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## Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Experience

### Abstract

*In his writings on mnemonics, Bruno established a complex affinity between magic and Kabbalah on the one hand, and between Lullism and the art of memory on the other. The Nolan is no stranger to the hermetic text of the Renaissance, based on the Corpus Hermeticum and especially on the Kore Kosmu, which pursued value purification of exteriority through interiority.*

*In The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast, Bruno picks up on the hermetic exercise of pattern conversion, from the sense-related vices towards the reason-related virtues, operating thus a reorientation from the exterior toward the noetic interior. One recognized here the same technique Plato used in his Republic, when he amassed all the gods of Homer into one alone, the embodiment of Truth, Justice and Good.*

*The purpose of The Expulsion dialogue is to grant a return to unity to the intellect. Thus, Bruno unveils the fact that the magical religion of the Egyptians becomes his own, seeking, by way of magical rituals, to attain divine loftiness, that condition in which things acquire their meaning and significance, making thus possible the acknowledgement of their existence.*

In his Italian dialogue, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*<sup>1</sup>, Bruno picks up on the hermetic exercise of pattern conversion, from the sense-related vices toward the reason-related virtues, operating thus a reorientation from the exterior toward the interior, in order to reshape the former according to the principles of the latter. One recognizes here the same technique Plato used in his *Republic*, when he amassed all the gods of Homer into one alone, the embodiment of Truth, Justice and Good. Although fascinating in theory, this exercise was not exempt from dramatic failures upon attempts to put it into practice. On the social side, the excesses of interiority are visible with the republic established by

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<sup>1</sup> Giordano Bruno, *Alungarea bestiei triumfătoare (The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast)*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 2004.

Dion in Syracuse, and later on, with the Florentine experiment of Savonarola, with Calvin's Republic of Geneva or with the French Revolution – the example offered by Hegel in the *Philosophy of History*.

As far as the interiority-exteriority relationship in the evolution of historical facts is concerned, Hegel's *Philosophy of History* describes excesses, be it of exteriority or interiority. Similarly to Schelling, Hegel was an avowed admirer of the Nolan's philosophy, deeming him to be one of the main inspirers of the dialectical method, which has as main core the unity and struggle of contraries, the Becoming as a result of the tensions between form and content, abstract and concrete, interiority and exteriority.

Bruno is no stranger to the hermetic texts of the Renaissance, based on the *Corpus Hermeticum* and especially on the *Kore Kosmu*, which pursued value purification of exteriority through interiority. The purpose of *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* dialogue is to grant a return to unity to the intellect, due to the organization of significant images, achieved by using the art of memory. Thus, the original thinker of the Renaissance unveils the fact that the magical religion of the Egyptians becomes his own, seeking, by way of magical rituals, to attain divine loftiness, that condition in which things acquire their meaning and significance, making thus possible the acknowledgement of their existence. Brunian mnemonics aims at facilitating the inner magical ascension, with the help of an imagery involving the stars and the things correlated to them. It was through this reform alone that a man could have gained true dignity.

In *The Heroic Frenzies*<sup>2</sup>, the enthusiast hunter who follows the tracks of divinity gains the power to contemplate the beautiful and orderly manifestations of nature. The purpose of mnemonics is to achieve a unifying vision of the inner self, the place where the man can find fulfilment, for the inner images of things are closer to reality considered as a whole. Inside the man, the universe condenses, taking the form of the microcosm, whose meaning is revealed to us through meditation.

In the famous fourth dialogue of the first part, where the myth of Actaeon is commented upon, Bruno mentions that this is an allegory of the intellect striving to grasp the divine wisdom and to gain

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<sup>2</sup> Giordano Bruno, *The Heroic Frenzies*, <http://www.esotericarchives.com/bruno/furori4.htm>

comprehension of its beauty. Since divine beauty is rather loved than comprehended, the will is prone to be a more reliable and effective guide than the intellect on the way toward the Absolute. Bruno uses here the parable of the Pythagorean Y, pertaining to the choice of the path that is to be followed in life. The right path is the difficult one, the one taken by the hounds, which leads to the game, symbol of the intangible models and ideal concepts, to which the chosen ones alone may gain access. Eventually, by following this path with implacable willpower, the hunter arrives at the unique place where he can contemplate the bare Diana, or, better said, where Diana willingly lets herself be contemplated unclothed, but with the condition that the hunter irreversibly becomes the game<sup>3</sup>. Made of purple, alabaster and gold, Diana emerges from the water, which, by Neoplatonic tradition, represents the material world. For Bruno, the image of the goddess imposes itself as a mnemotechnical symbol: the purple bears a magical significance for divine power, the gold for divine wisdom, and the alabaster for divine beauty, three essences of special importance for Pythagoreans, Chaldeans and Platonists.

