

GIORDANO BRUNO: A FINE BIBLIOPHILE

The love for books and libraries of a great philosopher

GUIDO DEL GIUDICE

The life and destiny of Giordano Bruno are closely linked to books. His extraordinary desire for knowledge and for spreading his ideas led to a particular and privileged relationship with books, which accompanied him since his youth. One can easily say that the main reason that led him to joining the convent of St. Domenico was the fact that he could get access to the well-equipped library of the convent, which would quench his omnivorous hunger for knowledge, help him developing his exceptional mnemonic skills and feed that ingenious naturalistic and infinitistic afflatus, which he strongly felt. But this passion itself put him in danger. As he said during the interrogations in Venice, he was first censored “because I asked one of the novices, who was reading the *Historia delle sette allegrezze* in verse, what he wanted to do with that book, as he should have thrown it away, and he should have started reading immediately some other book, like *Vita de’ santi Padri*”. At that time the library – or *Libreria* – of St. Domenico was a place of worship both for religious and secular scholars, as there was a valuable and unique collection of several kinds of books, including those written by heretical authors or those which had been censored. In a period when



Venetian edition of Aristotle's
De Anima (1562)

living in a convent involved lack of discipline, vices, murders and punishments, it was not hard getting the prohibited books from the library. Because of the continuous coming and going of books and the several thefts, as the General Master of the Dominican Order pointed out, in 1571 Pope Pius V had published a “Breve”, in which he declared that whoever stole or took, for whatever reason, any book from the *Libreria*, without a clear licence of the Pope or the General Master, would be excommunicated¹.

This decision was written on a stone, which has now disappeared, inserted in the right wall of the little hall which gives access to the Library. This detail, which many had not noticed, determined the final departure of the Nolan from his home land. He went to Rome to defend himself from the accusation of having declared his heretic opinions about the doctrine of Arius, during a dispute with his brethren. While he was there, he got to know that his enemy, Brother Bonifacius (to whom, in the dedication of *Candelaio*, he promised he would get his revenge in this or another life), he had found in the *necessaire* of his room the books of St. Chrysostom and St. Jerome with some erased scholia, originally written by Erasmus. Then he realised he had no choice: the mere fact of having taken



heretic books from the *Libreria* automatically involved, because of that “Breve”, being excommunicated. Some years later, in 1591, Brother Tommaso Campanella had to face the same issue, when he went to Naples, just because he had mocked the decisions of the “Breve” by saying: “What is this excommunication? Something to eat?”. He would then be put in prison and sent to trial.

In his humble bag, Bruno would always leave some space, mostly for his loved-hated Aristotle, thanks to whom he could earn his living. Also, there was space for “De Sphaera” of Giovanni Sacrobosco, which he had used to study astronomy in the convent, and that he used to teach noblemen, creating his visionary infinitistic theories. He couldn’t forget the books of his favourite authors, from the “divine” Cusano and Thomas Aquinas to Erasmus from Rotterdam, which, during his adventurous trips, were stolen several times, together with some of his works, by thieves, pirates and unfaithful servants.

Besides the content, Bruno loved the book as an object, as a true bibliophile, since he started working in a typography in Geneva to



Clockwise from top left: *Le Sette Allegrezze della Madonna*, Siena, 1578; An edition of *Vite de Santi Padri*, Venice, 1563; *Commentarius Acta Apostolorum* by St John Chrysostom, commented by Erasmus Antwerp, 1550. On the left: *Giovanni di Sacrobosco's Sphaera*, Venice 1572.

earn his living as a proof-reader. He learnt how a book is born, how to make one with his own hands, manhandling the lathes and carving the moulds of the images. This experience taught him how to edit his own works before publishing them, as he did in Prague, in the workshop of Georg Daczicenus, for the *One hundred and sixty articles against the mathematicians*, dedicated to the emperor Rudolf II. Later on he did it again in Frankfurt, in the workshop of Johann Wechel, who says it in the presentation of *De minimo*: “Once the work has started, in order to finish it in the most accurate way, not only he drew figures with his own hands, but he also edited it”². The fact of being accustomed to the libraries and the bookmakers impacted on the daily life of the philosopher. In Geneva he was arrested with Jean Bergeon, who had printed one of his papers, where he pointed out twenty

mistakes made by a philosophy lecturer, Antoine de la Faye, in one single lecture, and he called “pedagogues” the ministers of the Church of Geneva. Whereas the bookmaker was fined and was jailed for one night, Bruno was punished with the “*defence de la cène*”, which was the ban from taking part to Eucharist, which was an actual excommunication. In Paris he developed an actual friendship with bookmakers, such as Gilles Gourbin, who published his *De Compendiosa architectura* and his *De Umbris idearum*. The latter made him beloved by the king Henry III, who introduced him to the royal readers, to the world that he had always chased and dreamt of.

