

Wonder and the Philosopher's Perfection: Giordano Bruno*

Frankfurt am Main, June 1590 – late January or early February 1591. Giordano Bruno has found lodgings in the Carmelite monastery, the 'Karmeliterkloster', a few minutes' walk from the City Hall, known then, as now, as 'der Römer'.¹ In a map engraved by Matthäus Merian the Elder some thirty years or so later, the monastery is indicated by the number 8, and stands across the road from the cloister of the Cistercian nuns, the 'Weißfrauenkloster', number 9. (Fig. 1.) When not there, Bruno is usually at the premises of Johann Wechel, a printer connected, in ways not fully understood, with the prestigious printing company founded by his uncle or older cousin, André Wechel. The building no longer stands but it was, very probably, housed within the Wechel family abode, known to contemporaries as Haus Reineck, located on the other side of the city, about fifteen minutes by foot from the Karmeliterkloster. At the time it bordered on an open field, marked 'Klapper feldt' in Merian's map.² Here Bruno passes the day putting the finishing touches to a trilogy of philosophical works in Latin, dedicated to Heinrich Julius, Duke of Braunschweig–Lüneburg, and checking the text as it comes off the press. He liked to involve himself in the printing of his works, a habit nurtured during his stay more than ten years earlier at Geneva, where he had earned his livelihood correcting proofs.

* The abbreviations BOI and BOL used in this chapter refer to the editions of, respectively, Bruno's Italian and Latin works listed in the section 'Works cited'. Readers unfamiliar with Bruno's life and works may find the survey in Knox, 'Giordano Bruno', a convenient resource for contextualizing biographical and philosophical details mentioned below. The translations below, apart from those of passages in Kant's works, are mine.

¹ For the documents and details concerning Bruno's two stays in Frankfurt and the publication of what is nowadays referred to as his 'Frankfurt trilogy', see Lombardi; Aquilecchia (661–2); Canone (134–8); Segonds (538–41, 599); Ricci (432–52); Becker (2, 767–71); Matthäus ('Der Frankfurter Drucker' 173–4; '... dz er sein pfennig' 125–41), the most detailed treatment to date; Lepri (forthcoming).

² My thanks to Dr Roman Fischer of the Institut für Stadtgeschichte, Frankfurt am Main, for identifying the probable location of Wechel's business at the time of Bruno's stay.

Just another fastidious author, we might think, intent on the minutiae of literary creation. The circumstances, however, are curious. Bruno is a Dominican friar or, more exactly, he is a Dominican who has deserted his order and declared himself ‘a philosopher’. His views on religion were notorious. So much so that on 2 July, 1590, a few weeks after his arrival, the governing Council (*Rat*) of Frankfurt – a Lutheran city that tolerated confessional diversity – albeit with many a qualification in practice – had rejected Bruno’s petition to lodge with Wechel (a Calvinist) ‘for some weeks’ while preparing his works for publication.³ They permitted Wechel nonetheless to find lodgings for him elsewhere in the city and the Carmelites (Catholics), who, by virtue of an Imperial privilege granted in 1531, were not subject to civil authority, had obliged. The Senate’s disapproval of his presence in the city did not deter him from airing his unconventional views.⁴ Johann Müntzenberger, Prior of the Karmeliterkloster, remarked – or so a witness testified a year and a half later to the Venetian Inquisitors prosecuting Bruno – that he ‘had fine wits and was well read, and that he was a universal man (*homo universale*) but that he did not have any religion that he believed in’.⁵ Sometime in late January or early February 1591, Bruno had to leave the city in haste, for reasons unknown.⁶ Perhaps he had, as he was prone to do, exhausted the patience of his hosts. His departure did not, however, deter Wechel, who, in collaboration with another Frankfurt printing house, that of Peter Fischer, published the trilogy, together with a fourth work on mnemotechnics. The first of the three works went on sale at the Frankfurt spring book fair that year. The remaining works followed in the autumn after a second, brief, visit by Bruno to the city.

³ Lombardi (469), quoting the record of the Council’s deliberations held on 2 July, 1590; Matthäus (‘... dz er sein pfennig’ 130), transcribes and reproduces the document.

⁴ Firpo (27–9 [doc. 8], 253–5 [doc. 51.1, §§7–10]).

⁵ Firpo (29 [doc. 8], 255 [51.1, §10]).

⁶ On Bruno’s request, Wechel added a dedicatory letter, dated 13 February 1591, to *De minimo*, the first of the three works to be published. In this letter he commented that Bruno had been ‘suddenly torn away from us by an unexpected circumstance’ before he had put the finishing touches to the last page of the work; see BOL I.3: 123.

The universe as God's epiphany

The worthy Senators' concerns were not unfounded. Take, for example, the best known of the three works, *De immenso et innumerabilibus seu de universo et mundis* ('*On the Infinite and the Numberless; or, On the Universe and Its Worlds*').⁷ Its aspirations are, deliberately, similar to those of Lucretius's poem *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of the Universe*). It establishes, to Bruno's satisfaction, that the universe is infinite and explains the moral lessons that follow from this conclusion.⁸ The similarities should not, though, be exaggerated. Compositionally, *De immenso* differs from *De natura rerum* in that, whereas Lucretius's work is in verse throughout, each chapter of the eight books in *De immenso* includes a section of verse followed by a lengthy disquisition in prose. More to the point, the philosophies of the two authors had little in common. Bruno did not subscribe to an atomistic materialism of the kind that Lucretius, following Epicurus, had proposed. Or rather, Bruno transformed Lucretius's atomism so that, in ways that seem far-fetched nowadays, it became part of vitalistic, panpsychic, vision of the universe (Papi 91–107; Monti). Lucretius's 'air' became *spiritus* or soul; and his solid, indivisible 'atoms' became, analogous to the dimensionless points of two-dimensional geometry, dimensionless spheres, the centres of which coincided with their circumferences. Other contributions to what Bruno called his 'new philosophy' came from Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Stoicism, Hermeticism, Arabic and Jewish philosophy, Copernicus and, despite his professed aversion to it, Aristotelianism and its scholastic variants.