The mnemonics practiced by Bruno puts forward a Renaissance and hermetic metamorphosis of the classical art of memory, which becomes the means for shaping the psyche of a mystic and a magus inspired by Hermes. Due to the art of memory, the hermetic principle of duplicating the universe within the human spirit takes the form of a magical-religious technique, used for perceiving and unifying the world of appearances by following orderly successions of significant images.

*De Umbris Idearum (The Shadow of Ideas)*<sup>4</sup> is Bruno's first book on memory (1582) which integrates mnemonics, psychology and hermetic magic. It is a sort of encyclopaedia, but one in which a live object comes into play. Knowledge is ordered by interrelated disciplines. The owner of a magical encyclopaedia of this kind is a genuine universal man, who not only has knowledge, but is also able to elaborate upon and apply his knowledge to real-life situations, and who does not forget the great discoveries of the past. Through mnemonics, the man augments his capabilities, anchors himself more deeply in the world he lives in, and discovers that the universe does have a meaning, one that is not the result of mere hazard.

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<sup>3</sup> I.P. Culianu, *Eros și magie în renaștere. 1484 (Eros and Magic in the Renaissance. 1484)*, Nemira, Bucharest, 1994, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> Giordano Bruno, *De Umbris Idearum*, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki Editore, MCMXCI.

A similar mnemotechnical method was used during the same period by Tommaso Campanella. In his *City of the Sun*, he advances conceiving the architecture of the ideal city as a structure of circular streets bordered by buildings with walls that bear the most exquisite painted images, “in a wonderful order”, displaying the entire history of human knowledge. The inhabitants of the city would have acquired this knowledge effortlessly and would have recalled to memory facts of history, biology, mathematics, geography, etc. on a daily basis <sup>5</sup>.

Departing from the investigation of the art of memory in *De Umbris Idearum*, Frances Amalia Yates undertakes a most rigorous analysis of Bruno’s connections to the hermetic movement, as described in *Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* <sup>6</sup>.

In 1583, Bruno inaugurated his visit to England with a volume dedicated to the ambassador of France, which included *Ars Memoriae (The Art of Memory)*, a new edition of *Cantus Circaeus (Incantations of Circe)*, as well as two other works, entitled *Explicatio Triginta Sigillorum* and *Sigillus Sigillorum*. These texts are valuable tools for memory exploration and, at the same time, an important means in the formation of a Magus.

On addressing His Excellency the Vice Chancellor of the Oxford University and the illustrious doctors and professors here, Bruno confessed:

“Philotheus Jordanus Brunus Nolanus, doctor of a less obscure theology, professor of a purer and more harmless knowledge, known by the most renowned academics of Europe, acknowledged philosopher, welcomed with honour, stranger to no one even amongst barbarians and the less noble, the one who awakens numbed souls, tamer of reluctant ignorance, I proclaim a general philosophy which does not discriminate between Italian and Breton, man and woman, mitred head and crowned head, man wearing a toga and man of arms, cowl-headed man and bare-headed man, but which always chooses those whose souls are at peace, the most civilized, loyal and useful; which does not take into account the anointed brow, nor the sign of the cross, nor the raised arms, nor the circumcised

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<sup>5</sup> Tommaso Campanella, *Cetatea Soarelui (City of the Sun)*, Incitatus, Bucharest, 2000, p. 120.

<sup>6</sup> Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno et la tradition hermetique*, Dervy-Livres, Paris, 1988, p. 248.

penis, but only the culture of spirit and soul. He who is despised by the idiots' propagandists and by hypocrites, but whose company and knowledge is sought after by the honest and diligent people, and whose genius is acclaimed by the most noble..."<sup>7</sup>

The Nolan seeks to achieve the purity of spirit by delivering it from its haphazard conditions of existence. The essence of the spirit is its infinite thirst for knowledge, which can be a mirror of the world's soul, of the universal active intellect.

Bruno conceived a method of knowledge unification in which he combined logics, mathematics, the Kabbalah, the heliocentric theory, the theory on the infinity of the universe, based on the coincidence of opposites, of Cusanian origin, and natural magic, as inherited from Marsilio Ficino and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. These writings on mnemonics, published in England, actually describe the complex affinity Bruno established between magic and the Kabbalah on the one hand, and between Lullism and the art of memory on the other.

