

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

VOL. XXXV (No. 12)

DECEMBER, 1921

NO. 787

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The Open Court Publishing Company

122 S. Michigan Ave.

Chicago, Illinois

Per copy, 20 cents (1 shilling). Yearly, \$2.00 (in the U.P.U., 9s. 6d.)

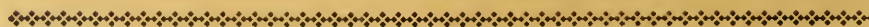
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Philosophic Studies

Issued under the direction of the Department of Philosophy of the
University of Chicago



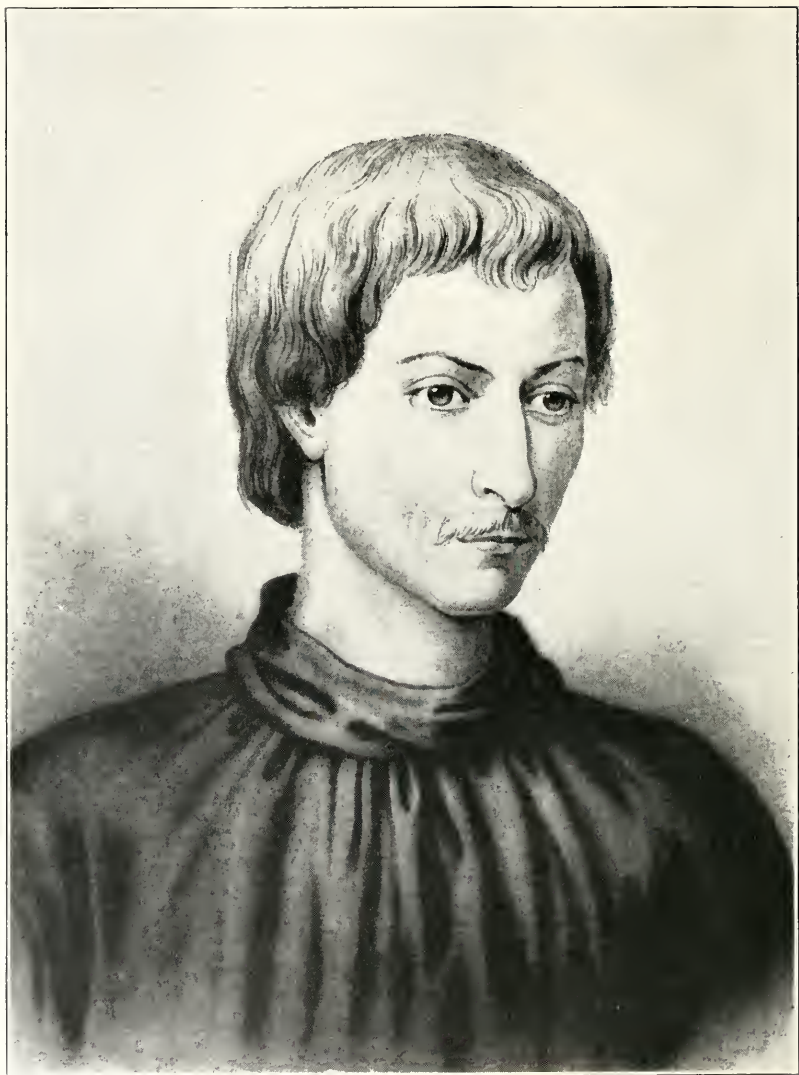
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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS



GIORDANO BRUNO

1548-1600

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GIORDANO BRUNO—HIS LIFE AND MISSION.

BY ALBERTA JEAN ROWELL.

WHEN one contemplates the turbulent albeit noble life of that illustrious Italian, Giordano Bruno, whose uncompromising devotion to Truth—which love the philosopher Locke regarded as the "principal part of human perfection in this world, and the seedplot of all other virtues"—culminated in the stake, the memory, by the exercise of that most infallible law, which Aristotle first discovered and designated as the Law of Association, invokes the venerated names of some few other exalted ones. They are Socrates, Jesus, Savonarola and Voltaire, whose unswerving loyalty to the Ideal, compelled the gods to grant to them the palm of immortality!

