is a system based on creating the total illusion. If even the night sky is manipulable, the manipulator has ultimate power. As potentially amoral as he sounds, he builds in an ethical stopgap; non-attachment. As we mentioned before, separation of the self from desire is the means by which the magus directs himself toward a natural good rather than selfish goals. Bruno is unexpectedly optimistic here; in his view, if one can transcend petty desires, one will naturally drift toward right action<sup>275</sup>.

This is why these two works are so important to the understanding of Bruno. Yet *Magia* and *Vinculis* have been woefully overlooked within the field of Bruno scholarship, partly because there is such a resistance within academia to acknowledge "the M-word" at face value<sup>276</sup>. Scholars such as Gatti and Sturlese have gone to great lengths to strip Bruno's writings of any magical element, with the net result of radically misrepresenting his purpose. *Magia* and *Vinculis* must be duly considered because they give us a clearer understanding of Bruno's worldview.

The brain trusts of the system laid out in these works are the advertisers, the political machines, the media of our own present reality; these are the organizations that now create

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<sup>274</sup> Couliano, 121.

<sup>275</sup> *Vinculis*, 164.

<sup>276</sup> Professor Clucas agrees with this assessment on the importance of *Magia* and *Vinculis* (personal correspondence, August 2006).

our images<sup>277</sup>. They are the ones who understand that to appeal directly to our phantasy, is to control our reality. We live in the most image-laden culture in history. We uncritically accept images on a daily basis through television, billboards, and the Internet. Nonetheless, beyond the study of aesthetics, we are lacking a comprehensive understanding of the influence of images; and quite remarkably, Bruno gives us one. He provides a concise explanation of how images can control people's reality, a point that is proven every time a shopper responds to a brand logo. He also provides an apparently amoral, but ultimately ethical set of guidelines for their use.

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<sup>277</sup> cf. Couliano 105.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Hermetic Ethics: *Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, Ethics, Social Reform, and the Application of Images**

“We live in an empire ruled not by kings or even presidents, but by images.”

(Bordo, 144).

“Poets indeed, never philosophers, have so described and introduced the gods”

(*Spaccio*, 91-2)

Through the careful study of *On the Composition of Images, Signs and Ideas, Magia*, and *Vinculum*, we can foster an understanding of Bruno’s mechanics for creating magical images, and of the importance he attaches to the faculty of phantasy. At his syncretistic best, Bruno combines Hermeticism, Neo-Platonism, memory systems, mythology, philosophy, theology, and magic in this endeavor to create complex images of power. Though he is seldom considered in this light, Bruno should be counted amongst the radical reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He was not a Thomas Muntzer<sup>278</sup> leading a peasant army under a rainbow banner; however, he clearly thought himself capable of overcoming the Catholic Protestant

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<sup>278</sup> A fiery German radical reformer (1489- 1525) who was executed after helping to lead an unsuccessful peasant rebellion.

divide by introducing a Hermetic superstructure into Christianity. His intent was not only to heal the rift in Christianity, but also to propel it forward by reaching into the distant, Hermetic past.

*The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*<sup>279</sup> (*Spaccio de la bestia triofante*, here after *Spaccio*) is one of Bruno's longest and most interestingly synthetic works. It is a treatise on virtues and vices, a social satire, an attack on both Catholic and Protestant Christianity—though the Calvinists are singled out for the most scorn. It is also comedy that mocks the Greco-Roman pantheon, a political treatise, and much more. It is Bruno's most comprehensive work on ethics<sup>280</sup> and social reform which derives from, and reinforces, his philosophy. This reform takes place on the level of the image: images in the minds of gods, images as they are projected onto the heavens by the gods (and their various personalities), and their effect on the universe. At a more immediate level, he addresses how the celestial images are perceived by humans and others (in Bruno's conception of the infinite universe, there were infinite worlds populated by other beings, some superior and some inferior to humans), and their effect on us personally, socially, and spiritually. But for Bruno, this was all part of the same schema. For him, the human and divine worlds were interconnected and interdependent, connected by the infinite *vinculi*, manipulable bonds which connect all things.

Bruno, like Ficino, saw an unbroken line of transmission of wisdom from ancient times to the present<sup>281</sup>. Though Zoroaster and Hermes jostled for first place in the reception

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<sup>279</sup> London: J. Charlewood, 1584, anonymously translated into English in 1713. Imetri gives an interesting account of the background fortunes of this translation (21-23)

<sup>280</sup> He wrote two other works on ethics: *Heroic Frenzies* (*De gl' heroici furori*) published in 1585 London: J. Charlewood. And the *Cabala of Pegasus* (*Cabala del cavallo Pegaseo*) published in 1585 London: J. Charlewood.

<sup>281</sup> *Cena*, 85-86.

of this original wisdom, the chronology was generally presented as follows: Hermes Trismegistus (“The prince of Egyptian priests”), Zoroaster, Orpheus, his disciple Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, Philolaus, and his disciple Plato<sup>282</sup>. Through this line was carried the *prisca theologia*: the most ancient, and therefore the truest, theology. What Bruno perceived was a corruption of the message over time, and the cure was to return to the most ancient sources, which for him were “Egyptian”, that is Hermetic: for Bruno the two were synonymous<sup>283</sup>. In fact, as I will argue, *Spaccio* can be read as a companion piece to the Hermetic text the *Asclepius*. It is structurally and thematically similar, and Bruno alludes constantly to the Hermetic work. *Spaccio* is also a response to the *Asclepius*, in particular to Hermes’ lament and prophecy of the fall and reemergence of the ancient, “true” religion. In *Spaccio*, Bruno sees that prophecy coming to fruition in his work.

### 3.1 Synopsis

*Spaccio* is a dialogue consisting of ten parts: an “Explanatory Epistle” followed by three dialogues with three sections each. The dialogue takes place in the Olympian heavens and is narrated by an earthly Sophia to a mortal, named Saulino. The principle characters are Jove, Momus the god of mockery and criticism, and patron of writers and poets, who was banished for his criticism of the gods, but Bruno who has invited back into the heavens because of his frankness. Momus is clearly Bruno’s voice. The other characters are Mercury (“A most wise

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<sup>282</sup> Ficino, *Théologie*, XVII, i.

<sup>283</sup> Hermes Trismegistus often appears in Bruno’s writings (e.g. *Spaccio*, 238) and is clearly identified as the most representative source of ancient Egyptian religion.



Egyptian<sup>284</sup>), and Sophia. As the subtitle informs us, the narration is recorded by the Nolan<sup>285</sup>. The dialogue begins with Jove announcing to the assembled gods that that he has hijacked the feast of Gigantomachy (honoring the gods' victory over the Titans), in order to establish reform of both the gods and the heavens. He explains that it was necessary to take over the feast since if he had called a council meeting, few would have attended, so degenerate and corrupt have the gods become.

The aged and infirm Jove has been meditating for one year on his past actions and concluded that his life, and those of the other gods, has been wicked, sinful, debauched, and vile. Their crimes and misdeeds have been vainly imposed on the heavens in the form of constellations. They have turned the heavens into an altar to worship their own immorality and to celebrate their wickedness. The heavens have been filled with images of "filthy" animals, war, violence, rape, and avarice. Ursa Major, for example, with its "claws of destruction"<sup>286</sup>, was put in the sky by Jove to remind us of his infidelity to Juno. Worse still, "You [Jove] have placed that ugly, huge animal in the very part of the sky which sailors consult during the course of their devious and uncertain sea voyages"<sup>287</sup> and in fact the pole star, so useful for sailors, marks the bear's anus. Bruno is pointing out an inversion of a divine order of the cosmos. What should be holiest, the zenith, somehow became debased, and therefore in need of reconsecration.

Jove proposes that the gods first reform themselves and then reform the heavens by replacing the negative images with positive ones. "Come now, come now oh gods!"

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<sup>284</sup> *Spaccio*, 238.

<sup>285</sup> "Proposed by Jove, Achieved by the Council, Revealed by Mercury, Narrated by Sophia, Heard by Saulino, Recorded by the Nolan"

<sup>286</sup> *Spaccio*, 121.

<sup>287</sup> *Spaccio*, 120.

pronounces Jove “Let there be expelled from the heavens these ghosts, statues, figures, images, portraits, recitations, and histories of our avarice, lusts, thefts, disdains, spites and shames . . . Let us prepare our selves, I say, first in the heaven which intellectually is within us, and then in this sensible one which corporeally presents itself before our eyes”<sup>288</sup>. This will, in turn, transform the worlds below.

The banquet then becomes a divine courtroom in which each sign of the zodiac and thirty-six other constellations are put on trial. If the image is deemed noble and worthy, it is allowed to keep its seat in the heavens; though very few pass the test, the rest are banished and replaced. Scorpio, “That infernal worm”<sup>289</sup>, who causes cruel death and symbolizes Fraud, Deception and Betrayal, is replaced by Sincerity, Observance of Faith, and Execution of promises. Perseus and Hercules are both banished for being Jove’s illegitimate sons, for their cruel deeds and for obeying Jove’s folly. Both of them, as are many of the old images, are sent down to Earth to perform good deeds. Perseus and Hercules are charged with slaying new monsters that are awakening. Bruno has the Calvinists in his sights here. Immediately preceding the new charge given to these heroes, Bruno devotes several pages to the errors of the Calvinists who Momus calls “that idle sect of pedants, who, without doing good, according to natural and divine law, consider themselves and want to be considered religious men. . . Behold, oh Gods, if there ever existed a ribaldry more open than this”<sup>290</sup>. And later “they are the worse than maggots, sterile locusts, and those harpies who did no good . . . and impeded those who worked”<sup>291</sup>. Bruno put supreme importance on works, and

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<sup>288</sup> *Spaccio*, 115.

<sup>289</sup> *Spaccio*, 233.

<sup>290</sup> *Spaccio*, 124.

<sup>291</sup> *Spaccio*, 126.

despised the reliance on faith alone and the emphasis on predestination which seemed to rob mortals of free will<sup>292</sup>.

After leaving Italy, Bruno initially went to Geneva in 1579, hoping to find sanctuary. His stay there did not last long as he was expelled from the city for his lectures on the errors of Aristotle. He was also forced out of his teaching position in Helmstedt in 1588, when Calvinists took control of the university from the Lutherans. Throughout his writings his grudge against the Calvinists is very overt.

So in turn, all the celestial images come forward and are evaluated. Though Jove is the final Judge, it is Momus, the voice of Bruno, poet and master of imagination who is the crown prosecutor, as it were, and speaks the most. Each constellation pleads their case for retaining a seat in the heavens. The various gods attempt to champion the images associated with them, for the most part unsuccessfully. Thus the heavens are purged and reformed one image (i.e. constellation) at a time. Finally the gods celebrate with a highly symbolic banquet. The gods remove the final constellation, Pisces, and have it cooked for their meal ("with a Roman Sauce"<sup>293</sup>). The fish, of course, is a symbol of Christ. It seems clear that Bruno is signaling that his Reformation is the end of the Christian era.

The style of the work deserves note. Imerti writes that *Spaccio* "with its tropology, its grammatical and factual inconsistencies, its circumlocutions, its prolixity, its diffuseness, its digressiveness, its excessive use of Latinisms and dialecticisms, furnishes us with sufficient evidence to assume that Bruno made only the most superficial revision of his writing once his thoughts were penned"<sup>294</sup>. This is not an entirely unfair observation and

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<sup>292</sup> *Spaccio*, 125.

<sup>293</sup> *Spaccio*, 272.

<sup>294</sup> *Spaccio*, 22.

could be applied to much of his work. Yet there is some element of his style which conforms to his philosophy; a philosophy which attempted to understand and incorporate the infinite. Bruno writes not so much with sentences as with webs. He incorporates lists, images, geometrical diagrams, mathematical formulae, technology, and experiments in physics, to give but a few examples. His prose style is based on listing, for example:

God acts on gods, the gods act on celestial or astral bodies .  
. . These act on the spirits who reside in and control the  
stars, one of which is the Earth; the spirit act on the  
elements, the elements on compounds, the compounds on  
the senses, the senses on the soul, and the soul on the whole  
animal<sup>295</sup>.

Or

However, since we see in the faces of many of the human  
species, expression, voices, gestures, affects, and  
inclinations, some equine some porcine, asinine, aquiline,  
and bovine, so we are to believe that in them there is a vital  
principle through which, by virtue of the proximate past or  
proximate future mutations of the bodies, they have been or  
are about to be pigs, horses asses, eagles . . .<sup>296</sup>

*Imaginum* seems, at first glance, to be largely composed of a series of random, unconnected and incomprehensible lists<sup>297</sup>. Bruno's writing style actually mimics his creation of the *atrii*. Saiber writes that Bruno needs to discuss the infinite and, seeing the failure of language alone, cabbalistically combines other meta-languages to approximate better a system which can, in form and content, incorporate the infinite.

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<sup>295</sup> *Magia*, 108.

<sup>296</sup> *Spaccio*, 78.

<sup>297</sup> See chapter one.

Bruno saw geometry's figures as equivalent to language's figuratives and he used both kinds of figurations to signify, refer to one another, and indicate an integrated vision of the universe and all that is in it . . . geometric space/form and verbal space/form were used together to strengthen one another . . . demonstrating the interconnection of the celestial, terrestrial, and human worlds, and the importance of not breaking these divine bonds<sup>298</sup>.

### 3.2 The Hermetic background of *Spaccio*

A Hermetic myth lies behind the *Spaccio*: namely the lament of the *Asclepius*. The *Asclepius*, (or *To Me this Asclepius is Like the Sun. A Holy Book of Hermes Trismegistus Addressed to Asclepius, or The Perfect Discourse*<sup>299</sup>) is the longest dialogue in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and perhaps the most influential. The spectrum of its subject matter includes philosophy, theology, cosmogony, astrology, cosmology, prophecy, laments, musings on the sacred power of music, psychology, ritual, physics, anthropology, semiotics<sup>300</sup>, sex, theodicy, vegetarianism, prayer-devotion, and of course magic<sup>301</sup>.

The text is a dialogue. It contains a cast of characters: Hermes the instructor, Tat his son, Asclepius a disciple, and Hammon (who does not do much). Asclepius plays the role of the idiot. He provides a foil to the teacher and gives Hermes a reason to explain his teachings further. Hermes repeatedly chastises him, saying "Asclepius, how quickly you

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<sup>298</sup> Saiber, 17.

<sup>299</sup> *Hermetica*. Translation Brian P. Copenhaver. 1992.

<sup>300</sup> E.g. *Asclepius*, p 78-9.

<sup>301</sup> For scholarship on the *Corpus Hermeticum* see Copenhaver 1990, E.R. Dodds, 1951, A.J. Festugiere 1950, Garth Fowden 1986, Moshe Idel 1988, P.O. Kristeller 1956, Yates 1964.

have lapsed from reason's true restraint"<sup>302</sup> and "it is as if I have been telling you all of this in your sleep"<sup>303</sup>, and has to offer further teachings to Asclepius and of course to the reader.

It is emphasized over and over that these are secret teachings and they cannot be shared with the profane public. If they are not kept secret, they will lose their power or be abused by the uninitiated. They are in the most literal sense occult or "hidden". It is interesting to note that the process of hermetical sealing, that is creating an airtight closure, comes from alchemical techniques. All Western alchemy, both Christian and Islamic<sup>304</sup>, ultimately has its roots in Hermetic philosophy<sup>305</sup>. Bruno too, in nearly all of his writings, stresses that they are only for an elite reader. At times he suggests that they can be read on two levels: in *De Umbris Idearum*, for example, one for "practical" purposes such as memory enhancement and on a higher for a level for "ordering the operations of the soul"<sup>306</sup>. In *Spaccio*, he writes that truth "loves a few wise men. She hates the multitude"<sup>307</sup>. One of the enduring mysteries of Bruno's legacy is his references to an early work of his entitled *Magna Clavis*<sup>308</sup> ("The Great Key"). This work is not extant, yet teases us enough to think that their might be an entry point to some of his fiercely complex writings. It is another of Bruno's contradictions that he was a populist-elitist: he wanted to be understood only by the select few, but admired and adored by all.

At the beginning of his discourse Trismegistus instructs Asclepius and Tat to "call no one but Hammon lest the presence and interference of the many profane this most reverent

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<sup>302</sup> *Asclepius*, 67.

<sup>303</sup> *Asclepius*, 89.

<sup>304</sup> S.H. Nasr commented that "Hermeticism must be considered as one of the most important factors which aided in the construction of the Muslim worldview", 1976. 76.

<sup>305</sup> Marsall 139 ff; 215 ff on Islamic alchemy. Baigent 33ff.

<sup>306</sup> *Umbris*, 22.

<sup>307</sup> *Spaccio*, 141.

<sup>308</sup> See, for example *Umbris* 128. For a discussion of the *Magna Clavis* see Yates, Art, 211, 221.

discourse on so great a subject, for the mind is irreverent that would make public, by the awareness of many, a treaty so very full of the majesty of divinity"<sup>309</sup>. Hermes explains that not all people are at the same level of consciousness. Only those who have achieved a certain spiritual level through practice and meditation can receive this high level of instruction.

Thus the master teaches only his initiated disciples. The tradition has been perpetuated in this way. This is a constant theme in the *Hermetica*. The first *Corpus*, for example, portrays *Poimandres*, here identified with the world soul, teaching the elder Hermes in a dream. The physical proximity of the master is an integral aspect of the educational process. Throughout the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the enlightenment of the disciple is often accompanied with a touch or hug from the master<sup>310</sup>. Furthermore, the character of Hermes as teacher is a descendent of another Hermes, who was also a great teacher. Asclepius, likewise, is a descendent of another Asclepius, a semi-divine figure in Greek mythology<sup>311</sup>. These ancestors form a part of the aforementioned close-knit community of masters and disciples that is integral to the tradition. Thus the *Corpus Hermeticum* begins with the World Soul teaching the elder Hermes, and this divine teaching is passed from father to son.

