

There is no centre

Rome, Genoa, Bergamo, Chambéry, Lyon, Toulouse, Paris, London, Helmsted, Frankfurt, Prague, Padua and Venice are some of the stages in Giordano Bruno's European peregrination. Giordano Bruno is an exile. Since his youth, he has been moving all over Italy, and then throughout Europe, at the mercy of the threats and persecutions he has suffered, and the controversies he himself has fueled. In fact, such wandering bears no resemblance to the journeys of a humanist. When Bruno crosses countries and borders, it is not because he is looking for manuscripts — he travels rather as a man banished by ecclesiastical and political authorities, and, dare we say, by history. No transnational community of scholars awaits him. He sometimes meets other exiles like himself, as for instance Corbinelli in Paris or Alberico Gentili in Germany, but Bruno's loneliness is the loneliness of the philosopher who cannot fit into any social circle and who is good for none. In the frontispiece for his comedy “The Chandler”, he even describes himself as an “Academician of no Academy”, which not only calls to mind Spinoza himself but also the loneliness of any man, the fate of us all. Indeed, Bruno is “a stranger to every nation, an exile, a fugitive, a plaything of fortune, small in stature, poor in possessions, devoid of any privileges and overwhelmed by the hatred of the crowd and therefore despicable in the eyes of the fools and the vile for whom nobility only lies where gold shines and silver tinkles and where people like them triumph and applaud”. (*Oratio Valedictoria*). For Bruno, exile is a way of life, the only way of life that can possibly be. At a very early age, he left his homeland — Nola, Campania — and never returned there. Exile is not just one sad period in his lifetime; his whole life is an exile. It is the outline of the countless roads he had to take to flee the authorities and challenge them.

After repeated and incessant flights, he ended up in Venice cornered by a certain Mocenigo who sent him to prison, from where he would never get out again. Those flights were, in reality, challenges to power, constant actions against arrogance, prejudice, abuse and violence, as when he evaded the authority of the Court of Inquisition. During his trial, Cardinal Robert Bellarmine submitted to Bruno eight heretical propositions which he had to abjure. Bruno accepted, but at the last minute, instead of signing Bellarmine's list, he wrote a brief directly addressed to the Pope, in which he challenged the censured propositions. On December 21, 1599, he declared: “I fear nothing and I retract nothing, there is nothing to retract and I don't know what I would have to retract” (*The Trial of Giordano Bruno*). This challenge to the authority of the Inquisition reads like a real desertion. It is one more flight, although this time experienced without moving at all. And it is the most dangerous one because it dismantles the structure around which the Inquisition — all Inquisitions, past and present — built and are still building

their authority. This structure is that of the confession, as without the consent of the subjects, there is no trial, no court, no power. Bruno didn't confess anything to Bellarmine. In fact, he didn't have anything to confess, even to Pope Clement VIII. He just wanted to talk to him. Fundamentally speaking, that is to say, from a philosophical standpoint, Bruno recognizes no authority. Seen from the perspective without perspective of the infinite universe, a "*Pontifex maximus*" or a "Sun King" are ridiculous masks. That is why Bruno embodies the intractable in the history of philosophy. "Don't pronounce that name, don't pronounce that name any more", as requested by the Curator of the Padua University at the beginning of Brecht's *Galileo*.

Today, more than 400 years after the tragic conclusion of Bruno's life, we want to shout his name loud and clear. We celebrate his courage, his fight, as well as the controversies he raised during his lifetime. We defend his thought – the notion of the infinite that he developed with the paradoxes and questions attached to it – and we want to continue his fight. We, too, are negating the center, are going off-center. We, too, want to turn the experiences of the exile and of decentering into a policy. Throughout his life, Bruno continued to call himself "the Nolano" and to call his philosophy the "Nolana filosofia", even when he was in Paris, London, Frankfurt or Prague. The point for him was precisely to claim the centrality of an off-center place.