The dialogues, written in Italian and published in England, are generally included among those on the subject of ethics and metaphysics. Yates sets out to demonstrate that the moral reform advanced by Bruno, as well as his philosophy, belong to his mission, which keeps to the hermetic philosophy. This mission confers to the magic practiced by Ficino and Agrippa its full amplitude, in keeping with the spirit of the magical religion found in *Asclepius*, a text of Egyptian origin and one of the most important hermetic writings that circulated during that period in Latin translation. The proper Egyptian quality of Bruno's message is most prominent in his 1584 dialogue on ethics, *Spaccio della bestia trionfante* (*The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*).

The glorification of the Egyptians' magical religion is one of the fundamental themes in this dialogue. Their cult consisted in worshipping the Divinity in things (*natura est deus in rebus*)<sup>8</sup>. In this respect, one of the most relevant excerpts on the content of the new hermetic religion is found in Sophia's speech, in the *Expulsion* dialogue. In the spirit of hermetic religion, as also encountered with Paracelsus, Bruno is seeking

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 248.

<sup>8</sup> Giordano Bruno, *Alungarea bestiei triumfătoare* (*The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*), Humanitas, Bucharest, 2004, p. 182.

the mystery of life. Various living things represent various deities and powers, manifestations of a unique vital energy, ensuing that God is present with all His being in all things, but in conformity with the exact measure of their excellence<sup>9</sup>. The presence of Mars is more prominent in natural embodiments such as the viper and the scorpion, but also in onions and garlic; the Sun is to be found especially in saffron, daffodils, and sunflower, in the rooster and the lion. It is in this manner that the Nolan conceives all gods and species, within the various embodiments of existence. Since in a way the divinity descends to permeate all things in nature, it is also possible to reach divinity through nature. Through the life that radiates from nature's things, one can attain the life that reigns above them. Knowledge of these things grants to the magus the power to appease and propitiate the gods, to enter into dialogue with them. Egyptian magic, commended by Bruno, consists in discovering the source and the mystery of life. Magic is the science of the subtle energies that interconnect things. Bruno was seeking that connection of all connections (*vinculum vinculorum*), the *Eros*, in its pure form. Once its nature is discovered, the magus is able to understand the flows of the Becoming by attractions and rejections, by the coincidence of opposites. The conventional ecclesiastical rituals, deprived of the magical mystery, can only arouse disgust in the Nolan's passionate soul, expressed through Sophia's voice:

«But what seems pitiful», said Momos, „ is the sight of a number of senseless and foolish idolaters who imitate the Egyptian cult as imperfectly as the shadow imitates the plenitude of a body; and who seek divinity, of which they do not have any idea whatsoever, in the remains of dead and lifeless things. And despite this, they mock not only the true and skilful masters of magic, but even us, since they deem us to be animals; and what is worse, they triumph over the fact that their foolish rituals are observed everywhere, while others have diminished in numbers and nearly died away“. „Do not feel saddened by this, Momos,“ said Isis, „for the destiny has decided that darkness alternates with light“. „But the harm is“, Momos went on, „that they are convinced this is the light“. But Isis added that the darkness would not be what it is, if it were known by those who live inside it. In order to gain blessings and gifts from the gods, the Egyptians, having profound knowledge of magic, passed through certain natural things, in which divinity was engrafted in

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 184.

a particular way, and through which it was able to make its presence noticed, so as to communicate its purposes. Consequently, their ceremonies were not meaningless fantasies, but living voices that even reached to the ears of the Gods; and just as we, the gods, want them to show that they are listening to us by replying not in a language invented by men, but in one of natural effects, they also want to know that we are listening to them, they want us to speak the language of nature: otherwise, we would remain as deaf to their prayers as is a Tartar to a sermon in Greek, of which he cannot speak an iota. Those wise men know that God is in all things and Divinity is within nature, manifesting itself and glittering in different ways with different objects, and is sharing itself, that is, allowing itself, its being, its life and its thought to be reached through various physical conformations and in various ways.»<sup>10</sup>

In conformity with the idea that Divinity is within things, it suffices to possess the key for translating their divine meaning in order to reach it directly. Thus, the nature of the eagle (symbol of victory), of the snake (symbol of wisdom), of the crocodile (symbol of revenge) or of a truly great man actually conceals the essence of Jupiter, the sovereign force. The presence of these figures is a sign that the divinity (Jupiter) is acting here, on Earth.