On the hundredth anniversary of Voltaire's death, Victor Hugo delivered an eloquent and impassioned oration. The former, like Giordano Bruno, was the implacable enemy of a despotic, overweening priestcraft, which would coerce the ignorant, irrational, superstitious and trembling rabble into an acceptance of incomprehensible dogmas and petrifying creeds. The mission of Voltaire was the mission of Bruno. In his characteristic vivid, dramatic and terse style, Hugo dilates upon the function of Voltaire.

"To combat Pharisaism; to unmask imposture; to overthrow tyranny, usurpations, prejudices, falsehoods, superstitions; to demolish the temple in order to rebuild it, that is to say, to replace the false by the true; to attack a ferocious magistracy; to attack a sanguinary priesthood; to take a whip and drive the money-changers from the sanctuary, to reclaim the heritage of the disinherited; to protect the weak, the poor, the suffering, the overwhelmed, to struggle for the persecuted and oppressed—that was the war of Jesus Christ! And who waged that war? It was Voltaire."

Bruno was born in the year 1548, in the vicinity of the little idyllic, Italian town of Nola, when Naples was knowing anxieties and tribulations from fear of a premeditated introduction of the Spanish Inquisition within the boundaries of her fair and peaceful city. Gioan and Francesca Bruno named their baby son Felipe (Philip). Yet he was to be known to the world not as Philip, but Giordano, a supremely dignified appellation later conferred upon him by the monastery of St. Dominico. Nola had gained a lasting renown from its heroic resistance to Hannibal after the slaughter of Canae. Here, where the air was sweet and balmy and the skies were azure blue; where the bountiful vineyards yielded the vermilion grape and the plains were rich and golden with the gleaming corn; where the dying day sighed its last along the purple hills and at eventide surrendered her kingdom to the moon and stars—the little Felipe spent his early years. Endowed with the susceptibility of the poet to all living beauty, he early drank draughts of the heavenly nectar. The simple, volcanic and pleasure-loving Nolan folk, sensitive likewise to the all-prevading glory of their native place, had called it Campagna Felice (the happy fields). When in later years, Giordano Bruno, a homeless wanderer upon the face of the earth; when like his noble predecessor Dante he had come to realize how savoreth of salt the bread of others and how hard the climbing up and down another's stairs, a mighty longing would well up in his soul again in the retrospect of detached and melancholy moments for those happy, golden plains of his birthplace which he had deemed only justly comparable to the garden of the Hesperides. But it appears also that in common with other Nolans, Bruno was inclined to be superstitious. In the ancient and deserted temples, the Nolans witnessed the fitful visits of earthbound souls, while Bruno himself maintains that he beheld spirits on hills where the beeches and laurels grew.

Even as Renan has imaginatively depicted the youthful Jesus, in a reverent posture, wrapped in holy mediation upon the lofty mountaintop, which revealed to him an appalling and infinite vista, so the child Bruno would pass many a night on the mountain Cicada and under the dream-mellow rays of moonlight and the distant lamps of Heaven, abandon himself to solemn musings. The stars signified to his awesome and pious soul the infinitude of Time, Space and Experience. His favorite expression—"My thoughts are stitched to the stars"—which his English contemporary, John Lyly, originated, rendered him impervious to calumny, penury, per-

secution and pain. The latter recalls the Emersonian dictum—"Hitch your wagon to a star." Said Latini, who pointed out to Dante the way to find Eternity, "Follow thy star and it cannot help but lead thee to a glorious port." Mazzini, the great Italian patriot and religieux, when imprisoned in a vile dungeon, through a small aperture was enabled to contemplate the sea and sky, two sublime symbols to him of the Infinite. The latter was a profound consolation and an eternal source of inspiration, which sustained Mazzini in moments of direst distress and poignant sorrow. He was thus enabled to transcend all sensibility to inharmony and pain.

