

Giordano Bruno: The Forgotten Philosopher

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by *John J. Kessler*, Ph.D., Ch.E.

Filosofo, arso vivo a Roma,
PER VOLONTA DEL PAPA
IL 17 FEBBRAIO 1600

In the year 1548 an Italian boy was born in the little town of Nola, not far from Vesuvius. Although, he spent the greater part of his life in hostile and foreign countries he was drawn back to his home at the end of his travels and after he had written nearly twenty books.

When he was thirteen years old he began to go to school at the Monastery of Saint Domenico. It was a famous place. Thomas Aquinas, himself a Dominican, had lived there and taught. Within a few years Bruno had become a Dominican priest.

It was not long before the monks of Saint Dominico began to learn something about the extraordinary enthusiasm of their young colleague. He was frank, outspoken and lacking in reticence. It was not long before he got himself into trouble. It was evident that this boy could not be made to fit into Dominican grooves. One of the first things that a student has to learn is to give the teacher the answers that the teacher wants. The average teacher is the preserver of the ancient land marks. The students are his audience. They applaud but they must not innovate. They must learn to labor and to wait. It was not Bruno's behavior but his opinions that got him into trouble.

He ran away from school, from his home town, from his own country and tried to find among strangers and foreigners a congenial atmosphere for his intellectual integrity that he could not find at home. It is difficult not to get sentimental about Bruno. He was a man without a country and, finally, without a church.

Bruno was interested in the nature of ideas. Although the name was not yet invented it will be perfectly proper to dub Bruno as an epistemologist, or as a pioneer Semanticist. He takes fresh stock of the human mind.

It is an interesting fact that here, at the close of the 16th Century, a man, closed in on all sides by the authority of priestly tradition, makes what might be termed a philosophical survey of the world which the science of the time was disclosing. It is particularly interesting because it is only in the 20th Century that the habit of this sort of speculation is again popular. Bruno lived in a period when philosophy became divorced from science. Perhaps it might be better to say that science became divorced from philosophy. Scientists became too intrigued with their new toys to bother about philosophy. They began to busy themselves with telescopes and microscopes and chemical glassware.

In 1581 Bruno went to Paris and began to give lectures on philosophy. It was not an uncommon thing for scholars to wander from place to place. He made contacts easily and was able to interest any group with whom he came in contact with the fire of his ideas.

His reputation reached King Henry III who became curious to look over this new philosophical attraction. Henry III was curious to find out if Bruno's art was that of the magician or the sorcerer. Bruno had made a reputation for himself as a magician who could inspire greater memory retention. Bruno satisfied the king that his system was based upon organized knowledge. Bruno found a real patron in Henry III and it had much to do with the success of his short career in Paris.

It was about this time that one of Bruno's earliest works was published, *De Umbras Idearum*, *The Shadows of Ideas*, which was shortly followed by *Ars Memoriae*, *Art of Memory*. In these books he held that ideas are only the shadows of truth. The idea was extremely novel in his time. In the same year a third book followed: *Brief Architecture of the Art of Lully with its Completion*. Lully had tried to prove the dogmas of the church by human reason. Bruno denies the value of such mental effort. He points out that Christianity is entirely irrational, that it is contrary to philosophy and that it disagrees with other religions. He points out that we accept it through faith, that revelation, so called, has no scientific basis.

In his fourth work he selects the Homeric sorcerer Circe who changed men into beasts and makes Circe discuss with her handmaiden a type of error which each beast represents. The book '*Cantus Circaeus*,' *The Incantation of Circe*, shows Bruno working with the principle of the association of ideas, and continually questioning the value of traditional knowledge methods.

In the year 1582, at the age of 34 he wrote a play *Il Candelajo*, *The Chandler*. He thinks as a candle-maker who works with tallow and grease and then has to go out and vend his wares with shouting and ballyhoo:

"Behold in the candle borne by this Chandler, to whom I give birth, that which shall clarify certain shadows of ideas ... I need not instruct you of my belief. Time gives all and takes all away; everything changes but nothing perishes. One only is immutable, eternal and ever endures, one and the same with itself. With this philosophy my spirit grows, my mind expands. Whereof, however obscure the night may be, I await the daybreak, and they who dwell in day look for night ... Rejoice therefore, and keep whole, if you can, and return love for love."

