

# The Invention of Solitude: Giordano Bruno's Self-Presentation in Speech, Works and Trial

Leen Spruit

## Abstract

*The paper looks at Giordano Bruno's self-representation and whether or not this portrayal played a role in his death sentence. The author takes into account Bruno's first published extensive self-representation, how he represented himself to those he met in France, England, and Germany and how he was depicted by his cellmates and inquisitors in Italy. In all occasions Bruno appeared extremely self-confident as he defended his views, justified his career and ultimately struggled to save his life. His misinterpretation of the epoch in which he lived led to his execution on February 17, 1600 in Rome.*

## Keywords

Giordano Bruno,  
Inquisition,  
Renaissance philosophy

Giordano Bruno frequently talked about himself and presented his philosophical ideas: during conversations with persons he met on his way through Europe, in his published works and, finally, during his trial in Venice and Rome, speaking both to cellmates and inquisitors. It goes without saying that these self-presentations differ essentially as to occasion, circumstances and aim. His talks to librarians in Paris and Venice before his arrest shows a proud and self-secure personality, but they also reveal a profound loneliness. In presentations in printed works Bruno boasts his mission of renovation in those turbulent days. With haughty rhetoric he portrays himself as the sole bearer of enlightenment and wisdom, and anyone who fails to comprehend (and admire) him, is both a pedant and an enemy of truth.<sup>1</sup> In effect, Bruno had a talent for rubbing his contemporaries the wrong way.<sup>2</sup> Even a cursory analysis of the documentary evidence is sufficient to demonstrate that English, French, German and Italian perceptions of Bruno were shaped by his behaviour more than by the merits of his philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

In conversations with his cellmates in Venice and Rome he generally figures as a-religious and ranting, cutting up rough directly, deeply despising Christian faith and its symbols. By contrast, in his depositions to the inquisitors he fiercely denied accusations he considered as vulgar, trivial or

<sup>1</sup> Salient cases in point are in the letter to the vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford in Bruno, *Explicatio triginta sigillorum* (London 1583); Bruno, *Ash Wednesday Supper (La cena de le ceneri)*, London 1584; Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast (Spaccio de la bestia trionfante)*, London 1584 and Bruno, *Oratio valedictoria* (Wittenberg [1588]).

<sup>2</sup> See Feingold, 'Giordano Bruno'.

<sup>3</sup> The most colourful was George Abbot's description: "that Italian Didapper, who intituled himself [...] *Philotheus Iordanus Brunus Nolanus, magis elaborata Theologia Doctor & c.*, with a name longer then his body". See McNulty, 'Bruno at Oxford', pp. 302-303.

offensive (blasphemy, use of foul language), he opened his mind on major issues and seriously attempted to explain his philosophically grounded doubts on the concepts of the Trinity and incarnation. Thus, he appealed to the Holy Writ, the Fathers and medieval doctors to justify his thought. But whenever his heterodoxy was evident, he admitted to have erred and asked to be duly castigated. Still another picture emerges from the extant documentation of his trial in Rome, where everything Bruno did to delegitimize the proceedings of the Cardinals and the censors was seen as evasive.

Here, I present a rather cursory chronological overview of Bruno's self representation, with particular attention to autobiographical aspects of Bruno's claim of a *libertas philosophandi in naturalibus* and eventually tackling the thorny issue of whether or how his self-representation triggered his being sentenced to death.

### Bruno in France and England

Bruno's first extended self-representation appearing in print dates back to his first stay in Paris. In the preface of *On the Shadows of Ideas* to Henry III, Bruno presents himself as "the Nolan, the Academic of no Academy; nicknamed the exasperated. [...] Cheerful in gloom, gloomy in cheer."<sup>4</sup>

Shortly afterwards, in April 1583, Bruno landed in England with royal letters of recommendation to the French Ambassador in London, Michel de Castelnau, Marquis de Mauvissière (1520-1592). Entering the suite of an ambassador gave him access to a brilliant circle in which scientific and philosophical ideas were being canvassed. At Court literary interests were fashionable, and it was advantageous to be an Italian. Englishmen of literary, scientific and philosophic taste looked for light from Italy. Before Bruno settled in London, he was involved in a curious incident at Oxford, where he was invited to take part in 'disputations' in honour of the Polish noble Albert a Laski.<sup>5</sup> The result was disastrous. It could hardly have been otherwise. In dialogue I of *Ash Wednesday Supper* Bruno gave an impression of the general characteristics of members of the university.<sup>6</sup> 'Go to Oxford,' he says:

and let them recount to you what happened there to the Nolan when he disputed publicly with those doctors of theology in the presence of the Polish prince Alasco [sic] and others of the English nobility. Would you hear how they were able to reply to his arguments? How fifteen times, by means of fifteen syllogisms, a poor doctor whom on this solemn occasion they had put forward as a very Corypheus of the Academy, was left standing like a chick entangled in tow? Would you learn with