From his reading of these various sources Bruno concluded that the universe, infinite in extent and duration, was animated throughout by a Universal Soul (or, synonymously, World Soul). Populating it was an infinite number of solar systems, each with their own suns and, circling around them, planets and comets. These 'principal bodies', as Bruno liked to call them, floated weightlessly like specks of dust in an infinite expanse of *aether*, regulating, intelligent 'animals' that they were, their various circular motions to mutual advantage. From the sun at the centre of each solar system, the planets absorbed the heat and light that they needed to sustain themselves and the things living on them. Conversely, from the planets, the suns absorbed moisture and cold. Each sun and each planet sustained forms of life similar to those

⁷ For a collection of essays on *De immenso*, see Granada and Tessicini.

⁸ For Lucretius's presence in *De immenso*, see Papi (7, 10–12, 30, 91–106, 243–51); Monti; Haskell ('The Masculine Muse'; 'Conjuring with the Classics' 22–7).

on this earth, among them ‘rational animals’, a traditional philosophical term that included demons as well as the several species or races of human being. The former, in Bruno’s description of them, had rarefied bodies of pure aether or aether in combination with air, water or earth. When, on this earth or any other ‘principal body’, a cataclysm extinguished a species, new instances regenerated themselves spontaneously, that is, asexually, thanks to the omnipresence of the Universal Soul, thereby ensuring the survival of the species in question. This vision of the universe was not only quite unlike Lucretius’s, it also went far beyond, as Bruno himself boasted, the modest pretensions of Copernicus, who had only ventured, on mathematical and philosophical grounds, that the earth was a planet circling the sun located at the centre of a solitary cosmos. Perhaps we can sympathize with Prior Müntzenberger when he observed, or so the same witness told the Inquisitors, that Bruno ‘passed his time mainly in writing and going on about fantastic, bizarre, things of his invention’.⁹

Philosophical ideas of these kinds, as Bruno well knew, were incompatible with the Christian faith. God had created the cosmos six thousand years or so before the coming of Christ. Scripture gave no hint of other worlds like our own, inhabited by men and women, let alone demons. How, anyway, could the existence of ‘rational animals’ on other celestial bodies be reconciled with God’s providential plan for Mankind: Creation, Fall, Redemption and Resurrection at the end of time? To these and many other objections Bruno could reply that he spoke only as a philosopher and that his conclusions were based on reason alone, that, in the last count, he accepted the truths of the Christian faith and that his arguments had somehow led him to draw false inferences. Medieval and Renaissance philosophers before him, the Aristotelian Pietro Pomponazzi being the most celebrated case, had adopted this line of defence, and Bruno, at an early moment of his trial, did so too. ‘In some works I have spoken and argued too philosophically, improperly and not as a good Christian should.’¹⁰

His ambitions went, however, beyond the hesitant protestations of his predecessors. In *De immenso*, as in other works, as Miguel Granada (‘La perfección’ 222–37) has shown, Bruno proposed that philosophy alone was the means whereby

⁹ Firpo (27, doc. 8).

¹⁰ Firpo (373, doc. 51, §228). At another moment in his trial, Bruno’s Venetian Inquisitors rejected his claim that he had set out only philosophical views and not heretical ones; see Firpo (143, doc. 19).

the soul could perfect itself and denied, by allusion, that Christianity could serve this purpose. In the opening chapter of the work he declared:

No trifling or futile contemplative exercise do we undertake [in this book] but rather one that is the most profound and worthwhile of all for man's perfection. Herein shall we pursue the splendour, outpouring and communion of the divine and of nature, not in an Egyptian, Syrian, Greek or Roman individual, not in food, drink or some even less noble matter like the stupefied people of our age, or by fabricating and dreaming up inventions; but rather we shall look for them in the majestic palace of the omnipotent, in the limitless extent of *aether*, in the infinite power of twofold nature, becoming all things and creating all things. Whence it is that we contemplate the vast number of heavenly bodies, or worlds as I call them, those great animate beings and divinities that sing the praises of¹¹ the one most high and dance without limit of number or limit [of space] according to their own inclination and order, everywhere. Thus, from the eternal, limitless and innumerable effect of what is visible is glimpsed that everlasting and limitless intelligible majesty and goodness, which, in keeping with its dignity, is glorified by the presence and harmony of the innumerable gods, that is, the innumerable worlds [i.e. solar systems], and by the declaration of, or rather discourse on, its glory unfolding before our eyes. No dwelling or temple of determinate limit will accommodate its limitless extent. No arrangement of a [finite] number of ministers could lead the fullness of its majesty to be acknowledged and honoured as it should. Let us, then, cast our gaze towards the omniform image of the omniform god and wonder at the vast living likeness of him (BOL I.1, 205–6).

The gist of this magnificent is clear enough. The infinite universe was an epiphany of God and, by contemplating it in wonder, the soul perfected itself. The full force of the passage, however, becomes apparent only when we ponder the details. God revealed himself in the universe, not in 'some Egyptian, Syrian, Greek or Roman individual'. Who are these individuals? It is not difficult to guess. The Egyptian Moses; Christ, who was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, both towns, as indicated in the

¹¹ For the use of the dative in the original Latin, 'et numinum uni altissimo concinantium', compare Esdras 3:11: 'Et concinebant in hymnis, et confessione Domino'.

Gospel according to Luke (2: 2–4), being in what was known in the Roman Empire as Syria; the Greek, St Paul; and the Roman, St Peter and his successors. The blasphemy continues. We should not revere ‘food, drink or some even less noble matter’ as if it were divine. The allusion, it scarcely needs saying, is to the bread and wine of the Eucharist, which, despite or, better perhaps, because of the theological controversies that it incited during the sixteenth century, Bruno had mocked on other occasions.¹² The phrase ‘some even less noble matter’ probably refers to reliquaries, about which he was equally scathing.¹³ Bruno, in other words, went far beyond the pervasive anticlericalism of the age and, equally, beyond the sporadic attempts of Renaissance philosophers to assert a degree of intellectual autonomy outside the constraints imposed by faith. Religion of the kind practised in the ancient world, as Epicurus had first taught according to Lucretius (I.62–79 Bailey), had been the great impediment to understanding nature and the infinite extent of the universe. Its modern surrogate, Christianity, was, in Bruno’s view, no less pernicious.