There came a time when the novelty of Bruno had worn off in France and he felt that it was time to move on. He went to England to begin over again and to find a fresh audience. He failed to make scholastic contact with Oxford. Oxford, like other European universities of this time, paid scholastic reverence to the authority of Aristotle. A great deal has been written about the Middle Ages being throttled by the dead hand of Aristotle. It was not the methods of Aristotle nor the fine mind of Aristotle which were so much in question as it was the authority of Aristotle. A thing must be believed because Aristotle said it. It was part of the method of Bruno to object in his own strenuous fashion to the cramming down one's throat of statements of fact because Aristotle had made such statements when they were plainly at variance with the fresh sense experience which science was producing.

In his work *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, a story of a private dinner, being entertained by English guests, Bruno spreads the Copernican doctrine. A new astronomy had been offered the world at which people were laughing heartily, because it was at variance with the teachings of Aristotle. Bruno was carrying on a spirited propaganda in a fighting mood. Between the year 1582 and 1592 there was hardly a teacher in Europe who was persistently, openly and actively spreading the news about the "universe which Copernicus had charted, except Giordano Bruno. A little later on another and still more famous character was to take up the work: Galilee.

Galileo never met Bruno in person and makes no mention of him in his works, although he must have read some of them. We may not blame Galilee for being diplomat enough to withhold mention of a recognized heretic. Galilee has often been criticized because he played for personal safety in the matter of his own difficulties. We demand a great deal of our heroes.

While in England Bruno had a personal audience with Queen Elizabeth. He wrote of her in the superlative fashion of the time calling her diva, Protestant Ruler, sacred, divine, the very words he used for His Most Christian Majesty and Head of The Holy Roman Empire. This was treasured against him when he was later brought to trial as an atheist, an infidel and a heretic. Queen Elizabeth did not think highly of Bruno. She thought him as wild, radical, subversive and dangerous. Bruno found Englishmen rather crude.

Bruno had no secure place in either Protestant or Roman Catholic religious communities. He carried out his long fight against terrible odds. He had lived in Switzerland and France and was now in England and left there for Germany. He translated books, read proofs, and got together groups and lectured for whatever he could get out of it. It requires no great stretch of the imagination to picture him as a man who mended his own clothes, who was often cold, hungry and shabby. There are only a few things that we know about Bruno with great certainty and these facts are the ideas which he left behind in his practically forgotten books, the bootleg literature of their day. After twenty years in exile we picture him as homesick, craving the sound of his own native tongue and the companionship of his own countrymen. But he continued to write books. In his book *De la Causa, principio et uno*, *On Cause, Principle, and Unity* we find prophetic phrases:

"This entire globe, this star, not being subject to death, and dissolution and annihilation being impossible anywhere in Nature, from time to time renews itself by changing and altering all its parts. There is no absolute up or down, as Aristotle taught; no absolute position in space; but the position of a body is relative to that of other bodies. Everywhere there is incessant relative change in position throughout the universe, and the observer is always at the center of things."

His other works were *The Infinity, the Universe and Its Worlds*, *The Transport of Intrepid Souls*, and *Cabala of the Steed like unto Pegasus with the Addition of the Ass of Cyllene*, an ironical discussion of the pretensions of superstition. This "ass," says Bruno, is to be found everywhere, not only in the church but in courts of law and even in colleges. In his book *The Expulsion of the 'Triumphant Beast'* he flays the pedantries he finds in Catholic and Protestant cultures. In yet another book *The Threefold Leas and Measure of the Three Speculative Sciences and the Principle of Many Practical Arts*, we

find a discussion on a theme which was to be handled in a later century by the French philosopher Descartes. The book was written five years before Descartes was born and in it he says: "Who so itcheth to Philosophy must set to work by putting all things to the doubt."

He also wrote *Of the Unit, Quantity and Shape* and another work *On Images, Signs and Ideas*, as well as *On What is Immense and Innumerable*; *Exposition of the Thirty Seals* and *List of Metaphysical Terms for Taking the Study of Logic and Philosophy in Hand*. His most interesting title is *One Hundred Sixty Articles Directed Against the Mathematics and Philosophers of the Day*. One of his last works, *The Fastenings of Kind*, was unfinished.

It is easy to get an impression of the reputation which Bruno had created by the year 1582 in the minds of the clerical authorities of southern Europe. He had written of an infinite universe which had left no room for that greater infinite conception which is called God. He could not conceive that God and nature could be separate and distinct entities as taught by Genesis, as taught by the Church and as even taught by Aristotle. He preached a philosophy which made the mysteries of the virginity of Mary, of the crucifixion and the mass, meaningless. He was so naive that he could not think of his own mental pictures as being really heresies. He thought of the Bible as a book which only the ignorant could take literally. The Church's methods were, to say the least, unfortunate, and it encouraged ignorance from the instinct of self-preservation.

