

## Heroic Enthusiasts: Spirituality and Nihilism in European Thought

Dr. Melanie J. Van Oort - Hall

The separation of philosophy from religion, but also of religion from spirituality is a recent phenomenon. In our postmodern, subject oriented civilization, oftentimes, religion is associated with ‘overbearing dogma,’ ‘authoritarianism,’ while spirituality is associated with ‘freedom,’ ‘creativity,’ ‘harmony,’ etc. Nevertheless, there is another side to spirituality in the history of European thought that rather celebrates the opposite of harmony and is more nihilistic. This more nihilistic side of spirituality is probably particular to Modernity in that it tends to celebrate the self over against the community and sometimes advocates the self’s necessary destruction or annihilation in an attempt to recreate itself – a project with a questionable ratio of success. In order to better understand the development of the rise of nihilistic spirituality in modern European thought, we will focus on the philosophical background to Giordano Bruno’s suicidal figures in *Gli eroici furori* or *The Heroic Enthusiasts*. As perhaps one of the first ‘modern’ thinkers, who attempted to re-vitalize the philosophy and religion of the Presocratic philosophers within the framework of Renaissance Neoplatonism and Hermetism, Bruno represents a new understanding of the self in relation to the *Cosmos* that by nature becomes nihilistic.

The word nihilism, which Friedrich Nietzsche characterized as the spirit of modernity, is derived from the Latin term, *nihil* or “nothing.” In *Zur Genealogie der Moral* or *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he deemed nihilism as a form of spirituality, a detail important for this paper. In his posthumously published *Will to Power*, notes he wrote around the same time he published *Genealogie* (1887), Nietzsche says that “*Radical nihilism* is the conviction of an absolute untenability of existence when it comes to the highest values one recognizes...”<sup>1</sup> Significantly for Nietzsche, nihilism is a devaluation of *this* existence. In other words, it is a *belief* in the valuelessness or meaninglessness of existence as we know it, i.e. not as we might desire it to be or as it might be otherwise.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, this is the most commonly accepted definition of nihilism. For example, Nietzsche deemed that the Christian understanding of heaven – as it had been Platonically interpreted –devalued this life (the world below) in favour of another world (the world above) as an example of nihilism. For similar reasons, he deemed Buddhism as nihilistic.

More important for our understanding of the phenomenon, he says that nihilism is a psychological state or predisposition, and this is the “*normal* condition” of humanity.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the idea of heaven, however, Nietzsche believed that Christian morality had provided an *antidote* to both practical and theoretical nihilism by providing humanity with absolute *value* and with *knowledge* of what it could deem important.<sup>4</sup> According to Nietzsche, when this value was questioned, nihilism

---

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, I, 3, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968) 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Will to Power*, I, 8, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Will to Power*, I, 23, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Will to Power*, I, 4, p. 10.

raised its head again. Firstly, nihilism arises when a meaning or a purpose is sought behind the *actual* world, but one comes to believe that this search has been in vain.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, nihilism occurs when one begins to question the unity or harmony of the world. Initially, one posits a unity underlying all that is so that one has the impression that one is connected to something higher or greater. The belief in a higher unity renders one's own individual existence valuable so that when one ceases to believe in this higher unity, one's own individual value is proportionately diminished. Thirdly, after one's own estimation in the value of the world, of others and oneself is destroyed, then, out of disappointment one begins to invent a "true world beyond." Or, one posits an exaggerated sense of importance or dignity to one's own self, which is a condition of asceticism and a denial of the material world. In *Genealogy*, Nietzsche says that the philosopher holds up asceticism as the highest and boldest form of spirituality.<sup>6</sup> However, instead of denying the value of existence as such, he rather affirms his own existence as the only existence of any worth or value, even to the extent of desiring the world's demise: "*Pereat mundus, fiat philosphia, fiat philosophus, fiam!*" or "Let the world perish, but let there be philosophy, the philosopher, me!"<sup>7</sup>

However, in the final most radical stage of nihilism, one denies one's own fabrication of a world beyond and even one's own value. In an allusion to the Renaissance scholar, Pico della mirandola's *De hominis dignitate*, he says that in the modern age "man has lost *dignity* in his own eyes to an incredible extent."<sup>8</sup> Finally, the extreme nihilist accepts "the reality of becoming as the only reality," even though this is ultimately unbearable.<sup>9</sup> Although nihilism can be expressed in various strengths or degrees, it reaches its "maximum of relative strength as a violent force of destruction – as active nihilism."<sup>10</sup> That is to say, it does not merely contemplate destruction, but actively helps in the act of destruction<sup>11</sup> and ultimately the destruction of one's own self.

Nietzsche says that disappointment in the failure of our aims to achieve what we want and our loss of faith in the categories of reason, such as, "aim," "unity" and "truth" is the cause of spiritual nihilism. For the nihilist, "existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking: the character of existence is not 'true,' is *false*. One simply lacks any reasons for

---

<sup>5</sup> *Will to Power*, I, 12, p. 12. "This meaning could have been: the 'fulfillment' of some highest ethical canon in all events, the moral world order; or the growth of love and harmony in the intercourse of beings; or the gradual approximation of a state of universal happiness; or even the development toward a state of universal annihilation. ... What all these notions have in common is that something is to be *achieved* through the process – and now one realizes that becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*."

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, II, 7, The Basic Writings of Nietzsche, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000) 544. "(Der Philosoph lächelt bei seinem anblick einem Optimum der Bedingungen höchster under kühnster Geistigkeit zu, -- )."

<sup>7</sup> *Genealogy of Morals*, II, 7, p. 544.

<sup>8</sup> *Will to Power*, I, 18, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Will to Power*, I, 12, pp. 12 – 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Will to Power*, I, 23, pp. 17-18.

<sup>11</sup> *Will to Power*, I, 24, p. 18.

convincing oneself that there is a true world.”<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that there is no true or objective world beyond, but that the nihilist no longer *believes* that there is an objective world. Because nihilism is a belief in the absolute valuelessness of the present world and humanity and even one’s self – as opposed to their affirmation --, it is also a form of spirituality.

Although nihilism is a form of spirituality that is associated with Modernity, we contend that it nevertheless has its roots in a more ancient philosophy called Hermetism or Hermeticism, which we will need to discuss here in order to make Bruno’s self-destructive spirituality understandable. It is important to point out that this form of modern spiritual nihilism originates in Hermetism, because there are acclaimed scholars (e.g. Antoine Faivre), who are under the impression that “wherever Hermes passes, religious tolerance prevails.”<sup>13</sup> To some extent in this paper, we would like to show that this is not always the case.