<sup>4</sup> On the frontespice of Bruno, *Candelaiio*.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno may have been invited by the chancellor of the university, the Earl of Leicester, a great patron of the Italians in England, uncle of Sir Philip Sidney, and a member of the circle in which Bruno was known. Or the introduction may have been through John Florio, secretary to Mauvissière and tutor to his daughter, and thus a fellow member with Bruno in Mauvissière's suite.

<sup>6</sup> *La cena de le ceneri*, in Bruno, *Opere italiane*, I, dial. I, pp. 441-442.

what incivility and discourtesy that pig comported himself, and the patience and humanity of him who shewed himself to be born a Neapolitan and nurtured under a more benign sky? Are you informed how they closed his public lectures, both those on the Immortality of the Soul and on the Five-fold Sphere?<sup>7</sup>

‘That pig’ was Doctor John Underhill, Rector of Lincoln College and Chaplain to Her Majesty.<sup>8</sup> In the Oxford archives there is no record of Bruno’s visit, which evidently created less impression on the officials than on himself. Bruno’s contentious performance was surely motivated by his desire to shine at all costs and transgressed the bounds of decorum. By publicly targeting Underhill, Leicester’s protégé, Bruno offended both the chancellor and his former chaplain. Furthermore, Bruno must have provoked the Oxford theologians and it is hardly surprising that he stood little chance of obtaining official endorsement to lecture at Oxford. He returned or was returned promptly to his refuge under the more tolerant roof of Mauvissière.

In *Explanation of the Thirty Seals*, printed by Bruno in London, probably in 1583, there is a curious brief Epistle addressed by him “to the most excellent Vice-Chancellor, the most renowned Doctors and most celebrated Masters of Oxford University”. It sets forth, in Bruno’s most bombastic style, both his own claims and the imbecility of those who reject his message:

Salutations from Philotheus Jordanus Brunus of Nola, Doctor of a more scientific theology, professor of a purer and less harmful learning, known in the chief universities of Europe, a philosopher approved and honourably received, a stranger with none but the uncivilised and ignoble, a wakener of sleeping minds, tamer [vanquisher] of presumptuous and obstinate ignorance, who in all respects professes a general love of man, and cares not for the Italian more than for the Briton, male than female, the mitre more than the crown, the toga more than the coat of mail, the cowed than the uncowed; but loves him who in intercourse is the more peaceable, polite, friendly and useful; [...] [Bruno] whom only propagators of folly and hypocrites detest, whom the honourable and studious love, whom noble minds applaud [...] If this writing appears to conflict with the common and approved faith, understand that it is put forward by me not as absolutely true, but as more consonant with our senses and our reason, or at least less dissonant than the other side of the antithesis. And remember, that we are not so much eager to show our own knowledge, as moved by the desire of showing the weakness of the common philosophy, which thrusts forward what is mere opinion

<sup>7</sup> *Cena de le ceneri*, in Bruno, *Opere italiane*, I, dial. IV, pp. 534-535 (cf. Bruno, *Ash Wednesday Supper*, pp. 186-187).

<sup>8</sup> Abbot, *The Reasons*, p. 88, cited in McNulty, ‘Bruno at Oxford’, pp. 302-303. Cf. Stern, *Gabriel Harvey*, p. 74, note 83.

as if demonstratively proved, and of clarifying by our discussion (if the gods grant it) how much in harmony with regulated sense, in consonance with the truth of the substance of things, is that which the garrulous multitude of plebeian philosophers ridicule as foreign to sense.<sup>9</sup>

On the title-page of this effusion, issued after the unfortunate Oxford episode, Bruno again prefixes to his name the title Philotheo, which he used (interchanged with Teofilo) in the next three Italian works, published in London.

