

*Giordano Bruno: Parole, concetti, immagini.* Michele Ciliberto, ed.

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Alfonso Musci's entry on "James Joyce" in the volumes under review notes that Samuel Beckett discussed Giordano Bruno's presence in *Finnegans Wake* in 1929, ten years before it was published. Thornton Wilder, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1943 for *The Skin of Our Teeth*, was a fan of Joyce—so much so that the authors of *A Skeleton Key to "Finnegans Wake"* accused him of borrowing too freely from the *Wake*. Wilder read a few pages of the novel as describing the trial and execution of "Browne and Nolan," one of Joyce's many names for Bruno. For fact-checkers curious about Wilder's insights—or the charges against him—the *Skeleton Key* by Joseph Campbell and Henry Robinson provided the first roadmap to the *Wake*, which expects its readers not only to parse Joyce's private language, but also to share his experience of Irish nationalism around the turn of the twentieth century.

Except in its monumental scale, Michele Ciliberto's splendid work in three volumes is like Campbell and Robinson's: it is a skeleton key, and it works. Like Joyce's *Wake*, Bruno's books were highly original in their day and are still unintelligible to many unguided readers. Two mysteries especially well clarified by Ciliberto's volumes are Bruno's fortunes in later Italian politics and—still more important—his often elusive language. For this double decipherment, no one is better equipped than Ciliberto, who has given most of his career to Bruno and—as president of Italy's National Institute on Renaissance Studies and professor of philosophy at the Scuola Normale—has helped to guide the larger progress of Renaissance scholarship in Italy and around the world. He and a team of thirty-nine contributors have produced about 700 entries on Bruno, his works, their background, their reception, and the many controversies about them. From now on, students of Bruno will start where Ciliberto and his team have stopped.

Many entries are about persons—predecessors of Bruno (Alberti, Aquinas, Aristotle), contemporaries (Dee, Paracelsus, Tasso), later figures (Gramsci, Hegel, Spinoza), and characters from fiction, myth, and the Bible (Adam, Silenus, Thoth). There are also natural objects (air, blood, wood), subjects of study (alchemy, Kabbalah, magic), and terms of art from philosophy (accident, privation, substance) and theology (apocalypse, spirit, Trinity). Most important, however, are the many words—scores of them—that usually came to Bruno from ordinary Italian or Latin to be absorbed into his own lexicon: abyss, bond, circle, donkey, emulation, fantasy, justice, hunt, image, lamp, monad, and on through dozens of alphabets. Reflecting this bespoke terminology are images of Bruno's own construction, some reproduced in Ciliberto's third volume of apparatus.

A few examples, like Floriano Martino's entry on "Brunomania," can only suggest the enormous value of this project. Excitement in Italy about Bruno gathered momentum in the 1850s as nationhood came closer, despite resistance from the Church. Anticlerical Masons idolized the ex-Dominican as a martyr for freedom, a persona with great appeal in the Risorgimento. In 1889, after years of delay, a famous statue of Bruno went up in Rome in the square where he was burned. The event was a spectacle: *Civiltà Cattolica*, the papacy's Jesuit

voice, coined the label “Brunomania” in reply. But some philosophers and historians responded more productively by insisting on higher standards for learned debates about Bruno.

After 1900 the heir of those more thoughtful scholars was Giovanni Gentile, described for Ciliberto’s volumes by Alfonso Musci. For nearly half a century, Gentile shaped the course of Italian philosophy, while helping to make Italy a Fascist state. Early in his career—while still in partnership with Benedetto Croce, modern Italy’s hero of liberalism—Gentile studied Bruno, finding the Nolan’s ideas like Spinoza’s and thus in line with his own neo-Hegelian idealism. Nonetheless, he also produced a revisionist account of Bruno’s trial: he saw good reasons for the Church’s cruelty, at the very moment when he endorsed Pius X’s denunciation of modernism as a heresy. Bruno’s story has never been simple—least of all in Italy.

The core of the problem is the philosopher’s polymorphous language, both for common nouns and for proper names. Amphitrite—discussed by Simonetta Bassi and Laura Fedi—was a minor sea goddess when Bruno found her. Inserting her in works on very different topics, he turned the goddess into a vehicle for the transmigration of souls and the ascent of the individual soul to the highest beauty through an infinite flux and reflux of forces that transcends all distinctions between matter and spirit. None of that could be said of the Amphitrite of the old myths, but Bruno was seldom constrained by tradition.

When she appears in his theoretical works about magic, Amphitrite stands for Bruno’s solution to the main problem about magic: action at a distance. Suffusing the whole universe in her ocean of life, she empowers a star up there to help or to harm you and me down here. She thus personifies the abstract forces analyzed in Bruno’s intricate theory of “bonds” (“vincula”), described in detail by Ilenia Russo. In the case of magic, Bruno’s bonds replaced the usual theoretical constructs—occult qualities, astral causality, cosmic hierarchies, sympathies, antipathies—with something completely different. And magic was not the only case of Bruno’s stunning creativity, nor the most important. Many entries illuminate his daring vision of an infinite universe: in addition to “Infinite” by Elisa Fantecchi, see the entries on “Aether,” “Heaven,” “Immense,” “Matter,” “Space,” “Vacuum,” “Universe,” and “World.”

For a thinker as eccentric and as important as Bruno, who put his eccentricities to such astonishing uses, a guide like Ciliberto’s is absolutely indispensable; he and his team have put the world of learning in their debt.

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