### **Hermetism**

In the Renaissance, the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum (CH)* were rediscovered. The *Corpus Hermeticum* is a group of more theologically oriented texts, belonging to a larger body of texts called *Hermetica*. There are other Hermetic texts, which are more occult oriented and concerned with practical matters like astrology, alchemy, formal or ceremonial magic, healing, etc.<sup>14</sup> These other texts also offer occult tools, i.e. rituals, magical formulas, knowledge of the stars, minerals, plants and their specific influences, etc., which help one to heal or save oneself.<sup>15</sup> At the highest level, saving oneself entails seeing oneself in the Mind of God, which gives one a privileged knowledge or saving gnosis. In this sense, Hermetism is an ancient Gnostic religious system.

The most important Hermetic texts were written somewhere during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, and were attributed to legendary Egyptian priest, Hermes Trismegistus, who was to have lived during the time of Moses. He was reportedly the grandson or even son of the Greek god Hermes. In 1614, Isaac Casaubon proved that the texts could have never been written during the time of Moses, but some two hundred years after the death of Jesus. Nevertheless, due to its erroneously assumed antiquity before Casaubon’s analysis, many influential Renaissance intellectuals accepted the *Hermetica* as a complementary source to traditional Christian spirituality.

Metaphysically, Hermetism is a form of ancient panpsychism or the belief that all of reality is an emanation of mind or consciousness. Hermetic reality is a holistic one based on the paradigmatic creed: *Hen to Pan* or “All is One.” Recent work by Peter Kingsley<sup>16</sup> suggests that the Hermetic Tradition became a storehouse of alternative philosophies that were maligned as ‘irrational’ by both Platonism and Aristotelianism. In this sense, Hermetism became an important conveyor of the

---

<sup>12</sup> *Will to Power*, I, 12, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> *The Eternal Hermes*, 39.

<sup>14</sup> “Introduction,” *Hermetica*, xxxv.

<sup>15</sup> *The Egyptian Hermes*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> <http://peterkingsley.org/home.cfm>. Although he is an excellent scholar, he now claims to have rediscovered the practical implications of the ancient shamanic traditions of Empedocles and Parmenides, offering weekend seminars somewhere in the mountains of North Carolina.

Empedoclean and other Presocratic religious traditions. Believing life to have evolved from matter, the so-called Presocratic or natural philosophers were also called hylozoists.<sup>17</sup> Hylozoic animism posits that matter and God (or Mind) exists co-eternally and that matter (or *hule*) is filled with this divine spirit, Mind or the World Soul (*anima mundi*). The Presocratic traditions are magical, animistic traditions that have strong connections to early Greek shamanism, what is sometimes called *iatromantism*. The *iatromantis* is also called a witchdoctor, sorcerer (φαρμακευς) or a magician. Important to our thesis is that in Antiquity, these philosophic-religious traditions were also connected to material alchemy<sup>18</sup> and the mysteries, especially those of Demeter and Persephone.<sup>19</sup>

Although Hermetism has its roots in ancient Presocratic shamanic animism, given the fact that the texts were mostly written during the second century AD, Kingsley suggests that in order to make it more philosophically acceptable, the animistic paradigm was reframed within a Neoplatonic piety and religiosity that included an intellectual ascent through the spheres that ended in the Mind of God. Due to the Neoplatonic framework, however, God was kept sufficiently at a distance and absolute identification with the adept and God was not implied. In some sense, we could even see Platonism and Aristotelianism as a reversal of the earlier Presocratic traditions. For example, unlike the belief in the descending emanation of Being from the higher world of the Ideas, for the Presocratic Empedocles existence came into being through the upwards emanation from matter, prefiguring somewhat Darwin's theory of evolution. The Empedoclean notion of the "evolution" of Being starts from the *fire* in the bowels of the earth. Like plants, human beings spring up from the creative fire, and transmigration of human souls follows an ascending order from the earth towards the realm of aether and the sun, where the gods dwell.<sup>20</sup> In a version of the legend of Empedocles' death, passed on to us from Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, the philosopher threw himself into the mouth of the volcano Etna in order to confirm his divinity.<sup>21</sup> In Antiquity, Etna was believed to be an entry

---

<sup>17</sup> Hylozoism was an ancient form of materialism, derived from the Greek words, *hyle* or "matter" and *zōē* or "life." In hylozoism, all matter is believed to be endowed with divine life or spirit, and the human being is a divine microcosm of the divine macrocosm (i.e. as *God the cosmos*), where the material macrocosm is the totality of all there is. For example, the Latin *Asclepius* says: "There was God and *hulē* (which we take as the Greek for 'matter'), and attending matter was spirit, or rather spirit was in matter, but it was not in matter as it was in god nor as the things from which the world came were in god." (*Asclepius*, 14)

<sup>18</sup> Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), see especially 372ff.

<sup>19</sup> *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic*, 354.

<sup>20</sup> See "Aëtius, *Opinions* 5.18.1 Diels," *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and the Sophists*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2000) 150.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. T1, *The First Philosophers*, 140-141. Because the passage in Diogenes Laertius is so important, we quote it here in full: "There are different accounts of his death. After telling the story about a woman who stopped breathing and how famous Empedocles became for having restored her corpse to life, Heraclides tells how once Empedocles was performing a sacrifice near Peisianax's farm, and he invited some of his friends, including Pausanias. After the feast, everyone else took themselves off to rest (either under the trees of the nearby farm or elsewhere), but Empedocles stayed in the place where he had reclined for the meal. When they got up the next day, he alone was nowhere to be found. They looked for him and questioned the slaves, who said that they had no idea where he was; but one of them said that in the middle of the night he had heard a supernaturally loud voice calling out Empedocles' name, and then, when he had got out of bed, he had seen a light in the sky and torches shining, but nothing else. His friends were amazed at what had happened, and after Pausanias went home he organized a search party. Later, however, he stopped them from trying to interfere with events,

point into the Underworld. For the natural philosopher Empedocles, who lived on the volcanic island of Sicily, the paradoxical realm of the fiery Underworld could be easily associated with the creative underworld fire or the alchemical furnace,<sup>22</sup> where lead is transmuted into gold. As we will see, whether the legend contains some degree of truth or not, the identification of suicide with divinity, when transposed to modern thinking becomes the basis for modern spiritual nihilism in the thought of Giordano Bruno.