Bruno's first Italian dialogue published in London, *Ash Wednesday Supper* is constructed by way of a subtle intermingling of reality and fiction. Three narrative levels can be distinguished. First, in the proemial letter Bruno addresses his patron Michel de Castelnau, ambassador of France in England, insisting that his work should be interpreted allegorically. On a second level, the imaginary dialogue develops between four characters: the philosopher Teofilo, the English gentleman Smitho, and two comical figures, Frulla and the pedant Pruden-zio. A dialogue reported by Teofilo constitutes the third level: an earlier (reported) debate on the cosmology of Copernicus in the house of the noble Englishman Fulke Greville between a philosopher called the Nolan and two English Aristotelians with fictional names. As in all dialogues, the Nolan refers to Bruno himself, but the character and the author cannot be identified tout court. His feats are narrated by the intermediary of a fictitious figure, Teofilo. Many of Teofilo's views refer to a historical scientific debate, but we are not informed about precise place and date. Thus, the dialogue presents three narrators: the author speaking in the proemial letter, the main interlocutor Teofilo, and the Nolan whose opinions are reported only, not presented directly, but who is the highest authority.

Why did Bruno hide behind these fictional and discursive doubles? Anne Godard has argued convincingly that in the *Ash Wednesday Supper* Bruno intends to represent the real difficulties of satisfying the conditions for an argumentative discussion, showing that at least in fiction it would be possible to substitute the normal, faulty conditions with those which were not only ideal but practical as well.<sup>10</sup> The Nolan had been involved in a dialogue between deaf men and English Aristotelians. His failure which is told and commented upon by Teofilo dramatizes the impossibility of a preliminary agreement on the rules of a free discussion.<sup>11</sup> Adversaries of the Nolan, animated by a presumed wisdom, are not inclined to listen to his arguments. Nundinio, the first antagonist, limits himself to begging the issue: the Earth cannot move because it is the centre of the universe. Torquato is even worse: he lacks

<sup>9</sup> Bruno, *Jordani Bruni*, II, 2, pp. 76-78; English translation in McIntyre, *Giordano Bruno*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Godard, *Le dialogue*, pp. 164-170.

<sup>11</sup> *Cena de le ceneri*, in Bruno, *Opere italiane*, I, p. 463: "For it is impossible to know how to doubt and to inquire purposefully, and with profitable system, about any art or field of knowledge, if one has not first listened. One will never be a good examiner and judge of an issue if he has not first informed himself about the matter."

rudimentary mathematical knowledge needed to grasp Copernicus's arguments which the Nolan attempts to explain. But the failure of the Nolan is followed by the success of Teofilo, who moves in a utopian, fictional space. The fictional alter ego of the author successfully defends the theories of the Nolan who failed to do so in the real world with those of Copernicus. Bruno has distanced himself not only from Copernicus and the Nolan, but also from the Nolan and Teofilo. Thus, he presents a *dramatis persona* who is an almost independent philosophical authority aiming at persuading everyone involved in the discussion.

The *Ash Wednesday Supper* also adds a messianic dimension to the enterprise of the Nolan: in the second dialogue Teofilo refers the difficulties met by the Nolan in traveling through a dark and hostile London to arrive at the aforementioned dinner. The story highlights the 'sufferings', the obstacles, the brutality of the people in the streets, comparing the Thames to the Styx and representing the Nolan as ready to sacrifice himself for the victory of truth.<sup>12</sup> The philosopher described by Teofilo is a sort of messiah who brings a new 'Gospel' of such audacity that it cannot be represented directly. Both Christ and the Nolan are prophets who are neglected and ignored in their homeland. In order to destroy the traditional system of authority, the *Ash Wednesday Supper* presents a disarticulation of discourse, which in a certain sense reflects the decentralization of man in the Copernican world.

In the cosmological dialogues Teofilo/Filoteo is a pupil, more precisely a follower of the 'Nolan philosophy'. His commitment to Bruno's philosophy is not dogmatic, but the result of a quite long and complicated journey, articulated as the different phases of a cognitive process: from sense to reason, and eventually to the level of intellectual and intuitive knowledge. The interlocutors in the first three dialogues become gradually and progressively convinced of the value of the Nolan philosophy. The interchange among speakers gets more complicated in the moral dialogues (*Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast, Cabala of Pegasus, Heroic Frenzies*), where a central spokesman such as Teofilo or Filoteo is lacking. Here, Bruno's views on ethics, politics, and the destiny of human soul are presented and articulated by several interlocutors. The central view in these works is the intimate link between moral and natural philosophy. The ontology of the One-All (*Uno-Tutto*) and the cosmology of the infinite universe are the basis for founding and promoting a new ethics. However, based as they are on the conception of an indivisible and infinite World-soul, they cannot be developed with the same 'certainty' that characterized Bruno's natural philosophy in the first dialogues. Thus, in the proemial epistle to *Expulsion*, probably the most specifically 'moral' work of the later three dialogues,

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 485.