The Egyptians' worship for the most diverse animals and plants, such as crocodiles, roosters, onions or turnips, was owed to the fact that they perceived the vital principle of the cosmos manifesting itself in all these particular aspects, which, despite their perishableness, were hosts to divinity both individually and collectively. The hermetic philosophy is precisely that art by which one learns to ascend toward a unique principle that manifests itself in a multitude of manners. In this respect, an extremely important part was played by the study of the effects the stars had on the earthly life, with special emphasis on those of the Sun and Moon. Later on, nature – the *physis* – was interpreted according to other seven astral determinations, corresponding to the same number of so-called wandering celestial bodies, to which they attributed, as to a prime principle and fruitful cause, all the differences among species. This is to say that some of the plants, animals, rocks and other things depend on Saturn, others on Jupiter, others yet on Mars, etc. Therefore the qualities of the terrestrial world, including the colours, the characteristics

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem.*

of things, their seals and their images are dependent on the seven planets.

Through the voice of Sophia, the main character of *The Expulsion*, Bruno insists on constantly reminding us that the Egyptians didn't forget that „the Divinity was one and the same in all things; as it spreads in countless ways, it has countless names and men seek it following countless paths, according to their own reasons; and it is celebrated and honoured by countless rituals, for countless are the desires for which we strive to appease it. But in order to do this, one must possess that knowledge and good judgment, that art, skill and light of intellect, which are revealed to the world by the sun of the mind... This art is called magic; to the extent to which it has to do with supernatural powers, it is divine; to the extent to which it has to do with observing nature and penetrating its secrets, it is natural; and it is called intermediary and mathematics when it pertains to the principles and actions of the soul that are situated between the bodily and the spiritual and between the spiritual and the intellectual<sup>11</sup> (the division is of Platonic origin). Sofia recounts what she learned from the discussion between Isis and Momos, two prominent characters in the Egyptian religion, also present in the *Kore Kosmu* text. Isis tells Momos that „the idolaters, the dunces and the fools had no reason to laugh at the magic and divine cult of the Egyptians, who contemplated divinity in all things and all its effects... It is for this reason that in the sea the divinity was named Neptune, in the sun Apollo, in the earth Ceres, in the wild Diana and differently in each of the other species, which, being embodiments of different ideas, are different deities of nature, but all pertain to a single divinity of divinities, to the same source of ideas that is above nature.

It seems to me that this is where the Kabbalah has its roots, the wisdom of the Jews deriving from that of the Egyptians, from which Moses learned. This wisdom is the first to give an ineffable name to the prime principle, of which other four names derive, which in their turn ramify into twelve others: these directly engender seventy two and then, directly or indirectly, one hundred and forty four; they continue to multiply in series of four and twelve, in an infinite number, corresponding to the infinity of species. Thus, each of them names (as best suits each language) a god, an angel, an intelligence, a quality that characterizes a

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 186.

species: therefore, in the end, the multitude of divinities is reduced to a unique and prime source of light, just as the images that are reflected in different and numerous mirrors, as numerous as the specific existences, come from a unique formal and ideal principle, which is the source of them all.”<sup>12</sup>

These excerpts prove Bruno’s preference for the hermetic and kabbalistic teachings that he knew so well. The Nolan restores to the magic of the Renaissance its pagan sources. Particularly interesting from this point of view is the lamentation of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius, also reproduced by Sophia in the *Expulsion*:

„Do you see, Asclepius, these lifeless statues, full of feeling and spirit that do so many wonderful and meaningful deeds? I mean these statues that foretell the truth, that bring illness and health, joy and sorrow into the souls and bodies of men, according to their merits? Do you not know, Asclepius, that Egypt is the image of the heavens (he means the Milky Way) or, better said, the abode of all things that are decided and done in heaven? Truly speaking, our land is the temple of the world. But (alas), the time shall come when it shall become obvious that Egypt honoured divinity in vain: because as it returns to the heavens, it shall leave Egypt barren; and this abode of divinity shall be widowed of all religion, for the gods shall forsake it, as foreign peoples shall come here, barbarians with no faith, no mercy, no law and no cult. Alas, Egypt, of your faith shall remain mere tales, unbelievable for the generations to come; and to tell of your pious habits shall remain stone-carved letters alone, which shall not speak to gods and men (for they will have all died, and divinity will have moved to the skies), but to Scythians, Indians or other savages of the like. The darkness shall engulf the light, death shall be deemed more useful than life, no man shall raise his eyes to the heavens, the devout shall be deemed insane, the lawless shall be deemed mindful, the furious strong, and the wicked righteous. And believe you me, he who dedicates himself to the religion of the mind shall receive the death sentence: for new forms of justice shall be contrived, new laws, but nothing of what is sacred, nothing of what is truly religious; no thing worthy of the heavens and of the gods’ ears shall be uttered. The evil angels alone shall remain, who will mingle with the men, urging these wretches to commit ill deeds deeming them righteous, inciting wars,