The allusions continue, with Bruno, a priest and theologian by profession, bending Scripture to sacrilegious purposes. St Paul – hence his covert presence in the quotation above – is the main victim.¹⁴ In Romans 1:19–23, Paul had famously denounced philosophers as ‘fools’ for their attempt to understand the ‘invisible things of God’ from nature alone.¹⁵ Quite the opposite, replies Bruno. The true ‘image’ or ‘representation’ of the imperceptible God was the universe, infinite in extent, temporarily and spatially, not as Paul had claimed (2 Corinthians 4: 4; Colossians 1: 15; Hebrews 1: 3), the incarnate Jesus Christ. The universe was, as he wrote elsewhere (BOI I, 693) – appropriating a phrase in the Gospel according to John (1: 14, 18; 3: 16, 18; also, I John 4: 9) – ‘the only begotten nature’ of God. More exactly, the universe was that by virtue of which we were all in communion. No modest ‘dwelling or temple’ (*domicilium atque templum*), Bruno announces above, can provide a fitting abode for God. This is an allusion to, or, more exactly, subversion of,

¹² BOI I, 588; II, 388–9; BOL I.2, 291; II.2, 181–2.

¹³ BOI II, 369–70; BOL I.2, 316.

¹⁴ Bruno adapts Paul’s Epistles to his purposes in various works; see Meier–Oeser (235–6); Meroi.

¹⁵ Bruno’s *De la causa, principio et uno*, published at London in 1584, engages with the main themes of Nicholas of Cusa’s *Trialogus de possest*, which, in turn, explores the passage in Romans mentioned above. See Meier–Oeser (235).

Ephesians 2: 21–2, where Paul assures the recipients of his letter that, thanks to the coming of Christ, they now constitute, together with the saints, a community bound together by the Holy Spirit. They formed the ‘temple’ (*templum*) and ‘habitable of God’ (*habituaculum Dei*) built on the cornerstone of Christ. Simultaneously, Bruno is alluding to the ‘habitable of God’ defined as the abode of the elect, the so-called Empyrean, which Christian theologians, again on the authority of Ephesians 2: 21–2, imagined as a spiritual region lying beyond the finite geocentric cosmos.

Only a ‘majestic palace’, a universe infinite spatially and temporally, could appropriately bear witness to God’s absolute power. Well before Bruno’s day, scholastic authors had recognized the force of this argument and, to counter it, had devised an ingenious get-out clause. God, infinitely powerful though He was, had chosen to create a finite cosmos. He could, after all, do anything He wanted. Bruno would have none of this and, later in *De immenso*, as in earlier works, dismissed the possibility out of hand (Granada, ‘Il rifiuto’). Both God and the universe were infinite and, as he wrote in his dialogue *De la causa, principio et uno* (*On the Cause, the Principle and the One*), published at London in 1584, ‘all that can be’ (BOI I, 602). Both, that is, were the actualization of all possibilities. They differed in that, whereas in the universe all possibilities were at any given moment actualized somewhere, in God’s supersubstantial being, in which form and matter, being and existence, act and potentiality were undifferentiated, all possibilities were actualized absolutely without distinctions of time and place. The universe, that is, was the explication of two infinite powers, one active, one passive, reconciled in God’s absolute unity. Hence, in our passage Bruno exhorts his readers to contemplate God in ‘the infinite power of twofold nature, making (*facere*) all things and becoming (*feri*) all things’. These two complementary powers corresponded, as he explained in other works, to, respectively, the Universal Soul and Universal Matter.¹⁶ By virtue of the Ideas or Forms intrinsic to it, the Universal Soul regulated the universe perfectly. Together these Ideas constituted what Bruno called the Universal Intellect, interpreted, not as a separate hypostasis, but as a faculty of the Universal Soul, in the same way as intellect is a faculty belonging to the human soul. Looking upwards, so to speak, the plurality of Ideas unified in the Universal Intellect corresponded to the undifferentiated unity of

¹⁶ For (Universal) Matter and the formal or efficient cause acting upon it, i.e. the Universal Soul, as complementary powers, *feri* and *facere*, see BOL I.2, 344; III, 695–6.

the Ideas in God's Mind; while, looking downwards, they corresponded to the transient forms of individual things that they generated from within Universal Matter. Hence, at the end of the passage, Bruno refers to the universe as the 'omniform (*omniformis*) image of the omniform (*omniformis*) God'. Bruno found this phrase, and much else, in the works of the fifteenth-century Florentine Platonist, Marsilio Ficino (*Platonic Theology* XI.4, §14), who had coined it as a summary of a passage in the *Pimander* (XI.16), a work of the most venerable authority. According to Ficino and hence later Renaissance authors, including Bruno, its author was none other than the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistos, a contemporary or near contemporary of Moses.

The universe was numinous as a whole and also in its parts. The suns and earths were 'gods'. Undergo change though they might, they did not suffer extinction thanks to God's providential intervention, or so Bruno tended to think even if he conceded, uncharacteristically, that he was uncertain on this point (Granada, 'Voi siete dissolubili'). They danced 'without limits of number or limit [of space]', he writes in our passage, and sang 'the praises of the one most high'. The 'presence [*adsistentia*] and harmony' of this infinite number of 'ministers' (*ministri*) declared or, rather, since their actions were everlasting, 'discoursed' upon its glory. This was, needless to say, a reinterpretation of the time-honoured analogy of the music or harmony of the spheres, conceived originally to extol the merits of a finite cosmos. The celestial bodies 'danced' because, like dancers, they moved intuitively according to an intelligent design, without ratiocination (BOI I, 656–7). Plotinus inspired the analogy (*Enneads* IV.4.8). Simultaneously, Bruno is hinting at two passages in Scripture: Psalms 19: 1 (in KJV; Vulgate 18: 2): 'The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork'; and Daniel 7: 10 (KJV), describing the angels as ministers standing in the presence of God: 'thousand thousands ministered [Vulgate: 'ministrabant'] unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before ['assistebant'] him'. In fine, the true messengers of God were, not the angels of Scriptural tradition, but the animate and intelligent celestial bodies populating the infinitude of solar systems. Enlisting Daniel 7: 10 had extra bite inasmuch as, according to medieval and Renaissance scholastic authors, the angels guided, extrinsically or intrinsically, the celestial bodies in a finite, geocentric, cosmos. As so often, their Aristotelian and Christian prejudices had led them to ignore the truth displayed before their very eyes.