### **Alchemy and the Modern Reinterpretation of the Hermetic Ascent**

As stated, Hermetism is a form of ancient Gnosticism or a Gnostic system of salvation, where the goal is to become conscious or to know (*gnosis*) that one has been re-born *in* the Mind of God. Re-birth in the Mind of God allowed one, therefore, to participate in divinity and knowing consciousness. Given its close affinities to Neoplatonism, Hermetic/Gnostic self-divinization was understood as an intellectual ascent. A period of mental frustration and instability would lead to an eventual intellectual breakthrough, where one had a Gnostic vision. The process was meant to ensure the immortality of the initiate. This Hermetic vision of seeing oneself *in* the Mind of God also entailed recognizing one's origin in the "heavenly" Primal Man or *Anthropos*, who in late Antiquity was understood to be the ideal form of humanity. In the Hermetic Gnostic myth, masculine *Anthropos* looked down upon feminine Nature and had intercourse with her. Humankind was understood to be a result of this cosmic sexual union.<sup>23</sup> Since in most Gnostic systems matter and sex were perceived negatively, humankind was seen as a degenerated form of the primal man, whose goal was to return to his superior or higher state.<sup>24</sup> The individual man must recognize his heavenly origin and reverse the stages of the heavenly man's fall by intellectually ascending through the spheres in ecstatic contemplation. Later *Anthropos* became associated with Aion (in Greek, "Eternity"), the alchemical solar deity of Time. In representation, Aion was depicted as the lion-headed god, the famous *deus Leontocephalus*, where a serpent coils around a man, resting its head atop of the man's head and looking as if it is about to enter his mouth. (PICTURE) The serpent is also a symbol of the alchemical *Oroboros*, or the tail-eating snake. This is a Hermetic representation of the cyclical nature of the *cosmos* that must repeatedly destroy itself in order to re-create itself. (PICTURE) Aion was also

---

suggested that prayer was the correct response to what had happened, and that they ought to sacrifice to Empedocles as though he had become a god. Hermippus, however, says that it was after Empedocles had cured a woman from Acragas called Pantheia, whom the doctors had declared to be a hopeless case, that he performed the sacrifice, and that there were almost eighty guests at the sacrificial feast. Hippobotus says that after he had got up from his couch he made his way to Mount Etna, where he leapt into the craters of fire and made himself disappear, because he wanted to confirm what people were saying about him -- that he had become a god. Later, though, according to Hippobotus, he was found out when one of his sandals was disgorged by the mountain, since he had regularly worn bronze sandals."

<sup>22</sup> Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 77. "The Underworld is a place of paradox and inversion. In particular it is the place where polar opposites exist and merge, and especially the place where the paradox of destructive force being converted into creative power is realized at its greatest intensity."

<sup>23</sup> See (CH, I, 14-15)

<sup>24</sup> "Notes," *Hermetica*, 106; *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 43.

associated with the chthonic Zeus, the chthonic solar deity Helios, but also with the Orphic god, Dionysos Zagreus. Significantly, the Orphic version of the myth of Dionysos and the Hermetic myth of the fall of *Anthropos* have structural similarities.

In the Orphic myth of Dionysos Zagreus, he was known as the divine child of Zeus, who was shred to bits by his evil uncles, the Titans. According to the myth, after the birth of Dionysos, Zeus' jealous wife, Hera, prompted the child's uncles, the Titans, to murder and dismember him, leaving only his heart intact. This was subsequently brought to Zeus by Athena, who then either swallowed it or gave to Semele, his mortal lover. Semele provided Dionysos with a second womb, before she herself was tricked by jealous Hera and accidentally incinerated by her lover Zeus.<sup>25</sup> Zeus saved the child Dionysos from the fire and stored him in his "thigh," until it was time for his birth. The Orphics believed that humanity had a double-nature: the bloodthirstiness of the Titans and the divinity of Dionysos, whom the Titans had murdered and then cannibalized.<sup>26</sup> Their goal was to purge their souls of their heavier Titanic nature, so that they could be released from the cycle of rebirth and return to the pure and lighter realm of *aither*, beyond the sublunary world of the impure *aer* or atmosphere. This was understood to be the highest level on the Presocratic scale of Being. Nevertheless, the way to the realm of aither was a paradoxical one. In order to get there, one must first return to the source of Life, the Underworld Fire, in order to be purged of the heavier nature, allowing the lighter, more divine particles to float upwards. This return to fire was associated with alchemy.

Although the origins remain unclear, it is generally accepted that in Antiquity alchemy and the Mysteries were connected. Since only vague second-hand accounts of the secret rituals of the Mysteries exist, we can only speculate about their content. The initiate probably experienced a physical decent into darkness (e.g. into a darkened cave or hole) that entailed some kind of frightening experience or representation, implying his symbolic death and dismemberment. Thereafter, the initiate was allowed to re-ascend into the light, accompanied by the relief and ecstasy that he had survived the ordeal. It is often supposed that this ritual imitated the experience of the suffering of the gods, for example, the murder and dismemberment of the divine child Dionysos.<sup>27</sup> Given time constraints, we cannot go into a history of alchemy here, however, we emphasize that the development of the vocabulary and the structure of ancient alchemy probably grew out of the experience of the ancient Mystery Cults, but is also very closely connected to the Gnostic tradition of ancient Hermetism.

Ancient alchemy is primarily concerned the transformation of base metals into gold or silver, however, in the Renaissance and afterwards, what was once material alchemy became spiritualized. Instead of applying the structural principles of alchemy to an object outside himself, the Renaissance

---

<sup>25</sup> Oskar Seyffert, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature, and Art* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1995) 192.