At thirteen years of age, Giordano Bruno entered the monastery of St. Domenico. For nearly thirteen years he studied natural science and recondite philosophy, familiarizing himself with classical and ancient lore. He absorbed Neo-Platonism with avidity. He was particularly fascinated by the Neo-Platonic doctrine of illumination. Plotinus and other Alexandrian scholars had declared that Truth or the Absolute could be comprehended by intuitive insight only and not by discursive thought. Porphry said that Plotinus in ecstatic vision, experienced mystic communion with the Absolute, which he defined as "a flight from the alone to the alone," wherein there is "an absorption in a sublime tranquility." Moreover Bruno acquainted himself with the Pythagorean symbolism of numbers and the Orphic wisdom of Greece.

In his eighteenth year Bruno began to doubt the church doctrine of the Trinity. He regarded the Father, Son and Holy Ghost as attributes of the Deity or One. In the *Inferno* of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, the frightful picture of Lucifer, the arch-fiend who is imbedded in ice, exhibits a triple aspect. The three persons of the Holy Trinity—Power, Wisdom and Love—have their hideous counterpart in the three faces of Satan. On the right, the sallow visage which munches Cassius in the mouth, typifies weakness, the antithesis of Power; on the left, the face as black as night, which chews at Brutus, signifies Ignorance, the opposite of Wisdom; the central, red visage, from the mouth of which Judas Iscariot, the arch-traitor is dangling, expresses Hate which is opposed to Love. Dante lived in the thirteenth century and was an apostle of St. Thomas Aquinas, whose writings he studied with zeal. Even St. Augustine was rather adverse to the literal interpretation of the Divine Trilology of Persons. In fact all subscribed to the doctrine of the "language of accommodation"—that the bible "condescends to a comprehension of our faculties."

But the thinker who exercised the most potent influence upon the career and philosophy of Giordano Bruno was Copernicus. The physics and cosmogony of Aristotle, then popular with the schoolmen and incorporated into the dogmas of the church, were administered a mortal blow by the new cosmology of Copernicus. But the works of Copernicus found favor neither with the enlightened intellects of the Renaissance nor the Church; the former because they believed the dignity of man would be violated by an infinite extension of the heavens; and the latter because they believed that all ecclesiastical dogmas would perish with the refutation of one. But a perusal of the works of Copernicus demonstrated to Bruno his life's mission—that of promulgating a new theology and metaphysics which would correspond to the new cosmology. It was within convent walls that Giordano Bruno first realized his lofty destiny.

After attaining his twenty-fourth year, Bruno spent three years performing his priestly functions, reading masses and delivering sermons. His comedy, "The Chandler," depicts in a bright vivid style and pungent satire the demoralization of contemporaries, exposing the Personifications of the three vices, Stupidity, Rascality and Hypocrisy to the utmost ridicule and contempt. A satirical poem, "The Ark of Noah," also appeared in 1570.

On ascertaining that works by so-called heretical writers were found among his possessions at Naples, Bruno quickly severed all connection with his order, and as an excommunicated and fugitive monk, wandered forlorn and almost destitute about the Roman Campagna. In the year 1576 he broke his monastic vows and pledged himself to follow the "white star of Truth" whithersoever she might lead. It was then Bruno commenced his protracted wanderings throughout Europe, which lasted over fifteen years. The missionary zeal, the spiritual energy and inward fire to proclaim the truth, which consumed his spirit, would not permit him to settle for any length of time in one place. It was while in old London, England, that Bruno wrote some of his most important philosophical works. Nevertheless his attack on Aristotelianism landed him in numerous difficulties, even in tolerant England.

