

GIORDANO BRUNO OR THE PLEASURE OF THE DISPUTE

About a copy of Camoeracensis Acrotismus from Prague

GUIDO DEL GIUDICE

Sometimes a book's value has to be appraised beyond its content. Sometimes, mainly when it comes to ancient volumes, one has to pay attention to that charming magic for which the book itself, as an "object", enriches the meaning and the story of the work and of the author, because it testifies some piece of life, that impregnates the cover, the pages, the images, until it prevails over the written text. This is the case of the copy of "Camoeracensis Acrotismus", Giordano Bruno's Latin work, that is kept in the National Library in Prague. Besides the description of an unique event, that bonds history to philosophy, the book bears, on its body, the stigmatas of the author, from the leather of the binding till the pages made crumbly by the time; it expresses the soul strength and the determination which stimulated him; it testifies the cultural ostracism that

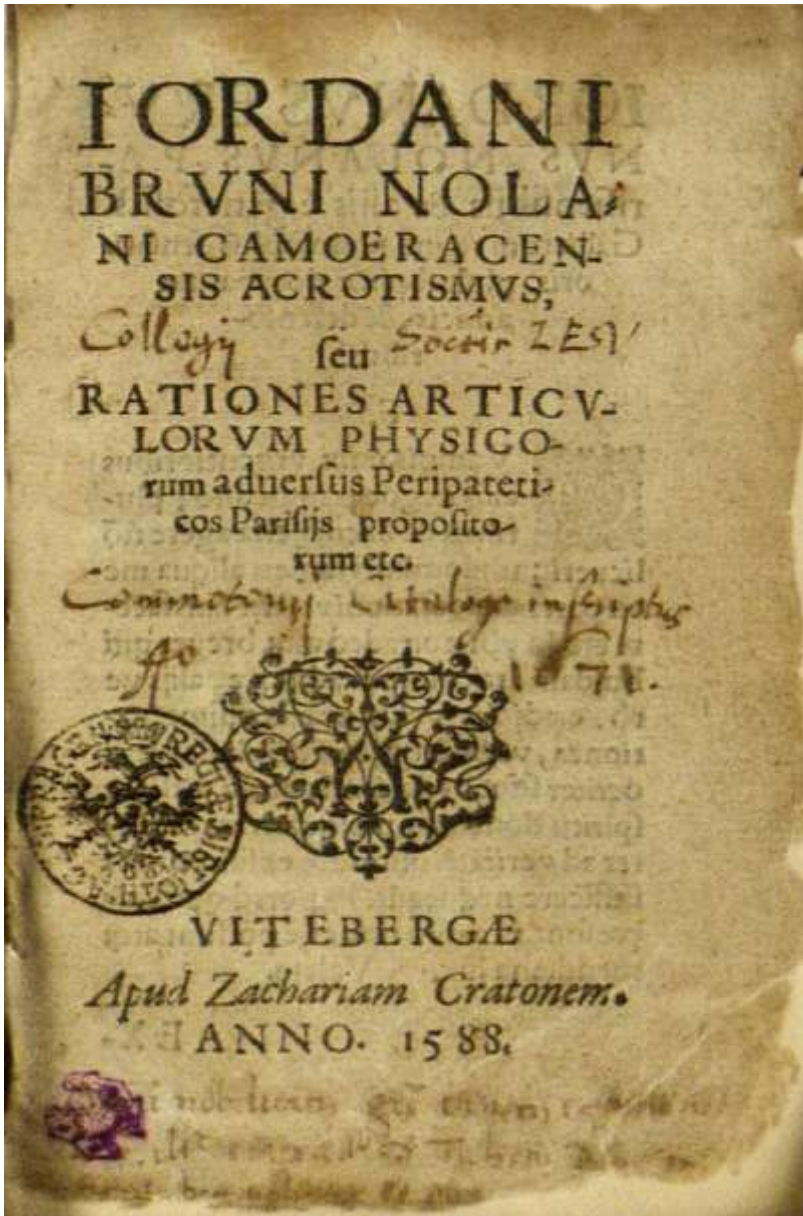


Bruno's portrait (19th century)