<sup>26</sup> *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, 120. The Orphic version of the story claims that discovering the crime of his brothers, the Titans, Zeus "zapped" them with his Thunderbolt and *burned them alive*. From their ashes, humanity arose, containing the evil of the Titans and the "good" or "divinity" of Dionysos, whom they had consumed.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) 96.

alchemist began to apply the principles to himself or to his own interior, subjective state. Spiritual alchemy was meant to sublimate or transfigure a degenerated spiritual condition into a sublime one. Just as base materials went through a process of dissolution and were reduced to chaotic *prima materia* (the *nigredo* or black phase),<sup>28</sup> so too must the alchemist go through a period of spiritual or emotional dissolution. This would supposedly lead to his purification (the *albedo* or white phase) and eventually to self-divinization (the *rubedo* or red phase), what alchemists called “gold” or the “Philosopher’s Stone.” He became aware that the processes to which the ancient alchemist subjected base metals (in material alchemy) were probably structurally analogous to the processes that the adept of the ancient Mysteries was meant to go through in order to experience divine “re-birth” and assurance of immortality.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Alchemical Becoming of Aion**

It is important to understand that already in the Renaissance, with the acceptance of Hermetic panpsychic animism, the understanding of Nature and God had also become increasingly psychological.<sup>30</sup> For those who accepted the Hermetic holism, a cyclical understanding of time gradually came to replace a linear one and God was collapsed into Nature.<sup>31</sup> With the broader reception of, amongst other things, Nominalism, the Neoplatonic framework that was used to make an intellectual ascent became redundant and another technique was needed to “become Aion.” This was found in the practice of psychological alchemy, which we will discuss more in depth later on. At this juncture, it is important to distinguish spiritual from psychological alchemy in that the symbolic function that matter plays in spiritual alchemy is reduced or collapsed into the object. This means that destruction or dissolution is no longer understood symbolically, but is temporalized and potentially acted out in real life, namely, in induced madness or even suicide. As we will see more clearly when discussing Bruno, this is the place where spirituality becomes potentially nihilistic and suicidal.

Another name for this self-divinizing process was called sublimation, a word now commonly used in psychology. In its alchemical sense, sublimation refers to the process of distillation, or the heating and cooling of a substance, as in the distillation of alcohol. As the heated substance cools off, the purified vapors or moisture can be trapped in a separate beaker. Therefore, sublimation is the process of purification by fire that a more base material must go through in order to achieve the Philosopher’s Stone or divinity. Sublimation is also a synonym for the self-divinizing effects of the *opus alchymicum* that necessarily begins with the *coniunctio* or the *nigredo*. This is the initial phase of the *opus*, where the alchemist attempts to return to the chaos of the *prima materia*, reducing his psychic state to ashes, through the conscious instigation of some type of emotional or psychological

---

<sup>28</sup> Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 136.

<sup>29</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, trans. Stephen Corrin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) 149ff.

<sup>30</sup> Harry Parry, *Thelxis: Magic and Imagination in Greek Myth and Poetry* (Lanham: University of America Press, 1992) 96.

<sup>31</sup> Karen-Claire Voss, “Spiritual Alchemy: Interpreting Representative Texts and Images,” *Gnosis and Hermeticism From Antiquity to Modern Times*, eds. Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany: State University of New York, 1998) 154.

trauma. Distillation is, therefore, analogous to the descent of the soul (or personality or mood) into the fiery furnaces of subterranean depths or induced trauma/depression, which supposedly purifies it. Sublimation is analogous to the soul's (or personality or mood) ascent and its transfiguration into a supposedly higher or superior state.<sup>32</sup>

To accomplish the alchemical process, usually, the alchemist enlisted the help of a magical assistant (*parhedros, agathodaemon*) or "divine other." The preferred assistant was not unsurprisingly, Aion, the God of Time and Eternity. The alchemical Mercurius or Aion united the opposites within himself<sup>33</sup> and was his curious *Doppelgänger*, or psychic double projection. Although in the beginning of the process, Mercurius or Aion was perceived to be outside of himself, in the end, the alchemist came to believe that the god was himself or that he contained the god or divinity within himself. In accepting and uniting both the good and evil within himself, the alchemist was thought to be imitating Nature/God, which was equated with the Divine Mind. The psychological alchemist accepted actual psychic self-destruction as a necessary step in the process of self-divinization, because Nature, which he deemed to be a product of cosmic thought – and of which he was its microcosm -- tends to destroy itself and then regenerate itself. Hence, instead of performing experiments on metals and then associating the results to analogous inner states, modern psychological alchemists started to experiment on their own minds as well as their material bodies in order to reform their degenerate personalities into divine ones. One such psychological alchemist was Giordano Bruno.

### **Giordano Bruno**

Today, Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) is a rather obscure figure. On the seventeenth of February 1600, on the orders of the Inquisition, Bruno was burned at the stake on the Campo dei Fiori in Rome.<sup>34</sup> Although in the Enlightenment, Bruno became known as the 'martyr of science' in opposition to organized religion, especially in opposition to Roman Catholicism, he is important for understanding the rise and even popularity of nihilistic spirituality in the West.

Unlike many of the Hermetic thinkers of the Renaissance, perceiving the consequences of Nominalism -- a philosophical theory that denies that universal forms or ideas exist in a separate realm other than human thought -- and detecting the underlying Presocratic strata within the *Corpus*, Bruno not only rejected traditional Christian theism, but was also one of the first Renaissance thinkers to reject the Neoplatonic religious intellectual ascent within which Hermetic philosophy up until that

---

<sup>32</sup> A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery, 56. Lyndy Abraham explains that metaphysically speaking: The descent of the soul into dense matter is seen as a part of the necessary experience which leads to the ascent into full 'philosophical' consciousness. The paradox that the way down is the way up ....

<sup>33</sup> Voss, "Spiritual Alchemy: Interpreting Representative Texts and Images," 154.

<sup>34</sup> Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964) 349-355. The trial concerned his pantheism (i.e. God is the infinite universe), his assertion that the stars are beings and that infinite worlds like ours exist, containing beings far superior to ours, his theories on the divinity of Jesus, the nature of the Holy Trinity and the doctrine of transubstantiation, but did not concern his theory of heliocentricity. For example, Jesus was not the second person of the Holy Trinity, while he did consider the *anima mundi* to be the Third Person. He also believed that Christians had stolen the Egyptian ankh as a sacred symbol.



time had been constructed.<sup>35</sup> For example, in *The Ash Wednesday Supper* or *La cena de la ceneri* (1584/5), he claims that he is carrying on their line.<sup>36</sup> He even envisions the establishment of a new Hermetic religion that included a Hermetic Eucharist, which he intended to found upon the ashes of his own sacrificial body.<sup>37</sup> Rejecting the Ptolemaic geocentric cosmology, Bruno accepted the Empedoclean notion of the emanation of Being out of matter. As a substitute, he posited an infinite universe filled with an infinite number of diverse peoples and worlds. However, his theory of infinite worlds was not something he deduced from Nicholas Copernicus' (1473-1543) theory of a heliocentric universe, which he had expounded in his *De revolutionibus orbium cœlestium* or *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*,<sup>38</sup> but from his re-thinking of Presocratic<sup>39</sup> and especially Empedoclean cosmology, with its doctrine of ascendant emanation.<sup>40</sup> We might say that Bruno attempted to reverse the Platonic "reversal" and return to a more magical and primitive understanding of religion that included his own innovations.