It has been suggested that Hermeticism is a collection of esoteric writing without rituals or a liturgy<sup>312</sup>, that it is a philosophy rather than a religion. More recently, scholars such as Fowden<sup>313</sup> and Marshall have disputed this. There is clearly both liturgy and ritual in

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<sup>309</sup> *Asclepius*, 67.

<sup>310</sup> Eg CH X.

<sup>311</sup> A god of medicine, Egyptian Imhotep.

<sup>312</sup> Eg. Festugière, 100 ff.

<sup>313</sup> See especially his chapter "Hermeticism and Theurgy", 142 ff.

the *Asclepius*. The cast is congregated in some “holy place, filled with god”<sup>314</sup>, and there is intimation that there has been some kind of ritual purification beforehand (fasting, abstinence, meditation, etc.). Once the preparation is done, the text reads, “the reverence of the four men and the divine presence filled that holy place”<sup>315</sup>. Only in this thoroughly ritualistic setting can the teaching begin

In the text a complex view of humanity, its relationship to the divine, and its place in the universe is developed. The first paragraph of the *Asclepius* states two important claims to be explored. First, the divine is within us and therefore humans are divine and access their divinity through the practice of magic; and second, the many and the one are the same<sup>316</sup>. There can be no separation, because “a continuous influence carries through the world, and through the soul of all kinds and all forms throughout nature”<sup>317</sup>. Bruno agrees that all things are interconnected and connected to the divine. “Diverse living things represent diverse divinities and diverse powers yet all of God is in all things”<sup>318</sup>.

Divinity flows from the One, or the All, through the intermediary of heaven, to the gods. *Spiritus*, which is beyond or predicated the pantheon of the gods is transmitted through Jupiter, their ruler. Light is transmitted through the sun, which must be worshiped as a god. The effluvia continue through the Horoscopes<sup>319</sup> to the thirty-six decans, (Egyptian sidereal gods, each of whom rule over ten degrees of the zodiac), then through the seven planetary spheres ruled by destiny or fortune into the material world and all its beings<sup>320</sup>. Trismegistus states that “the heavens, a perceptible god, administer all bodies whose growth

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<sup>314</sup> *Asclepius*, 67.

<sup>315</sup> *Asclepius*, 67.

<sup>316</sup> *Asclepius*, 67.

<sup>317</sup> *Asclepius*, 67.

<sup>318</sup> *Spaccio*, 235.

<sup>319</sup> I.e. the signs of the zodiac.

<sup>320</sup> *Asclepius*, 77-8.



and decline have been charged by the sun and the moon”<sup>321</sup>. The heavens here include all of creation. This is a hybrid of Mesopotamian, Hellenic and Egyptian cosmology<sup>322</sup>.

What is important to note here is the strong emphasis on an astral connection. This is consistent throughout the *Corpus Hermeticum*. “Pure philosophy”, Hermes states later, “that depends only on reverence for god should attend to these other matters only to wonder at the recurrence of the stars, how their measures remain constant in prescribed stations. . .”<sup>323</sup>

Another important point is the interconnectedness of all things from plants and rocks to mortals, to the gods, and ultimately to the One. Although this system seems rigidly hierarchal, as we shall see, humanity’s place in this hierarchy is extremely fluid.

Bruno’s relationship with astronomy and astrology is a complex one. He, in fact, uses the words interchangeably. On one hand he is critical of horoscopic astrology, yet he frequently uses astrological images and ideas throughout his writings<sup>324</sup>. When arrested by the Venetian Inquisition he was in possession of astrological texts, famously *De sigillis Hermetis, Ptolomaei et aliorum*<sup>325</sup>. At his trial he argued for the medical use of astrology along the lines of Ficino<sup>326</sup> which was certainly not unorthodox in his day. Yet, Bruno was doing something quite different than simply reproducing Ficino’s astral talismans. What is clear is that Bruno accepted the astral influences of the Hermetic tradition. Though given his unique understanding of the infinite universe traditional astrology/astronomy began to take on a very different meaning.

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<sup>321</sup> *Asclepius*, 68.

<sup>322</sup> Copenhagen xiv, xvi ff.

<sup>323</sup> *Asclepius*, 74.

<sup>324</sup> Indeed, *Spaccio* is a cooption and redefining of tradition astrology. *Imaginum*, contains scores of astrological images, etc.

<sup>325</sup> A lost work on astrology. See Clucas, 2001 79.

<sup>326</sup> See chapter 2 for a discussion of Ficino’s magic.

The infinite universe was an obsession of Bruno's. This was not a "scientific", Copernican discovery but rather a philosophical and theological insight.<sup>327</sup> It was beneath God to have boundaries. Bruno's pantheism led him to identify the universe with God, and God had no choice but to create the infinite. Though he thoroughly rejects the concept of the "unmoved mover". For Bruno, the unmoved mover would require a violent action which is contrary to nature<sup>328</sup>. He writes "Divine goodness can indeed be communicated to infinite things and can be infinitely diffused; why then should we wish to assert that it would choose to be scarce and to reduce itself to naught- for every finite thing is as naught in relationship to the infinite"<sup>329</sup>. This is an expression of the anti-Aristotelianism which led to his expulsion from Geneva, Oxford, and Paris. Deeply embedded in his metaphysics is the principle of plenitude. God in His fullness must be expressed fully, infinitely. The living, organic universe, as God, must itself therefore be infinite. Space, though, is not a void or a vacuum. It is, rather, a plenum; it is a space filled with an infinite material ether. Any emptiness would detract from the principle of plenitude: "we shall find the Plenum not merely reasonable but inevitable"<sup>330</sup>. Although space is an infinite "container", the container itself is subordinate to the infinite ether<sup>331</sup>.

Furthermore, space has no parts. Space is a continuous quantity; it is absolutely indivisible. Bruno turns this cosmological principle into an anthropological one. Every person, he explains, is a universe<sup>332</sup>. Separation is merely an illusion. Where we perceive evil

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<sup>327</sup> Bruno often felt the need to distance himself from the study theology, claiming that he only studied natural philosophy. See for example *Causa*, 69.

<sup>328</sup> *Cena*, 206.

<sup>329</sup> *Universo*, 260.

<sup>330</sup> *Universo*, 255.

<sup>331</sup> Grant, 189.

<sup>332</sup> *Spaccio*, 78.

or imperfection it is because we are focused on the part, or the moment, not on the infinite.

Greenberg writes:

The final goal of the individual human being [for Bruno] is not to be found in an individual good or particular truth, for those lead the individual from one thing to another; particular truths and particular goods serve only to show that there is more truth, and more good, to be known and to be desired. In each individual being there is a desire to become all things; for this reason, each is directed to the infinite, which is at once its cause source and end<sup>333</sup>.

A word should be said about the text's use of the terms "god" and "gods" in the *Asclepius*. The author clearly accepts the existence of a pantheon of Egyptian gods. Yet behind this pantheon lies a greater, original force that begat all things. Hermes calls this the One, the nameless, God, the All, the Father, the original source, and so on.<sup>334</sup> This is mirrored in Bruno's dialogue as well which takes on an interesting Egyptian twist at the end.

Hermes continues, "It is impossible to be shaped without divine assent, for forms to be figured without the aid of demons, and without humans soulless things cannot be started and kept going"<sup>335</sup>. There is a close connection being drawn among mortals, demons (who are not necessarily evil in this context, but simply another class of life which inhabits the universe) and gods, *because all three levels of beings create*. Humans are magi, we are active participants in the universe. Hermes goes on to say:

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<sup>333</sup> Greenberg, 66.

<sup>334</sup> These are all terms used by Plotinus, though it is generally agreed that the Hermetic texts were written one to four centuries before Plotinus. Plotinus seemed to have no knowledge of these texts but the latter Neo-Platonists, Iamblichus, Porphyry, Proclus, and Augustine certainly did.

<sup>335</sup> *Asclepius*, 69.

One who has joined himself to the gods in divine reverence, using the mind that joins him to the gods, almost attains divinity. And one who has been joined to the demons attains their condition. Human are they who remain content with the middle status of their kind and, the remaining forms of people will be like those kinds to whose forms they adjoin themselves<sup>336</sup>.

In this remarkable passage Hermes explains that humans can change their very nature and status in the universe. We can become gods or demons by adjoining ourselves to them as we choose. One should think of the Stoic and Plotinian principles of sameness and sympathy here as they relate to magic. It is because we share a *sameness*<sup>337</sup> with the gods and demons that we can not only experience them but, as Hermes takes this to its logical extreme, even transform ourselves into them “using the mind that joins him to the gods”.

What follows next is the passage famously quoted by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. “Because of this, Asclepius, a human is a great wonder, a living thing to be worshipped and honored: for he changes his nature into a god’s as if he were a god; he knows the demonic kind inasmuch as he recognizes that he originated among them”<sup>338</sup>. And later: “In short, god made mankind good and capable of immortality through his two natures, divine and mortal, and so god willed the arrangement whereby mankind was ordained to be better than the gods, who were formed only from immortal nature...”<sup>339</sup>. Humans are not only godlike; we are happier and better than the gods. What makes us better is that we have reasoning and learning – something the gods lack. We have

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<sup>336</sup> *Asclepius*, 69.

<sup>337</sup> See Luck, 190, on Theurgy and the principle of sameness.

<sup>338</sup> *Asclepius*, 69; Pico, 1.

<sup>339</sup> *Asclepius*, 80.

choice, and this is also something the gods don't have. We are superior because we have "two natures", a middle status that means we are rooted simultaneously in both worlds.

Another important influence on Bruno was the Hermetic, Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus who also understood the soul to have two natures. For Iamblichus, the human soul was actually qualitatively different than souls from higher classes of being. In his *De Anima*, he explains that humans have a unique double soul (e.g. XII. 140<sup>340</sup>; XXII. 150<sup>341</sup>). Our souls are partly intellectual and partly animal. These two aspects coexist. Our souls are capable of intellectualizing and also of being active in nature. But we are not always intellectualizing or we would be Intelligence itself. We are not always active in nature or we would be merely animal soul. It is that we can do both, that both constitute our essence. We have the unique ability to negotiate the proximity of a single soul to The Soul<sup>342</sup>—again, something gods, demons, animals, and other forms cannot do—and this will dictate our standing in the cosmos, including matters of reincarnation or transmigration of souls<sup>343</sup>. In fact we must engage in both activities, intellectualizing and worldly activity, to fulfill our natural purpose. The soul must descend into the body, into the "flux of becoming", or part of our essence remains unfulfilled and this would defy the divinely established order in the cosmos.

Up to this point the strong influence of Iamblichus can be seen on Bruno's thought. The proper role of the soul, for Iamblichus as for Bruno, is to mediate between these two worlds of intellect and matter<sup>344</sup>. Ontologically, for Iamblichus, the soul belonged in both

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<sup>340</sup> "Souls descend to earth but their heads remained fixed in the heavens"

<sup>341</sup> "There is a part of the Soul where the body is and a part where the body is not"

<sup>342</sup> *De Anima*, VI. 133.

<sup>343</sup> *De Anima* XXIV. 152.

<sup>344</sup> *De Anima* XII. 140.

worlds as a mediator. The soul cannot be associated with the Intelligence, as it is cut off from the Intelligence (we in fact only contain an image of the Intelligence in us) and yet we are nonetheless not fully identified with matter. This is where Iamblichus and Bruno begin to differ. Bruno, through the coincidence of opposites, collapses the distinctions that Iamblichus implies: intellect and matter, the divine and the earthly. Through his equation of the world soul with God, he is in effect raising the status of the human and lowering the status of God.

Iamblichus diminishes the power of the soul from that of his teacher, and may appear as something of a pessimist. For Plotinus, on the other hand, salvation begins with the recognition of the soul's divinity and connectedness to the higher hypostases. Through our own intellection we are able to work our way inward (and upward) back to the One (IV, 3 [27]). Clearly with the perceived separation of the human soul, this is not possible for Iamblichus. This problem is overcome with theurgy. Iamblichus writes "For it is not the pure thought (philosophy) that unites theurgists to the gods. Indeed what would hinder those who are theoretical philosophers from enjoying a theurgic union with the gods?"<sup>345</sup> Echoing Iamblichus Bruno writes in *Triginta Sigilli* "art is not consummated in discourse. . . [but] perfects itself in the moment in which it is connected to a natural agent"<sup>346</sup>. Philosophy alone is not enough. "Poets indeed, never philosophers, have so described and introduced the gods"<sup>347</sup>. If salvation was possible by our own intellection, it would be dependent on us and

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<sup>345</sup> *De Mysteriis*, 115.

<sup>346</sup> *Triginta*, 195-6, Clucas' translation, 269.

<sup>347</sup> *Spaccio*, 91-2.

this idea is intolerable to Iamblichus<sup>348</sup>. It would make us Intelligence and deny our true, dual essence.

Theurgy is thus part of divine law. It does not work through our intellect but through our entire being and allows the theurgist to become something more than human. Indeed theurgy unites the activities (*energeiai*) of mortals and divinities. This is possible because the gods have illuminated matter and are “in” material things. Objects, animals, plants, stones, symbols, songs, smells, rites, etc. all contain some “impression”, “receptacle”, or “signature” of the gods. The ritual use of these objects, through a correspondence, draws on the power of the gods. The gods have placed these impressions in matter to use as a divine “language” which they grasp immediately. The gods are neither constrained, nor cajoled, nor bewitched by the theurgist: the gods themselves are in no way changed, but the theurgist is.

For Bruno, everyone is a complete world and therefore every one is a god<sup>349</sup>. In the Explanatory Epistle he explains that Jove “represents each one of us” and that “Jove is made governor and mover of the heavens in order that he gives us to understand how in every man and in every individual are contemplated a world and a universe”<sup>350</sup>. We are both maximally and minimally interconnected with the cosmos. To internalize the cosmos is to act on it. Although Bruno shares much in common with Iamblichus, he begins to break down some of Iamblichus’ walls. The Iamblichan souls could only participate so far with the One. Bruno’s philosophy is always underpinned with the essential concepts of infinity and mutation. If the natural state of all things, including God, is to change, the ridged hierarchy of Iamblichus no longer makes sense. Bruno does accept a two fold nature of the soul, but it is always

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<sup>348</sup> *De Anima*, VI. 133.

<sup>349</sup> *Spaccio*, 78.

<sup>350</sup> *Spaccio*, 78-79.

overcoming itself, and it is not passive or a natural process. Those who have the ability to act will do so. The remainder will follow the process of transmigration depending on their nature.

Bruno represents the dual nature of the souls in the *Spaccio* in a number of ways. The constellation of Chiron the Centaur, one of the few he permits to stay, is one such example. The centaur is first mocked by Momus, who asks, "What do we wish to do with this man inserted into a beast . . . in which one person is made of two natures and two substances concur in one hypostatic union?"<sup>351</sup> Imerti sees this as a satirical jab at Christ and the Trinity<sup>352</sup>. He is in part correct. Yet Jove intervenes and says of the dual status of Chiron that "the mystery of this matter is occult and great"<sup>353</sup>. The centaur, who not only taught medicine to Asclepius, astrology to Hercules, but also how to ascend to the stars, was not an imperfect beast or an imperfect human, but rather "*pura mente colendo*, a god"<sup>354</sup> who is to preside over the altar of the heavens.

How does Bruno reconcile this seeming contradiction: his denial of the Second Person of the Trinity, and his elevation of the status of a dual-natured being? In an epiphany Momus concurs with Jove and proclaims that Chiron "should be priest of the celestial altar and temple; because when he has well consumed that beast he holds in his hand, it is impossible that he can ever be lacking a beast, since he himself, and only he can serve as sacrifice and the sacrificer, that is, as a priest and as a beast"<sup>355</sup>. The duality is overcome not through theurgic union, or contemplation, but through the coincidence of opposites.

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<sup>351</sup> *Spaccio*, 268.

<sup>352</sup> *Spaccio*, 310, note 25.

<sup>353</sup> *Spaccio*, 269.

<sup>354</sup> *Spaccio*, 269.

<sup>355</sup> *Spaccio*, 270.



It is interesting to note that as the assembly of gods rewrites the heavens they offer the old images up as gifts. Germany, for example receives the eagle<sup>356</sup>, and England receives the swan<sup>357</sup>. To Nicolas of Cusa, the gods give the square of the circle, but to Bruno himself, a much greater gift is given: the equality of the maximum and minimum: the true understanding of the coincidence of opposites<sup>358</sup>.

Similar to the case of Chiron is the image of Capricorn. It is Isis who recognizes the divinity of this image. She states that

Because of his having horns and because of his being a beast and, besides, because of his having caused the gods to become "horned" and beasts (he who contains within himself a great doctrine and judgment of natural and magical things, concerning the various reasons through which form and divine substance either immerse, or enfold, or distribute themselves through all, with all, and from all subjects), he is not only a celestial god but also one worthy of a greater and better place than this<sup>359</sup>.

Imerti suggests that this reflects Bruno's scorn of the over intellectualization of religion by the Protestants against a natural, ritualistic religion<sup>360</sup>. This is partly persuasive. Fuelled by analogy, Bruno's philosophy takes off in this section. He discusses the horns of Moses (as translated in the Vulgate Bible, Exodus 34:30), the crowns of kings, the Doge of Venice, the Grand Turk, the Pope, all being "en-horned". Biblical kings were anointed with oil from a horn. The illustrious and noble choose horned animals as their emblems. "All this", he writes, "is done to give testimony to one's greatness, to show, I mean to say,

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<sup>356</sup> *Spaccio*, 219.

<sup>357</sup> *Spaccio*, 183.