he suffered. The work refers to one of the most significant events in the adventurous peregrination of the Nolan, that is the dispute done in the College de Cambrai, at the end of the second Parisian stay of the philosopher. Bruno had decided to put an end to his experience in France, in order to start a new period of his thought in Germany. Before leaving, as he used to do, he decided to leave another indelible record of him and of his revolutionary ideas in the academic field. He had two options: the leave lesson (that he will

later use in Wittenberg) and the dispute. He chose the latter, of which he was an expert, as we know: the ability in the ars memoriae and the polemic and declamatory vis made him keep looking for a comparison with his opponents. The dispute was an academic custom of that time, that was regulated by a precise ceremonial and by well-defined rules, from the beginning and during its development.

Bruno describes precisely what kind of rules must be followed in a chapter of *De Architectura lulliana*, a work published in Paris during his first stay and dedicated to the Venetian ambassador Giovanni Moro. In the chapter entitled *De definitione disputationis*, he deduces from Raimondo Lullo the definition and the conditions of a correct discussion. The *Conditiones disputationis* are useful to understand Bruno's thought about a discussion and how he wanted to carry it out.



Frontispiece of Camoeracensis Acrotismus, printed in Wittenberg by Zacharias Crato in 1588, with the dedication to Tycho Brahe written in Giordano Bruno's own hands.

The approval or the rejection of an argumentation must be based on the respective demonstrations: one has to conform to some specific logic rules, without trying to confuse the reasoning jumping from one subject to another. Furthermore, besides the harshness of the competition, the most important thing is that there must be a mutual friendship between the competitors, based both on the love for the research, by respecting the opponent, and on the instinctive dislike for insincerity and overwhelming at all costs.

These are the opposite requirements of those applied by his opponents. It has been possible to reconstruct the event thanks to the account taken in two diaries: the Journal of the librarian of Saint Victor's Abbey, Guillaume Cotin, who had collected Bruno's confidences and followed his exploits, and that of the Parisian surgeon François Rasse des Neux, who, by chance, got to be present.

How can we define a dispute? It is a clash of souls, that reveals all the differences between the ideas of several intellects through the words. Thus, it is a spiritual clash, not a physical one. It must have the aim of convincing, not

of physically overwhelming an opponent. What kind of rules must be applied? First of all, the disputant must have a pure interest in the search for truth and must not be moved by a prevention or even by a premeditation for the clash.

First of all, the philosopher had the catalogue of thesis printed *ad auctoris instantiam*, giving it the title of *Centum et viginti articuli de natura et mundo adversos Peripateticos*. The work is divided into twelve books, which are dedicated to the eight parts of *Physica* and to the four parts of *De coelo* respectively, and which have been suggested by the faithful disciple Jean Hennequin, under the Nolan Giordano Bruno's protection and guidance. It is dedicated to Henry III and preceded by the letter to the Chancellor of La Sorbonne Jean Filesac. He had a plate written in Latin put up in the corner of *Rue des Ecole*, as they used to do in the *Collège de France*, in order to give notice of the event programme. Here is the text of the *petit placard*, which announced the discussion in the Cameracensis royal auditorium, the seat of teaching of the royal lecturers, whom the philosopher was still part of: "Affixed in the area of the Academy 1586. After the triduum of Whitsunday, from Wednesday to Saturday, the Nolan Giordano Bruno will support, through the words of Jean Hennequin, God willing, One hundred and twenty article about nature

and the universe against the Peripatetics. Every day, from morning to night"(1).

It was probably read by more people than the Nolan expected, so at the first lesson, on the 28 May 1586, there was an incredible amount of people: his noisy students, the actual readers and also some spoilsports that wanted to give battle. The dispute suddenly turned into a violent clash. His opponents made an ambush, inciting the mass of students against him, without giving him the chance to support his thesis and, at a certain point, they lifted him up bodily and threw him out of the room. In order to avoid other problems, Bruno had to promise he would come back the following day to answer, but before the sun rose he had already flown to Germany. Since he had not been frightened by that dissent, two years later, in *Camoeracensis Acrotismus seu rationes articulorum physicorum adversus Peripateticos*, Bruno repropose a new revised edition of *One hundred and twenty articles*, explained in the light of the objections made during the dispute and of its result.