Bruno's cosmological doctrine of infinite worlds is a key to understanding his religious doctrine, because after his reversal of the Platonic scale, the "worlds" provide a special "place" to where the *magus* can ascend or progress in the next level of re-birth. He no longer needs the Platonic spheres, but can advance to a planet or star. Although the intellectual Neoplatonic framework had collapsed, still, given Bruno's belief in hylozoic panpsychism, ascent to higher worlds in subsequent rebirths remains an act of thought, because for him, reality is thought. For Bruno, although divinity, through the world-soul (*anima mundi*), is present in each particle of matter,<sup>41</sup> unlike the rest of humanity, the human *magus* or magician represents the pinnacle of divinity and divine consciousness. The role of the Hermetic *magus*, within the impersonal infinity, is to distinguish himself from the herd of humanity and progress, through ascendant metempsychosis, into ever higher worlds.

---

<sup>35</sup> "Introduction," Giordano Bruno's, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, 7. In his debate with Oxford divines (ca. 1584), Bruno clearly stated his preference for Presocratic philosophers, like Pythagoras and Anaxagoras, who he believed were superior to the Aristotle of the schoolmen.

<sup>36</sup> *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, 94-95. As Bruno's Teofilo expounds: "Well, Master Prudenziio, if this vulgar opinion of yours is as true as it is old, certainly it was false when it was new! Before this philosophy which suits your brain arose, there existed the philosophy of the Chaldeans, of the Egyptians, of the magi, of the Orphists, of the Pythagoreans and of others who spring readily to mind [and] who better suit our head; from them first rebelled frivolous and empty logicians and mathematicians who were not so much enemies of Antiquity as strangers to the Truth. Let us put aside, then, the question of the old and the new, seeing that there is no new thing which cannot be old and there is no old thing which cannot be new, as your Aristotle rightly noted."

<sup>37</sup> See *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, 161.

<sup>38</sup> Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy*, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1963, 1993) 283.

<sup>39</sup> *The Cosmology of Giordano Bruno*, 42.

<sup>40</sup> *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, 136; *The History of Materialism*, 232.

<sup>41</sup> *Cause, Principle and Unity*, 45. "The world soul, therefore, is the formal constitutive principle of the universe and all it contains. I say that if life is found in all things, the soul is necessarily the form of all things, that form presides everywhere over matter and governs the composites, determines the composition and cohesion of the parts. That is why it seems that such form is no less enduring than matter. I conceive this form in such a way that there is only one for all things. But according to the diversity of the dispositions of matter and the capacity of the material principles, both active and passive, it happens to produce different configurations and realize different potentialities, bringing forth sometimes non-sensitive life, sometimes sensitive but not intellectual life, sometimes seeming to suppress or restrain all outside signs of life, because of the incapacity or some other characteristic of matter."

It is significant that the renowned historian Frances Yates believed that Bruno's goal was not only to found a new Hermetic religion, but also to realize himself as Aion, the god who contained all of "the divine powers within him."<sup>42</sup> As a psychological alchemist, who had potentially temporalized the process in and on himself, Bruno thought that by separating himself from the lower levels of existence, i.e. from what he understood as the herd or from more banal sediments of humanity, through a process of psychological 'heating' or sublimation – a process structurally analogous to material alchemy --, Bruno believed that he could make himself into a god or Aion.<sup>43</sup> Since Bruno saw himself as a messianic figure, who would found a new iatromantic or magical religion, he needed to devise a system to achieve this goal, but also be able to transmit the process to his followers. Now we will attempt to explain how it functioned.

### **Talismanic Literature**

As a Gnostic system of salvation, the monist-animist philosophical framework propagated in the *Corpus Hermeticum* allowed one to perform something called talismanic magic, which is based on the law of correspondences. A talisman is a magical object or image (either pictorial, tonal or verbal)<sup>44</sup> that is thought to bring good luck or special powers to the person wearing or using it.<sup>45</sup> Correspondences originate in the analogy that the human person is a microcosm of the macrocosm and that nature is *sympathetic*. In magic, *sympathia* is the belief that similar things in nature can affect each other – like affects like. Since in the Hermetic holistic paradigm All is One and the One is a Divine Mind, it follows that the individual human mind should correspond to the Divine Mind, as a microcosm of the macrocosm. Hence, images of a 'cosmic' nature should affect the human mind, but also proportionally 'God,' since God is understood within the context of panpsychic monism.

In her monumental, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Frances Yates discussed the talismanic nature of much Renaissance music, poetry, literature and visual art, which was created to provide the Hermetic adept access to both celestial and chthonic cosmic powers. For the Renaissance magician, talismanic art was not just to be looked at, or music heard, but "reflected on and remembered within."<sup>46</sup> Memory and the imagination became instruments to increase one's power. Memory was used to store phantasms or appearances arising from the imagination,<sup>47</sup> which were later evoked through erotic desire. The magician became a magical operator, because he was able to effectively manipulate his own and others' desires, or will, through the stimulation of the images he

---

<sup>42</sup> *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 199.

<sup>43</sup> "Introduction," Giordano Bruno's, *Cause, Principle and Unity: and Essays on Magic*, xxi.

<sup>44</sup> Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1966, 1992) 42. Yates points out in *The Art of Memory*, as early as the fifth century BC, the Presocratic Simonides of Ceos (ca. 556 – 468 BC) had already developed a theory that associated poetry to painting. This was "later succinctly summed up by Horace in his famous phrase *ut pictura poesis*. 'Simonides,' says Plutarch, 'called painting silent poetry and poetry painting that speaks; for the actions which painters depict as they are being performed, words describe after they are done.'"

<sup>45</sup> *The Dictionary of the Esoteric*, 300.

<sup>46</sup> *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 76.

<sup>47</sup> *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, 32.

created or suggested to the imagination, which had been stored in the memory. All of these ‘arts,’ therefore, could be created with the intention of transmitting talismanic images, which were suggested to imagination and, hence, were able to transform the desires of the recipients during contemplation for either good or evil.<sup>48</sup> The manipulation of desire or the will became the basis of modern magic and is to some degree how modern advertising functions. The Renaissance magician used talismanic images (be they auditory, pictorial or verbal) to transfigure his limited human mind to mirror or correspond to that of the *cosmos*, which was increasingly understood as the Totality or the All.<sup>49</sup> All the magician had to do was to look within himself. This is because he believed that the knowledge of his own being was proportionately analogous to knowledge of the *cosmos*, or even to the very Mind of God. In operating on himself, he could consider himself to be the architect of his own redemption as well as the savior of the entire world.<sup>50</sup>

In the Renaissance, it is clear however that under the influence of Hermetism, the microcosm/macrocosm analogy, which had been interpreted theistically, came under pressure and began to collapse. The redemption of both nature and humanity came to be increasingly understood as a sole human responsibility. Some Renaissance men began to interpret redemption as a “magical act on the part of man rather than a forensic act on God’s part.”<sup>51</sup> Art, including literature and poetry, became to be seen less as a gift from God and more as man’s tool to achieve human salvation through talismanic magic.