<sup>358</sup> *Spaccio*, 221-222.

<sup>359</sup> *Spaccio*, 247.

<sup>360</sup> *Spaccio*, 307 note 48.

by adjusting upon one's head, with the greatest of skill, this beautiful member which nature has conceded to beasts, he has the nature of the beast<sup>361</sup>.

Imerti is in part correct that the centaur is a satirical comment on the hypostatic union of Christ, and that Capricorn is a comment on the over-intellectualization of religion. But he does not go far enough. Clearly they are linked in Bruno's narrative. First, they are among the only four of the forty-eight images that Bruno allows to remain in the heavens. Both are linked by their dual status as both human and "beast" (he uses the same terminology): the centaur is inherently dual, while Capricorn offers the potential for duality. Both are reconciled and elevated as exemplars of the coincidence of opposites<sup>362</sup>.

This leads to a very fundamental metaphysical question: why, within the logic of the Hermetic worldview, were humans created? Hermes explains that god created a second god in his likeness "and it seemed beautiful to him"<sup>363</sup>. Mortals were created to admire it. First there was god, then the "second god" or creation, and the "third god" or humanity. Our role is to wonder at the heavens and tend to the earth<sup>364</sup>. "Seeing that the world is god's work, and one who attentively preserves and enriches its beauty conjoins his work with gods will when, lending his body in daily work and care, he arranges the scene formed by god's divine intention"<sup>365</sup>. God, seeing that we could not properly govern the "composite", material world, gave us bodies. Hermes states that, "on account of mankind's divine composition, it seems

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<sup>361</sup> *Spaccio*, 245.

<sup>362</sup> See also *Spaccio*, 205 ff.

<sup>363</sup> *Asclepius*, 71. Note the similarity to the language in Genesis

<sup>364</sup> *Asclepius*, 72.

<sup>365</sup> *Asclepius*, 73.

right to call him a well-ordered world, though *kosmos* in Greek would be better”<sup>366</sup>. As above, so below. Again Bruno uses the same language to describe the human cosmos.

Here the text of the *Asclepius* shifts to its possibly most infamous section: god-making. He writes:

And since this discourse proclaims to us the kinship and association between humans and gods, Asclepius, you must recognize mankind’s power and strength. Just as the master and father – or god to use his most august name – is maker of the heavenly gods, so it is mankind who fashions the temple gods who are content to be near humans. Not only is mankind glorified; he glories as well. He not only advances toward god; he also makes the gods strong . . . Always mindful of its nature and origin, humanity persists in imitating divinity, representing its gods in semblance of its own features, just as the father and master made his gods eternal to resemble him<sup>367</sup>.

We create gods. Here Asclepius asks “are you talking about statues, Trismegistus?” And Hermes rebukes him, saying

Statues, Asclepius, yes. See how little trust you have! I mean statues ensouled and conscious, filled with spirit and doing great deeds; statues that foreknow the future and predict it by lots, by prophecy, by dreams and by many other means; statues that make people ill and cure them, bringing them pain and pleasure as each deserves<sup>368</sup>.

This is one of the most famous passages in the Western occult tradition. We are reminded of the Golem or the homunculi, a goal of the later alchemists, which perhaps have something of

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<sup>366</sup> *Asclepius*, 72.

<sup>367</sup> *Asclepius*, 80-81. Fowden translates this last sentence in a provocative fashion: “In this way Mankind, always mindful of its nature and origin, persists in imitating the divine to the point that, just as the Father and Lord endows the gods with immortality, in order that they may resemble Him, so Mankind fashions its gods in its own image” (143).

<sup>368</sup> *Asclepius*, 81.

their origin here. It was so well known that Augustine railed against this passage<sup>369</sup>, and in 1326, a papal bull of John XXII denounced those, who by magic, imprisoned demons in images or other objects in order to interrogate them<sup>370</sup>. The same passage also influenced the Jewish occult tradition. The famous Rabbi della Reina (1470s) was said to have tried to invoke two chief demons, Samael and Ammon of No, with the aid of ten disciples in order to bring about the Messianic Age<sup>371</sup>.

Hermes proclaims “The most wondrous thing we have been able to discover is divine nature. We have discovered the art of making gods”<sup>372</sup>. Gods are made from “a mixture of plants, stones and spices that have the natural power of divinity”<sup>373</sup>. These gods need “constant sacrifices, with hymns, praises and sweet sounds in tune with heaven’s harmony”<sup>374</sup>.

Bruno repeatedly refers back to this section on drawing the spirits into statues of the *Asclepius*. Momus states: “see how those wise men [of Egypt] through these means had the power to make inanimate, affable, and friendly towards themselves, the gods, who by means of cries they sent forth through statues, gave wise men advice, doctrines, divinations, and superhuman institutions; whence with magic and divine rites they rose to the heights of Divinity by mean of the same ladder of Nature by which Divinity descends. . .<sup>375</sup>. Bruno’s narrative begins to gradually move from the Greco-Roman pantheon to the Egyptian one; the Hermeticism which will heal Christianity. The *Spaccio* itself is an exercise in god-making. As we refine ourselves, so too are the gods altered.

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<sup>369</sup> *City of God*, 347.VIII, xxiii.

<sup>370</sup> Marshall, 321.

<sup>371</sup> Idel, 86 ff.

<sup>372</sup> *Asclepius*, 90.

<sup>373</sup> *Asclepius*, 90.

<sup>374</sup> *Asclepius*, 90.

<sup>375</sup> *Spaccio*, 236. See also 238, 245.

After this comes the lament for Egypt which causes Asclepius to weep. Egypt, Hermes explains, is the image of heaven. Everything from heaven was transferred there. The language of Egypt is sacred and hieroglyphics are superior to all other writing systems; in fact they are divine<sup>376</sup>. Yet Hermes prophesies that foreign “barbarians” will overrun Egypt and outlaw the “true” religion of the Egyptians. After this the world will be turned upside down. The evil will be thought virtuous, the stupid thought wise, true religion and piety will be outlawed and its practitioners put to death. The ancient customs and rites will be forgotten: “Nothing holy, nothing reverent nor worthy of heaven or heavenly beings will be heard of or believed in the minds”<sup>377</sup>. The gods will withdraw from Egypt abandoning it to evil demons. The fruits of trees will rot, the soil will become barren, and “the very air will droop in gloomy lethargy”<sup>378</sup>.

In time though, Hermes says (in a rather biblical tone), god will cleanse the world with fires, floods, and pestilence, and the true religion will once again be restored. Church fathers such as Lactantius<sup>379</sup> and Augustine<sup>380</sup> interpreted this prophecy as the coming of Christianity. Ficino seemed to interpret it as a call to renew Christianity by embracing an “Egyptian” piety and spirit which would include astral magic. Bruno interpreted it as the full-blown renewal of Egypt religion and the ousting of Christianity and writes *Spaccio* from the perspective of, and the fulfillment of Hermes’ prophecy.

Finally, why is this text magical? Yates writes that “the rehabilitation of the *Asclepius*, through the discovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, is, I believe, one of the chief

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<sup>376</sup> *Asclepius*, 82.

<sup>377</sup> *Asclepius*, 82.

<sup>378</sup> *Asclepius*, 82.

<sup>379</sup> Lactantius, *Div. Inst.*, I, vi. English translation W. Fletcher, *The Works of Lactantius*, Edinburgh, 1871.

<sup>380</sup> *City of God*, 347.VIII, xxiii.

factors for the Renaissance revival of magic”<sup>381</sup>. . . Still it may be difficult for the modern reader to see why this text is magical and why it has been so influential. It is not a *grimoire*, a collection of spells. Magic is never even mentioned in the text.

Most importantly, its influence lies in its development of a complex view of humanity, its relationship to the divine, and its place in the universe. The anthropology of the *Asclepius* assumes that humanity is divine: we are magi. The magus and alchemist share the Hermetic assumption of the divinity of humanity. Humans are not merely “subject to” the divine but are co-creators and co-participants with the divine. In a sense, the text provided not only the philosophical and cosmological framework, but also the “permission” to act as a magus.

Sympathies and resonances are inherent in almost every magical practice. These sympathies (and antipathies) depend on the understanding of an interconnected cosmos. The Hermetic universe sees this interconnection resulting from the continuous effluvia pouring out from god, which connect all parts of the universe. As we ourselves are “a well-ordered world”, a *kosmos*, a microcosm of the macrocosm, with roots in both heaven and earth, thus our actions affect change and influence the universe around us. Thus Hermes’ description of the making of gods is a blueprint for astral and talismanic magic. Each god, zodiacal sign, demon, planet, decan, etc., has correspondences in plants, herbs, animals, stones, times (sunrise, sunset, days of the week), etc<sup>382</sup>. The knowledge and manipulation of these correspondences draws down the influence of the intended power. These actions are not merely for salvific purposes, but also to divine, heal, curse, communicate secrets, and so on.

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<sup>381</sup> Yates, GBHT, 41. Many others such as D.P. Walker (1958), Marshall (2001), Richard Cavandish, (1987), concur.

<sup>382</sup> *Asclepius*, 80-81.

This creation of terrestrial gods is probably the most overtly magical aspect of the text, and also the most condemned.

Like the *Asclepius*, *Spaccio* is a magical text. Unlike the *Asclepius* however, Bruno achieves the act of magic through the manipulation of images. Throughout the course of the work, he makes the reader aware of images- specifically celestial ones, as evidenced in his lengthy discourse on the constellations. Indeed, he deconstructs and replaces the heavenly images. Some of these replacement images are abstract, for example the concept of Truth which replaces Ursa Minor<sup>383</sup>, or the stubborn and proud Leo being replaced by “Heroic Generosity”<sup>384</sup>. Other images are quite bizarre, vivid and striking. For example

Zampaglione, the standard bearer, carries a banner of scarlet whence appears the natural picture of two starlings with the very color of their wings, and joined by two yokes, with fine grace; four proud and glorious pigs pull the shaft, a white one, a red one, one parti-colored, and a black one. Of these the first is called Grungarganfestofiel, the second, Sorbillgramfton, the third, Glutius, the fourth Stafocazio<sup>385</sup>.

Iamblichus writes:

It does not follow on this account that the offerings and invocations which are made particularly to the gods, and also the Divine Performances are thereby made fallacious. For it is not the concept that unites the theurgic priests to the gods: else what is there to hinder those who pursue philosophic speculation contemplatively, from having the theurgic union to the gods? Now, however, in actual truth, this is not the case. On the other hand, it is the complete fulfilling of the arcane performances, the carrying of them through in a manner worthy of the gods and surpassing all conception, and likewise the

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<sup>383</sup> *Spaccio*, 121.

<sup>384</sup> *Spaccio*, 230.

<sup>385</sup> *Spaccio*, 268.

power of the voiceless symbols which are perceived by the gods alone, that establish the Theurgic Union. Hence we do not effect these things by thinking<sup>386</sup>.

Bruno echoes this in nearly identical language. Isis says “ceremonies are not vain fantasies, but live words which touched the ears of us gods . . . gods do not want to be known by language but by utterances of natural effects”<sup>387</sup> and “whence with magic and divine rites they rose to the heights of Divinity by means of the same ladder of Nature by which Divinity descends”<sup>388</sup>. The way up is the way down.

Looking back at the bizarre image described above, it is visually striking and also contains a vocal component in the names of the animals. It has the elements of incantation. The words verge on nonsense; they are “unutterable symbols”. It is a dynamic, imaginative creation; an act beyond comprehension to touch the ears of the gods. Once again, for Iamblichus “it is not the pure thought (philosophy) that unites theurgists to the gods. Indeed what would hinder those who are theoretical philosophers from enjoying a theurgic union with the gods?”<sup>389</sup> For Bruno also “Poets indeed, never philosophers, have so described and introduced the gods”<sup>390</sup>. Human divinity is to be found in the creative power of Phantasy.

The process of deconstruction and replacement of images is Bruno’s preferred method for achieving reform. As discussed, the mission of *Spaccio* itself is reform on many levels: social, religious, political, and cultural. Bruno argues that we must use images

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<sup>386</sup> *Egyptian Mysteries*, Wilder’s translation, 101. Dodds’ translation of the last sentence is clearer: “Theurgic union is attained only by the efficacy of unspeakable acts performed in the appropriate manner, acts which are beyond comprehension, and by the potency of unutterable symbols which are comprehended only by the gods. . . Without intellectual effort on our part the tokens thereby their own virtue accomplish their proper work” Dodds 287.

<sup>387</sup> *Spaccio*, 237.

<sup>388</sup> *Spaccio*, 236.

<sup>389</sup> *De Mysterii*, 115.

<sup>390</sup> *Spaccio*, 91-92.



because the gods are not interested in our ordinary language, but in the “utterances of natural effects”. What are these utterances? They are, for Bruno, images and, more specifically, images as they are used in ritual.

The whole arc of the narrative of the *Spaccio* is presented in the form of a very long ritual, and the use of images in that ritual. In this sense, it is structured very similarly to the *Asclepius*. *Spaccio* begins with an invocation<sup>391</sup>; takes place on a feast day<sup>392</sup>; involves the confession of sins<sup>393</sup>; there is a purification; there are prayers and offerings<sup>394</sup>, a fundamental change of the ordering of things (in the case of *Spaccio*, a restructuring of the gods and the fundamental order of the universe<sup>395</sup>; in *Asclepius* a fundamental restructuring of the spiritual status of the students in relation to the universe<sup>396</sup>), a consummation, and a closing feast<sup>397</sup>. The entire book is narrated by Sophia to Saulino, and then written by Bruno. After Sophia finishes the tale, Saulino says “and now I shall go have my supper”<sup>398</sup>. He replicates the feasts the gods are having. As above, so below. Once again Bruno reinforces the ever present connection between human and divine realms.

This is how magic worked for Bruno through the creation of images. The controller of the images is the magus. In the case of *Spaccio*, the magician is Bruno. He invites the readers to go through the same process that the gods are going through: namely to purge themselves in order to rebuild the world. This is why he insists on repeating that Jove is every one of us, and that Momus, the magician, is the spark of the divine in all of us. The

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<sup>391</sup> *Spaccio*, 165; *Asclepius*, 67-68.

<sup>392</sup> *Spaccio* 106; *Asclepius* ritual preparation, 68.

<sup>393</sup> *Spaccio* 114-5; *Asclepius*, 68-69.

<sup>394</sup> *Spaccio*, 182-3.

<sup>395</sup> *Spaccio*, 269 ff.

<sup>396</sup> *Asclepius*, 90 ff.

<sup>397</sup> *Spaccio*, 271-2; *Asclepius*, 92.

<sup>398</sup> *Spaccio*, 272.

logic of the narrative has the gods changing the heavens, and through that process, changing the world. As a fulfillment of the prophecy of the *Asclepius*, the divine and the human are so intertwined in Bruno's Hermeticism that ability to reform the heavens must come from below and the ability to reform the earth must come from above. Neither can happen independently. Yet, the active process is a very human one. To be reformed, the gods must go through a very human, religious, ritual process of cleansing, confession, and observance. Mortals in a reciprocal process must enact those same processes.

Human will plays an important role in Hermetic philosophy. This must have appealed to the likes of Pico and Bruno. Those of a greater Hermetic intellect were thought to be able to impose their will on the world. This is perhaps why the teachings were kept secret; so that the power could not be abused by the profane: "To know, to will and to hope is the (straight and) easy way leading to the good"<sup>399</sup>.

### 3.3 The Ethics of Mutation

In *Spaccio*, Bruno sees himself at the end of Hermes' prophecy. It is not the end of days but the dawning of a new era revolving around a heliocentric, hermetic sun and a rebirth of Egypt. The connections between the *Asclepius* and *Spaccio* are many. Bruno freely quotes and paraphrases it. Mercury, "A most wise Egyptian", is a principal character. Trismegistus (Mercury/Hermes in his earthly form as author of the *Corpus*) and Asclepius also appear.

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<sup>399</sup> CH, 42.

Bruno's most famous work, *Cena*, published a year before *Spaccio*, is often portrayed as a scientific text dealing with astrology. In that work, Bruno does give his most spirited endorsement of Copernicus' heliocentrism and this went along way in ensuring his place in the history of modern science. Yet Bruno endorses Copernicus, not because of the latter's scientific, mathematical, or observational skills, in fact Bruno mocks him. He thanks "That German"—as he often incorrectly referred to him—saying "He was a man of deep, developed, diligent and mature genius . . . Yet, Copernicus did not go much further [away from the common and vulgar] because being more of a student of mathematics than of nature, he could not plumb and probe into matters to the extent that he could completely uproot unsuitable and empty principles"<sup>400</sup>. Later Bruno calls him a "stupid monk"<sup>401</sup>. There is even some doubt as to whether Bruno actually read *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*<sup>402</sup>. Instead, Bruno championed the heliocentric model because it conformed with his Hermeticism<sup>403</sup>. He took Copernicus' model as a sign of the coming new era, and he exploded it into an infinite universe. Bruno's philosophy is the philosophy of infinity.

Ultimately, what Bruno was attempting to do throughout his work was to create a philosophical method to deal with infinity. He knew that language or mathematics alone would fail, and so he brings together language, mathematics, poetry, music, geometry, and images. This is why much of his writing, especially *Imaginum*, seems so jam-packed that the books threaten to explode. He moves from geometrical proofs to planetary images to poems to methods of extrapolating everything in the universe from the first line of the *Aeneid*<sup>404</sup>, and on, and on, and on. In doing this, he creates a philosophy of infinity. Some times he is

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<sup>400</sup> *Cena*, 68.

<sup>401</sup> *Cena*, 68.

<sup>402</sup> Gosselin 30-31.

<sup>403</sup> See Chapter 4 for a further discussion of Bruno's relationship with Copernicus.