Bruno states that he intends to speak not assertively (*assertivamente*) but in indefinite way (*indefinitamente*).<sup>13</sup> Here, Bruno also explicitly referred to himself in the following manner:

Here Giordano speaks the common language and uses it freely and outspokenly, bestowing their own names on things on which nature bestows their own being. He does not call obscene what nature makes worthy; he will not cover up what she shows openly. Bread he calls bread, wine wine; the head he calls the head and the feet, and all the other parts by their proper names; eating he says, if it is eating, sleeping, if it is sleeping, drinking, if it is drinking; and accordingly he denotes all other natural acts by their own proper titles.<sup>14</sup>

This is not just simple and somewhat belated information on Bruno's writing in the vernacular instead of Latin.<sup>15</sup> It is rather a programmatic proclamation, and likewise a justification of his choice of a particular manner and style.<sup>16</sup>

In 1585 Bruno returns to France. Significant and puzzling are the short references in the diary kept by the librarian Guillaume Cotin: his praise of Thomas Aquinas and few others, sharply contrasted to his loathing of Pico della Mirandola, Cajetan, Cujas, Passerat, Panigarola, Toletus and the Jesuits in general, and, finally his detesting French and British heretics "as they despise good works and stress the certainty of their faith and justification".<sup>17</sup>

### Wanderings in Germany

Forced to leave Paris after a tumultuous discussion on Aristotelian natural philosophy, Bruno wandered for several years through Germany. His stay in Wittenberg was one of the few happy periods in his life. In the preface to *The Lullian Combinatory Lamp* (published in Wittenberg in 1587) he thanked his German colleagues for their hospitality with unusual warmth:

Certainly in my own case, you received me from the beginning with such hospitality, and have with such benevolence included me as your friend and colleague, so that anything could happen except that I should feel myself a stranger in your house [...] You took me in, accepted me, and have treated me kindly up to this very day, a man of no reputation among you for fame and worth, a refugee from the French wars, supported by no prince's recommendation, distinguished by no exterior signs (such as the crowd is wont to demand).<sup>18</sup>

Bruno's idyll in Wittenberg lasted almost two years, but after the death of the aged Elector Augustus in February 1586,

<sup>13</sup> *Spaccio de la bestia trionfante*, in Bruno, *Opere italiane*, II, pp. 177, 179.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 175.

<sup>15</sup> By the sixteenth century Italian writers still had the choice of three Italian dialects. The 'fundamentalists' considered Petrarch the supreme paradigm, the 'moderate conservatives' adopted the upper class dialect of Florence, while the 'liberals' held the plurality of dialects to be rather a virtue than a vice, insisted on integrating some of the vocabulary of the author's native region into the written language and gave greater freedom in grammatical and lexical rules. Obviously, Bruno's vernacular was of the third type, proudly showing off his Neapolitan roots.

<sup>16</sup> See E. Blum, '«Qua Giordano parla per volgare»': Bruno's choice of vernacular language', pp. 167-190. Blum refers to the outspoken obscene line in Pietro Aretino's *Capitolo al Duca di Mantova*, that declares his anti-Petrarchist spirit: "bread he calls bread, and cock he calls cock" ("*dice pane al pane e cazzo al cazzo*").

<sup>17</sup> Spampanato, *Documenti*, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Bruno, *Opera*, II. 3, p. 230.

and the accession of Christian I, which brought disturbance and a shift of power from Lutherans to Calvinists, he was forced to leave the city. Before he left Wittenberg, on 8 March 1588, Bruno delivered a heartfelt farewell speech to his colleagues. The *Valedictory Oration* to the Rector, professors, and to his noble and learned audience at the university is full of praise for his hosts, though a less peaceful situation is perhaps indicated by the cloudy complexity of his mythological analogies. He described his own journey to Saxony as a pilgrimage:

I came myself among many others to see this house of wisdom, burning with ardour to see this Minerva, for whom I was not ashamed to suffer poverty, envy, and the hatred of my own people, curses, ingratitude of those I wanted to benefit, and benefited, the effects of extreme barbarism and sordid greed; from those who owed me love, service, and honour, accusations, slander, insults, even infamy [...] but for her it has been no shame to suffer labour, pain, exile, because in labouring I improved, in suffering I became experienced, in exile I learned, for I found daily rest in brief labour, immense joy in slight pain, and a broad homeland in my narrow exile.<sup>19</sup>

In January 1589 Bruno had returned to Saxony and at the university he delivered, on the first of July, the *Consolatory Oration* for its Founder, the beloved Duke Julius, who had died the previous May. The oration, which he was honoured to make, is a somewhat extraordinary document, for Bruno not only expresses his customary gratitude for a quiet haven of study, but in describing the disturbances and woes of the rest of Europe, permits himself the bitterest strictures on his own land. "Spain and Italy," he declares, "are crushed by the feet of the vile priests". He contrasts the free pursuit of study at Helmstedt with the tyranny and greed that pervaded his own land. Again, the theme of wandering and exile is prominent:

This supreme concern and anxious care trouble me; I greatly fear that someone [...] will misinterpret what an obscure foreigner, whose purpose among you is unclear, should of my own volition, recognized by no one (as it seems) or encouraged to intrude on your mourning.<sup>20</sup>

Later that year Bruno moved to Frankfurt, where he published his major Latin works, the so-called Frankfurt trilogy. In the cosmological part, *On the Immense*, Bruno traced a short biography of himself. He recalls his childhood in Nola, when he believed that the world ended beyond Mount Vesuvius, and repeatedly describes the philosophy of Aristotle as 'puerile',

<sup>19</sup> *Oratio valedictoria*, in Bruno, *Opera*, I. 1, pp. 21-22.

<sup>20</sup> *Oratio consolatoria*, in Bruno, *Opera*, I. 1, p. 29.



because he himself was a boy when he learned it and marked his manhood by the moment he rejected it.

In 1591, when Bruno's position in the German-speaking world looked promising, both in Frankfurt and Zurich, he made an entirely unexpected move: he returned to Italy.

### Venice and Rome: his Arrest.

Bruno's first destination in Italy was Padua, but when he realized that the chair of mathematics at the university was out of his reach, he accepted Giovanni Mocenigo's invitation to become his private tutor. In 1592, wandering through Venice, he met Domenico da Nocera, former regent of the College of San Domenico Maggiore in Naples. Bruno told him the story of his life, his presumed defrocking, his contacts with kings, queens, and princes, and his plans. As Fra Domenico eventually reported to the Inquisition:

He resolved to settle down and put his efforts into composing a book that he had in mind, and to present it, accompanied by the proper recommendations, to the pope; and to obtain from him a pardon for what he had expressed to quiet his conscience, and, finally, to devote himself to writing and show his abilities and perhaps to obtain a lecture or two.<sup>21</sup>

In his own deposition, Bruno supplied the name of this book: *On the Seven Liberal Arts*. With its help, as he would eventually tell his inquisitors, he hoped to capture the pontiff's attention both for the Nolan philosophy and for his own situation. Bruno, however, did not take into due account that the situation in Italy had dramatically changed.<sup>22</sup> When, in May 1592, Bruno announced to his host Mocenigo of his plan to leave Venice, the latter, who was unhappy with the teachings he had received and had apparently developed a personal grudge against Bruno, denounced him to the Venetian Inquisition, that had Bruno arrested on 22 May of that same year.

At this point, at least two preliminary remarks on inquisition proceedings are due. First, the guiding spirit of the Inquisition was not to terrify but to admonish and to persuade. The officials and the inquisitors invited the defendants to tell the full truth in order to liberate their conscience (*scarico di coscienza*). This smooth approach (*approccio dolce*) aimed at pushing the defendant to an 'interior look' and a full confession.<sup>23</sup> In Bruno's case, this strategy was successful, at least as far as major issues were concerned. A case in point is his detailed reconstruction of his doubts on Trinity and incarnation. However, as far as his printed works and the reconstruction of his life were concerned, Bruno was less open-hearted, and kept silent on possibly compromising

<sup>21</sup> Firpo, *Il processo*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>22</sup> See the case of Francesco Pucci.