Bruno wrote: "Everything, however men may deem it assured and evident, proves, when it is brought under discussion to be no less doubtful than are extravagant and absurd beliefs." He coined the phrase "Libertes philosophica." The right to think, to dream, if you like, to make philosophy. After 14 years of wandering about Europe Bruno turned his steps toward home. Perhaps he Was homesick. Some writers have it that he was framed. For Bruno to go back to Italy is as strange a paradox as that of the rest of his life.

He was invited to Venice by a young man whose name was Mocenigo, who offered him a home and who then brought charges against him before the Inquisition. The case dragged on. He was a prisoner in the Republic of Venice but a greater power wanted him and he was surrendered to Rome. For six years, between 1593 and 1600 he lay in a Papal prison. Was he forgotten, tortured? Whatever historical records there are never have been published by those authorities who have them. In the year 1600 a German scholar Schoppius happened to be in Rome and wrote about Bruno, who was interrogated several times by the Holy Office and convicted by the chief theologians. At one time he obtained forty days to consider his position; by and by he promised to recant, then renewed his "follies." Then he got another forty days for deliberation but did nothing but baffle the pope and the Inquisition. After two years in the custody of the Inquisitor he was taken on February ninth to the palace of the Grand Inquisitor to hear his sentence on bended knee, before the expert assessors and the Governor of the City.

Bruno answered the sentence of death by fire with the threatening: "Perhaps you, my judges, pronounce this sentence against me with greater fear than I receive it." He was given eight more clays to see whether he would repent. But it was no use. He was taken

to the stake and as he was dying a crucifix was presented to him, but he pushed it away with fierce scorn.

They were wise in getting rid of him for he wrote no more books, but they should have strangled him when he was born. As it turned out, they did not get rid of him at all. His fate was not an unusual one for heretics; this strange madcap genius was quickly forgotten. His works were honored by being placed on the Index expurgatorius on August 7, 1603, and his books became rare. They never obtained any great popularity.

In the early part of the 18th Century English deists rediscovered Bruno and tried to excite the imagination of the public with the retelling of the story of his life, but this aroused no particular enthusiasm.

The enthusiasm of German philosophy reached the subject of Bruno when Jacobi (1743-1819) drew attention to the genius of Bruno and German thinkers generally recognized his genius but they did not read his books. In the latter part of the 19th Century Italian scholars began to be intrigued with Bruno and for a while "Bruno Mania" was part of the intellectual enthusiasm of cultured Italians. Bruno began to be a symbol to represent the forward-looking free-thinking type of philosopher and scientist, and has become a symbol of scientific martyrdom. Bruno was a truant, a philosophical tramp, a poetic vagrant, but has no claims to the name of scientist. His works are not found in American libraries. In this age of biographical writing it is surprising that no modern author has attempted to reconstruct his life, important because it is in the direct line of modern progress. Bruno was a pioneer who roused Europe from its long intellectual sleep. He was martyred for his enthusiasm.

Bruno was born five years after Copernicus died. He had bequeathed an intoxicating idea to the generation that was to follow him. We hear a lot in our own day about the expanding universe. We have learned to accept it as something big. The thought of the Infinity of the Universe was one of the great stimulating ideas of the Renaissance. It was no longer a 15th Century God's backyard. And it suddenly became too vast to be ruled over by a 15th Century God. Bruno tried to imagine a god whose majesty should dignify the majesty of the stars. He devised no new metaphysical quibble nor sectarian schism. He was not playing politics. He was fond of feeling deep thrills over high visions and he liked to talk about his experiences. And all of this refinement went through the refiners' fire -- that the world might be made safe from the despotism of the ecclesiastic 16th Century Savage. He suffered a cruel death and achieved a unique martyr's fame. He has become the Church's most difficult alibi. She can explain away the case of Galileo with suave condescension. Bruno sticks in her throat.

He is one martyr whose name should lead all the rest. He was not a mere religious sectarian who was caught up in the psychology of some mob hysteria. He was a sensitive, imaginative poet, fired with the enthusiasm of a larger vision of a larger universe ... and he fell into the error of heretical belief. For this poet's vision he was kept in a dark dungeon for eight years and then taken out to a blazing market place and roasted to death by fire.

It is an incredible story.

The "Church" will never outlive him.