<sup>404</sup> *De Imaginum*, 238.

frustratingly nonsensical, such as in his creation of the image of Zampaglione, above. Yet just as he is able to extrapolate infinity from the first line of the *Aeneid*, so are his books filled with images, entry points into the philosophy of infinity.

The subtitle of *Spaccio* holds an important clue to the text. It reads: "Proposed by Jove, Achieved by the Council, Revealed by Mercury, Narrated by Sophia, Heard by Saulino, Recorded by the Nolan [Bruno]". What can be found here is a descent, but a descent which assumes an interconnection and interdependency and implies in turn, a corresponding ascent. Momus says "whence with magic and divine rites they rose to the heights of Divinity, by means of the same ladder of Nature by which Divinity descends even to the lowest things in order to communicate herself"<sup>405</sup>. It is also reminiscent of the subtitle of *Cena*: "Five Dialogues, By Four Interlocutors, with Three Reflections, on Two Subjects". The one is implied here, as it is throughout Bruno's work. There is always a constant movement in Bruno's thought and writing from the multiple to the singular. Yet for the movement to be complete, it must also go the other way. The introduction to his work *Causa* begins with five poems: "To the Principles of the Universe", "To His Own Spirit", "To Time", "On Love", and the final poem curiously untitled<sup>406</sup>. Bruno does not leave things untitled, he over-titles his works. The untitled poem ends with the line "Blind error, greedy time, adverse fortune, deaf envy, vile rage, hostile zeal, cruel hearts, perverse spirits, bizarre passions will not suffice to obscure the air before me, nor place a veil before my eyes, nor ever stop me from beholding my beautiful sun"<sup>407</sup>. The progression of the poems is typical of Bruno's thought. The progression from principle, to spirit, to time, to eros, to something beyond love,

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<sup>405</sup> *Spaccio*, 263.

<sup>406</sup> *Causa*, 12-15.

<sup>407</sup> *Causa*, 15

ultimately something which cannot be properly named: a vision of the beautiful Hermetic sun.

There is a constant motion in Bruno's thought from the simple to the multiple and back. Neither one is preferable, in fact to choose one over the other is to miss Bruno's point:

God acts on gods, the gods act on celestial or astral bodies .  
.. These act on the spirits who reside in and control the stars, one of which is the Earth; the spirit act on the elements, the elements on compounds, the compounds on the senses, the senses on the soul, and the soul on the whole animal<sup>408</sup>.

This succinctly sums up the theory of images and reform that he prescribes in *Spaccio*.

Nonetheless, it needs to be read backwards: the soul of the animal acts on the senses, which act on the compounds, all the way up to God. Bruno does not reject the hierarchy of being; rather he changes its parameters. Bruno adds to this and stresses the principle of mutation. Everything is constantly changing into everything else. This principle of universal metamorphosis is at the core of his philosophy. Jove himself has changed into an old and decrepit man, regretful of his life. He writes

we here, then, have a Jove, not taken as too legitimate and good vicar or lieutenant of the first principle and universal cause, but well taken as something variable, subject to the Fate of Mutation. . . knowing that together in one infinite entity and substance there are infinite and innumerable particular natures (of which he is one individual), which, since they in substance, essence and nature are one, likewise, by reason of the number through which they will pass, incur innumerable vicissitudes and a kind of motion and mutation<sup>409</sup>.

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<sup>408</sup> De Magia, 108.

<sup>409</sup> *Spaccio*, 75.

The chief of the gods has become the humblest, the most impotent. For Bruno, the mutation of Jove represents the perpetual change of all things in spite of death<sup>410</sup>. This, in turn, Bruno relates back to the coincidence of opposites. Sophia says, "So if in bodies, matter, and eternity there were not mutation, variety, and vicissitude, there would be nothing agreeable, nothing good, nothing pleasurable"<sup>411</sup>. There is no pleasure in rest if there is no labor; no joy without sorrow. The gods themselves grow old and die, to be reborn as something new. He explains this through the concepts: the infinite active potency (or world soul) and the infinite passive potency (or matter). These two potencies are constantly changing into each other through a coincidence of opposites. Everything, material and spiritual, is continuously metamorphosing into everything else. Bruno's universe is one of perpetual motion and change.

Only Truth with Absolute Virtue is immutable and immortal. "Nothing comes before the Truth, nothing comes after the Truth, Truth is cause and principle"<sup>412</sup>. Truth is Divinity. Though we, and even the gods, can only experience Truth as a shadow or a reflection through an immanent God who manifests in nature. "God, as absolute, has nothing to do with us except insofar as he communicates with the effects of Nature and is more intimate with them than Nature herself"<sup>413</sup>.

Hermes' prophecy is coming to pass in the *Spaccio*, and the reformation begins in the minds of the gods. First they must choose to reform themselves and their actions. From there, the heavens must be reformed through the cleansing of its negative images one by one.

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<sup>410</sup> *Spaccio*, 78.

<sup>411</sup> *Spaccio*, 89.

<sup>412</sup> *Spaccio*, 140.

<sup>413</sup> *Spaccio*, 240.

Jove commands: "Let us prepare ourselves, I say, first in the heaven which intellectually is within us, and then this sensible one which corporally presents itself before our eyes"<sup>414</sup>. This, in turn, will reform all the worlds and their inhabitants. Here is another grand extrapolation of a Hermetic myth: Hermopolis. It was to be the realization of the Hermetic teachings, a city built in Egypt<sup>415</sup>. Its nine walls and towers were to be filled with images to benefit its inhabitants by drawing down positive forces. It was the model for Thomas Campanella's "City of the Sun"<sup>416</sup>. Yet Bruno, never one to think small, imposes the concept on the entire universe.

Bruno's allegory works on other levels as well. He tells us that gods and humans are of the same substance and furthermore every person is a universe himself: "That same Jove is made the governor and mover of heaven in order to give an understanding how in every individual is contemplated a world and a universe where, for governing Jove, is signified Intellectual Light, which dispenses and governs it in [the world], and distributes, in that admirable structure, the orders and seats of the virtues and vices"<sup>417</sup>. So the heavenly reform is also a personal reform. The gods represent us, in fact are different aspects of ourselves. "Because, just as here, Jove who represents each one of us"<sup>418</sup>. Jove is our soul, our Intellectual Light, our Will. Momus is our ethical conscience which Bruno refers to as *synderesis*, a divine spark, "a certain light that resides in the crow's nest, top sail, or stern of our soul"<sup>419</sup>. Cupid is our memory, Sophia our wisdom, and so on. We must reform, balance, and polish these faculties to purify ourselves: "Let us prepare ourselves, I say, first

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<sup>414</sup> *Spaccio*, 115.

<sup>415</sup> See *Asclepius* 83; C.H. XII, 3.

<sup>416</sup> See Yates, GBHT, 233. She also draws a parallel of *Spaccio* to Thomas More's *Utopia*.

<sup>417</sup> *Spaccio*, 78.

<sup>418</sup> *Spaccio*, 79.

<sup>419</sup> *Spaccio*, 79.

in the heaven which intellectually is within us”, in order to fulfill the hermetic prophecy. Bruno’s religiosity, in relation to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, calls for this ritual initiation and purification as it was outlined in the *Asclepius*. Isis tells the reader that “ceremonies are not vain fantasies, but live words which touch the ears of us gods”<sup>420</sup>.

The Third level of reform is socio-religious. The transformations take place in the heavens and in individuals also reform society. What is absolutely essential to Bruno’s ethics is action. He detested the Protestant belief in *sola fides*, especially that of the Calvinists who he viciously attacks and mocks. Momus says “but they say it is not by the good that is done, or by the evil which is not done, that one becomes pleasing to the gods, but rather it is by hoping and believing, according to their catechism. Behold, oh gods, if there ever existed ribaldry more open than this, which by those alone is not seen, who did not see anything”<sup>421</sup> and “Whereas nobody works for them and they work for nobody (because their only labor is to speak ill of works)”<sup>422</sup>. So strong is his dislike, Jove keeps the constellation of *Corona Borealis* as the “Ideal Sword of Judgment” to wipe out Calvinists and “other stinking filth”<sup>423</sup>. Even the gods themselves are judged on their good works. Momus says to Fate “Commonly, oh blind lady, all the other gods expect for themselves the reward of these seats for good works they have done, are doing, and can do. And for such [good works] the Senate has proposed to reward those people”<sup>424</sup>.

Bruno presents a strong ethic based on Divine Law which is transmitted by an immanent and unmediated God as it appears in nature. Jove tells Momus “You know that

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<sup>420</sup> *Spaccio*, 237.

<sup>421</sup> *Spaccio*, 124.

<sup>422</sup> *Spaccio*, 125.

<sup>423</sup> *Spaccio*, 124.

<sup>424</sup> *Spaccio*, 169.



animals and plants are living effects of Nature; this Nature (as you must know) is none other than God in things. . . diverse living things represent diverse divinities and diverse powers. . . whence all of God is in all things”<sup>425</sup>. Bruno is a strong supporter of social institutions, even the churches he so vehemently attacks, since they keep order by literally putting the fear of God (and Hell) into people: “Let there be preserved the fear and the cult of invisible powers, and honor, reverence, and respect toward our proximate living rulers”<sup>426</sup>. Arguably, Bruno himself didn’t live up to that standard. He was clearly an elitist. He felt there was a “true” religion, namely his own, which could only be comprehended by the select few. Copernicus and Aristotle, for example, were good craftsmen, but Bruno himself was an artist. As for the masses, the “unwashed” should be encouraged to observe their “lesser” religions in order to maintain public peace and safety<sup>427</sup>. In this, Bruno revives the classic pagan distinction between the religion of the philosophers and that of the popular cult.

Through another chain of being, Law operates through Sophia to maintain that order. Eternal Law moves downward to become Natural Law, which in turn becomes Human Law<sup>428</sup>. His views on the application of Law are really quite progressive. He writes “through law princes reign, and kingdoms and republics are maintained. Law, adapting herself to the complexion and character of peoples and nations, suppresses audacity through fear, and sees to it that goodness is secure amongst the wicked”<sup>429</sup>. If the law functioned properly, Bruno believed that:

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<sup>425</sup> *Spaccio*, 235.

<sup>426</sup> *Spaccio*, 145.

<sup>427</sup> See for example *Cena* 181.

<sup>428</sup> *Spaccio*, 144.

<sup>429</sup> *Spaccio*, 144.

The weak not be oppressed by the stronger; that tyrants be deposed, just rulers and realms be constituted and strengthened, republics be favored; that violence not tread upon reason, ignorance not despise knowledge; that the poor be aided by the rich; that virtues and studies, useful and necessary to the commonwealth, be promoted, advanced and maintained, and that those be exalted and remunerated who profit from them; and that the indolent, the avaricious, and the owners of property be scorned and held in contempt<sup>430</sup>.

As we have seen, Bruno's ethics are based on good works. And here he departs from one of the central tenets of Protestant Christianity: one cannot sin without action; one cannot sin in thought alone. Sophia recounts that "he [Jove] has commanded that she [Judgment] should not be concerned with what each one imagines or thinks providing that words and deeds do not corrupt the tranquil state of affairs<sup>431</sup>. Judge the tree, he says, by its fruit not its leaves, "internal sins, however, must be considered sins only to the extent that they produce, or could produce an external effect; and internal justice is never justice without external practice"<sup>432</sup>.

### 3.4 Return to Egypt

In the final dialogue of the expulsion a movement takes place in the text away from the Greco-Roman gods to the Egyptian. Isis and Trismegistus both arrive and begin to participate in the discourse. Isis, in fact begins to dominate it. The envious Jove himself acknowledges the superiority of Egypt:

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<sup>430</sup> *Spaccio*, 145.

<sup>431</sup> *Spaccio*, 146.

<sup>432</sup> *Spaccio*, 148.

Therefore, we Greeks recognize Egypt, the great monarchy of letters and nobility, as parents of our fables, metaphors and doctrines, and we do not recognize that generation that never had a span of land which naturally or by virtue of civilized justice was theirs. Whence we can with sufficiency conclude that they have neither naturally nor because of long enduring violence of fortune ever been part of this world<sup>433</sup>.

This harks back to the *Asclepius*, Hermes' lament and the Egypt as the model of heaven.

Bruno introduces the famous Egyptian speaking statues of the *Asclepius*. The Egyptians were able to penetrate Divinity with their natural religion, magical use of plants and animals, and statues imbued with gods' presence. But their descendents, the Greeks and the Christians, were simply awed by their outer appearance. As Isis proclaims, "the most vile in Greece and in other parts of the world abuse the Egyptians", for they do not understand

the Deity, one and simple and absolute in itself, multiform and omniform in all things, in the forms of live beasts, live plants, live stars and in inspired statues of stone and metal, how much incomparably worse is that cult, and how much more vilely do they sin who, without any convenience and necessity, rather outside of every reason and dignity, under divine garbs, titles, and insignia, adore beasts and worse than beasts<sup>434</sup>.

While others only admired the surface, the Egyptians were able to penetrate to the true form and ascend to the Divine.

Bruno's ethics, in *Spaccio* are based on the framework of Hermes' lament of the *Asclepius* and the hope for the birth of a new era. This new age is not a divine intervention into human life and history, but rather a human intervention into the divine

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<sup>433</sup> *Spaccio*, 251.

<sup>434</sup> *Spaccio*, 247.

realm. Because of this close Hermetic connection that Bruno understands between the human and divine worlds, if we reform ourselves we reform God. This reform has social, political, legal, religious, and divine consequences. Most importantly, this is done on the level of the phantasmic image.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **An Intuition of Infinity in the Cosmology of Bruno: A Tale of Two Boats, Two Eucharists and Two Societies**

“Whoever does not find within himself the heroic fervor of self assertion and of the limitless unfolding will always remain blind to the cosmos and its infinity” (Cassirer, 188).

“Who will mount me, O Madonna, to the sky,  
and bring back thence my lost wisdom?”

(Ariosto, *Orlando furioso* XXXV, 1. Quoted by Bruno, *Cena* 90).

There is no doubt that Bruno was on the forefront of something, but of what exactly is not necessarily clear. Atanasijevic writes “Bruno sensed more intensively than all other intellectuals of his time that soon there was to arise a new philosophy on foundations established by ancient philosophers”<sup>435</sup>. Bruno was acutely aware, writes Gatti, of the beginning of a new scientific era, and *Ash Wednesday Supper* “is a dialogue about the new

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<sup>435</sup> Atanasijevic, 21.

science”<sup>436</sup>. Cassirer states that in *The Supper*, Bruno announces, “what might be called the new attitude and the new tone of the whole way of *feeling the world*”<sup>437</sup>. So which vanguard was Bruno championing: philosophical, scientific, or religious? If Bruno is known today for anything, it is that he was one of the first to embrace Copernicus’ heliocentric model. Nearly every general reference text will give the same story. He championed Copernicus; consequently Bruno’s work was “an important step towards the scientific views of nature that followed”<sup>438</sup>. His persecution and execution by the Inquisition is, more often than not, portrayed as a harsher version of the fate of Galileo, occurring for the same reasons. Bruno eventually became a symbol for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian Republicans. He was a champion of free thinking, an enemy of the church, and a martyr to science<sup>439</sup>. The statue that was erected in the Campo de Fiore in Rome, where he was burned at the stake, was erected in this spirit. Saiber cites a letter from one donor to that statue:

February 8, 1889

My Dear Sir:

It gives me great pleasure to include my check for one hundred dollars. I shall never be quite satisfied until there is a monument to Bruno higher than the dome of Saint Peter’s<sup>440</sup>.

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<sup>436</sup> Gatti, 48.

<sup>437</sup> Cassirer, 187.

<sup>438</sup> *The Philosophers Dictionary*. Ed. Robert M. Martin. Peterborough: Broadview Press. 1994. p 38.

<sup>439</sup> See Swinburne’s poem “For the Feast of Giordano Bruno: Philosopher and Martyr” (1899) as another example of Bruno being portrayed as a champion of modernity. Appendix 2.

<sup>440</sup> Saiber, 41.

This sentiment that Bruno presented a “scientific” or “enlightenment” challenge to the Vatican is very typical, even today, among those who are acquainted with the life and writings of Bruno.

I will argue that Bruno is not a champion of Copernicus, but rather hijacks Copernicus into his own radical reformation. He combines Nicholas of Cusa, Copernicus, and Hermes Trismegistus to create a new vision of the universe which had to be dealt with by everyone from Bacon, to Leibniz, to Newton, and ultimately Einstein who put a boundary on the universe once again. Bruno’s insight was not observational, or akin to anything we might associate with objective science. Rather, Bruno created an original cosmology based on his ethics, psychology, and philosophy, which disregarded observation and objectivity. Instead, Bruno relied on his intuition of infinity and forced the universe to conform to it.

*The Ash Wednesday Supper*<sup>441</sup>, published in 1584, was written during Bruno’s sojourn in London, and its setting and providence are important in understanding the work itself. Gatti and Koyré have argued strongly for its standing in the history of modern science. This text does indeed have a place as rumination on scientific theory, but to read *Cena* as primarily a scientific text is to do it an injustice. Claiming that Bruno is a scientist is, if not anachronistic, then certainly something unintentional on Bruno’s part. As the subtitle implicitly states, this work is a contemplation of the movement from multiplicity to unity.

There is much to admire in the writings of Hilary Gatti on Bruno. She has done a particularly excellent analysis of the Copernican content in *Cena*, as well as Bruno’s use in this work of physics and their precedents, mathematics,<sup>442</sup> optics, and so on – essentially, all

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<sup>441</sup> *Five Dialogues, by Four Interlocutors, with Three reflections, on Two Subjects (La Cena de le Ceneri*. Hereafter *Cena*).