Christian stupor, philosophical wonder

These two contrasting visions of God's embodiment, the Jesus Christ of Christian imagination and the infinite universe of Bruno's philosophy, provoked contrasting responses in the soul. Christian beliefs and the fear of death that they inculcated induced consternation and mindless obedience – stupor – in its adherents, both those of little learning and those who, learned in the 'vulgar philosophy' of the day, remained wedded to a finite, geocentric, picture of the cosmos (Granada, 'La perfección' 227–30). Bruno refers allusively to such people in the passage above as the 'stupefied' (*attoniti*), a word borrowed from 'Pythagoras's' account of metempsychosis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (XV.153–4):¹⁷ 'O mankind, stupefied (*attonitus*) by fear of cold death,/ Why fear the Styx, the shades and empty names'. Lucretius, Bruno's constant companion in *De immenso*, had similarly decried the fear of death, and at much greater length (*De rerum naturae* III.830–1094). It was, however, Ovid that he had in mind on this occasion, for, like Ovid's Pythagoras, but unlike Lucretius (III.417–1094), who denied that souls survived bodily death (I.115–16), Bruno held that only the body died. Ovid's 'Pythagoras' had rightly taught that the soul was 'without death' and passed from one incarnation to the next. We should await mutation serenely, for death was no more than the dissolution of an ephemeral conjunction of an immortal soul with a mortal body (*Metamorphoses* XV.158–75). Although he ostensibly commended 'Pythagoras's' conclusion (BOI I, 665; BOL I.3, 142–3), Bruno interpreted metempsychosis differently from him and indeed other classical authors. An individual soul was indestructible in the sense that it was, to simplify, an aspect of the Universal Soul.¹⁸ As such it participated, to the degree that its bodily attributes permitted, in the Universal Soul's animate and intellectual powers. A soul incarnated in the body of, say, a snake developed snake-like cognitive powers, whereas the soul of a human being, thanks to the articulation of its body, particularly of the hands, developed ratiocinative skills that a snake could not attain. On the death of the body, the individual soul immediately turned its powers to forming a new body, the limitations of which were determined by how it had

¹⁷ For Bruno's adaptation of Ovid's lines to the purposes of his philosophy in the *De immenso* passage discussed above and in other works, see Granada ('La perfección' 225–30).

¹⁸ This is, at least, how Bruno tends to explain how individual Souls relate to the (Universal (World) Soul. His position was, as he recognized, problematic; see Knox ('The World Soul').

conducted itself in its previous embodiment. It did not, that is, endure an intermediary shadowy existence in an underworld of the kind that ancient accounts of metempsychosis had depicted (BOL III, 257, 429–30).

This doctrine underpinned Bruno's moral philosophy, in particular his notion of cosmic justice. A soul endowed with a human body that behaved like a pig had been a pig in a previous incarnation or, on account of its conduct, was doomed to become a pig in the next. To ensure a prosperous reincarnation, it had to strive to perfect its rational and intellective powers by progressing from the world of sense data to the intelligible principles underlying it. Hence, just before the *De immenso* passage above, Bruno explained that the soul, enjoying as it did a body that allowed it to perfect its rational and intellective potential, was peculiarly well placed to accomplish this goal (BOL I.1, 202–3). He could speak from experience. His own soul soared into the yonder, 'a marvel' to the *attoniti* that it left behind (BOL I.1, 202), and roamed over the infinite extent of aether. Or, to put the point prosaically, the universe offered the soul the means to understand nature and thereby perfect itself. By virtue of the principle, Aristotelian in origin, that in the act of intellection an intellect was identical with its object,¹⁹ the soul could become one with the Universal Soul/Universal Intellect understood as God inasmuch as He engaged with Universal Matter to produce the universe. Bruno had achieved this 'deification', or so he declares when, in the verse section preceding our *De immenso* passage, he alludes to the Gospel according to John 14: 6: 'I am become the Lord, Law, Light, Prophet, Father, Author and the Way' (BOL I.1, 202; Granada, 'La perfección' 232). In the same breath Bruno is likening himself to Epicurus, whom Lucretius (V.1–54) had praised for having purged the mind and, to euhemerize, for having been a greater god than Ceres or Bacchus. The comparison was all the happier for Bruno in that he associated Ceres and Bacchus, the gods of bread and wine, with the Eucharistic elements (BOL II.2, 181–2). Ultimately, however godlike a perfected soul might become, God in himself, that is, the supersubstantial unity of the Universal Soul and Universal Matter and hence the unity of all other things, remained unknowable. Bruno makes this point shortly before the *De immenso* passage. The individual soul could discover particular truths, particular instances of the good, but not Truth or the Good (BOL I.1, 203–4). The soul's yearning to know God remained unsated, with the result that the universe

¹⁹ E.g. Aristotle, *De anima* III.4.429a13–8, b30–31; III.7.431a1–2, b16–17; *Metaphysics* XII.7, 1072b20–3; 1075a3–5.

remained forever an inexhaustible object of wonder. Hence the exhortation at the end of our passage: ‘Let us wonder at the vast, living, image of God’.²⁰ Wonder, in short, was the state of mind engendered by the ‘contemplative exercise’ – ‘the most profound and worthwhile of all for man’s perfection’ – described in *De immenso*.

To wonder or not to wonder ...