The work, from its title and the apologetic oration, has caused a dispute within the

dispute, this time of a philological kind, which has turned out to be a perfect way to distinguish the sterile academic pedantry from a faithful exegesis of the actual meanings of the work.

As I always do, following my research method, I am convinced that what a "wandering thinker", like Bruno, has written, might be completely understood only paying attention to his human vicissitude and to the particular existential moment of which his works are testimony. Thus, I have chosen to translate the neologism "acrotismus" with the word "dispute", since it is an example of the philosopher's habit of summarizing more than one concept in just one term. In this I am supported by the opinion of the great philologist Felice Tocco, who, in the monograph *Le opera latine di Giordano Bruno esposte e commentate con le italiane*, wrote: "The word *acrotismus* is obscure, in vain one can look for it in Stefano or Ducange. I don't know if Bruno got it his own way from the word *àkròsis*, which can be used as a title for Aristotle's physics, with the meaning of assembly, conference, or anything of that kind; or, but this is very unlikely, from the word

àkrotes, which means top, peak, referring to the climaxes with which the discussion had to deal.”

Thus, the word “acrotismus” means that it happens in an Aristotelian field, and that it is not a lesson but a confrontation among opposite opinions. “The dispute of Cambrai” (2) seemed to me the most suitable translation for expressing the importance that Bruno gave to the event that represented his coming into action, in the official language of the wise men, against the peripatetics. The correctness of this interpretation has finally become popular, despite the resistance of an academy that is often insensitive to the argumentations linked to the historical actuality of the work, even in the precise philological study.

The same goes for the title of *Excubitor* given to the *declamatio apologetica*, whose lecture was entrusted by Bruno to his faithful disciple Jean Hennequin. In this case too I have decided to give the word the exact meaning of *Awakener*, that Bruno had already given him in Oxford, in his letter to the vice-chancellor of the university, as an introduction to *Explicatio Triginta*

Sigillorum of 1583, defining himself “*dormitantium animorum excubitor*”. The Nolan claims here again his purpose, that is waking the drowsy souls, the idle and sleeping intelligences in order to guide them towards a superior condition of conscience, which means passing from sleeping to waking. Bartholmess too used to translate this term with *Réveiller*, referring to this function of *mathesis*. The interpretation is reinforced by the gist of the oration, that is a specific critic to those that, being used to believing, tend to trust some thesis, which often are not Aristotelian at all, since they have been misunderstood. The rejection of the *consuetudo credendi* is the guiding thread of the whole *Acrotismus*, since the dispute, mainly in the first part of the work, is less based on Aristotle than on those that, without even reading the Master’s doctrines, passively accept and support them, giving them out as a poison: “*Here we are not considering Aristotle’s ignorance, but that of almost all the Aristotelians*”. *Excubitor* is the most evident expression of the importance that Bruno used to give to this work. There he recalls, through a sort of literal translation,