<sup>442</sup> She has also analyzed Bruno’s mathematics with regard to *De Imagium*.

the aspects of Bruno's thought that might be associated with modern science. Implicit in Gatti's work is the assertion that Yates is wrong in concluding that Bruno was primarily a Hermetic philosopher. This too is an admirable argument to some extent; Yates did go too far with Bruno's hermeticism and made it the basis of all of Bruno's thought<sup>443</sup>. Yates limits Bruno by concluding that his work was entirely Hermetic, and downplays many of the other influences and traditions that Bruno drew on. However, Gatti makes the same error in reverse. In her eagerness to counter Yates, she strips Bruno of all the Hermetic, Neo-platonic, magical, and animistic influences, which are so clear in his thought and instead tries to pigeonhole him as a modern scientific thinker<sup>444</sup>.

Gatti and Yates, then, are both mistaken in their interpretations of Bruno. His rejection of the classical cosmology was not driven by an enlightenment intellectualism, but by a religious fervor based in intuition and ecstasy. He was not so much a scientist as a radical religious reformer. That said, contrary to Yates's belief, *Cena* and Bruno nonetheless do have a place in the history of science. *Cena* is a text which deals with astronomy. In it, Bruno expounds the Copernican theory, and indeed goes far beyond it to postulate an infinite universe with infinite planets, populated with life, revolving around infinite suns. There is a strong possibility that Galileo was familiar with this work as some of his wording is extremely close to Bruno's<sup>445</sup>. It is well known that Kepler wrote to Galileo chiding him for not giving Bruno credit in his (Galileo's) work. Bruno appears to have been the first person to deduce the sun's rotation<sup>446</sup>. He contributed to physics the dynamical steady state<sup>447</sup> and to

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<sup>443</sup> See Gatti 1999, Clucas 2002.

<sup>444</sup> Clucas, 2002, 256 ff.

<sup>445</sup> Kristeller, 1964, 138.

<sup>446</sup> Gosselin, 229. Galileo observed this phenomenon in 1610.

<sup>447</sup> Gosselin, 33.



the science of geology as well. Interestingly, he speculates on global warming<sup>448</sup>. However, despite its scientific elements, *Cena* is a not work of physics, and Bruno was certainly no physicist. This is a work that uses the Copernican system as a launching point for expressing Bruno's highly magical, religious and Hermetic ideas.

Part of the myths which surround Bruno's legacy is that he was a champion of Copernicus<sup>449</sup>. However, outside of this work, Bruno rarely even mentions him. Even in this book, Copernicus is not discussed until the third dialogue and is then ignored again until the fifth and final dialogue, where his ideas are dealt with only briefly. There is so much else going on with this book.

*Cena* deserves its reputation as one of the first philosophical texts to consider the Copernican system seriously. Copernicus famously downplayed or ignored the implications of his own work on a regular basis. For obvious reasons, which were lost on Bruno, Copernicus passed off his work as a better "model" for more accurate calculations. He did not acknowledge the fundamental challenge that heliocentrism posed to orthodox cosmology, theology, even politics. Bruno not only criticizes Copernicus for this, but insults him as well. In Bruno's mind Copernicus, like Aristotle, was a gifted craftsman whose mind was better suited to mathematics than natural reasoning<sup>450</sup>. For Bruno, philosophy was better left to

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<sup>448</sup> *Cena*. 216-17.

<sup>449</sup> In "Far From Home" (*The Walrus*, Sept. 2006, Vol.3 Is. 7), an article on the University of British Columbia's space program, which is trying to locate planets on distant stars. Bruno is quoted on his belief that other stars have planets and life. He is identified as an "astronomer and philosopher" and is portrayed as a martyr for this modern science. See also Swinburne's poem "For the Feast of Giordano Bruno: Philosopher and Martyr" (1899) for another example of Bruno portrayed as a champion of modernity.

<sup>450</sup> *Cena*, 86.

those like himself; “the helmsmen of exploration [who] have discovered how to disturb everyone else’s peace”<sup>451</sup>. And disturb he did.

To call this a scientific text is anachronistic. The confusion comes from Bruno’s analysis and incorporation of Copernicus’ heliocentric model. However, Bruno does not address Copernicus in any scientific sense; rather, he uses the heliocentric model in a highly irregular way and explodes it into an infinite model. So rather than dealing with Copernicus’ theories, he actually uses them for his own, Hermetic purposes. Copernicus’ cosmology is a heuristic tool to further Bruno’s philosophy; it is not, for Bruno, an astrological system. Gatti’s insistence that *Cena* is a scientific work ignores the fact that much of his science is incorrect. She attempts to correct much of the scientific content, but in this she rather strains Bruno’s thought. Still, she holds to her argument that Bruno was thinking about Copernicus in a scientific way.

*Cena* is regarded in the history of science as being one of the first books on Copernican theory. But as we have already noted, Copernicus isn’t actually mentioned until the third dialogue, and then not again until the very end of the book. So it should be clear that Copernicus is not the focus of this work. Furthermore, when Bruno does deal with Copernicus, it is only to deride him; he essentially says that Copernicus is an idiot, that he was good at math but bad at philosophy. If there is any doubt that Bruno’s philosophy is not focused on Copernicus, we need only to look to his own words; Bruno writes that “he saw through neither the eyes of Copernicus nor those of Ptolemy, but through his own eyes”<sup>452</sup>. In other words, Bruno did not see himself as a product of scientific history – or even really as a participant in it – but rather, he used science to his own ends, manipulating theories “in his

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<sup>451</sup> *Cena*, 88.

<sup>452</sup> *Cena*, 85.

own eyes” and to suit his own philosophy. In Bruno’s view, Copernicus had no understanding of the implications of his theory. Cleverly, Bruno locates Copernicus within the line of ancient philosophers, going back through Plato and Pythagoras and ultimately to Hermes Trismegistus, and then (of course) forward to himself<sup>453</sup>. He does this to assert that so-called discovery is simply a return to an existing, very ancient theory. Copernicus himself struggled to overcome problems regarding the observations of the movements of the planets and Ptolemaic theory; this was the impetus for the heliocentric model. Bruno saw this as overcoming a fundamental problem. In this sense, *Cena* is very much like *Spaccio*, in that it works from an astrological/philosophical model, in order to overcome present problems and to initiate a new future, which ultimately is a remembrance of the past and a resurgence of the ancient philosophy, even an “original” philosophy, dictated directly from God. A *prisca theologia* from the lips of the most ancient Hermes<sup>454</sup>.

Bruno’s physics, if not his cosmology, are largely derivative and thoroughly Aristotelian<sup>455</sup>. Of his physics, Gosselin and Lerner write that Bruno “had an uncanny aptitude for starting with a false premise and proceeding through faulty reasoning to correct conclusions”<sup>456</sup>. I will not deal with Bruno’s physics here, but rather the more important aspect of *Cena*; it’s philosophical focus.

In 1583, Bruno received a letter of recommendation from King Henri III to his ambassador to Queen Elizabeth’s court, Michel de Castelnau, Marquis de Mauvissière<sup>457</sup>.

Bruno spent two years living with the ambassador, which was probably the most stable time

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<sup>453</sup> *Cena*, 85-86.

<sup>454</sup> See Chapter 2 on the importance of myth of Hermes.

<sup>455</sup> Gosselin, 32-33.

<sup>456</sup> Gosselin, 12. As a professor of physics himself, Lerner is unquestionably an authority on the subject.

<sup>457</sup> Along with Queen Elizabeth, *Cena* is dedicated to de Mauvissière.

in his turbulent life. It granted him a certain diplomatic immunity, and this stopped him from being run out of the country sooner (as he was run out of Geneva, and would later be run out of Paris, Wittenberg, and Helmstedt.) His attachment to de Mauvissière allowed him access to Elizabeth's court. There, he fostered contacts and patronage amongst the court elite such as Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Fulke Greville, at whose home *The Ash Wednesday Supper* was set<sup>458</sup>. It was also a time and a milieu wherein all things Italian were very fashionable.

Queen Elizabeth was fluent in Italian, and liked to show off her talent to visitors. This was to play an important role in the publication of his book. However, by the end of his stay, thanks to his writings and general disposition, Bruno had managed to insult and alienate all of his potential allies.

Bruno's confrontational behavior began immediately upon arriving in England.

Bruno went to Oxford for a debate held in honor of the Polish prince Albert Laski. There, he attempted to defend Copernicus and, as usual, to insult Aristotle. Bruno's contribution was the first time Copernicus was taught at Oxford<sup>459</sup>, and it was hardly met with acceptance. By all accounts, the debate quickly collapsed into a shouting match, and Bruno was laughed off the stage. At this point in history, Oxford's quality of scholarship was at an all-time low. As a result of Reformation house-cleaning, the once esteemed university had been emptied of many of its great minds<sup>460</sup>. Bruno was questioned, reasonably, for confusing Ficino's *Three Books on Life* with Copernicus, but he was also taunted for his Italian accent. As a result, Elizabeth herself wrote to Oxford complaining about the behavior of its dons in front of the Polish prince.

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<sup>458</sup> At Bruno's inquisition trial he stated that the supper took place at the embassy, the only place a Catholic rite could be held in England.

<sup>459</sup> Gatti, 1999, 43.

<sup>460</sup> see Gosselin, 38; Yates, GBHT, 167-8.

This event would come to have great significance to the content of Bruno's work. In *Cena*, Bruno turns this very debate into a stunning victory for himself. He portrays the Oxford dons as "asses, oafs and fools"<sup>461</sup>, pompous and vain, confused, muddled and drunk: "Did they seem to know Greek?" asks one interlocutor; "and beer" is the response<sup>462</sup>. It would seem that Bruno was looking for an appointment at Oxford. The debate and the book certainly lost him any chance of obtaining a fellowship.

It is unclear why Henri III sent Bruno to England. He was impressed enough by Bruno to give him a special lecturing position in Paris. Bruno was involved in the Palace Academy, a Neo-Platonic think tank similar to the Platonic Academy in Florence that had been established by Cosimo de Medici and Ficino<sup>463</sup>. Whether Bruno was charged with an actual mission by Henri is uncertain<sup>464</sup>, although *Spaccio* makes it clear that he certainly felt that he had one. Henri's ambassador's mission was certainly clear: to try to maintain an uneasy alliance with Protestant England as a counterbalance to the rising power of Spain and the Spanish-backed Catholic League. But the role that Bruno was to play in that mission, if there was any, is much less clear.

Bruno found ordinary politics crass, and though the *Supper* is one of his most "political" writings, in the sense that it discusses political matters of the day, these matters play only a small role in this book. What Bruno seems to be attempting is not a political union between England and France, but a philosophical union of like-minded liberal thinkers.

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<sup>461</sup> *Cena*, 186.

<sup>462</sup> *Cena*, 81-82.

<sup>463</sup> On Ficino and the Platonic Academy see Yates 1964, 11 ff; White 107. On Bruno and the Palace Academy, a similar institution established in Paris, see Gosselin, 18.

<sup>464</sup> Bruno has been accused of being a spy for the French king in the Elizabethan court. See John Bossy *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair* (Yale UP, 2002). But this seems very unlikely.

One of the reasons for publishing the book in Italian rather than in Latin<sup>465</sup> is that it was a fashionable language among the intellectual elite of Elizabeth's court, and this was his target audience<sup>466</sup>. Even most of the Oxford pedants whom he insults throughout the book could not read Italian. In addition, Copernicus had generated a certain interest in these same circles, as had the *Corpus Hermeticum* (Sidney and Greville were both students of John Dee<sup>467</sup>.) Capitalizing on these factors, Bruno deliberately secured a certain readership by writing in Italian.

His mission was to unify Catholic and Protestant minds by overcoming one of the most contentious issues dividing them: the Eucharist. Bruno disliked theologians as much as Oxford pedants, and attributed all religious troubles to "insidious subtleties of theologians in discussing the sacraments, in particular the Eucharist"<sup>468</sup>. Thus, it must be noted once more that *Cena* is not merely a tract on astronomy, but rather a work, as the title says, on the Eucharist. Bruno tries to overcome doctrinal differences by imposing a Hermetic superstructure on the Eucharist. In a characteristically grand and sweeping gesture, he proposes a revolution to overcome divisiveness and to unify Europe, bringing a lasting Hermetic peace. And yet, the Eucharist, like the elements dealing with astronomy, is only one part of this text. He ties all of these things into his greater mission in *Cena*; a philosophy of the infinite, which underlies his radical religious, ethical, and philosophical reformation. We should recall the subtitle of the text ("*Five Dialogues, by Four Interlocutors, with Three Reflections, on Two Subjects*"), which indicates that this work is about the movement from plurality to unity.

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<sup>465</sup> The majority of Bruno's work is written in Latin.

<sup>466</sup> Gosselin, 25.

<sup>467</sup> Yates, GBHT, 187. Gosselin 19.

<sup>468</sup> Yates, GBHT, 230.

Bruno's interest in Copernicus was not in the clarification of calculations but how much it fit his philosophy. According to Bruno, Copernicus did not "discover" as much as he "rediscovered" the ancient philosophy<sup>469</sup>. Looking back on what we have said about *Spaccio*, which was also written during Bruno's period in London; we can see the parallels of the Asclepian prophecy of the coming of the new age through the rediscovery of the ancient.

*Cena* is a complex and confusing text. The book is a dialogue among four interlocutors: Teofilo ("dear to God"), who was at the supper who recounts the tale and speaks for Bruno; Smith, the pedant; Prudenziio, who is excessively prudent and bickers constantly; and Frulla ("a snap of the fingers", i.e. a trifle) who provides comic relief. The discourse takes place over five days as the tale of Bruno's ordeal is retold. *Cena* is a literary work rich in symbolism, unlike *De Magia*, *De Vinculis*, or *Cena's* companion piece, *Causa*, all of which are more conventional philosophical dialogues.

Like most of Bruno's writings, at first glance *Cena* is a stylistic and structural mess. Bruno seems to be trying to express his philosophy of infinity in the language itself; infinite sentences, by definition, are seldom concise. He structures his writings on complex numerological and astrological metaphors. However, in the introductory Epistle, Bruno gives us a clue to reading the work. The key to its decipherment is familiar by now: the text is an image. He describes it as a painting which attempts to incorporate all things. Yet "the colours do not correspond perfectly to life, and the lines do not appear to you as exactly as they should"<sup>470</sup>. The challenge for the reader then, is one of perspective, to be able to see the image for what it is: "the fact that the canvas or field was too close to his face and eyes, it was not possible to take the least step backward, nor to place himself to one side or the other

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<sup>469</sup> *Cena*, 86.

<sup>470</sup> *Cena*, 73.

without fear of making the leap that that son of the famous defender of Troy [Astyanax]<sup>471</sup> made”<sup>472</sup>. In other words, the ambitious reader runs the risk of falling into the abyss, into death. Gatti writes that this analogy is consistent with Bruno’s skepticism and pessimism<sup>473</sup>, but she is mistaken; this is actually another example of Bruno’s almost messianic egotism. Bruno is setting himself up as the only one who can stand back, take in the image, and interpret it for all of the others who might perish in the endeavor<sup>474</sup>. Copernicus is the peasant who warns the general of the whereabouts of the enemy. The General, Bruno, must muster and lead the forces in battle. The senses cannot be trusted: “for the infinite cannot be the object of sense perception: therefore he who demandeth to obtain this knowledge through sense is as one who would desire to see with his eyes both substance and essence”<sup>475</sup>. Bruno is suggesting that Copernicus only went as far as the senses could take him. But he could not truly *see* because the image he sought was beyond him. In Bruno’s mind, Copernicus created a model which only conformed to observational data whereas Bruno wanted to have a revolution which had nothing to do with agreements of observations to timetables.

It is telling that in his introduction Bruno once again gives primacy to the image. We can see much of Bruno’s larger program being reiterated here at the beginning of *Cena*. What is at stake is an image, the greatest one of all: the infinite universe, and God, as the immanent expression of it. Throughout *Cena*, Bruno bombards us with images even stranger than those in *De Imaginum*.

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<sup>471</sup> I.e. to his death.

<sup>472</sup> *Cena*, 73.

<sup>473</sup> Gatti, 1999, 49.

<sup>474</sup> See *Cena*, 87 ff.

<sup>475</sup> *Universo*, 2.



Bruno writes in images, but also presents them in visual form. He often draws the parallel between the artist, poet and philosopher, and fancies that he embodies all three. Phantasmic images loom large in *Cena*. In his multifaceted approach to his philosophy of the infinite, Bruno brings all of this together to prepare us for a glimpse of the infinite world. Bruno writes that in creating his works, he

acts just like a painter for whom it is not enough simply to portray a story, but then, in order to fill up the canvas, and to bring his picture into conformity with nature through his art, he also paints stones, mountains, trees, fountains, rivers, and hills; here he shows a royal palace, there a forest, here a stretch of sky, and in that corner the half-disk of the rising sun<sup>476</sup>, and one by one a bird, a pig, a deer, an ass, a horse. But it is enough to show of this animal only the head, of that one only the horn, of another only the hind quarter, of this only the ears, of that the whole; and he portrays each one with a gesture and manner peculiar to him, so that the person looks and judges can attach substance to the *image* with greater contentment. In the same manner are you to read and *visualize* what I have to say<sup>477</sup>.

In other words, Bruno wishes to emphasize that the book is an image. It is not simply a collection of words but a complete work of philosophy, poetry and art. Likewise, the supper is an image. Bruno describes here the underpinnings of all his thought: there is an infinite world, this world contains all multiplicities, but, by definition, infinity must be singular.

*Cena* is drenched with symbolism from the very first page. Bruno applies a “negative theology” to the work: “this book is not a banquet of nectar for Jove the Thunderer ... [nor] a protoplasmic one for man’s desolation... It is not a banquet of Ahasuerus for a mystery<sup>478</sup>, not

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<sup>476</sup> Clearly a reference to the dawning of a new Hermetic age.