Bruno used to consider the book as the main mean of spreading his ideas. In one of the few lectures he held in Oxford, his eulogy of translations, thanks to which “*all the sciences can be widespread*”, make a sensation, so that it was handed down in a note signed N.W. (probably Nicholas Whithalk), and then taken by his devout friend John Florio. Even then, when applying his “universal” vocation to overcoming the differences in languages, the Nolan proved his cosmopolitan editorial mentality. When he came back to Paris, without the support of the king, it was his old friend Gilles Gourbin who

became his landlord, as Bruno rent one of his flats. Two narrow rooms and a small loft, right next to the Collège de Cambrai, where the royal readers used to teach and where several bookmakers used to open their shops, to make money out of the cultural activities of the Parisian universities. As the Nolan was no longer an extraordinary readers, he could not get “his books printed”, so that he had to pay to have them printed. Gourbin, who had reduced his activities, this time recommended him Petrus Cheuillot in S. Giovanni in Laterano Street. He published in one single volume both the dialogues on Mordente and the *Figuratio*, with some copies of the thesis of the famous dispute of Cambrai, the *Centum et viginti articuli de*

natura et mundo adversos Peripateticos. The books were also what Bruno used to show to those he admired, and with whom he wanted to enter a cultural relationship. I have already described, in another article³ the copy of *Quod nihil scitur*, that professor Francisco Sanchez gave him in Toulouse with admiration, but which the Nolan caustically commented: “It is surprising how this ass can be called doctor!”. The same happened to him with Tycho Brahe, who returned the deferential dedication of *Camoeracensis Acrotismus* with a scornful commentary: “Nolanus Nullanus”.



Opus epistolarum by St Girolamo with the scholia of Erasmus, Paris, 1546.



From the left: Frontispiece of *De triplici minimo et mensura*, printed in Frankfurt in 1591; The edition of *De rerum natura*, edited by Hubert van Giffen, Antwerp, 1566.

The evidence that libraries were always fascinating for Bruno comes from his Parisian life, as he regularly visited the Saint Victor library. It's the librarian Guillaume Cotin, who recalls it in his *Journal*, describing his favourite books (mainly Lucretius) and his scornful comments on both ancient and contemporary authors. Unfortunately, the confidence he had with the booksellers also impacted on the sad epilogue of his life. It was a bookseller, Giovan Battista Ciotti, who, in Frankfurt, accompanied by his colleague Andrea Briciano, sent him the

invitation of the infamous Zuane Mocenigo, the Venetian nobleman who brought him to the Inquisition. Both of them will complete the misdeed, witnessing – not in a favourable way – in the trial. Note Mocenigo's description, in his third denunciation, of the circumstances of the arrest: "he was begging me to set him free and if I wanted all he had in his house, he would have given me everything [...] and that he just wanted me to give him the copy of a booklet of conjurations, that I found among his papers."

IORDANI
BRVNI NO-
LANI ARTICVLI
CENTVM ET SEXA-
GINTA

ADVERSVS HVIVS
*tempestatis Mathematicos
atq; Philosophos.*

Centum item & octoginta Praxes, ad
totidem problemata, ceteris quædam
ardua, quædam verò impossibilia,
possibili & faciliore negotio
persequenda.

AD DIVVM RODOL-
PHVM II. ROMANO-
rum Imperatorem.

* * *

P R A G Æ.

Ex typographia Georgij Dacziceni.

A N N O M. D. LXXXVIII.

CENTVM, ET
VIGINTI
ARTICVLI
DE NATVRA ET

MVNDI ADVER-
SVS PERIPA-
TETICOL.

PER IOH. HENNEQVINVM NOBILEM
Parisiem, Lutetiam propositi. Sub clipeo & moderamine

IORDANI BRVNI NOLANI.
infra octavam Pentecostes, an. 1586.



Impressum Parisiis, ad Authoris instant.
1586.

From the left: Frontispiece of the 160 Articles, printed in Prague in 1588; The only copy now known of the 120 Articles (London, British Library).

It is touching how Bruno was worried about the book he was writing, rather than his own safety. His begging didn't clearly touch the traitor, who gave the Inquisition three printed books and the manuscript of some "predicates of God", which was the last chapter of the lectures published by his student, Raphael Egli, as *Summa terminorum metaphysicorum*.

The chapter concerned the "anima mundi", his priceless legacy, perhaps forever lost⁴. Probably, in that sad February 1600, while listening to his sentence, the indomitable philosopher suffered more for the condemnation to stake of his work, rather than of his physical body.

NOTE

¹Cfr. LUIGI AMABILE, *Fra Tommaso Campanella: la sua congiura, i suoi processi e la sua pazzia*, Napoli, Sir Antonio Morano, 1882, Vol. 3, pp. 44-45.

²"Opus aggressus, ut quam accuratissime absolveret, non schemata solum ipse sua manu sculpsit, sed etiam operarum se in eodem correctorem praeibit".

³See my article: *The pleasure of the dispute. Giordano Bruno's*

copy of Camoeracensis Acrotismus from Prague, BVS Marzo 2013, pp. 57-64.

⁴Cfr. GUIDO. DEL GIUDICE, *Giordano Bruno and the Rosicrucians*, 2013, pp. 6-14.