While in Paris, prior to his landing in England, Bruno by reason of his marvelous gifts, had aroused the interest of King Henry III who summoned him to appear before him. Bruno possessed a prodigious memory. He demonstrated to the satisfaction of the king that he had acquired the latter by natural means. He

also dedicated a pamphlet to his majesty, entitled *The Shadow of Ideas*—a dissertation on the Lullie art, for it was from Lulla he derived the fundamental principles for his system of mnemonics. In addition to presenting an improved art of remembering, *The Shadow of Ideas* contains an outline of the philosophy, then embraced by the writer. The doctrines expounded in his book are Neo-Platonic. Bruno accepts the theory of universal animism,—that the spirit of the One or God pervades every atom of the cosmos. But God is transcendent as well as immanent. Bruno bases his system of mnemonics upon the following main premise: our ideas being shadows of truths, we use the shadows (words) of these shadows (ideas) in mnemonics.

Throughout this work, Bruno is constantly reinforcing his own arguments by truths culled from mediaeval and ancient philosophy, even not disdaining the classical myth, for with Dante, Swedenborg, Madame Blavatsky, Emerson and other mystical and philosophical writers he believed all present truths symbolic of higher truths. Truth in the Absolute was an unattainable star. Madam De Stael, the French authoress who has been called the child of the French Revolution, subscribed to an analogous theory. She contended that between reason and Truth an eternal and indissoluble harmony pre-exists. The style of Bruno is rough-hewn, possessing the spontaneity of an abundant imagination with something of the elemental fire of Aeschylus. From sparks and smouldering fires he bursts into mighty conflagrations. He is constantly diverging from his main theme, to which he returns again with lightning-like rapidity, after a brief skirmish in its thought vicinity. Although his bombast, dogmatism, often to the degree of harshness, his vulgar buffoonery and obscenity might antagonise the admirer of modern literature, his contemporaries utilized the identical setting, for the age deemed its entertainment considerably enhanced thereby.

The comedy entitled *The Chandler*, which he wrote ten years ago, he rewrote during his residence in Paris. Although the characters are abstract types and the play is redundant with indelicate allusions, still these artistic foibles did not detract from its eminent uniqueness, for it has been adjudged by the foremost critics as quite "sui generis"—presenting an innovation in the comedy. The vivacity of its dialogue has been compared to the French dramatist Aretino. *The Chandler*, in addition presents many similarities in style and mode of treatment to Plautus, Moliere and

Cyrano. Also its light, rollicking humour suggests Rabelais. In the play, Bruno exhibits the affectation, vanity and mental limitations of the foolish, pretentious pedant, Manfurio, who was the prototype no doubt of Holofernes in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour Lost* in all its gross indelicacy, vulgarity and aesthetic repulsiveness. Bonifacio and Bartolomeo typify the over-credulous who place a profound and unquestioned trust in the occult powers of alchemists, magicians and the "powder of Christ" of designing members of the priesthood who made merchandise of the fetishes of childish, superstitious and ignorant minds. In the dedication of the *The Chandler*, Bruno propounds his doctrine of The One: "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 daybreak, and they who dwell in day look for night Rejoice therefore, and keep whole, if you can, and return love for love." Believing as he did in the immanence of God, Bruno regarded the vices as inversions of their corresponding virtues, nay their necessary counterpart even as the gross matter of the candle furnishes the radiant flame.

Bruno's ardent, fiery temperament, with its absolute disregard for his own safety, coupled with his missionary zeal, urged him to depart from France and promulgate his doctrines on English soil. Accordingly equipped with credentials from the French king, Bruno presented himself at the home of Michel de Castelnau de Mauvissiere, French ambassador in London. At Oxford, Bruno introduced himself by issuing a pamphlet, *Thirty Seals*. There he lectured on the Copernican system, the Pythagorean Symbolism of numbers, the immortality of the soul and his own doctrine of the infinitude of the solar systems. His ideas couched in a self-assertive and tortuous language aroused tremendous opposition. On those pedants who clung obstinately to the tenets of Aristotle, also excusing the "defects of their divinity," Bruno conferred the satirical sobriquet of "parrot."