Yet, there is no center in the infinite universe. The political power of such a world view is obvious. Bruno's study of Copernicus's work is what enables him to assert that the universe is infinite. Heliocentrism, as he construes it, breaks through the walls of the universe and the "new philosophy" does not only do away with the central position of the Earth but also with that of any other body in space. The idea of infinity determines a conception of the universe as being open and in continual evolution: "There are no ends, boundaries, limits or walls which can defraud or deprive us of the infinite multitude of things. Therefore, the earth and the ocean thereof are fecund; therefore, the sun's blaze is everlasting, so that eternally fuel is provided for the voracious fires, and moisture replenished the attenuated seas. For from infinity is born an ever-fresh abundance of matter. Thus Democritus and Epicurus who maintained that everything throughout infinity suffered renewal and restoration, understood these matters more truly than those who would at all costs maintain a belief in the immutability of the Universe, alleging a constant and unchanging number of particles of identical material that perpetually undergo transformation, one into another" (*On The Infinite Universe and Worlds*). However, Giordano Bruno's infinity cannot be shaped like an "all-comprehensive totality". Potency is never fully actualized: "For from infinity is born an ever-fresh abundance of matter" ("*dall' infinito sempre nova copia di materia sottonasce*"). Potency is such an overflowing, upsetting and incessantly producing force that natural infinity is not totally infinite, but rather a perpetual construction, an

eternally unfinished becoming. Can a philosophy of the infinite be a philosophy of “the Same”, namely, of eternal recurrence? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to approach the philosophy of the infinite as a philosophy of becoming as well as a philosophy of difference? Bruno reminds us that infinite matter is always in the making. In the light of those concepts, we could read Bruno's philosophy with the help of a few categories elaborated by Alfred North Whitehead, and begin by saying that infinite potency represents a becoming of continuity and not a continuity of becoming. The worlds of Bruno and of Whitehead are more than a mere becoming process. Indeed, the concept of “*dynamis*” is still too marked by the characterization that Aristotle formulated with his model of the transition from potency to action. Thus, becoming is blocked by a higher purpose. It becomes teleological, which means that everything in the universe has its rightful place and knows its destiny. That way, becoming always reaches an ideal, in the totality of the universe as well as in its parts. On the other hand, the paradigm embraced by Bruno and Whitehead is that of the perpetual flow, of the inexhaustible movement that is not incompatible with continuity or unity, on condition that these are not conceived in terms of permanence – i.e., the state of being always equal to oneself – but more precisely in terms of becoming. In other words, the world is not moving towards perfection; it rather expresses perfection in its motion. This teaches us that being is always new, always renewed and that natural movement cannot be reduced to a circle. On the contrary, it develops within a structure that closes only to be open again in a constantly evolving movement. In other words, it is not the becoming that is continuous but the continuous (the “Whole”, the infinite nature) that is in the making.

Because potency, as conceived by Bruno, is never really “actualized”, or better, because it constantly achieves and goes beyond its own actualization, it shatters Western metaphysics. Clearly, the philosophy of the infinite is not a new ontology. Indeed, a philosophy of the infinite is compatible with no ontology whatsoever as it rejects all kinds of measure. It puts an end to metaphysics as a science of being as being and as the logic of unalterable measures.

We believe that on the basis of this intuition, Bruno embodies the emergence in the modern world of a conception of politics that has nothing to do with politics, the State and constituent power. In fact, in the dimensionless dimension of infinity, Bruno's potency takes on a “destituent” role which, by definitively breaking away from its pairing with the act, signals the annihilation of all identity, substance and violence: it is capable of unleashing a liberating force starting from the idea that every finite and singular being is an infinite wandering.

Power, contrary to what Agamben wrote until recently, is not always associated with action. A power becomes “destituent” when it is infinite, when it is never completely actualized, when “an abundance of matter is always reborn”. There can be no “last perfection” in the infinite universe. That is why