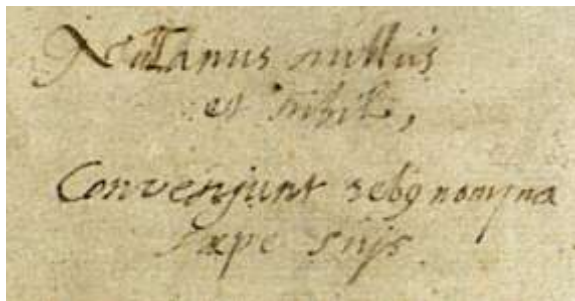
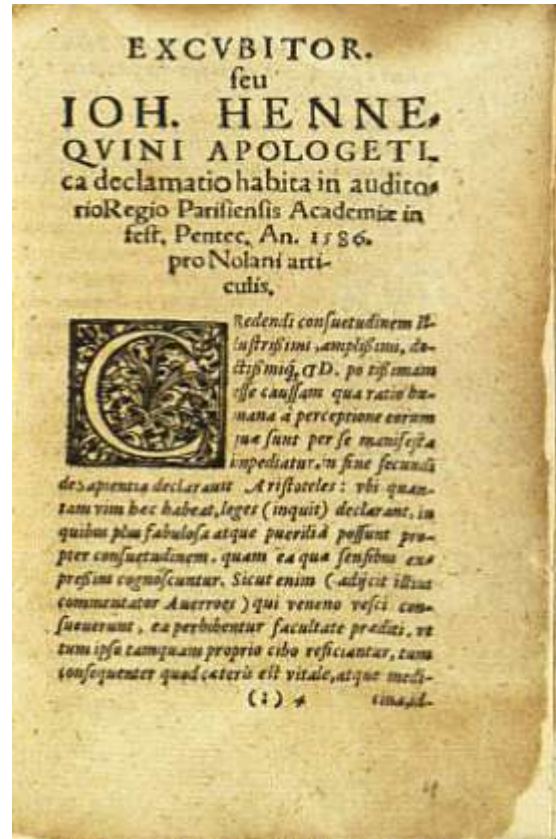
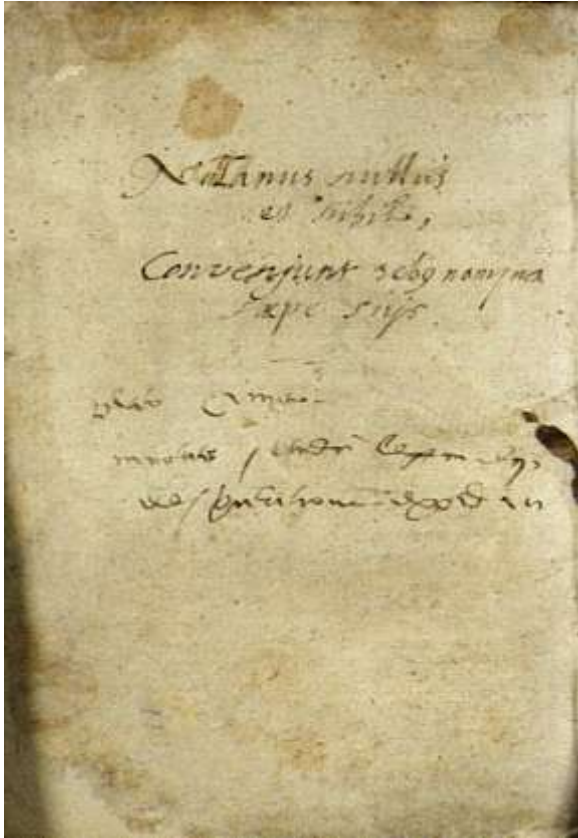
some of the fundamental passages of *Cena de le ceneri*, those in which he describes his astronomical prophetism in the most triumphal way. It is also, together with the dedication to Rudolph II of *One hundred and sixty articles against the mathematicians*, the most explicit and strict claim of the *libertas philosophandi*. Thus, the work turns out to be an ideal complement of the frankfurter poems in which Bruno translates in Latin, in order to make them eternal in the language of the wise men, some significant extracts of some of his Italian works, such as *De la causa* and *De infinito*. Bruno is proud of his *Acrotismus* and he finds always an occasion to pride himself. The great amount of copies circulating (almost fifty, scattered anywhere, of which only eight can be found in Italian libraries) makes us believe that they were commissioned by the printer Zacharias Crato, in order to be used as a sort of “visiting card” which had to be spread as much as possible. What better presentation could he have for the *summa* of his anti-Aristotelian critic and, most of all, for his *nova* cosmology? He gave a copy of this work to a certain Caspar Kegler, with the



affectionate dedication: *“To my dear and most erudite mister M. Caspar Kegler from Rostock, my eminent and well-deserving friend, Nolan Giordano Bruno donates and dedicates as*

homage and for his memory”. Anyhow, the most famous model is the one from Prague, that the Nolan sent to the famous Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, after affixing on the

frontispiece a dedication full of admiration and respect: *To Mister Tycho from Denmark, eminent and most famous for every kind of nobility, renowned and most excellent, as a demonstration of*



On the left: The last page of *Cameroacensis Acrotismus*, with (particular) the comment of Tycho Brahe.