<sup>23</sup> For the contemporary views on confession and its role in the war against heresy, see Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza*, pp. 220-239.



periods, events and books.<sup>24</sup> Thus, after a first series of interrogatories, the judges most probably were dissatisfied and repeatedly insisted on 'liberating' his conscience.<sup>25</sup> However, Bruno did not provide significant new information and merely rephrased his sincere intention to repeal his errors, culminating on 30 July 1592 (during the seventh deposition) in kneeling down before his judges and asking to be pardoned, probably hoping that his act of penance would settle the issue.<sup>26</sup>

Second, it should be borne in mind that there was evidently an information gap between inquisitors and defendants. As a rule, the latter could only guess which information was in the hands of his judges. For example, Bruno probably thought that his judges were informed about his trials in Naples<sup>27</sup> and Rome in the 1570s. Yet, research in the central archive of the Dominicans in Rome has shown that only Bruno's name is mentioned on a list of 1576 proceedings,<sup>28</sup> while in 1592, when the Venetian Inquisition asked the Roman Holy Office for information, in its archives nothing was found on earlier accusations.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, Bruno thought it wise not to be silent on these proceedings, because a possible reticence could be used against him.

A first glance at the extant documentation in Venice and Rome reveals a sharp contrast between the image that arises from the testimonies of Bruno's cellmates and his declarations before his judges. For example, in Venice Bruno boasted on his own sect of *Giordanisti* active in Germany and declared himself, as in Ariosto's adage, enemy of any law and faith ("d'ogni legge nemico e d'ogni fede").<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, he would have awakened in the night, cursing God, Christ, and his own fate in a string of blasphemies: "Traitor! Take that, wretched dog fucked cuckold! Look how you run the world!"<sup>31</sup> By contrast, from the depositions to his judges a completely different picture emerges. As said before, the defence of his views on Trinity and incarnation are an illustrative case in point.

Probably, Bruno began to doubt the divinity of Jesus Christ at the age of eighteen.<sup>32</sup> More than twenty-five years later he told his Venetian inquisitors that he had in effect, harboured doubts about the term 'person' for the Son and the Holy Spirit, thus expressing doubts about the dogma of Trinity. When his examiners pressed him to state it more explicitly, Bruno detailed his doubts, but he insisted that those were only doubts in discussing philosophy, not Catholic theology or Christian faith:

As for the second person, I declare that in reality I have held it to be one in essence with the first, and likewise the third [...] I have only doubted how this second person could be incarnate, as I have said above, and suffered, but I have never openly

<sup>24</sup> Firpo, *Il processo*, p. 166

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 190, 192-93, 196.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 199.

<sup>27</sup> See Rowland, *Giordano Bruno*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>28</sup> Spampanato, *Documenti*, pp. 23, 27-28.

<sup>29</sup> Spruit, 'I due nuovi documenti'.

<sup>30</sup> Firpo, *Il processo*, p. 250.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 282-283: "Io l'ho sentito in prigione molte volte biastemar Christo «becco fottuto, puttana di Dio» [...] gl'ho sentito dire «potta di Cristo», e con colera diceva che chi governava questo mondo era un traditore."

<sup>32</sup> Rowland, *Giordano Bruno*, pp. 56f.

denied this or taught it, and if I have said something about this second person, I have done so by referring to the opinions of others.<sup>33</sup>

One of these others whose thinking Bruno summoned in support of his arguments was none other than Augustine, stating that he could not understand the Trinity ‘if not in the way that I have explained before speaking philosophically, and designating the Father’s intellect as the Son and his love as the Holy Spirit, without recognizing the term ‘person’, which Saint Augustine says is not an ancient term but a new one of his own time.’ This command of theological literature and argument surely made Bruno a difficult defendant. However outrageous his claims may have seemed, his uncanny ability to put orthodoxy in a historical context made the certainties of dogma look uncertain.<sup>34</sup>

In Venice Bruno skilfully defended himself, stressing the purely philosophical character of the positions attributed to him, denying others and only admitting that he had had doubts on some matters of dogma. He also underlined that he never held or taught these erroneous views,<sup>35</sup> merely admitting some, fairly insignificant, deviations from Aristotelian philosophy in his *One Hundred and Twenty Articles on Nature and the World against the Peripatetics*.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Bruno concludes, his works may contain views that contradict Catholic faith, but he did not entertain them *ex professo*.<sup>37</sup>