Now we are able to see how Bruno might have perceived his own literary work as a redemptive magical tool or talisman to become “Aion,” albeit outside of the former Neoplatonic framework within which it had been originally practiced. Bruno would have imprinted on his own talismanic psychological images on his magical memory and, then, transmitted these to his ‘followers’ for the purpose of becoming ‘Aion.’<sup>52</sup> As we will see, the verbal images developed by Bruno are not only structurally analogous to the Orphic myth of Dionysos, but also helped his ‘disciples’ to go through a similar process of psychological fragmentation or destruction and, then, hopefully sublimation or self-divinization. This process is no longer that of spiritual alchemy, but of

---

<sup>48</sup> *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 104, 333. Yates suggests that many of the great works of Renaissance art, for example from Botticelli or Raphael, might have been painted for this purpose.

<sup>49</sup> *Spirituality and the Occult*, 34.

<sup>50</sup> *Spirituality and the Occult*, 24-25. As Gibbons says: The underlying attitude is autoplasmic, seeking control over the world by ‘self-manipulation’ instead of ‘by operating directly on the external environment’. Cosmic redemption was simply the most general instance of one of the basic laws of magic, the law of contiguity [i.e. correspondences]. In its simplest form, this law suggests that the part contains the whole. It follows from this that an act performed on one part of an organism will produce effects on the whole. Man is a part of the cosmos: an operation performed on or in him will therefore affect the entire universe. Since the great world around us is simply a reflection of the little world within, changes in the spiritual state of man are accompanied by changes in the physical state of the universe.

<sup>51</sup> *Spirituality and the Occult*, 34.

<sup>52</sup> *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 192. Yates also asserts that the Brunian contemplation is executed by imprinting “the archetypal, or magically activated, images on the memory. By using magical or talismanic images as memory-images, the *Magus* hoped to acquire universal knowledge, and also powers, obtaining through the magical organization of the imagination a magically powerful personality, tuned in, as it were, to the powers of the cosmos.”

temporalized psychological alchemy, where the earlier symbolic function that material alchemy played in spiritual alchemy has been reduced. Namely, the idea that the human being is a microcosmos of the macrocosmos is collapsed onto itself, giving the impression to the adept that he or she is literally the incarnation of the cosmic Mind of God. One no longer sees oneself *in* the Mind of God, but *as* the Mind of God. Hence, Bruno's innovation in the original Hermetic process can lead to a psychological disposition we call panenanthropism, or the individual human being is the All. Panenanthropism developed out of the ancient idea that the human person is a microcosm of the macrocosm. However, when the microcosm/macrocosm idea is understood within a pantheist panpsychic worldview, so that the human person is seen to be the microtheos of the macrotheos, then, eventually the macrocosmic All can also be collapsed into the microcosmic ego and then reversed.

### **Heroic Enthusiasm**

As suggested, Bruno's *Gli eroici furori* or the *Heroic Enthusiasts* provides the basis for the necessary imagery to print on his magical memory and perform his form of nihilistic psychological alchemy.<sup>53</sup> Since our time is limited, we will provide a brief description here. *Gli eroici furori* is a series of dialogues in two parts. In the first part, Bruno provides his suicidal imagery he deemed necessary to descend into the chaotic *prima material* of his mind and perform a *coniunctio oppositorum* or conjunction of opposites. This occurs when two contradictory states are opposed to each other in order to bring about a third, supposedly higher state. In this case, Bruno wanted to confront what he considered to be the weak – for example, Christian – state of the reader with more brutal or nihilistic images, for example, the murder or suicide and subsequent dismemberment of certain literary figures. In doing this, he believed that he could create a stronger mental condition in the reader as well as himself, should they survive it.

The first image in the series is the figure Actaeon; a figure who greatly resembles the Orphic god, Dionysos Zagreus or the founder of the Orphics, Orpheus himself. In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells the story of the young hunter Actaeon who, as a devotee of Diana/Artemis, stumbled upon the virgin goddess bathing in a spring. Enraged and as a punishment for his indiscretion, Diana turns him into one of her favorite sacred stags. Actaeon's hunting dogs mistake their master for prey and pursue him. When they finally catch him in the chase, they shred him to bits and devour him. In Ovid's version, the poet questions the goddess's sense of justice;<sup>54</sup> however, in Bruno's version, no such questions

---

<sup>53</sup> Annie Besant, *Giordano Bruno: Theosophy's Apostle in the Sixteenth Century and The Story of Giordano Bruno* (Adyar: The Theosophist Office, 1913) 11. For example, Annie Besant, former leader of the Theosophical Society and esotericist claimed that *De la causa* and *Del infinito universo e mondi* were the "foundations of the whole edifice of our philosophy" and "*Gli Heroici Furori*," contained "the application of his philosophy to conduct and the description of his ideal."

<sup>54</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 57-58. "He fled where often he'd followed in pursuit, Fled his own folk, for shame! He longed to shout 'I am Actaeon, look, I am your master!' Words failed his will; their baying filled the sky. Blackhair bit first, a wound deep in his haunch; Next Killer; Climber fastened on his shoulder. These started late but cut across the hills and gained a lead. They held their master down till the whole pack, united, sank their teeth into his flesh. He gave a wailing scream, not

arise. He re-interprets Actaeon's dogs as the hunter's thoughts and his murder as a willing suicide.<sup>55</sup> For Bruno, to become the sacrificial animal of the deity is the preferred way that the *magus* unites with his object of desire: *Deus sive Natura*. The hunter, who pursues divine wisdom or *gnosis*, realizes that the only way to grasp the object, which he has turned into his prey, is to become the prey himself.<sup>56</sup> Instead of recoiling from his fate, he recognizes the sameness or *sympathia* of his identity with divine Nature.