In conformity with the pompous and voluminous diction of the age, Bruno, in his superb contempt of censure and convention, and boundless self-confidence, penned the following high-sounding epistle to the Vice-Chancellor and dons of the university of Oxford, prior to his brief instatement there: "Jordanus Bruno

of Nola, lover of God, doctor in a more perfect divinity, professor of a purer and more harmless wisdom, a philosopher, known, esteemed and honorably entreated by the foremost academies of Europe, a stranger to none but churls and barbarians, the awakener of souls from slumber, the queller of presumptuous and recalcitrant ignorance, one who showeth in all his actions, the love he beareth to all men, whether Briton or Italian, female or male, whether bearing the mitre or the crown, the gown or the sword, the cowl or without one; but who chiefly yearns for the man whose converse is peaceful, human, true and profitable; he who seeks not for an anointed head or a crossed brow, for the washed hand or him that is circumcised, but for those true lineaments of man which be his soul and trained understanding; one who is abhorred of them that spread foolishness and are but petty dissemblers, but whom men proven and in earnest love, and who is applauded by the nobler sort”

The bourgeois character of the dons did not escape the observation of Bruno nor evade his caustic and bitter sarcasm. He had stated that the dons knew much more about beer than they knew about Greek, which no doubt contained a grain of truth. The Oxfordians in their turn retaliated by giving vent to a sneer at the “excitable, gesticulating foreigner, hairy as Pan.”

Bruno, despite the fact that his soul was replete with the music of lofty and immortal thoughts; in spite, too, of his profound gratitude and penetrative insight, was not without his shortcomings. His supreme self-confidence and missionary zest rendered him irritable, vain, resentful, passionate and indiscreet. But like the Crippon, that mythical animal who possessed the head and forepart of an eagle with the body of a lion, symbolic of the divine and human, Bruno, borne aloft upon his eagle pinions, could mount heavenward to the stars or with eyes bent in fixed gaze upon the earth, remain oblivious to his noble destiny! The great, even with the common herd, partake of the sum of human weaknesses to a greater or lesser degree. What Robert Louis Stevenson observed of the life of Goethe, who ranks with the immortals, may be appropriately applied to Bruno. The extreme ethical opposites revealed in the conduct of Goethe, demonstrated to Stevenson how greatness and weakness may co-exist in the one soul without diminishing admiration one whit for the expressed virtues.

In company with the French ambassador Castelnau, Bruno repeatedly appeared at the court of Elizabeth. There he was espe-

cially welcomed, for Elizabeth boasted of her knowledge of Italian and took a pride in surrounding her court with gentlemen who had visited Italy and rendered themselves conversant with Italian literature. The extreme enthusiasts returned to their native England to display some "strange, antic tricks," which was the unmistakable indication of an Italian education. Shakespeare immortalized these superfluous mannerisms through the mouth of Rosalind: "Look you lisp . . . , etc., etc., or I will scarcely think you have swam in a gondola." The queen, Bruno eulogized in extravagant terms, well-nigh exhausting the language of adulation, in that age a point of etiquette when addressing monarchs. He named her the great Amphidrite. While at the court Bruno came into close touch with Sir Philip Sidney, a devotee of Petrarchism, who dedicated sentimental and romantic verses to a lady from whom he had stolen a kiss in youth. With his characteristic tactlessness, Bruno made some supercilious observations, adjuring him to substitute a worship of imperishable wisdom for the perishable charms of body or personality.

It is said that Bruno had the Horatian contempt for the rabble. In fact he even went so far as to maintain that sublime truths should be invested in the obscurity of symbol and allegory, that it might not confuse the crass ignorance and stupidity of the vulgar mob. The hatred of the English for the foreigner is traditional. Bruno evidently was not beloved of the English populace, for in a chain of abusive epithets he describes them: "England can boast a common people which will yield to none other in disrespect, outlandishness, boorishness, savagery and bad bringing up."