### Bellarmino versus Bruno.

In the summer of 1592, the Roman Holy Office asked for his extradition. After several months and some quibbling the Venetian authorities reluctantly consented and Bruno was sent to Rome. On 27 February 1593 he was locked up in the prison of the Roman Holy Office and on 12 April was ordered to hand in his books and manuscripts.<sup>38</sup> In the course of 1593 Bruno’s case was hurt by the deposition of Friar Celestino da Verona. In 1594, on the basis of new evidence (probably gathered during the autumn of 1593), Prosecutor Marcello Filonardi formulated the major charges which served for the *repetitio testium*. Subsequently, a copy of his *processus* (the file of his trial) was handed over to Bruno who presented a rebuttal to the evidence given by the witnesses on 20 December.<sup>39</sup> In February, on the basis of the evidence and Bruno’s replies, the tribunal ordered the examination of his works.<sup>40</sup> It can be inferred from this decision that, although strong evidence was available, this evidence was not regarded as sufficient to prove Bruno’s guilt. This was probably due to the fact that most of the evidence given by witnesses was anything but flawless, being prisoners or strongly

<sup>33</sup> Firpo, *Il processo*, p. 170.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 172; Rowland, *Giordano Bruno*, pp. 57-58. See also Quagliani, ‘*Ex his quae deponet iudicetur*’ on invocation of schoolmen.

<sup>35</sup> Firpo, *Il processo*, p. 164.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 167.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 172; cf. p. 186.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 215-217.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 218-221.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 225-228.

biased – Mocenigo is a case in point – or else because they did not concur on the tenor of the propositions and circumstances. Thus, the trial entered a second phase, concentrating not on the depositions of the witnesses but on an assessment of Bruno's works. This operation lasted until the end of 1596.<sup>41</sup> In March of the following year, Bruno was interrogated, not tortured, however, and afterwards he received the text of the *censores*. In March 1598, the summary of his trial was completed; this text permits the modern reader a reconstruction of the propositions selected from his works, but it does not provide exact information about the *censores* by the consultors or qualificators.<sup>42</sup>

As is well known, the voluntary adhesion to suspect propositions was not sufficient to condemn a defendant, even though he was impenitent. In similar cases, it was also necessary to demonstrate that the indicted theses were heretical, that is, plainly opposed to faith and thus not liable to a theological censure inferior to (formal) heresy. Bruno's trial, which dragged on for almost two years, arrived at a decisive turning-point when, at the beginning of 1599, Roberto Bellarmino proposed to submit to the judgment of the defendant a list of propositions to be abjured, selected from his works and from the depositions. This enterprise aimed at proving that Bruno, besides being a heretic, was also obstinate. From the subsequent events and the 1600 verdict, it can be deduced that Bruno responded to this request to abjure with a rather smart and surprising move. Probably well aware of the fact that at least for some of the charges — among which certainly those concerning his cosmology — formal juridical grounds for condemning them were lacking, he challenged their qualification as merely heretical *ex nunc* and appealed to the Pope urging him to declare explicitly the heretical nature of the contested propositions.<sup>43</sup> In that way he attempted to undermine the formal juridical correctness of the proceedings up to that moment. In fact, had the Holy See recognized that the heretical nature of the propositions was still to be defined, Bruno could not have been condemned as either a heretic or obstinate; the incriminating propositions would have been simply erroneous. In case the pontiff regarded the propositions as plainly heretical, Bruno promised to subject himself to the ecclesiastical authorities. The issue was submitted to Clement VIII during the meeting of the Holy Office on 4 February 1599, and the Pope, without judging the merits of the cause, validated the proceedings of the Cardinals, declaring the proposed propositions as formally heretical and not only *ex nunc*.<sup>44</sup> This decision by Clement VIII was in some sense paradoxical.<sup>45</sup> If the eight propositions were clearly heretical, because they contradicted the consensus of the Fathers as well as the doctrine of the Church, there would have been no need

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 233-236, 241-242.

<sup>42</sup> For an analysis of this document, see Beretta, 'Giordano Bruno'.

<sup>43</sup> Firpo, *Il processo*, pp. 340-341.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 314-315.