<sup>477</sup> *Cena*, 69, my emphasis.

<sup>478</sup> An allusion to Purim.

that of Lucullas<sup>479</sup> for his fortune . . . not that of Tantalus for torment, not that of Plato for philosophy...<sup>480</sup> etc. After this negation, Bruno then presents a long series of opposites: “this is a banquet so great and so small, so professional and student-like, so sacrilegious and religious, so joyous and choleric” etc<sup>481</sup>.

The purpose of this form of introduction is to reduce the work to an absolute minimum, a starting point from which he begins to rebuild what he has cut back: it will be a banquet of the “sophist with Aristotle, philosopher with Pythagoras; laughter with Democritus and weeper with Heraclites...you will find something...to break the silence of any graveyard.” What is the purpose of this supper? “To see what nature can do in creating two ghastly harridans, two dreams, two ghosts”<sup>482</sup>. Clearly, this is no kind of explanation at all. After reading this first paragraph of *Cena*, the reader is no closer to understanding the purpose of the book. But Bruno’s intention is not to explain; rather, he presents his cosmology as a series of images, in order to show that this book is actually a representation of that cosmology through a series of dualistic images. Here, Bruno invokes Cusanus’ Minimum and Maximum and reconciles them through a coincidence of opposites<sup>483</sup>. This is clearly not an introduction to a text on Copernican cosmology. Bruno is leading us towards something quite different; his own radical vision of an infinite universe, which usurps and defies Copernicus.

In this sense, Bruno ties *Cena* into much of his other writings by making it a vehicle for his cosmology of an infinite universe. This program is visible throughout Bruno’s

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<sup>479</sup> Who was renowned for his great wealth

<sup>480</sup> *Cena*, 67.

<sup>481</sup> *Cena*, 67.

<sup>482</sup> *Cena*, 67-68.

<sup>483</sup> *Cena*, 67.

corpus. For example, *Cena* has many similarities with *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*. First, both texts have a ritual aspect; both are centered on religious feasts<sup>484</sup>. More importantly, both texts deal with images; *The Expulsion* deals with what we see when we look at the night sky; *Cena* deals with the even greater image of the universe in its infinite entirety. Bruno steps back from the illusion<sup>485</sup>, and explains it all to us. One of the interlocutors, Teofilio, says that Bruno “gave eyes to the mole and light to the blind, who could not fix their gaze and see their image reflected in the many mirrors which surround them on every side; he loosed the tongues of the dumb who could not and dared not express their entangled opinions. . . .”<sup>486</sup>.

The dialogue proper begins with a discussion of binaries, because two, as Pythagoras says, is a mystical number. Bruno provides one of his many lists, beginning with the two sexes, the two kinds of numbers, the two kinds of beasts of burden, the two most common colours, etc. Of the binaries that he discusses, however, there are three that are the most significant to Bruno’s thought: the two boats, the two Eucharists, and the two models of society.

The first of the two boats is the rotting ark, represented by the ferry that Bruno takes down the Thames on his way to the supper. The ferrymen are described as old and decrepit, “like ancient ferrymen of the Tartarean<sup>487</sup> realm” and likewise the boat “rival[s] Noah’s ark

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<sup>484</sup> In *The Expulsion*, it is the feast of Gigantomachy (honouring the Greek gods’ victory over the Titans), and in *Cena*, as the title explains it is the Ash Wednesday Supper.

<sup>485</sup> He often uses Plato’s image of the painting on the cave wall to elucidate the ignorance of humanity to the larger image.

<sup>486</sup> *Cena*, 90.

<sup>487</sup> i.e. hell

in antiquity”<sup>488</sup>. Eaten by worms and time, the boat cracks, crumbles and splinters under their weight. Fearing for their lives, the passengers pray for their safety. Not only is the boat old and unreliable; it is also a vessel of iniquity; at the end of the journey, the ferrymen cheat the passengers, taking them to the wrong destination and eventually leaving them right back where they started.<sup>489</sup>

The second ship is presented as a woodcut, supposedly in order to explain a complex physics problem, though in actual fact the image has little to do with Bruno’s proof.<sup>490</sup> Rather, I would argue that the image has a greater philosophical and historical significance beyond its ostensible purpose as a visual aide to a scientific problem. This ship is the most detailed woodcut in the book, and there is significant evidence that Bruno did it himself.<sup>491</sup> It is a large masted ship reeling on rocky seas. Two flames appear from the yardarms<sup>492</sup>. The wind god appears in the upper left-hand corner, blowing and propelling the ship. The physics experiment allegedly demonstrates that if a person standing on the masthead dropped an object, it would fall to the foot of the mast as long as the boat did not pitch. But if a person threw an object from the shore, it would miss the target by as much as the space determined by the rate of the current. In scientific terms, it would appear that Bruno is trying to explain what we now know to be the effect of gravity on a rotating planet.

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<sup>488</sup> *Cena*, 111-112.

<sup>489</sup> See also p. 125 for allusion to the rotting ark.

<sup>490</sup> He writes, “if someone standing at point C on the bank of a river throws a stone straight at the ship, AB passing by a river, he will miss hitting it...so if someone who is inside the ship throws a stone perpendicularly from point D to point E...” (162) None of these lettered points or lines actually appear in Bruno’s woodcut.

<sup>491</sup> See especially Yates (1964) 59, note 66.

<sup>492</sup> See appendix 3.

This experiment was not Bruno's invention. It was a common one<sup>493</sup>, and would have been familiar to an educated reader of his day. Yet, there is something unique about this image. First of all, the boat is pitching. There is no one on shore; the boat is nowhere near the shore, which is shown at a great distance. There is an important dissonance between his prose and this image. Bruno understood the incapacity of language to portray the infinite accurately. Thus, he often resorts to images, mathematics, geometry, and so on, to bolster his philosophy and create new layers of meaning.

Secondly, if this is a purely scientific image, what purpose is there to portraying the flames and the wind god? Within 16<sup>th</sup>-century iconography, the two flames would be identified as the celestial twins Castor and Pollux, who were traditionally invoked by sailors to pray for calm seas<sup>494</sup>. Gosselin and Lerner identify the wind god as the world soul, or even as Bruno himself<sup>495</sup>. Bruno refers to himself as a helmsman, propelling a ship "to disturb everyone else's peace, [and] violate the native spirits of diverse regions"<sup>496</sup>. He also identifies with Christopher Columbus, and portrays himself in parallel as the new explorer. There is an ancient Roman prophecy of someone who will find the island of Thule; Bruno takes the fame away from Christopher Columbus by implying that he is superior, since he is discovering the "real" new world: not a new continent, but a new vision of the universe. Yates and Gosselin further associate the two flames with England and France, or more specifically with Henri and Elizabeth<sup>497</sup>.

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<sup>493</sup> Gatti, 1999, 59-60.

<sup>494</sup> Yates, 1999, 135-7. Yates provides several examples of similar images associated with the Bourbon kings.

<sup>495</sup> Gosselin, 46.

<sup>496</sup> *Cena*, 85.

<sup>497</sup> It should be remembered that in *The Expulsion* Bruno elevates Henri III into the heavens as a constellation.

Bruno carries this imagery even further. He cites the legend (which he wrongly attributes to Alexander of Aphrodisias<sup>498</sup>) of the person who wrote in the ashes of a sacrifice on the summit of Mount Olympus, and upon returning a year later found the ashes and letters undisturbed: a sign of holy peace and calm. He links this peace to the two mountains which are France and England: "However by these 'highest mountains' we do not mean such [mountains] as the Alps or the Pyrenees.... but the whole of France which extends between two seas... [and] truly the whole island of Britain is a mountain rising its head above the waves of the ocean sea, and the most eminent point in this island should be taken as the summit of this mountain... it proves that this is one of those highest mountains and is perhaps in the region of the happiest living creatures"<sup>499</sup>. The image of the flames is reinforced by the image of the mountains. Bruno is constantly synthesizing ideas. The seemingly irreconcilable differences between France and England, Catholic and Protestant, are made to coincide on the Hermetic ship and in Bruno's Olympus. Protestant England was committed to the illuminationist Platonism of Augustine, while Catholic France was committed to the theurgical Platonism of Pseudo-Dionysius. Bruno did not wish to combine the two, he meant to overcome the two by imposing a Hermetic superstructure. Thus, there are too many allegorical elements to this woodcut to allow us to see it as a purely scientific diagram. Bruno sees himself as the captain on the vessel, which is riding the rocky seas of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The image is a symbol of peace and concord, and as such, Bruno saw his own work as uniting the liberal minds, in a political coincidence of opposites. His mission was to bring together Protestant England and Catholic France under the banner of his Hermetic cosmology. It is telling that in the experiment he describes, the one on the ship

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<sup>498</sup> See *Cena* 161 note 102.

<sup>499</sup> *Cena*, 161.

who drops the object hits the target: the one on the ship hits true. In this Hermetic ark, Bruno rises above the wicked hearts and corruption of those who will be washed away by the flood. He sees himself as a Noah figure rescuing the world.

As we have seen, this work is a compendium of dualities. Another important set that Bruno presents is his two versions of the Eucharist. As with the rotting ark, the first image is a corrupt one. He calls this the “Ceremony of the Cup” a grotesque and degenerate version of the Eucharistic rite. This ceremony would take place at a British dinner table:

the goblet or chalice passes from hand to hand, all around the table from top to bottom, from left to right, and in all directions with no order but that dictated by rough politeness and courtesy. After the leader of this dance had attached his lips leaving a layer of grease which could easily be used as glue, another drinks and leaves a crumb of bread. Another drinks and leaves a bit of meat on the rim. Still another drinks and deposits a hair of his beard, and in this manner and with great mess, no one is so ill-favored of relics stuck to his moustache...thus by applying each one his mouth to the selfsame tankard, they come to form themselves into one selfsame leech, in token of one community, one brotherhood, one plague, one heart, one stomach, one gullet and one mouth”<sup>500</sup>.

Bruno excuses the upper class – to which he is appealing – from participation in this revolting ceremony, and instead maintains that this was a ritual of the common people. In presenting a vision of the Eucharist turned upside down, Bruno is launching a criticism of Christianity; but the ceremony of the cup is also a symbol of the debasing of that religion.

Thus the extant world is shown as profoundly flawed. The supper itself is made up of idiotic Oxford scholars, who consistently try to insult Bruno but are only able to drool and

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<sup>500</sup> *Cena*, 127.

act like bumbling morons. Amidst this, however, there are moments in which a true union of like minds takes place at the supper. Ultimately, Bruno's program of reform was aimed at uniting like minds. In the moments where some of the more noble guests are able to ignore the Oxford boors have a productive discourse, the meeting of these minds takes place – and that is where the reader is given a glimpse of the good Eucharist. In this, Bruno is undeniably elitist. He saw himself as part of, or even the leader of, a group of select individuals who were able, through their understanding of the infinite, to lead the world forward. The remainder of humanity needed to be led, their reality carefully, and ethically, controlled by those who understood the power of images.

Bruno does not provide a liturgical replacement for this corrupt Eucharist, but rather reinvents the spirit of it by focusing on the ultimate concern of these like minds. In true Renaissance tradition, he attributes the new ritual that he has invented to the thinkers of the ancient past. In other words, in order to purify the Eucharist, it is necessary to return to an ancient understanding of ritual. He writes that those like minds who wish to renew the ancient philosophy are “moderate in life, expert in medicine, judicious in contemplation, unique in divination, miraculous in magic, wary of superstition...irreproachable in morality, godlike in theology and heroic in every way...[with] inviolable sacraments, the great justice of their actions, [and] the familiarity of good and protecting spirits”<sup>501</sup>. Here, again, we see echoes of the prophecy in the *Asclepius* of leaving the Dark Age through a rebirth of the ancient.

Traditionally in Christianity, the Eucharist is where worshippers are closest to God. Indeed, the name of the ritual itself implies this relationship, as the devout experience a

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<sup>501</sup> *Cena*, 96.



*communion* with God. Bruno uses this metaphor as a starting point for reform. His proposal for a new Eucharist is not a physical ritual; rather it is a new method of attaining closeness with God through positive interaction with other people. Bruno seeks to close the gap between humans and God. As much as he raises the earth to be a noble star, he also lowers heaven so that it is not far away; the divine is actually very close. Through the coincidence of opposites, humans become God and God becomes human. This is Bruno's new Eucharist; it is a communion not just of like minds, but of Godlike minds. This transcends the Christian Eucharist, for which Bruno has no respect.

It is interesting to note that part of the Hermetic rejection of Christian modes of thought is the reversal of the notion that the physical body is somehow evil or polluted. And yet, Bruno's representation of the Christian Eucharist is a thoroughly physical one, and he uses a traditionally Christian notion of the vileness of the body in order to deride the extant ritual. Is this an indication that Bruno agreed that the physical world was somehow debased? Not quite: unlike many Christian thinkers of his day, Bruno believed that the body was a good thing, but conceded that it also had the potential to become vile. With bad leadership and corrupt religion, he asserts, human beings do become debased. On the other hand, with good leadership and good religion, human beings have the potential to be divine. *Cena* is a metaphorical, literary work, and so the use of the grotesque body here is largely metaphorical. His purpose in describing the ceremony of the cups is to communicate the human capacity for corruption rather than to assert that the body itself is corrupt. Indeed, as he often asserts, "God is matter"<sup>502</sup>, and "the universe is heaven"<sup>503</sup>. He does not share the Scholastic, or even Neoplatonic view of matter as being evil, or in anyway a privation of

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<sup>502</sup> *Vinculis*. 173.

<sup>503</sup> *Cena*, 184.

good. The Eucharist that he presents in *Cena* is, in part, a meeting of minds. But it is much more than that. It is the meeting of human minds with God.

The final binary to be discussed is the presentation of the two societies. Most of the second dialogue of *Cena* is devoted to recounting the journey of Bruno and his party from the ambassador's residence to the supper, purportedly held at the home of Sir Fulke Greville. He calls this section of the dialogue a "moral topology", and in it he paints a very dark, ugly, and even monstrous portrait of British society. The journey takes place because his host neglected to send him transportation to the dinner, so he must venture into the streets of London and attempt to get there by his own devices. On the way, he encounters the common people, whom he describes as little better than beasts living in their own filth:

Such a stink hole that, if they were not mightily well suppressed they would send forth such a stink and such an evil reek as would darken the name of the whole population, to the extent that England could boast a people which in irreverence, incivility, coarseness, boorishness, savagery and ill-breeding would yield nothing to any other people the earth might nourish on its breast<sup>504</sup>.

And upon seeing a foreigner they "seem, by God, so many wolves and bears and who, by their grim looks, regard him as a pig would someone who came to take away his trough"<sup>505</sup>.

Bruno is manhandled, insulted, laughed at and beaten by the unruly mobs. After their ride on the rotting ark, Bruno and his party are left to fend for themselves. Through the darkness and mire they struggle to get to their destination:

Suddenly he [Bruno] fell so deeply in the mud that he could not pull his legs out; and, thus, helping each other, we passed through the stretch of road hoping the purgatory

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<sup>504</sup> *Cena*, 120.

<sup>505</sup> *Cena*, 121.

would not last long...since there was no light at all to guide us, we could not distinguish the road already passed from one we had to follow...ever sinking knee-deep into the liquid mire, we fell toward deep, dark Avernus [i.e. the entrance to Hell]<sup>506</sup>.

This is a highly allegorical journey<sup>507</sup>. Bruno fights through darkness, muck, ignorance and intolerance in order to reach his destination, where he will be able to espouse his radical ideas. However, as we have seen through the imagery of the unruly Oxford crowd, the supper itself is not entirely a bastion of tolerance, wisdom and good society. Ultimately he blames the state of the common people on their social betters such as the Oxford fellows and Protestant leaders. The latter's corruption and ignorance establishes an ethos for the entire society. It should be recalled that in Bruno's ethics and social theory, those in power who control the images, religious and otherwise, control the population's experience of reality. His mechanics of magic explain how this is possible through the language of phantasy<sup>508</sup>. In *Spaccio*, he presents a new set of images by which to reform religion and society. This is another expression of Bruno's reformation movement.

Society can be rescued from this darkness, filth and corruption by the imposition of an ancient philosophy. Who should "mightily well suppress" these unwashed masses? Bruno mentions many by name beginning with Queen Elizabeth herself and her councilors; the Treasurer of the Realm, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Sir Philip Sidney, and Sir Fulke Greville among others<sup>509</sup>. These are progressive thinkers with (at least perceived) Hermetic leanings, the target audience of Bruno's book, and the contacts that he made in Elizabeth's court. These are the figures to whom Bruno refers when

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<sup>506</sup> *Cena*, 113.

<sup>507</sup> Though this probably reflected actual events which happened to Bruno during his stay in Britain, the supper itself was held at the ambassador's residence where Bruno was living.

<sup>508</sup> See chapter three.

<sup>509</sup> *Cena*, 119-120.

he describes the “moderate in life, expert in medicine, judicious in contemplation, unique in divination, miraculous in magic, wary of superstition. . . irreproachable in morality, godlike in theology and heroic in every way . . . [with] inviolable sacraments, the great justice of their actions, [and] the familiarity of good and protecting spirits”<sup>510</sup>. That is, not those who wish to create a new scientific worldview, but those who are striving to re-establish an ancient intellectual lineage.