Bruno's *The Ash-Wednesday Supper* gives a vivid if repelling picture of the English savants, who with "the souls of geese that bear the shape of men," regale themselves on a miscellaneity of viands, after which they discourse on the Copernican cosmology whilst defending Aristotelian physics and cosmology with its division of space into a celestial and earthly region, upon which Dante based his *Divina Commedia*. At this supper Bruno explains his theories relating to the heavens. He maintained that the scintillation of stars is due to the fact that they give forth their own light while Venus does not twinkle because it simply reflects light. Also the atmosphere of the earth rotates with her. His truly sublime theory was the doctrine of the infinitude of worlds. According to Bruno the center is the middle around which any-

thing revolves, but the doctrine of an infinitude of worlds implies an infinitude of centers. Moreover Bruno believed that the planets were inhabited, thus considerably weakening the fundamental, orthodox doctrines—that of fall and redemption through grace.

Bruno published numerous philosophical works in England and indeed his residence there was the most productive period of his life.

Germany next called to the restless zealot. There he spent a tolerably peaceful period, still disseminating his ideas as he traveled from place to place. He predicted a high destiny for the Germans: "Here," he said, "is being prepared the soil for the transplanting of wisdom from the lands of Greece and Italy. May Jupiter grant that the Germans may recognize their strength and strive to aim for the highest, and they will be no longer men, but rather resemble gods, for divine and god-like is their genius."

At last in an ill-fated moment Bruno accepted the invitation of the oscillating, weak, treacherous and irascible Mocenigo of Venice, to share his home and teach him the liberal arts and the sciences. His stay with Mocenigo was of short duration, the latter finally betraying him to the Inquisition for his refusal to stay longer with him.

He was incarcerated in the prison of Ancona for seven years, which living death was finally terminated by the dire doom inflicted upon him by the Roman Inquisition. In the year 1600, February 16, Giordano Bruno departed from this bourne of Time and Place upon a pyre which the flames greedily consumed, in the Campo dei Fiori (the field of flowers). He rendered up the ghost with those memorable words of Plotinus upon his lips: "Vast power was needed to reunite that which is divine in me with that which is divine in the universe!" Bruno was martyred in Jubilee year, when all Rome resounded with the merrymaking of good and bad and penitential psalms arose to Heaven.

But Bruno was the apostle of pain. He deemed sorrow a necessary mode of realization. This negative aspect of eternal joy is the golden spur. He had written with such a noble ardour: "O difficulties to be endured! cries the coward, the feather-head, the shuttle-cock, the faint-heart The task is not impossible though hard. The craven must stand aside. Ordinary, easy tasks are for the commonplace and the herd. Rare, heroic and divine men overcome the difficulties of the way and force an immortal palm from necessity. You may fail to reach your goal.

Run the race nevertheless. Put forth your strength in so high a business. Strive on with your last breath." Again he says, in defining his mission: "The Nolan has given freedom to the human spirit and made its knowledge free. It was suffocating in the close air of a narrow prison house, whence, but only through chinks, it gazed at the far-off stars. Its wings were clipped, so that it was unable to cleave the veiling cloud and reach the reality beyond."

It would be well to conclude with Bruno's own rapturous song, of which Boulting has rendered an excellent, free translation:

"Rising on wing secure, with burning heart,
What fate may scare me, smiling at the tomb,
Bursting all bonds and scorning gates of doom,
Whence few are chosen for such lofty part?
I soar beyond the mortal years; and start
For regions where grim iron casts no gloom
Nor adamant restrains. Forth from the womb,
Free from the darkness, free and passionate, I dart.
I dread no barrier of banished spheres;
I cleave the sky, and other suns behold;
Celestial worlds innumerable I see;
One left, another company appears;
My pinion fails not, and my heart is bold
To journey on through all infinity."