Directly following the Actaeon section, in *Eorici* I, 5, Bruno develops another suicidal talismanic text that concerns the desire of the moth or butterfly to destroy itself. According to Bruno's character Tansillo, the moth becomes fascinated by the splendour of the flame and goes willingly to meet its death.<sup>57</sup> After the figure of the suicidal moth, the character Cicada questions Tansillo whether one should "desire to bear shocks in order to prove" one's strength. Bruno provides examples of other semi-historic and legendary heroes, probably taken from Livy's (59 BC- 17 AD) *Ab urbe condita*,<sup>58</sup> his patriotic *annales* of the founding of the city of Rome. Bruno sets up these suicidal heroes as new mimetic models, or perhaps as "hermetic saints," whose lives his disciples should emulate.

First, he mentions the death of the Roman soldier, Marcus Atilius Regulus, whose legend has him returning to Carthage after the First Punic Wars (250 BC) to face torture and death rather than convince the Romans to surrender. Next on the list of Bruno's immortals is the Roman noblewoman Lucretia, who was raped by the last Etruscan prince. In defense of her honour, she impaled herself, inflaming her husband and father to avenge the crime by inciting mobs to overturn the Etruscan monarchy and establish the Roman Republic.<sup>59</sup> After Lucretia, Bruno lists the philosophers Socrates

---

human, yet a sound no stag could voice... But his friends with their glad usual shouts cheered on the pack, not knowing what they did, and looked around to find Actaeon; each louder than the rest calling Actaeon, as though he were not there; And blamed his absence and his sloth that missed the excitement of the kill. Hearing his name he turned his head. Would that he were indeed Absent! But he was there. Would that he watched, not felt, the hounds' (his hounds') fierce savagery! Now they are all around him, tearing deep their master's flesh, the stag that is no stag; And not until so many countless wounds had drained away his lifeblood, was the wrath, it's said, of chaste Diana satisfied. As the tale spread views varied; some believed Diana's violence unjust; some praised it, as proper to her chaste virginity. Both sides found reason for their point of view."

<sup>55</sup> *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, 93.

<sup>56</sup> *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, 90ff.

<sup>57</sup> *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, I, 130. Tansillo later confirms that the moth knowingly destroys itself: "So sweet, so grateful, so divine, as these hard bonds, this death of mine, to which by fate, by will, by nature I incline." And if one thinks that should the moth understand its destiny, it would avoid its own destruction, Bruno refutes them. For the heroic enthusiast: "It is no less pleasing to perish in the flames of amorous ardour than to be drawn to the contemplation of the beauty of that rare splendour, under which, by natural inclination, by voluntary election, and by disposition of fate, he labours, serves, and dies more gaily, more resolutely, and more courageously than under whatsoever other pleasure which may offer itself to the heart, liberty which may be conceded to the spirit, and life which may be discovered in the soul."

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Lintott, "Roman Historians," *The Oxford History of the Classical World*, eds. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 636. Of Livy's 142 books, only thirty-five are extant.

<sup>59</sup> Livy, *The Rise of Rome: Books 1-5*, trans. T. J. Luce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 66-68. Livy tells her story in Book One, chapters 57-58. After a night of drinking and carousing with the last Etruscan king's son, Sextus Targuinius Superbus, Lucretia's husband Collatinus enthusiastically brags about his wife's beauty. He and the prince ride off to confirm the boast, where they find Lucretia chastely spinning. However, Sextus "was seized by the evil desire to debauch her, spurred on as he was by her beauty and redoubtable chastity." The prince later returns in stealth and rapes her. Totally distraught, she calls for her father and husband to tell them

and Anaxagoras. After being imprisoned for impiety and corrupting the youth, Socrates willingly drank poison. Anaxagoras willingly starved himself to death, becoming perhaps the first famous hunger striker. Last on the list are the young Horatius Cocles<sup>60</sup> and Gaius Mucius Scaevola.<sup>61</sup> Both supposedly faced death while defending Rome against the Etruscans.

From Livy's story, it is important to highlight the fact that the Etruscans intended to use Gaius Mucius as a human sacrifice, probably to the god of war. Secondly, the potential victim did not protest his destiny, but rather accepted it and attempted to show the king that he – as well as scores of other Roman youth – were *willing to die* as holocausts. In *Eroici*, Tansillo suggests that the divinity or heroic status of these figures is attributed to their ability to “bear” blows and face physical torments with divine indifference. They are ready to die, to kill others or to kill themselves for their cause.

Directly after presenting these suicidal heroes, Tansillo then makes a clear allusion to Empedocles, “Look at this other who bears the device of an anvil and a hammer, round which is the legend ‘Ab Aetna!’”<sup>62</sup> Without mentioning his name, Bruno compares Empedocles to the smith god, Vulcan, whose forge was said to be Etna. However, Bruno's Tansillo claims that he, i.e. Bruno, is a better smith than Vulcan, meaning a better philosopher than Empedocles. He will be able to bear his martyrdom and create a harmony out of it – even before he is dead! Bruno then says that Love, perceiving the divinity “near us, in us and with us,” punishes the aspiring god for his shortcomings. In the same way that Vulcan hits heated metal with his hammer, the fire and blows that the heroic

---

about the crime. They impress upon her that since “her mind was not willing,” she herself is absolved from any guilt. Still, she drives a dagger into her own breast to inflame them to avenge her death. Urged on by Brutus, the three incite the mobs to overturn the monarchy and establish the first Roman Republic, which banishes the royal family.

<sup>60</sup> *The Rise of Rome*, 81. In Book 2, chapter 10, Livy provides the account of Cocles, who single-handedly fought off the Etruscan army from a major bridge across the Tiber. As his comrades begin to flee, he rallied them to destroy the bridge in order to halt the Etruscan advance. Livy develops a dramatic scene where Cocles stares down the enemy army: “Then his defiant gaze swept menacingly over the assembled Etruscan leadership, he challenged them by name and taunted them as a group: Pawns of arrogant kings and careless of their own liberty, they had come to attack that of others.” After a bit more fighting, once the connection to land had been destroyed, under a rain of spears, he jumped into the Tiber and supposedly swam to safety, although other accounts point towards his death. The people of Rome immortalized Cocles by awarding him with a statue and land.