Wechel no doubt read *De immenso*. Even if we suppose, improbably, that he did not notice the blasphemies in the opening chapter of *De immenso*, we can assume that Bruno regaled everyone in the workshop with extravagant accounts of his philosophy. He liked to hold forth. Prior Müntzenberger, whom we met above, is one witness among others to this effect.²¹ Another is Jakob van Brecht, a bookseller originally from Antwerp but living at the time in Venice. In his deposition to the Venetian inquisitors, dated 26 May 1592, Brecht related an event that probably took place during Bruno’s second, brief, visit to Frankfurt in May 1591, following, that is, the publication of the trilogy. He had seen, but not read, some of Bruno’s ‘curious’ works and became eager to meet their author, which he eventually managed to do. Brecht had asked him what he was up to in the city and praised his works, which, Brecht told the Inquisitors, ‘were also praised by many other people’.²² Nothing sells books better than the outrageous, or so Wechel, overcoming his Calvinist scruples, may have thought, perhaps in desperation, since business was not going well. The gambit was not successful. By the time of his death two years later, in July 1593, he was heavily in debt (Matthäus, ‘Der Frankfurter Drucker’ 172, 178–80, 182). Fate proved no kinder to Prior Müntzenberger. The indulgence that he showed towards Bruno may

²⁰ In the *De minimo* (II.4), the first work in the Frankfurt trilogy to be published, Bruno similarly spoke of the wonder that the universe could inspire; see BOL I.3: 199–200.

²¹ In addition to Brecht’s testimony, we have the comments of Jacopo Corbinelli, an Italian exile living in Paris, who knew Bruno during his stay there in 1585–86. In a letter dated 6 June, 1586, addressed to Gian Vincenzo Corbinelli in Padua, he remarked that Bruno was ‘a pleasant companion, an Epicurean in his view on life’; see Yates (181).

²² Firpo (25–31, doc. 8). Brecht met Bruno several times afterwards in Zurich and Venice.

have contributed to his downfall (Fischer 249–51). His superiors summarily removed him in 1593 from the priorate that he had held since 1580.

Bruno's affront to contemporary religious sensibilities is obvious enough. Less obvious, but just as perplexing, at least at first glance, is his contention that philosophers should aspire to wonder. The conventional opinion of the time was that wonder, philosophically speaking, was no more than a state of mind that provoked the search for an explanation. On discovering the cause, once ignorance had given way to knowledge, wonder ceased. This was the position adopted by Aristotle in the first book of the *Metaphysics*, as in other works,²³ and repeated by his commentators thereafter. 'To wonder', wrote Alexander of Aphrodisias (late 2nd, early 3rd cent. A.D.), 'is the mark of those who are ignorant' (35–6). Less flattering still were interpretations of the kind proposed by Epicureans, Stoics and other ancient philosophers. Wonder was a passion and passions were detrimental to what the Epicureans called *ataraxia* and the Stoics *apatheia*, the passionless, tranquil state of mind, promoted by philosophy, free from concern and consternation. 'Wonder at nothing – this is almost the one and only thing, Numicius, that can make and keep a man happy' (Horace, *Epistles* I.vi.1–2). The Aristotelian and Horatian interpretations blend in a passage in Lucretius's *De rerum naturae* (II.1023–47), one that contrasts strikingly with Bruno's position. It may be difficult at first, Lucretius concedes, to believe that the universe is infinite. But then, if we had never seen the sky, the sun, the moon and the other heavenly bodies, we would, on seeing them for the first time, 'marvel' (*miror*) at them and consider them the most marvellous (*mirabilis*) of things. Accustomed, however, as we are to this spectacle, we do not experience such feelings. We should not, then, allow the novel idea that the universe was infinite to strike fear into (*exterreo*) us and overcome our reason (*ratio*). Eventually, we shall take it for granted.

In the first chapter of this volume, Guido Milanese has discussed these ancient Greek and Roman interpretations of wonder and so there is no need to rehearse them here. Suffice it to say that during the Middle Ages and Renaissance the Aristotelian and Stoic interpretations remained well known, even if Christian prerogatives divested them, in part, of their former authority. Horace, or so medieval commentators explained, was admonishing Numicius not to be seduced by worldly

²³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A.2, 982b11–21, A.2, 983a12–20; *Rhetoric* I.11, 1371a31–4; *De caelo* II.13, 294a12–17.

things or vanities.²⁴ His maxim, in other words, concerned what was ethical rather than spiritual, the things of nature rather than those of grace.²⁵ Towards the latter wonder might be an appropriate response. Similarly, scholastic philosophers and theologians, following the rehabilitation of Aristotelian philosophy in the Latin West during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, routinely invoked Aristotle's interpretation of wonder and continued to do so well into the seventeenth century, yet they adjudged it incomplete. A case in point was Thomas Aquinas, whom Bruno had studied in early career and continued to admire even as he rebelled against everything that he stood for. There was, Thomas explained, wonder of the kind that Aristotle envisaged, that is, the wonder that excited the soul to discover the 'natural causes' (*causa naturales*) of things; but there was also the wonder produced by 'a completely hidden cause' (*causa occultissima*), namely, the power of God, which no man 'in the state of this life' (*in statu huius vitae*) could ever fathom. Divine power produced what were called, properly speaking, 'miracles' (*miracula*), events that were 'absolutely and in themselves wonderful (*mira*)'.²⁶ In making this distinction, Thomas was gently chiding those who, like Augustine, insisted that Creation in its ordinary course of events was the greatest of God's miracles and contained an endless number of miracles, great and small (Roessli).

Do Bruno's aspirations coincide, then, with Christian notions of wonder? Was the wonder that the majestic, infinite, universe inspired in Bruno a Christian

²⁴ An eleventh-century commentary on *Epistles*, discussing *Epistles* VI.i.1–9, explains that Numicius was ensnared by his desire for food, sex, honour and money, especially the last two (Botschuyver 346). Similar interpretations occur in two twelfth-century commentaries; see Fredborg (217, 221).

²⁵ For Horace's *Epistles* interpreted in this way, see Fredborg 210–18. The Aleph Scholia contrasts the Stoic idea that the virtues were given by nature with the Christian view that they were given by grace; see Botschuyver 406, Fredborg 214 n. 75.