On the right: The “incipit” of *Excubitor*.

benevolence and respect. (3) Surely Brahe received it before the 17 August 1588, because on that day, in a letter to the astronomer Cristoph Rothmann, he describes Bruno in a way which is not flattering at all, since he calls him for the first time by the derogatory

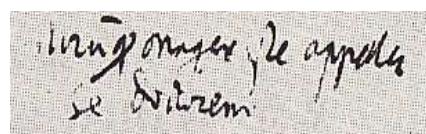
word *Nullanus*: “... *et nuper Jordanus Nullanus in quodam scripto de Mundo contra Peripateticos*”(4). Obviously, the brave theories of the philosopher were not appreciated by the astronomer. After he started to highlight, with some crosses in the

margin, the parts of *Excubitor* in which Bruno developed his theory of *consuetudo credendi*, that clearly bothered him too, he began to be dismayed, as he went on, because of the subversive significance of Bruno’s theories. He felt his

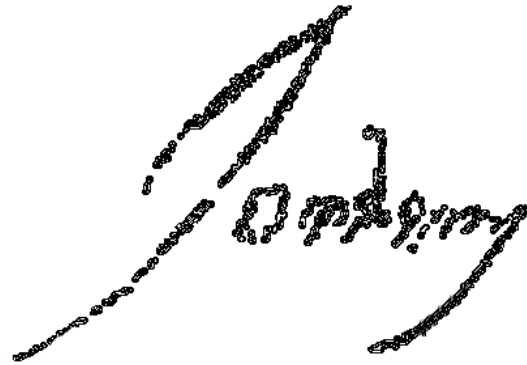
astronomical building falling under his feet, which he had patiently built during his whole life, and with which he will try, in vain, to convince Kepler. The continuous air, the uncountable worlds of Bruno, the refusal “of that absurd fifth essence”, they all dismantled completely the tyconic system, that imagined, not even in an original way (it had been suggested by Paul Wittich), that the Earth was stationary at the centre of the universe, the Sun and Moon turning around it and all the planets around the Sun. Thus, he reacted with the usual haughtiness, reiterating his ferocious pun on the last page of the book: *Nullanus nullus et nihil, Conveniunt rebus nomina saepe suis* (5). Bruno didn't ever come to know it (the fate spared him at least this sorrow!), since in *De immenso* he repeated his praises to Tycho, defining him a shrewd intellectual and the most noble prince of the astronomers. In all sincerity, we have to say that, even if he had read the scornful comment of the Dane, he wouldn't have had much to complain about. In this case one could easily say “we reap as we sow!” Tycho had the same attitude as Bruno had had years before towards one of his colleagues in the office in Toulouse, the Portuguese Francisco Sanchez, the author of *Quod nihil scitur*. In this work, even if he did not abandon the research and the

improving of the methods of learning, the author shows an absolute scepticism about the possibility that they could lead a man to a true knowledge. Sanchez started to feel a great admiration towards Bruno, after hearing his lessons. One of the few books of the Nolan that we now have, which ended in a mysterious way in Wroclaw, is a copy of *Quod nihil scitur*, published in 1581 by Antoine Gryphe, which shows an enthusiastic dedication of the frontispiece: “*To the dear Giordano Bruno, doctor in theology and most sharp philosopher, Francisco Sanchez made this present as a demonstration of friendship and reverence*”(6). One can

understand if Bruno returned these feelings by reading his disdainful comment written on the frontispiece of the volume: “*It is unbelievable that this ass should be called doctor*” (7). The sentence shows a severe critique: what is the point of aiming to teach only the human weaknesses and the impossibility of getting to have an universal knowledge? According to Bruno, the only insuperable limit of the human knowledge is represented by the unknowableness and the ineffableness of God, while the world, that is His shadow, through study, contemplation and exercise of virtue, can be fully understood by men. Thus, we might probably explain the second ironic note that he wrote on the following page, with an annoyed superior tone: “*It is incredible that he might want to teach*” (8). Goodness knows how the Nolan reacted when he got to know that, thanks to the reputation received with *Quod nihil scitur*, Sanchez became Royal Professor of philosophy in the University of Toulouse in 1585! Only in 1612 he will start to teach medicine, until his death.