<sup>61</sup> *The Rise of Rome*, 83-84. In Book 2, chapter 12, Livy presents the legend of Scaevola, or “lefty,” as another example of courage in the face of death. The youth, fed up with the siege of Rome by the Etruscan army, snuck into the Etruscan camp to kill the king, Porsenna. He was caught, however, after killing the wrong man. Livy puts the following rousing speech into Scaevola's mouth. “I am Gaius Mucius, a citizen of Rome. I came here as an enemy to kill my enemy, and I am as ready to die as I am to kill.” According to Livy, the king was so struck with fear that he ordered Mucius to be cast into the flames burning on the sacrificial altar. To show his fearlessness in the face of death, the youth placed his right hand into the fire. Showing no visible signs of pain, he replied: “Look upon me ... and realize what a paltry thing the body is for those who seek great glory.” Mucius' fearlessness impressed the king so greatly that he released him. Although the figure Scaevola might have existed, Livy most probably wrote many of these suicidal accounts in order to spur the Roman citizens on to sacrifice themselves for the Roman dictatorship, after the fall of the Republic.

<sup>62</sup> *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, Part I, 151. Bruno then dedicates a sonnet to his hero: “Not now to my Sicilian mount I turn,/Where thou dost forge the thunderbolts of Jove,/Here, rugged Vulcan will I stay;/Here, where a prouder giant moves,/Who burns and rages against Heaven in vain,/Soliciting new cares and divers trails./ Here is a better smith and Mongibello/A better anvil, better forge and hammer;/ For here behold a bosom full of sighs,/Which blows the furnace and the fire revives./The soul nor yields nor bends to these rough blows,/But bears exulting this long martyrdom,/And makes a harmony from those sharp pangs.”

enthusiast endures – from his own self-punishment -- is a necessary part of the purifying process. Besides Vulcan, there is another god in every man. The goal of the *magus* is to discover who he is.<sup>63</sup> The method of discovery is of course an alchemical one. As in sublimation, in order to separate the pure vapors from banal impurities, Bruno's heroic enthusiast must go through the process of mental distillation, or *solve et coagula*, in order to become conscious of the manifestation of god that he already is.<sup>64</sup> One becomes conscious of one's divinity by willing and knowingly destroying one's mental composition by either inducing depression or madness.

Later, in *Eroici*, Part II, Bruno continues to hold Empedocles up as an example to be followed, but also to be transcended. While discussing the ascent of the soul towards the intellect, he presents perfection, the goal of contemplation, as a return to the origin. For Empedocles, that was the creative underworld fire. With our knowledge of the alchemical process as well as the importance of Empedocles for alchemists, we believe that Bruno is describing the path of a *coniunctio oppositorum* in and even on himself. That is, according to the Empedoclean legend, Empedocles really jumped into the mouth of the volcano Etna. Therefore, Bruno is proposing something perfectly logical for a temporal alchemist in the Empedoclean tradition: those who want to go forward must go backwards or return to the subterranean origin of the *creative Underworld fire*. Those who want to re-create themselves must be willing to destroy themselves, preferably by 'divine' fire. Many questions can be raised, but given Bruno's 'faith' and desire for divinity through fire, it is altogether possible that Bruno was happy to be burned at the stake, but this is not a question we can answer here.

### **Conclusions:**

Although Bruno himself is an obscure figure, his philosophy has left its indelible mark on Modern thought. According to the philosopher, Louis Dupré many important modern philosophers were indebted to Bruno's thought,<sup>65</sup> amongst others, Spinoza, Leibniz, Jacobi, Hegel, Schelling. By the nineteenth century, Bruno's ideas had become, albeit covertly, well integrated into European intellectual life that looked far less to traditional theistic Christianity for inspiration.<sup>66</sup>

As the Renaissance progressed and developed into the initial stages of Modernity, the belief in divine transcendence – whether this was a Platonic or a traditional Christian one -- came under

---

<sup>63</sup> *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, Part II, 152. "I say there is this smith Vulcan, and as there is no man that has not a god within him, so there is no lover that has not a god within him, and no lover within whom this god is not. Most certainly there is a god in every man, but what god it is in each one is not so easy to know."

<sup>64</sup> *The Heroic Enthusiasts*, Part II, 153. Bruno himself says: Thus the soul striving to recover its natural beauty seeks to purify itself, to heal itself, and to reform itself, and to this end it uses fire, because, being like gold, mixed with earth and crude, with a certain rigour it tries to liberate itself from defilement, and this result is obtained when the intellect, the real smith of Jove, puts itself to the work and causes an active exercise of the intellectual powers.

<sup>65</sup> Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 63-64.

<sup>66</sup> *The Great Chain of Being*, 249; *A History of Philosophy: Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy*, vol. 3, 262.

pressure.<sup>67</sup> The collapse of transcendence as well as the collapse of the universal into the individual reached a climax in the thought of Giordano Bruno. Unlike other earlier Renaissance *magi* and alchemists, Bruno no longer attempted to reconcile his holistic Hermetic philosophy with traditional Christianity, which affirmed a world sustained by a personal Creator, who is concerned with the world, but not equal to the world. Bruno affirmed an impersonal panpsychic infinity that not only corresponded to – based on the microcosm/macrocosm analogy – but was even equivalent to the human *magus*, Bruno. In his system, salvation is a form of self-divinization and is attained by realizing one's equality with the impersonal Cosmos. One does this through a series of psychological exercises, which are structurally analogous to material alchemy, namely, imagining the destruction and then reconstruction of oneself into the alchemical solar deity Aion. Thereafter, the Hermetic adept no longer sees himself *in* the Mind of God as a participant of God, but sees himself *as* the 'God'.

When the microcosmos/macrocosmos analogy is collapsed onto itself within a pantheistic or panentheistic framework, the former practice of spiritual alchemy not only becomes psychologized but also temporalized. That is, the practitioner can start to believe that he or she is literally the incarnation of the Mind of God or the *anima mundi*, who must, like nature, physically or materially destroy itself in order to recreate or regenerate itself.

Bruno's philosophy represents a new understanding of the self in relation to the *cosmos* that by nature – given its assent to panpsychism and dependence upon the processes of psychological alchemy to achieve a higher state -- becomes nihilistic. This is because, even though Bruno anticipates reincarnations into ever higher forms in worlds beyond, he devalues *this* life to the extent that he is willing to destroy it. Nietzsche..... Bruno's goal of becoming conscious of the divinity within himself, namely, his innovative alchemical interpretation of becoming Aion, introduced a conscious Will to Destruction in modern western thought that we are only now beginning to fully understand.

Dr. Melanie J. van Oort – Hall  
Keulen, Bodenshofweg 5  
50858 Köln – Junkersdorf  
Duitsland  
49- 221 – 941 4427

---

<sup>67</sup> Although we did not figure this into our study, we cannot underestimate the effect that the development and acceptance of Nominalism had on the European psyche. The study of Nominalism on Hermeticists and the possible influence of some form of Hermetism on Nominalists like William of Ockham would be helpful.