<sup>45</sup> Beretta, *Galilée devant le Tribunal de l'Inquisition*, pp. 210 f.

for a separate decision by the Pontiff. Yet, Clement's judgment had the formal value of an act of papal authority because it was recorded during a meeting of the Inquisition tribunal,<sup>46</sup> and in that guise, it determined the course of the trial in a decisive way. In effect, Clement VIII had acted as supreme judge, laying the groundwork for the eventual condemnation of the defendant to be burned at the stake. By consequence, all Bruno's moves aimed at delegitimizing the proceedings of the Cardinals and the Censors were seen as pure reticence. Notwithstanding several delays and truces during the rest of 1599, Bruno insisted on denying his crime, sending memoranda to the Pope and refusing abjuration. Considered as a negative and unrepentant heretic he could not be reconciled with the Church which in the end delivered him up to the secular arm. On 8 February 1600, the verdict was read in the residence of Cardinal Ludovico Madruzzo and on 17 February Bruno was burnt at the stake on the Campo dei Fiori.

### Concluding Remarks

Since the nineteenth century, Bruno has become a symbol of the courageous philosopher who paid the ultimate price for daring to challenge authority, combat obscurantism, and advocate the freedom to philosophize. Although Bruno never tired of insisting that it was the substance of his philosophy that effected his marginalization, he, too, apparently seemed to recognize that what offended contemporaries – or at least reduced their willingness to listen to him – was his haughtiness, combativeness, and belittlement of others.<sup>47</sup> Contemporaries were provoked by someone they perceived as a dogmatic zealot. Bruno's words and writings provide corroboration for such perceptions. He portrays himself as not merely alone in possession of the truth but even as a prophet of sorts, anointed by God and charged with spreading the 'gospel'. Thus Bruno frequently was unprepared to accept contradiction, as he came to pontificate, not to reason.

In his written works we find both highly rhetorical self-esteem (letter to vice chancellor of the University of Oxford) as well as a subtle intermingling of fact and fiction, author and spokesman (*Ash Wednesday Supper*). To people he met in France, Germany and Italy Bruno appears as extremely self-secure, boasting his views and role in society. Before his judges he moderated his tone, but he did not give up his central philosophical views. *A fortiori*, he hoped to settle his suit by presenting himself as conscious of his errors, well-aware of causing serious suspicion of heresy.<sup>48</sup> To be sure, his autobiographical reconstruction before the Inquisition is not based on systematic introspection and unconditioned self-analysis. Bruno attempted to defend his views, to justify his career and eventually to save his life. Thus,

<sup>46</sup> See Firpo, *Il processo*, pp. 314-315.

<sup>47</sup> See the dedication of *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*, in Bruno, *Opere italiane*, II, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Firpo, *Il processo*, p. 196.

fact and fiction, openness and silence, probity and dissimulation intermingle and colour his rhetoric of sincerity and the picture of veiled authenticity he presented to his judges.

By way of conclusion, I ask attention for three issues: (1) Bruno's hope in Clement VIII, (2) his self-image as a doubting and merely erring philosopher in matters theological, and (3) his final refuse to recant. First, Bruno's moves in his last year of freedom were obviously inspired by a terrible misinterpretation of the real nature of his times. Bruno's return to Italy was probably due to his hope that the Church was in for a peaceful program of reform after the wars of religion. However, his hope to be pardoned by Clement VIII, dedicating to the latter a work on the seven liberal arts, went far beyond any utopian dream in post-Tridentine Italy. And his hope for official endorsement to lecture at the Sapienza University was a mere illusion. Second, during his trial Bruno refused the label 'heretic' and claimed freedom of thought *in naturalibus*, thus essentially ignoring the then strong bounds between theology and philosophy. His distinction between the realms of faith and philosophical thought only partially convinced the inquisitors. His claim that the works of Plato and Aristotle also contained anti-Catholic doctrine<sup>49</sup> did not hold ground, as they were not considered as formal heretics. Yet, not disposing of a substantive number of proofs, the cardinals were unable to condemn him — until Bellarmino cornered Bruno with his list of eight propositions to recant. This leads us to the final issue: why did Bruno declare himself ready to recant in Spring, but refused to abjure any view he had held in the Autumn of 1599? Nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholars explained this refusal by referring to Bruno's unshaken trust in his own philosophy. By contrast, in the late 1930s Antonio Corsano stressed Bruno's view of the intimate link between his individual destiny and the vicissitudes of contemporary society, bringing up the failure of Bruno's project of universal renovation. Later still other scholars, among whom Eugenio Garin, hypothesized a psychological breakdown, due to desperation or madness, as the possible cause of Bruno's eventual obstinacy.

All explanations are more or less flawed by psychologism or anachronism coloured by Bruno's later fame as the herald of free thought. It cannot be denied that in the final months of 1599 something pushed Bruno to take his destiny into his own hands.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 167.