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, II *Sent.*, dist. 18, qu. 1, art. 3, solutio (*Scriptum* 2, 455–7). Similarly id., *Summa theologiae* Ia, qu. 105, art. 7, resp., ad 1^m (*Opera* 5: 479); id., *Contra gentiles* III. 101 (*Opera* 14: 312–3), discussed by Daston and Park 122–3. The early sixteenth-century Dominican Francesco Silvestri discussed Thomas's distinction at length in his commentary on the *Contra gentiles*; see Thomas Aquinas (*Opera* 14: 313–5).

contamination in his otherwise resolutely naturalistic philosophy? Despite all the bluster about being a ‘philosopher’, had he reverted, as the many Scriptural allusions in the passage above might suggest, into the Christian mindset in which he had been brought up and trained? Not exactly. To make sense of wonder in his conception of things we must turn to a philosophical tradition that scholarly surveys of wonder as a concept, a notable exception being that of Stefan Matuschek (9–12, 17–23, 46–51), tend to overlook.²⁷ Two kindred passages in Plato’s works provide the starting point. In the first, *Symposium*, 210A4–212A10, Socrates describes how the lover ascends from perceptible to intelligible beauty and, then, suddenly beholds what he has been seeking, namely, ‘a beauty wonderful in its nature’ (210E5: τι θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν καλόν) on which all other beauty, corporeal and moral, depends. In the second, *Phaedrus*, 250A8–9, he recounts how the few souls who are prompted by sensible beauty to recollect the beauty of intelligible realities ‘are amazed and no longer themselves’ (ἐκπλήττονται καὶ οὐκέθ’ αὐτῶν γίνονται). Plotinus’s reworking of these passages brings out just how far his master’s interpretation differed from that of Aristotle. The beauty of intelligible things – virtues, truth, the Platonic Ideas – excited ‘wonder and a delicious consternation [θάμβος καὶ ἐκπληξιν ἠδεῖαν], longing, desire and shock mingled with pleasure’, just as, by analogy, lovers were excited by the beauty in a body (I.6.4). In short, wonder for Plotinus was, as for Plato, a state of mind to which the philosophical soul should aspire, not, as Aristotle had taught, seek to surpass. The soul’s true aspiration was affective, to love the beauty of intelligibilia that collectively constituted the Neoplatonic Intellect and to remain enchanted by – in wonder of – them. Beyond the realm of intelligible realities lay the One, ineffable, unknowable, superessential, ‘a marvel’ (θαῦμα) beyond being (VI.9.5), on which all things, even imperfection and evil in some way, ultimately depended.²⁸ Christian

²⁷ The distinctive Platonic interpretation of wonder and its influence on Christian thought is ignored by, e.g., Fisher, Campbell, Daston and Park mentioned in the ‘Introduction’ to this volume. Hepburn 17 touches upon the Platonic or Neoplatonic position, broadly conceived.

²⁸ Superficially this interpretation resembles Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII.7, 1072b24–6. If, Aristotle says, the contemplative pleasure enjoyed continuously by God is of the same kind as we sometimes enjoy, then it is ‘wonderful (θαυμαστός)’; if is greater than the pleasure that we enjoy, then it is even ‘more wonderful’ (θαυμασιώτερος). Since we can, at most, only intermittently experience the

theology and metaphysics, particularly mystical theology, *mutatis mutandis*, proposed much the same, and not by coincidence. Neoplatonic monotheism had lent itself to the needs of the Church Fathers as they sought to establish a Christian theology that accommodated reason to revelation. God was the sole origin of all things, including, in some way mysterious to us, evil. Unknowable in Himself, He was a God of love and, in return, we must try to know him, not theoretically, but affectively (see Boitani in this volume; Matuschek 53–65, 71–81).

This was the setting in which Christian Platonists of the Renaissance spoke of wonder. In his treatise *On Learned Ignorance* the fifteenth-century theologian Nicholas of Cusa, whom Bruno acknowledged as an important influence, included a chapter entitled ‘On the Wonderful Art of God in the Creation of the Cosmos and the Elements’ (II.13). ‘So admirable’ were these created things that we could not discover the explanation of them all, leaving us ‘only to wonder (*admiror*)’. ‘wishes that we be led to an admiration of so wonderful a world-machine’, continues Nicholas, before offering his version of the Neoplatonic idea that wonder at the divine was insatiable: ‘However, the more we wonder at it, the more He hides it from us, since it is Himself alone that he wishes to be sought with wholehearted devotion’. The coincidences with Bruno’s position, putting aside Nicholas’s pious intentions, are conspicuous. More influential still, however, for Bruno’s interpretation of wonder was Marsilio Ficino, the philosopher who, almost single-handedly, introduced Latin Christendom to the works of Plotinus and other Neoplatonists. Ficino was in Bruno’s

pleasure that he enjoys, we cannot fully understand it. This does not contradict the account of wonder in the first book of the *Metaphysics* (see p. 000 above).

Christian authors tended, however, to interpret the passage Neoplatonically. Commenting on it, Francisco Suárez (25: lxiii–lxiv), a contemporary of Bruno, explained that the philosopher delighted in contemplating ‘separate substances’, especially the ‘first substance’, i.e., the angels and, especially, God, and, ascending to him, experienced wonder (*admiratio*) at his perfection. This type of wonder presumably corresponds to the second of the three types of wonder that Suárez (18: 213–4), as discussed by Blum and Blum 40–2, distinguished in his commentary on the third part of Thomas’s *Summa theologiae* (IIIa, qu. 15 art 8, arg. 1): 1) wonder arising from the ignorance of a cause; 2) wonder arising from something great and unique, albeit known; 3) wonder arising from the ignorance of how an effect emanates from its cause.

thoughts as he wrote the *De immenso* passage quoted above, indeed it can be read, as two of the most eminent Bruno scholars, Miguel Granada and Rita Sturlese, pointed out some years ago, as a reply to his, Ficino's, interpretation of human perfection.²⁹ Adapting Thomas Aquinas (see p. 000 above), Ficino had explained that the human soul's yearning for infinity, its yearning to pass always beyond what it knew, could not be satisfied in this life. Since it had this innate yearning and since God did not create anything that could not achieve the perfection proper to it, we must conclude that it could do so in the next life. Therefore, concluded Ficino, the soul was immortal. Bruno demurred. In our *De immenso* passage, as elsewhere in other works, he explains how philosophy – his 'new philosophy' – did permit the soul to achieve perfection in this life, even if only fleetingly and intermittently. Like all else, the soul, in human as in any other embodiment, was subject to the eternal vicissitude of things. Its perfection was not so much dispassionate knowledge, as Aristotle would have us believe, as the recognition that we were instantiations of the intelligible reality – the Universal Soul and its faculty the Universal Intellect – informing the perceptible universe. The awe, wonder and rapture experienced in such moments derived from the sense that this unity in diversity in which we, as souls, participated derived from an absolute, infinite and incomprehensible, unity.³⁰

These convictions inspired Bruno's response to Renaissance notions of Platonic love. In *De gli eroici furori*, published at London in 1585, he explained that it was by contemplating the perceptible universe, rather than the physical beauty of a young man, as Plato had advocated in the *Symposium*, or of a woman, as in Petrarchan

²⁹ Granada ('Giordano Bruno et la *dignitas hominis*' 71–2; and 'La perfección' 227); and Sturlese (107, 118–19).