singular things can move towards their dignity: by tearing themselves away, by separating themselves from the original being, they are able to introduce individuality in the visible world. Indeed, they remain charged with the original unity, and yet these “separations” continually produce new facets of this unity, new (infinite) worlds and modes of the original being. Bruno uses an admirable word to unveil how things unfold the power of unity in their individuality. He speaks of “sglomeramenti” – “disagglomerations” – (*Concerning Cause, Principle, and Unity*) as if to indicate a properly operative activity of things aimed at disaggregating, at disseminating the fundamental unity. Thus, although these separations “contract” the pre-individual being, they diversify and multiply it forever, since each of them contains it in a different way, that is, in times and places that are always distinct. This is what Bruno means when he maintains that “each thing possesses all being, but not all modes of being”. In a desperate attempt to become all modes of being, things then take turns taking the place of all the others following the vicissitudes – thanks to these incessant transmutations of forms and places, matter itself is in continual mutation. Ultimately, it is the conditions of space and time that determine individuality and multiplicity in the universe. Precisely because he grasped the power of singularities in the concept of “vicissitudinal mutation”, Bruno has heralded to modernity the news of an infinite and multiple world that has nothing of the invariance which is typical of metaphysics. Such infinite variations, such “disagglomerations”, such wandering singularities make up a “destituent power” destituting both the world and history.

This new image of the universe as being open, infinite, multiple, acentric and devoid of any hierarchies reinforces the exile condition of all fashion in the universe. In the infinite universe, beings can only be wandering. Human beings, in particular, are nomadic, or they are not. From that perspective, we have a better understanding of Bruno's existential choices. In the infinite universe indeed, human beings are released from gravity and from their obligation to stay home without any case of consciousness. Human beings no longer belong, nor do they own a dwelling place. The whole world is their homeland: “for the true philosopher, every land is a homeland,” Bruno writes in *Concerning Cause, Principle, and Unity*. The world of this philosopher is not simply the Earth. Its spaces become infinite and the stars become as familiar to him as if he had taken up residence there. This opening of the exile's condition to the infinite heavens, to exoplanets and to the countless other solar systems, frees us from the present civilizations and from history, as proved by Bruno's criticism of the colonization of the Americas. It was after denouncing the violence of the conquistadores (“the Tiphys discovered the means of disturbing the peace of others, (...) of violently propagating unprecedented madness, of sowing unheard-of disorder on still virgin ground, considering in the end the reason of the strongest to be the best; they have renewed the taste, the instruments, the methods of tyranny and murder”, *The Ash Wednesday Supper*), that Bruno, who was among the first to do so in old Europe, presented the liberating

aspects of his discovery of infinity: “Here then appears the man who has crossed the air, traversed the sky, traversed the stars, gone beyond the limits of the world, dissipated the imaginary walls of the first, eighth, tenth and other spheres which could have been added to them, according to vain mathematicians and following the blindness of vulgar philosophers: in full conformity with the senses and reason, it is he who with the keys of his competence opened by his research those of the cloisters of truth to which we could have had access. He laid bare nature, which was enveloped by veils; he gave eyes to the moles and gave light to the blind, who were unable to look at their own faces, to contemplate their own image, the multitude of mirrors that surrounded them from all sides; he untied the tongue of the dumb, who neither knew nor dared to unravel the tangle of their thoughts; he rebuffed the lame, who were unable to travel in spirit the path inaccessible to the vile and perishable body. The sun, the moon, the other stars, he makes them as familiar to men as if they had taken up residence there” (*The Ash Wednesday Supper*). The discovery of the infinite takes the shape of a thinking of emancipation as Bruno invites us to leave the regions and customs of our surroundings to go very far away and break the time line. As we have just seen in the passage quoted, and as Warburg has shown, his gaze towards the heavens is spurred on by ancient wisdoms. Nevertheless, this gaze intends to discover something new, to create the world of tomorrow, other conditions of existence as well as another history. Because he dared to think that way, Bruno was burned alive in Campo de' Fiori in Roma, on February 17th, 1600. The Church must bring to heel the whole movement of cultural and political renewal which is called the Renaissance. She must close a world, obstruct all passages and hinder the circulation of people and of ideas. She must impose her image of the universe, in spite of Bruno, Telesio, Menocchio and Vanini's stances. The adventurous ideas of the Renaissance, however, have continued to live on covertly, from Galileo's active retirement to more recent aesthetic, scientific and philosophical research. The world that Bruno wanted to open up, the new world of which his philosophy is the messenger, thus resurfaces. It is the world of Blanqui, the world of Alberto Santos-Dumont, the world of Kubrick, the world of Yuri Gagarin, the world of Joyce, the world of all those who travel through the skies in the hope of changing the state of the world below. This is also K's struggle. We are struggling to decisively change humanity's relationship with the Outside world. We study Bruno because his thought is a reminder of the future.

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