On the left: Frontispiece of *Quod nihil scitur*, printed in Lyon by Antoine Gryphe in 1581, with the dedication written in Francisco Sanchez' own hands to Giordano Bruno, and (particular) Bruno's comment.



Bruno's autograph found on the first page of the Acrotismus of Prague.

But let's get back to Acrotismus. The copy of the National Library of Prague has had an eventful story and, even if it has been examined several times, it keeps making us surprised and giving interesting hints. First, Ivo Kořán, the man who discovered it, noticed on the last page Tycho's cruel comment. It was Rita Pagnoni Sturlese who published, in 1985, a precise analysis of the volume, which showed his whole philosophical and historical value (9). During the researches I have made for the Italian translation of the work, I could examine the book in the ancient rooms of *Klementinum*, where a plaque bears these words: "Giordano Bruno, philosopher and astronomer". Consulting that book, besides the excitement for holding in my hands an original work of the Nolan, made me find other

particulars, which had not been noticed before, and which deserve further investigations. In the last page, under Tycho's comment, there are three other sentences, of unclear hand, period and meaning. The handwriting is different and the meaning is apparently incomprehensible: they look like small verses separated by two slashes. Kořán, who was the first to examine the dedication on the frontispiece, said he could read at the bottom of the page the word *author*, which now is completely erased because of the time passed. In the same way, some years later Bruno will sign also the last of the dedications that we now have, the one inserted on *De Lampade combinatorial* given to the young student Jacob Cuno: "*Admodum generoso, nobili studiosissimoque D. Iacobo Cunoni Francofurtensi benevolentiae ergo et in sui*

memoriam dedicavit author" (10). In the case of the tribute to the famous astronomer, whom he really cared about, one could expect to find his name, considering his habit of writing it clear, often with resounding titles, as he used to do when he signed himself in the registries of the universities or when he signed the *album amicorum* of his students. So, the Nolan loved to give autograph, even if we do not have many of them today. Examining the back part of the first page of the book, which was damaged and used-up by time too, I have caught a glimpse of another faded extract, mostly undecipherable, which clearly starts with the word "*Jordanus*". Thanks to the help of the National Library of Prague, I have been able to do a computerized analysis of the reproductions of the page and make a comparison between

them and the other rare autographs of Bruno that still exist, noticing several calligraphic concordances. We can notice, in particular, the

shape of the “r” and, most of all, that of the “d” and the final “s”, which show such analogies with the autograph of the xylography of

Wittenberg as to make me think that it might be a Nolan’s original sign, which would complete the dedication on the frontispiece.

NOTE

1 *“Affixum per Academie Compita 1586. Iordanus Brunus Nolanus, post triduum Pentecostes e die Mercurii usque ad diem Sabbathi ,Deo volente, Centum et viginti articulos de natura et mundo Johanne Hennequino Dicente & respondente, ad versus Peripateticos tuebitur. Quotidie ab hora prima usque ad vesperam.”.*

2 BRUNO, Giordano. *La disputa di Cambrai. Camoeracensis Acrotismus*, edited by and with an introductory essay of Guido del Giudice, Di Renzo 2008.

3 *“Omni nobilitatis genere insigni et famosissimo illustri et excell.º D. Tichoni Dano in signum benevolentiae et obsequii”.*

4 *“... and recently Jordano Nullano, in a certain work de Mundo against the peripatetics”.*

5 *“Nullano, null and nothing. Names are often worth the people who bear them.”.*

6 *“Clarissimo Viro domino Jordano Brunus Nolano Theologiae Doctori Philosopho Acutissimo familiaritatis gratia honoris*

causa dono dedit F. Sanchez.”

7 *“Mirum quod onager iste appellat se doctorem”.*

8 *“Mirum quod presumi docere”.*

9 PAGNONI STURLESE, Maria Rita. *Su Bruno e Tycho Brahe* in *Rinascimento*, Firenze, Olschki 1985, Seconda serie, Vol. XXV, pagg. 309-333.

10 *“To the most generous, noble and most studious Mr Jacopo Cuno Frankfurter, the author dedicated as a demonstration of benevolence and for his own memory”.*