³⁰ Hence I tend to think it would be best to qualify Miguel Granada's conclusion ('La perfección' 228–229, 237–45) that, despite his hostility towards Aristotle's and Averroes's cosmological and metaphysical ideas, 'Bruno is Averroist (and peripatetic) in his conception of the perfection of Man and of Philosophy, independently of the modifications that he imposes in his articulation of these two concepts'. Bruno's emphasis, recognized by Granada, on the universe as a source of awe and on wonder as marking a state of fulfilment, albeit transitory, for heroic souls is, ultimately, Platonic (Christian or pagan). Averroes's (and peripatetic) ideas on perfection through philosophy are better seen, in my opinion, as ancillary rather than formative.

poetry or Renaissance treatises on ‘Platonic love’, that the soul – the ‘heroic’ soul – came to yearn after the intelligible principles of things. Drawn ever upward, it came to understand the Universal Intellect, the locus of the Ideas, in its unity. In doing so, however, it relinquished its individual identity in accordance with the principle, mentioned above (see p. 000 above), that in the act of intellection the intellect was identical with its object.³¹ Beyond that, ‘in this state’, says Bruno, adapting Thomas Aquinas’s phrase to his own ends (see p. 000 above), the soul could not pass (BOI II, 564–7; similarly BOL II.2, 212). The supersubstantial principle or cause of all things remained unknown, the hidden God, ‘the one most high’, as he writes in the *De immenso* passage quoted above. Hence, too, in the sentence that immediately follows it, he writes that ‘Hermes Trismegistos calls Man (*homo*) a great miracle because he passes into God as if he himself were God, and tries to become all things just as God is all things’ (BOL I.1, 206). This sentence, including the reference to Hermes (*Asclepius* 6), as Granada (‘Giordano Bruno et la *dignitas hominis*’ 71) and Sturlese (118-19) have pointed out, derives from Marsilio Ficino’s *Platonic Theology* (XIV.3, §2), a work that he frequently drew upon in other contexts, without acknowledgement. In a chapter entitled ‘The sixth sign [of the soul’s immortality]: that the rational soul strives to become all things’, Ficino observed that it had been ‘the wonderful way’ in which the soul sought ‘to become all things’ that had compelled Hermes ‘in admiration’ to call Man ‘a great miracle’. Whereas, however, Ficino coopted Hermes to prove that this ‘great miracle’ was a distinct substance in accordance with Christian theology, Bruno – truer, as it happens, to ‘Hermes’ intentions – did so to support his view that the individual soul, passing eternally from one embodiment to another, was an instantiation of the Universal Soul/Universal Intellect, ‘God in things’ (Knox, ‘The World Soul’).

Bruno’s Legacy

Bruno was not, as will be apparent by now, a Christian theologian. But nor was he a Platonist. He accommodated aspects of Platonism, pagan and Christian, on sufferance. Near the beginning of the first chapter in *De immenso* he specifies that an individual soul was distinct from its body. It was self-subsistent and indivisible. This was, he notes, the interpretation of the ‘Platonists’ (BOL I.1, 202). Yet in *De immenso*

³¹ E.g. Aristotle, *De anima* III.4.429a13–8, b30–1; III.7.431a1–2, b16–7; *Metaphysics* XII.7, 1072b20–3; 1075^a3–5.

and other works he denied, with strong doses of sarcasm, Platonism's central tenet, the notion that the Ideas and intelligences apprehending them were transcendent realities existing independently of the corporeal world. In what sense, he quipped, could they be outside an infinite universe? His allegiance to other ancient philosophies was equally and consistently instrumental. Indeed he can claim to be the first thinker since antiquity to integrate a metaphysics, physics, psychology and ethics into an original, if unsystematically presented, philosophy, one that aspired to go beyond the reelaborations of Platonism, Aristotelianism or scepticism within a Christian context that had hitherto prevailed. Quintessential to this 'new philosophy' was the idea that the universe was the 'image' of God and that, as such, it could lead the soul, if only intermittently, to a state of fulfilment in which, enrapt, it marvelled at the 'majesty and goodness' of the heavens.

This earns Bruno a special place in the history of wonder as a concept. He is the harbinger of secular views, some of them discussed in essays later in this volume, that the wonder experienced by the soul when it understood itself in relation to the majesty of nature and of the universe marked the moments of its greatest fulfilment.³² The affinities with Kant, to mention just one example, are intriguing,³³ all the more so in that Kant never mentioned Bruno or, as far as is known, read any of his works. 'Two things', Kant famously wrote in the Conclusion of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), 'fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence [*Bewunderung und Ehrfurcht*] the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me'. Neither was transcendent. Both were immediately evident and, he noted, connected 'immediately to the consciousness of my existence'. The infinite extent of the heavens, in which an infinite number of 'worlds' and 'systems of systems' moved eternally in regular patterns, led him to realize that, as far as his animal nature was concerned, he was but a transient combination of a 'vital force' (*Lebenskraft*) and a parcel of matter destined to return to 'the planet from which it came'. By contrast, through the 'moral law' – that is, the principle our consciousness of which entitles us to conceive ourselves as

³² For an account mentioning such views (without reference to Bruno), see Hepburn.