Ultimately, Bruno is not really interested in dealing with Copernicus’ model at all (“I care little for Copernicus” he writes<sup>511</sup>). In his notes, Lawrence S. Learner<sup>512</sup> refers multiple times to Bruno’s misguided understanding of the Copernican model. In fact, he ultimately concludes that Bruno probably didn’t even read Copernicus’ book in its entirety. Furthermore, his copy was most probably the garbled French translation by Pontus de Tyards<sup>513</sup>. Bruno gets the science completely wrong; his only concern is how the Copernican model fits his Hermetic paradigm. The spirituality in Neoplatonism and in Hermetic thought is highly solar in its focus, and it is both monotheistic and pantheistic. This can be seen repeatedly in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in which God is metaphorically viewed as the sun. “The sun is a visible god”, Hermes Trismegistus says in the *Asclepius*<sup>514</sup>. So, to someone thinking hermetically, locating the sun at the centre of the universe makes perfect sense – not scientifically, but philosophically.

The solar model, then, had already been created by Neoplatonism and by Hermetic thought; Copernicus simply allowed Bruno to locate this religious/spiritual model within a

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<sup>510</sup> *Cena*, 96.

<sup>511</sup> *Cena*, 192.

<sup>512</sup> Learner is one of the translators of this work and, as we have mentioned, a professor of physics.

<sup>513</sup> *Cena*, 193, note 58. *Oeuvres* Pontus de Tyard, Genève : Librairie Droz. 1950.

<sup>514</sup> *Asclepius*, 68.

scientific medium. Of course, Copernicus certainly was not the first scientist to postulate a heliocentric model. The ancient Greeks did the same thing but were refuted by Aristotle, who chose to keep the world at the centre of the universe specifically because it fit into his philosophical schema. Aristotle “saw but did not believe”, writes Bruno<sup>515</sup>. The infinite universe was also postulated, but rejected in medieval thought<sup>516</sup> because of the philosophical and religious need to locate Jerusalem as the nexus of the cosmos. Just as these authorities had rejected the solar model, likewise Nicholas of Cusa and Bruno accepted it specifically because a new model was philosophically convenient for them. For Bruno, the infinite universe with infinite planets revolving around infinite suns became a model, a hieroglyph, which under pinned all of his thought.

In Hermetic thought, hieroglyphs are ancient symbols that in the past were part of the original and direct language of God, and so as images, they are very attractive to Bruno. He takes Copernicus’ theory, and instead of seeing it as a scientific model, Bruno reinterprets it as the hieroglyph of hieroglyphs, or as the ultimate image (which is, in fact, God.) Here, Bruno uses the same language that Aristotle used in order to talk about form and matter. However, for Aristotle, everything in the sub-lunary sphere was corrupt, whereas everything above that sphere was composed of the incorruptible “quintessence”; there was an inherent barrier between human and divine, marked by the moon. What was sub-lunary, in Aristotelian thought, was prone to corruption and therefore inferior to the supra-lunary world. Bruno differs from Aristotle and Plato in that he views the form not as being separate but as actually present in matter as matter is in form: the two are equal and ultimately one. For

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<sup>515</sup> *Cena*, 216-217.

<sup>516</sup> See, for example, Cassirer 189.

Bruno, the form of forms is existence itself. We live in the Form; it is not an abstract concept.

In the most literal sense, a hieroglyph is a symbol that can be read by anyone who understands its language, and only then does it have meaning. For Bruno, the infinite universe is also a hieroglyph. He takes the Copernican model and uses it as a readable image, the ultimate meaning of which is God. While this is a metaphor, Bruno takes this notion very literally. The universe is a readable image; however, since it is inherently an infinite image, one cannot read it in any kind of regular way. In other words, it is not readable in time and space. Rather, one must transcend dialectical and rational thought; only then can great hieroglyph be understood<sup>517</sup>.

There is an element of the ecstatic in this work. At the beginning of the first dialogue, Teofilo (the main interlocutor) rhapsodizes:

To you, Muses of England I say: inspire me, breathe on me, warm me, ignite me, distil me and resolve me into liquor, make me into juice and make me utter not a small, feeble, narrow, short and succinct epigram, but an abundant, broad vein of lengthy, fluent, grand and steady prose, whence my rivers will not be fed as from a narrow stream but as from a capacious channel. And thou, my Mnemosine, who art hidden under thirty seals and shut up in the bleak prison of the shadow of Ideas, harmonize a little in my ear<sup>518</sup>.

In this passage the sensual, sexual, and alchemical images are combined to invoke an experience of *Eros*. In this remarkable appeal to the Muses of England, Bruno locates himself and his corpus. His works on memory (Mnemosine, the goddess of memory) which

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<sup>517</sup> Gosselin 48. Yates, 1964, 163-4.

<sup>518</sup> *Cena*, 84-85.

so impressed Henri III, The shadow of ideas (his work *De Umbris Idearum*), and the thirty seals (another title of his *Explicatio Triginta Sigillorum*). It is as though Teofilo cannot begin to recount the tale until he himself has elevated his *psyche* beyond the mundane and merely rational to that of some divine realm of heroic inspiration. Again, we can see that Bruno is not writing anything approaching what we would consider a scientific text. He is reaching for the ends of rational thought, and in a masterful move of theurgy, he calls the gods down from the heavens in order to transcend mere rational thought in order to see the universe for what it is, and to participate in it.

There is an important difference in this work between the idea of an image and a model. Our modern idea of the solar system is a model, or basically a representation in miniature. Copernicus was famously vague in the presentation of his model and refused to address its implications in terms of a larger meaning. It is to this aspect of Copernicus' thought that Bruno invests the most attention and interest. Bruno insists that the model does have a larger meaning, and so rather than being simply a miniature representation, it is actually a Hermetic image. Copernicus inspired the image, but Bruno's project is to bring that to fruition within a philosophical and religious discourse rather than a scientific discourse. Essentially, the difference between a model and an image is the difference between scientific and magical discourse. A model represents something in a literal way; whereas an image represents something in a metaphorical or magical way. This is the difference between Bruno as a scientist and Bruno as a magical philosopher. Where the scholarship on Bruno has failed in this respect is to locate him in the former, but he is undeniably concerned with magical implication rather than scientific theory. A model is

something to be observed, an image is a creation; a creation involves not merely witnesses, but participants.

For Bruno, infinity is necessarily the state of things. If God is the universe, it is insulting to think that God could be anything but infinite. This is part of Bruno's lowering of heaven, in that he locates God within the World Spirit itself. For the Neo-Platonist, the World Spirit emanated from God, who remained a behind-the-scenes presence of a sort. Bruno cuts out these steps and instead posits that the universe is the world spirit, and the world spirit *is* God. This is how he concludes that the universe is infinite, since the universe is God, and God must be infinite. The infinite universe then, is absolutely full. There are no empty spaces, and what fills the infinity is *plenum* (fullness).

Bruno's notion of *plenum* is a complex thing. It is an "infinite material ether that offered no resistance to motion and position of bodies and that completely penetrated them while simultaneously receiving their qualities"<sup>519</sup>. For Bruno, the empty void was unacceptable. The *plenum* is alive and connects all things in a living, ensouled, infinite universe. On Earth, it is "air"; further away it is "spirit"; but it is all one, continuous substance. Bruno is able to absorb Lucretius' atomism but rejects his "Void", an empty, uncreated universe. The universe, for Bruno, is full, alive and interconnected<sup>520</sup>. This, of course, fits perfectly into his theory of magic, since magic cannot work without a connecting principle. Bruno's theory of "optics"<sup>521</sup> is a theory of the communication between the infinite living planets and stars.

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<sup>519</sup> Grant, 188.

<sup>520</sup> Cf. Grant 188-190.

<sup>521</sup> As described in *Cena* 150.



All these elements of Bruno's philosophy buttress each other. His epistemology is based on the generation of infinite images through the faculty of phantasy. His ethics and his social program are based on the control of those images and on controlling people through that faculty of phantasy. His theory of magic depends on the creation of bonds, which takes place through images and connects back to the generation of infinite images. His cosmology reflects all of this; while it is infinite, Bruno's cosmology itself is an image, and each of the infinite planets is likewise an image. The infinite hieroglyph ultimately comes down to a representation through the faculty of phantasy of the universe as the single hieroglyph; through the coincidence of opposites, the two are the same thing.

An important part of Bruno's project is to impose a Hermetic superstructure on religion. He is in favor of religion, but largely as a means of social control.<sup>522</sup> Scripture, he writes, is moral law, not natural law<sup>523</sup>. It too is meant for social control. Those who have the ability to transcend this horizon and see past the element of social control, actually have an obligation to control religion and the masses through the manipulation of images and through magic. This can only be done by ethical people who will not use this tool for their own selfish purposes.

For Bruno the Eucharist is a perfect example of this notion, because in its current state it is bogged down in bad theology. This is due, in part, he argues to corrupt and ignorant theologians and perpetuated by credulity of those under their care. Bruno consistently distances himself from received orthodox theologies and instead gives priority to natural philosophy to overcome these Protestant/ Catholic debates.

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<sup>522</sup> See in Chapter 3.

<sup>523</sup> *Cena*, 177.

Part of the project is to overcome religious problems through an improved superstructure, but another aspect of Bruno's thought is the ultimate goal of overcoming religion itself by attempting to move religious debate from the world of theology to that of philosophy. This is something of a false distinction that Bruno is making. Bruno often insists that he is forgoing theology and concentrating only on natural philosophy<sup>524</sup>. Yet his writings are of a religious nature and constantly deal with the nature of God and our relationship with god. Bruno was certainly a theologian<sup>525</sup>. Still it is important to note that he felt the need to make this distinction. It is probable that he felt the need to separate himself not from theology but from Christianity.

Furthermore, this is where the idea of like-minded people comes in, since Bruno sees this debate as necessarily taking place among philosophers of real worth rather than among theologians. These philosophers would come not only from Christianity; Bruno maintains that every religion has some truth in it. Central to Bruno's Hermetic thought is the notion that the ancient philosophy is the truest philosophy, and as an extension of this, every religion has elements of that ancient truth within it. The problems with religion arise when becomes perverted and mired in "theology". So a superstructure must be imposed, but Bruno also wants to find the nugget of truth that already exists within all faiths. He turns also to Judaism and Islam to try and find this truth<sup>526</sup>.

For Bruno this truth that is present in the origins of all religion is the truth which comes from ancient Hermeticism. The new element here is Bruno's reinterpretation of Hermetic thought. Bruno wants to combine the new and the old and through the coincidence

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<sup>524</sup> E.g. *Causa*, 69.

<sup>525</sup> He was a Dominican priest, and his education certainly prepared him for a life of theological speculation.

<sup>526</sup> *Cena*, 181.

of these opposites he insists that they are actually the same thing. Bruno insists that Hermeticism predates Christianity, and that a purification of Christianity is possible as long as it depends on this ancient philosophy. Therefore, in Bruno's project the masses would be free to follow their traditional religions. The only difference is that Bruno postulates a subset of people who are intellectually able enough to know how the structure works, to see that religion is a social tool and to manipulate it for the greater good. Though they too must practice a religion. Bruno always acknowledges the importance of ritual and observant practices.

Of course, the problematic part is in understanding the difference between philosophy and religion. Bruno does not address this problem other than to ridicule theologians and extol philosophers. But it must be remembered that the separation between religious and philosophical discourses was already very strong in Bruno's day, and so in that sense this is not a radical idea. Because of the Greco-Roman origins of Christianity, theology has a very specific meaning in Christian thought – a very specialized way of talking about God – which is not as distinctive in other religions. But in a modern sense, the division between religion and philosophy is exceedingly tenuous. For Bruno, the distinction between philosophers and theologians is basically about an attempt to separate himself and those that agree with him from the Catholic and Protestant establishment thinkers and those who thought he was wrong. They are the ones who are bogged down in the minute distinctions of the meaning of the Eucharist; Bruno says that these distinctions are not important enough for a war, since at its root the extant ceremony is flawed. Indeed Bruno takes great pains to separate himself

from a theological discussion<sup>527</sup> and rather frames his entire theory as one of natural philosophy.

Gatti asserts that Bruno is trying to find a new science, and goes on to say that “Bruno recognizes his dependence on the data collected by practicing scientists.”<sup>528</sup> I would argue that this is completely misguided. In fact, Bruno regards practicing scientists with great disdain. He says that scientists are like peasants who come to the general of an army in order to inform him of the whereabouts of the enemy army<sup>529</sup>. Essentially, Bruno sees himself, insofar as one who transcends science and deals with a larger truth, as the general of the army. He insults Aristotle and Copernicus repeatedly, insisting that they were at best clever craftspeople with no capacity for thought or philosophy. So it makes no sense at all to call Bruno a scientist. When he does use “data”, even Gatti admits that he belittles it, more often than not gets it wrong, and ultimately throws it out in favor of his own philosophy<sup>530</sup>. This is not a scientific process; it is a philosophical, cosmological process intended to create an understanding of a unified, living universe based on principles rather than on the observation of data. Indeed, after one of Bruno’s so-called proofs, Lerner quips that “no intent should be made to interpret this pseudo-geometrical argument literally.”<sup>531</sup> His science doesn’t make any sense. Bruno is not a scientist of any kind, though he likes to deal with these ideas and use them for his own purposes.

In *Cena* in particular, Bruno uses a series of diagrams that simply do not match up to the attendant scientific ideas. The only image that matches the writing is the one that

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<sup>527</sup> See especially *Cena* 182 ff.

<sup>528</sup> Gatti, 1999, 51

<sup>529</sup> *Cena*, 85.

<sup>530</sup> Gatti, 1999, 195.

<sup>531</sup> *Cena*, 159, note 94.

represents the boat. But as I have already pointed out, his explanation of “gravity” in that image is not scientific – it is simply given in order to support his belief that the atmosphere is part of the physical world, which is the world soul. Rather, Bruno is attempting to create a Hermetic philosophy that is complete and includes science, cosmology, epistemology, etc. Bruno is the product of a Classical education, in which these things had to fit together to explain observable phenomena. This is his project; science is a trifle compared to the overwhelming concern with the relationship to cosmology, and the relationship to God. Bruno’s goal is the creation of a philosophical model, not any kind of applicable scientific objective.

Bruno is striving for a Hermetic cosmology in this book. For Copernicus, the universe was essentially dead; it simply spun around in circles. This notion carried over into modern thought, and for Newton and Descartes as for Copernicus, the universe is mechanical; it is a big machine and God is the famed absent watchmaker. Bruno reacted against this, insisting instead that the universe is a living organism. He hated the new science of Copernicus in that it robbed the universe of its soul.

Bruno’s universe is pantheistic, animistic, alive, infinite, and as such, it is God. This being the case, everything in the universe is a part of God, and through the coincidence of opposites, matter becomes form and vice versa; nothing ever dies, it simply changes, and everything is infinite. In this scheme, as I have already discussed, those who are aware of the structure and are able to work with it, have the capacity to become God.

Bernardino Telesio and later Francis Bacon, wished to strip astronomy of philosophy and of Aristotelian categories such as form, matter, activity, potentiality, and so on<sup>532</sup>. These thinkers favored a model based on empirical data and observation. Bruno also rejects this approach. He never attempts to affirm his infinite universe using mathematics, empirical data, or sensory observations. It is said of Albert Einstein that one of his greatest achievements was to demonstrate to us once and for all that our visual observations of the universe will *necessarily* be incorrect. Instead, we need new tools of observation: physics, relativity, etc.<sup>533</sup>. To some extent, Bruno was the precursor of Einstein's insight, in his insistence that the universe could not be fully experienced through the senses. Bruno tells us that Tiresius, the blind soothsayer of Thebes, is the one who truly *sees*. Bruno quotes Seneca's *Oedipus*: "You, daughter, guiding a father in need of light, report the sure signs of the divinatory sacrifice"<sup>534</sup>. Seneca's imagery fits Bruno's thinking so well; the Cosmos is not something to be seen, but something to be felt. Bruno's explanation of optics in *Cena* boils down to the constant communication of the infinite planets and stars with each other and all things, even at unfathomable distances. Infinity is beyond what is visible to the senses. He asks:

What could we judge if the many and the diverse verifications of the appearances of the superior or surrounding bodies had not been proclaimed and presented to the eyes of reason? Certainly, nothing. Nevertheless, having rendered thanks to the gods, the bestowers of gifts, who proceed from the first and infinite omnipotent light, having exalted the scholarly works of those noble spirits,

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<sup>532</sup> Cassirer, 145.

<sup>533</sup> It is interesting to note the similarities between Bruno's bond and super string theory.

<sup>534</sup> *Cena*, 85. Seneca *Oedipus*, vv. 299-300.

we recognize without reservation that we must open our eyes to what they have noted and seen<sup>535</sup>.

We ascend from the visual, to the vision of reason, and eventually to merge with the light of the gods. This is where it is possible to attain a true vision of the universe. In order to truly see, there must be a transcendence of the senses, moving into the sense of senses: phantasy.

The problems of space and infinity, then, take on a whole new dimension in Bruno's thought. It goes beyond the perceptual to the experiential. Where Copernicus feared to tread, Bruno rushes in with a marching band, screaming into his bullhorn. Bruno brings together Lucretius and the atomists, Copernicus, Nicholas of Cusa, and Hermes Trismegistus. He cannot abide the empty void of the atomists, so he fills it full of life; the empty space becomes the ethereal space. He challenges Copernicus' timidity and explodes the heliocentric model into infinity. He takes Cusanus' Maximum and Minimum more literally than Cusanus ever did and builds a cosmology upon it. And he adopts a Hermetic understanding of the divinity of humanity, and imposes it on the universe.

Behind all of Bruno's thought lie two ideas: infinity and mutation. The earth and all the bodies in the universe are animals; they are ensouled. Not just with vegetative or sensitive souls but also with intellectual souls; even more intellectual than our own.<sup>536</sup> They move and change because of their relationship to the world soul which is grounded fundamentally in *Eros*. For example, iron is attracted to the magnet because in iron there is "a sensible faculty which is aroused by a spiritual force which diffuses from the magnet"<sup>537</sup>. In all things is desire; not the Aristotelian desire to rest in its natural place, but the desire to mutate. There is

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<sup>535</sup> *Cena*, 85-86.