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

pillagers' plunders, and all other things inimical to the soul and the natural justice; and this shall be the old age and orderlessness and religiouslessness of the world. But fear not, Asclepius, for after these things come to pass, our Lord and Father, the ruler of the world, the almighty and all-seeing God, by force of flood, fire, disease, plague or other means of His merciful justice, shall doubtlessly put an end to this shame, restoring to the world its face of yore."<sup>13</sup>

In the *Expulsion*, Bruno revives the magical religion of the Egyptians and their moral legislation in the attempt to counteract the chaos of his times. The prophecy in Asclepius' lamentation is accompanied by heavenly signs, heralding the return of Egypt's light and the expulsion of the existing darkness. It may be contended that the *Egyptian revolution* is in fact a code for the Copernican revolution, and for all revolutions that will be started under the sign of the Sun. Bruno openly displays his fascination with the Egyptian cults; for him, Hermes is the name given to the supreme divine wisdom, and the *Expulsion* describes the religious and moral reform that must occur.

According to the *Expulsion*, the reform begins in the heavens: the images of the constellations of the zodiac, as well as the constellations of the north and south are depicted; these are reformed and cleansed by a council of planetary deities assembled by Jupiter. Among the speakers taking part in this empyreal council that undertakes the reform of the heavens are the divine Sophia, Isis and Momos. Bruno came across and embraced the idea of a reform that begins in heaven by a restructuring and purging of the celestial images due to the hermetic treatises, and especially *Kore Kosmu* (*The Virgin of the World* in English or *Minerva mundi* in Latin).

*Kore Kosmu* takes the form of a dialogue between goddess Isis and her son, Horus, with Momos as a third interlocutor. Isis begins by describing the Creation, whose first stage is the ordering of the celestial images upon which all things on Earth are dependant. Nature proves to be insufficient here, and the Divinity thinks to the creation of the man, summoning thus a gathering of gods, who offer their help, each planetary deity bestowing their gifts upon the man. Things take a turn for the worse, the Divinity calls for another council (in the same manner in which Jupiter summons the gods in Bruno's *Expulsion*). Ignorance,

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 188-189.

who reigned without consideration for the others, is banished, and the universe purged. The treatise ends with praises to Isis and Osiris, who put an end to the carnage and reinstate justice, and who learns from Hermes that the things below must be kept in sympathy with those above. Thus, the sacred functions attached in a vertical manner to the mysteries of the heavens are established.

In his dedication to Sir Philip Sidney<sup>14</sup> at the beginning of the *Expulsion*, the Italian philosopher shows that the gods represent the virtues and powers of the soul, and that the world, the entire universe, can be found within every person. The reform of the heavens is a change whose aim of conceiving a new type of personality, one that has been converted toward values. Jupiter, symbol of celestial authority, announces that the reform has already begun inside the spirit of the gods. In the *Expulsion*, what Bruno desires is the development of a personality the powers of which are an embodiment of values (as in Plato's *Republic*, where Homer is converted).

First of all, the conversion of the cosmic forces supposes an action upon the mental dimension, a reorientation from the values based on exteriority toward those that find their source in our subtle interior nature, which nonetheless must be able to manifest itself in the exterior. The discussion toward the end of the dialogue between Minerva and Jupiter is illustrative in this respect. The warrior goddess thinks that the reformation of values can only be imposed by force. Jupiter seeks to calm her: „Wisdom suffices, my daughter; for these bad things of which you speak grow old and die out naturally, and, lacking solid foundations, they are swallowed and consumed by time.“<sup>15</sup> Minerva insists on the fact that the times no longer allow a contemplative stance, and that the time for action has come, because the evil is overwhelming: „...during these times, we must hold firm and fight if we wish to avoid them destroying us by violence before we get the chance to reform them“.<sup>16</sup>

*The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast* reveals an author convinced of the necessity for a hermetic reform based on all-encompassing knowledge and the application of the art of memory in a magical manner that unifies the superior and the inferior, the form and the matter, heaven and earth.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 205

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.