³³ For Kant on wonder, see Matuschek (187–9, 192–4) and Frierson. I owe a special word of thanks to Sebastian Gardner for his generous advice on Kant's interpretation.

immaterial souls capable of moral perfection – he was assured of his identity as an intelligence distinct from his animal nature and from the sensible world in its entirety. Unconfined by ‘the conditions and boundaries of this life’, in this respect he ‘reached into the infinite’.³⁴ Elsewhere Kant distinguished the enduring wonder (*Bewunderung*) inspired by these two infinitudes, cosmic and individual, from the ephemeral astonishment (*Verwunderung*) – equivalent roughly speaking to Aristotle’s concept of wonder – that we experience when something contradicts our preconceptions.³⁵ Does a common source, perhaps, account for the resonances with Bruno? Exiled on Corsica, Seneca the Younger wrote to console his mother, Helvia. ‘Two things most fair’, he observed, combining two Stoics commonplaces (Meinel 99–122; Costa 210), accompany us wherever we may be: nature, shared by all and understood as ‘God’ or ‘incorporeal reason’, and our individual virtue. These ‘two things’, equivalent respectively to the cosmos with its magnificent panoply of the heavens, and, its noblest part, the mind, ‘its contemplator and admirer’, remain with us for as long as we live (*Dialogi* XII.8). That Seneca, one of the classical authors, together with Lucretius and Horace, that Kant most admired (Kuehn 49), may have inspired, at least in part, his ‘two things’ has long been surmised.³⁶ Bruno, for his part, read Seneca, including his *Dialogi* (Granada, ‘Giordano Bruno et la Stoa’; Dell’Omodarme), and, in the *De immenso* passage discussed in this essay, he echoes, intentionally or not, his message of consolation: the soul fulfilled itself, became

³⁴ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (129 [V.161-2]). Do ‘admiration’ and ‘reverence’ here refer to both ‘the starry heavens’ and ‘the moral law’ alike? Or do they corellate with, respectively, ‘the starry heavens’ and ‘the moral law’? The latter is philosophically more articulate: ‘wonder leads to awe’, etc. The former reading, however, has some support in a passage in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (69 [VI.49–50]): ‘the moral predisposition’, i.e., ‘moral ‘law’, in us is the one thing ‘in our soul’ that ‘we cannot cease viewing with the highest wonder (*Verwunderung*), and for which admiration (*Bewunderung*) is legitimate and uplifting as well’.

³⁵ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* §§29, 62 (154, 236–8 [V.272, 364–5]); Doran (268–9). In *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View* 42 (I.1, §13§; VII.150–1), Kant describes *Verwunderung* as the reaction that those of weak reason were partial to when faced by something extraordinary.

³⁶ Vaihinger; Lippman; Bickel; and Sala (348–9).

‘deified’, by contemplating, in a state of wonder, the cosmos, the perceptible image of nature, defined as God immanent, of which it was an instance. For ‘a Neapolitan’, in his own words, ‘born and bred under a more benign sky’ (BOI I, 535), busying over proofs in Wechel’s Frankfurt workshop far from home, Seneca’s denial of the existential reality of exile would have had a poignancy inconceivable to Kant, who, throughout his life, never ventured more than sixty miles beyond his native city of Königsberg.

For all, then, his protestations that he was ‘a philosopher’ and despite his outright rejection of Christian doctrines, ideals and practices, Bruno retained a sense of the divine and the wonder due before it. He anticipated, that is to say, secular philosophies or world views which, in reaction to human ambitions to dominate, to ‘finitize’, the natural world through knowledge and technology, covertly appropriated religious sentiments to express the soul’s relationship to the infinite. Sometimes he speaks himself of his ‘new philosophy’ as a religion. It was the rebirth, he writes in the *Despatch of the Triumphant Beast*, an Italian dialogue published at London in 1585, of the true ‘religion’ of the Egyptians that had lain oppressed for so many generations.³⁷ In *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, published the year before, he proclaimed that his philosophy ‘not only contains the truth but even favours religion more than any other kind of philosophy’.³⁸ More boldly still, he claimed that his philosophy of God immanent in an infinite universe was the true bread of life (BOI I, 433; BOL I.3, 199–200). Christ-like, it ‘illuminated the blind’, ‘loosed the tongues of the dumb’, ‘cured the lame’, and so permitted the human spirit to ‘progress’ once more (BOI I, 454). He was, after all, as mentioned above, ‘the Way’ (see p. 000 above). Seen in this light, his philosophy is ‘pan-theistic’, more so, at any rate, than that of his fellow substance monist, Spinoza. The world was not divine, Spinoza insisted (*Ethics*, pt 3, prop. 52, scholium), and wonder, in its unalloyed form and defined, broadly speaking, in an Aristotelian vein as a reaction provoked by something unusual, was an affect that befitted the uneducated. Such people, unaware that the laws of nature were inviolable, believed in miracles (*Tractatus theologico-politicus* VI.1, 3). The religious undercurrent in Bruno’s philosophy did not pass unnoticed. During the *Pantheismusstreit* (‘Pantheism Controversy’) of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Bruno passed from being a heinous heretic to

³⁷ BOI II, 363–4, 371–2; Scapparone (1646–8).

³⁸ BOI I, 528. Similarly BOI I, 436, 710.

the courageous, if undisciplined, precursor of Spinoza and hence of ‘modern’ philosophy as a whole. Coleridge was one admirer. Copies of Bruno’s works were, he observed, hard to come by but he succeeded nevertheless in obtaining a copy of *De immenso*. In an essay of 1809, he quoted, translated and commented on the very passage in *De immenso* discussed in this essay, praising it, despite ‘some intermixture of Error’, for its ‘sublime Piety’.³⁹ Ten years later his admiration for Bruno remained undiminished even though his intellectual affiliations had changed. ‘This man’, he wrote in 1819, ‘though a pantheist, was religious’.⁴⁰

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³⁹ Coleridge, (*The Friend* 2: 79–82). For Coleridge on Bruno and particularly his reading of *De immenso*, see Gatti (‘Coleridge's Reading’; ‘Giordano Bruno’; and *Essays*, 201–19).

⁴⁰ Coleridge (*The Philosophical Lectures* 323–327); Gatti (‘Coleridge's Reading’, 137; and *Essays*, 202–203).

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