<sup>536</sup> *Cena* 156.

<sup>537</sup> *Cena*, 207.

no rest in Bruno's universe. Instead, "every part of it must be subject of every form, so that every part can become everything"<sup>538</sup>. This constant mutation becomes an intrinsic principle and answers the question, if the planets and stars are animals, why do they not die? Planets, he writes, are microcosms of the universe: they are multiform but part of a larger whole. They grow, change, and die in their individual parts while retaining and renewing the whole structure.

This theory allows Bruno to dispute the Aristotelian/Christian idea of the unmoved mover. The violent motion of the mover would render it less perfect than the moved.<sup>539</sup> What would be more perfect? At first glance it would seem to be a Plotinian, erotically charged universe. It is not a mover who controls the universe, but a lover. Bruno goes even further to say that reality is controlled by the painter, the poet, the one who controls the image. He ends *Cena* with a vision of Egypt and a vision of the myopic Aristotle: a philosopher who saw the truth, but could not speak it, a seer who did not believe.<sup>540</sup> It is a new vision of something ancient. It was ancient even in Aristotle's day. He had an inkling of it, but allowed himself to be mired in bad philosophy just like the Oxford Dons. He gave up the truth for convenience's sake. It should be remembered that Bruno was banished from Geneva, Oxford, and Paris (to name a few) for his anti-Aristotelianism. He saw himself the recipient, or rediscoverer, of something purer, more authentic; a universe filled with monsters of a very different kind.

In *Cena*, then, Bruno destroys the Ptolemaic and Aristotelian concept of the incorruptible, immutable heavens. Nicholas Cusanus' insight was a logical problem of

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<sup>538</sup> *Cena*, 213.

<sup>539</sup> *Cena* 155.

<sup>540</sup> *Cena* 216-217.



relation and measurement. In *De Docta Ignorantia*, Cusanus does not ask about the existence of God but about the ability to know God. All knowledge, he postulates, must be relational or allegorical. To have any sort of knowledge of the infinite presents a problem of measurement; to what can the infinite be compared? This question collapses the Scholastic house of cards.

Because it is evident that between the infinite and the finite no relationship exists, it is also completely clear that wherever there is something that surpasses and something that is surpassed, one can never attain the absolute Maximum, for that which surpasses, like that which is surpassed, is finite, whereas the absolute Maximum is necessarily infinite. If, therefore, there is something which is not the absolute Maximum, something greater can obviously be found. Thus there cannot be two or more things so similar that something even more similar could not be found, and so on *ad infinitum*. There always remains a difference between the measure and the thing measured, no matter how close together they may come. The finite intellect, therefore, cannot know the truth of things with any exactitude by means of similarity, no matter how great. For the truth is neither more or less, since it is something indivisible... The intellect is to truth as the polygon is to the circle: just as the polygon, the more sides and angle it has, approximates but never becomes a circle, even if one lets the sides and angles multiply infinitely, so we know of the truth no more than we can grasp it as it is with any true precision. For the truth is absolutely necessary, which can never be more or less than it is; whereas our intellect is only possibility<sup>541</sup>.

Cusanus reconciled this problem through the coincidence of opposites and through his Christology.<sup>542</sup> In Cusanus' view, the Aristotelian cosmology failed because of the law of the excluded middle, and because of a language which grammatically excluded the concept

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<sup>541</sup> *De Docta*, i. 3

<sup>542</sup> It should be remembered that in *Spaccio* the gods gave Cusanus the square of the circle.

of infinity<sup>543</sup>. Bruno voided himself of any need to resort to a Christology and a creation *ex nihilo* comes to a similar, yet expanded, epiphany, but not through relation and measurement but through location. The problem with Aristotle's cosmology, which Bruno realized was this:

Space could not be homogenous because the difference between 'places' was as essential as the difference between physical elements. If a certain element naturally strives upwards, and another naturally strives downwards, it means that the 'up' and 'down' possess their own, fixed constitutions . . . But if space is to be conceived of not as compromising these given constitutions but, rather, as a systematic whole to be synthetically constructed, the first requirement must be that the form of this construction obey a strictly unitary law<sup>544</sup>.

If there is nothing outside of the world, Bruno asks, where is the world?<sup>545</sup> If the distinction between the celestial and sublunary spheres is struck down, if the unmoved mover is banished, if quintessence is overridden, then the idea of a center also falls apart. The universe no longer needs a trash heap, which is earth, to which all matter falls. Matter is infinite, matter is reconciled with form, and the universe *is* heaven.<sup>546</sup> In his constant striving for unity, Bruno's new anthropology becomes his new cosmology. By breaking down the spheres of the heavens he frees the mind: he gives souls, life, even excrement to all the ensouled parts of the universe.<sup>547</sup> Why would Bruno attribute excrement to stars that are supposedly divine? The only logical explanation is to demonstrate that they are incredibly similar to us; or even better, that we are like them. This is a concrete example of Bruno's

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<sup>543</sup> See Koyré 5 ff. Cassirer 7 ff.

<sup>544</sup> Cassirer, 182.

<sup>545</sup> *Cena*, 152.

<sup>546</sup> *Cena*, 184.

<sup>547</sup> *Cena*, 90.

parallel movement of raising humanity to the level of the divine while bringing the divine down to the earthly level. He never tires of reminding us that “divinity is in us”<sup>548</sup>. For Bruno, the model of the universe must correspond to the model of the human experience

Throughout Bruno’s writing, his cosmology is not simply concerned with the location of the stars and their science. Instead, his cosmological system fits into his ethics and his mechanics.

Bruno did not look upon the problem of space as exclusively or even primarily a problem of cosmology or natural philosophy, but, rather, as a question of *ethics*. . . Bruno never affirms the infinity of space by basing himself on the simple testimony of empirical or mathematical vision. He considers sense and intuition as such to be incapable of leading to the true concept of infinity. Rather, we grasp the infinite with the same organ with which we grasp our own spiritual being and essence: the principle of its knowledge is to be sought nowhere but the Ego, in the principle of self-consciousness. If we want to penetrate the true essence of the infinite. . . we must perform a free act and a free upward movement of the mind to raise ourselves to it<sup>549</sup>.

As we have seen, Bruno’s perfect human is the one who can incorporate, and even generate, the infinite. However, this capacity is not a gift so much as it is a quest. Bruno is many things, but he is not a mystic. Dion Fortune made an applicable observation about the difference between a mystic and a magus. The mystic, in the classical Christian sense, is one who strips away all the elements of this world in order to free that spark of the divine within us to fly upwards to its natural place with the divine. The magus fulfills the same task by

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<sup>548</sup> *Cena*, 91.

<sup>549</sup> Cassirer, 188.

embedding themselves into this world and by calling the divine down to their own level.<sup>550</sup>

In this sense, Bruno is properly a magus rather than a mystic.

So in Bruno's cosmology, the earth revolves around the sun not because of the observations of Copernicus, but because of the life-giving principles of the sun itself. The universe is infinite because it is consubstantial with God, and it is an insult to assume that God is anything but infinite. Space is filled with the fullness (*plenum*) of itself which is a continuous quantity of multiplicity which, logically, must be one organic being. Nothing can exist outside of the universe. There is no spiritual space without matter: God is not separate, or apart from the universe. Space is neither a substance nor an accident; rather space is that in which things subsist locally.<sup>551</sup> We have access to all space because, ultimately, as a participant in infinity, it is identical with us (and dependent on us) through the coincidence of opposites. The universe is alive, aware, ensouled, and responsive. And, most importantly, it is fundamentally malleable.

Bruno was not a "modern" thinker. Although he incorporates, or perhaps more accurately co-opts, a certain early "scientific" language in *Cena*, the text does not bare out the theory that he was attempting to create a new science as we understand science today. Something quite different emerges from the text. Instead of creating a new science, he seeks to reveal an ancient hermetical truth. *Scientia*, in Latin, implies the knowledge of something, as opposed to *ars*, which connotes the knowledge of how to *do* or *make* something. Bruno's cosmology has far more to do with *ars*; or as Cassirer put it, a "feeling" of the universe. Doing, or participating in the universe is an integral part of Bruno's intuition. The more one

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<sup>550</sup> Fortune, 1-2.

<sup>551</sup> Grant, 187.

is able to apprehend the infinite, the greater one is able to influence the universe and play a part in it.

Bruno's vision of the universe is one of infinite interplay between unity and multiplicity. His philosophy drove him to find a model of the universe which could be an infinite, organic whole, and yet could encompass—without contradiction—its multiplicity. Bruno is critical of the Aristotelians for reducing the universe to a plurality without a unifying force<sup>552</sup>, but is also critical of the Platonists for reducing the universe to the One and belittling its multiple nature<sup>553</sup>. He also attacks the classical idealists' view which depreciates the value of matter. In *Cena* Bruno proposes a cosmological system which attempts to reconcile these contradictory schema. He does so through the application of a Hermetic superstructure and through his logic of coincidence.

Bruno is not a scientist in any modern sense of the word. One of the clearest expressions of his "unscientific" approach is that he believed that his cosmological work had applications outside of its field. Bruno's cosmology was linked to his ethics, his politics, and his philosophy. In *Cena*, he attempts to make all these aspects of his thought agree. Adopting his new cosmology meant, for Bruno, profound social and religious reform. In his richly symbolic and highly idiosyncratic fashion, Bruno paints the pictures of two possible societies: the corrupt, ignorant, and xenophobic mobs, versus the meeting of educated minds; drowning in the sinking, rotting Ark of backward religion or sailing in the Hermetic ship of peace and enlightenment; drinking from the filth laden cup, or enjoying the true Eucharist which is the potential of the human made divine.

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<sup>552</sup> *Causa*, 47; *Ingegno*, xvii.

<sup>553</sup> *Causa*, 70; 110.

Bruno's cosmology was so much more than trying to make a better model to correspond with observations. The image of the infinite, living, and divine universe that Bruno creates is meant to be internalized—the macrocosm *is* the microcosm. It must be allowed to enter into the faculty of phantasy and speak directly to the soul. If the image is accepted, change will follow. In *Spaccio*, rewriting the constellations, the images of the heavens, will reform not only the gods but also mortals. In *Cena*, the acceptance of the new image of the universe provides model on which to rebuild social, political, and religious life and structures.

## Conclusion

The gods gathered in a barrack on the outskirts of the city. Zeus, as usual, spoke at great length and sounded dull. The conclusion: the organization must be dissolved, enough of meaningless conspiracies, one must enter rational society and – somehow survive. Athena was sobbing in the corner.

The final assets – it must be noted – were split up in an honest manner. Poseidon maintained an optimistic attitude. Loudly, he proclaimed that he will manage just fine. The ones who felt the worst were the caretakers of the now-regulated streams and clear-cut forests. In secrecy, they all counted on their dreams, but no one wanted to speak about it.

No special motions were brought up. Hermes abstained from lending his vote. Athena was sobbing in the corner.

They were returning to the city, late in the evening, with false documents in their pockets and a bundle of coins. As they were crossing the bridge, Hermes jumped in the river. They watched him drown, but no one offered to rescue him.

The opinions were divided; was it a bad or, on the contrary, a good omen? In any case, it was a point of departure toward something new and unclear.<sup>554</sup>

It has been the endeavor of this work to explore one of the reoccurring patterns, and heuristic tools, which appears throughout Bruno's writings: the role of images. It is certainly not the only weapon in the arsenal of a thinker so complex and profound as Bruno, but hopefully it can add another dimension to the understanding of his work. It is an aspect of Bruno's work which has not yet been fully explored and yet it has the potential to offer so much to uncovering the mysteries of Bruno's philosophy.

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<sup>554</sup> Zbigniew Herbert. "An Attempt at Dissolving Mythology". Trans. Dawid Kołoszyc.

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn at this point. The image is central to the inner workings of the mortal being and her relationship with everything external to herself. For Bruno, the fundamental and primary mode of engagement with the world is through the interactivity of images negotiated through the faculty of phantasy. Languages, geometry, mathematics, religion, ethics, and cosmology are all mitigated through the call and response of images. The experience of reality is the product the sum total of the images to which one is exposed. Bruno's mechanism for incorporating this phenomenon into his philosophy is, as he often does, to invoke the past: he appropriates the ancient language of phantasy. Yet nothing goes unchanged in Bruno's hands. *Imaginum* provides the guidelines for a reciprocal, co-creation of reality through the active formulation of images. *Imaginum* is, very literally, an instruction manual for the creation of infinite images. This is the basis of his psychology and epistemology. In the correct hands, he argues, the behavior, reactions and disposition of both the human and divine are dependent can be manipulated through the faculty of phantasy. That is, through the manipulation of images. The *atrium* is a paradigm for producing images. With each incarnation, with each manipulation of sets, a new image is created and each new image will have repercussions.

The next step is into the mechanics of magic. Magic, for Bruno, was a very real and operative force. More than prayer or worship, magic is our most direct connection with the divine. By reducing God to the status of world soul, God becomes answerable to the same laws as humans. These laws are not reason, gravity, or quantum physics, but the laws of magic: sympathy, antipathy, and sameness. The mechanics of his universe inevitably involved human participation, and that participation was magical. Bruno's language of magic is centered around bonds which occur both naturally and by design. Those who have



the ability to bond, are ethically required to do so, and through their lack of attachment must bind in accordance with the greatest good.

*Spaccio* is an account of Bruno's ethics as both the response to, and fulfillment of, the hermetic prophecy in the lament of the *Asclepius*. In this work, Bruno reforms Christianity, and religion in general, by creating an entirely new set of images in the heavens. He argues that if the images, in this case of the night sky, change so must we all. He makes a further, more radical argument, that is the images change so must God.

Finally he applies his theory of images to the cosmos itself. *Cena* both appropriates and then explodes the cosmology of Copernicus. He creates a model of an infinite universe as an image of God. Through this image, Bruno attempts to reconcile religious strife by the imposition of the superstructure of what he believes to be the rediscovery of the most ancient philosophy. To get past the language of, what was in his mind, the twisted logic of theology of his day he proposes a new way to commune with God.

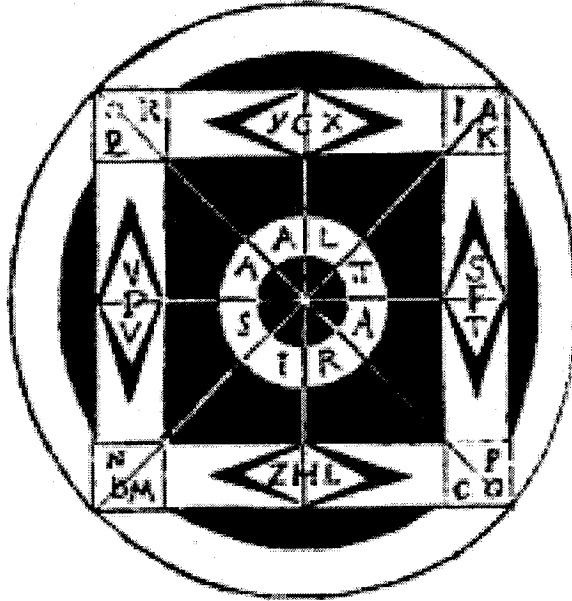
This work has argued that Bruno should be thought of as a radical reformer. He thought of himself as neither a Catholic nor a Protestant, but lived in a time where these distinctions meant life or death. Bruno was keenly aware of the political and religious environment of his day and his work, ultimately, needs to be understood as an attempt to overcome these differences. To his death, he held to the vision that humanity could be reformed. We have not only a unique relationship with the divine, which for Bruno was the living universe, we have a responsibility to it. The divine relies upon us as much as we rely upon the divine.

Why is Bruno's philosophy relevant today? We live in the most image laden culture in human history. Bruno provides us with a comprehensive philosophy to understand the

relationship between power and images. Furthermore, Bruno supplies us with a theory of the application of images: how they are created, and how and why they work.

Modernity has seen to the death of magic. To see the world magically might be a way to save it. Bruno reminds us of this intimate connection that we have with the world around us, his thought depends on it. Before we let Hermes drown, it might be important to heed a heretic such as Bruno.

## Appendix One



The Atrium from Bruno's *De imaginum, signorum et idearum compositione*.

## Appendix Two

### For the Feast of Giordano Bruno, Philosopher and Martyr

#### I

Son of the lightning and the light that glows  
    Beyond the lightning's or the morning's light,  
    Soul splendid with all-righteous love of right,  
In whose keen fire all hopes and fears and woes  
Were clean consumed, and from their ashes rose  
    Transfigured, and intolerable to sight  
    Save of purged eyes whose lids had cast off night,  
In love's and wisdom's likeness when they close,  
Embracing, and between them truth stands fast,  
    Embraced of either; thou whose feet were set  
    On English earth while this was England yet,  
Our friend that art, our Sidney's friend that wast,  
Heart hardier found and higher than all men's past,  
    Shall we not praise thee though thine own forget?

#### II

Lift up thy light on us and on thine own,  
    O soul whose spirit on earth was as a rod  
    To scourge off priests, a sword to pierce their  
    God,  
A staff for man's free thought to walk alone,  
A lamp to lead him far from shrine and throne  
    On ways untrodden where his fathers trod  
    Ere earth's heart withered at a high priest's nod

And all men's mouths that made no prayer made  
moan.

From bonds and torments and the ravening flame

Surely thy spirit of sense rose up to greet

Lucretius, where such only spirits meet,

And walk with him apart till Shelley came

To make the heaven of heavens more heavenly

Sweet

And mix with yours a third incorporate name.

-from *Swinburne's Poems*, Vol III "Poems and Ballads", Chatto &  
Windus, London, 1905

## Appendix Three



The Ship Image from *Lo Spaccio de la Bestia Trionfante*

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