

38. White, Michael *The Pope & The Heretic, The True Story of Giordano Bruno, The Man Who Dared to Defy the Roman Inquisition* (William Morrow 2002)

I read this book because the caricature of Bruno's belief in Bloom's book (item # 5) peaked my curiosity. Can a name I keep running into, usually mentioned with some degree of respect and reverence, really have proposed something as ridiculous as replacing Christ with Hermes?

After reading White's book I have to say that Bloom does not do justice to the complex beliefs of Bruno, and the impact he had on science and philosophy during his life and after his death.

White introduces Bruno's philosophical work this way (page 10):

The Church held Aristotle's ideas to be the only true description of the physical world; Bruno found joy in ripping apart Greek philosophy and exposing its obvious inconsistencies. The Church saw itself as the one true faith; Bruno spent his entire life building a philosophy that amalgamated Catholicism with rationalism, Hermeticism, and ancient religions. The Church utterly rejected the occult (yet burned witches and exposed alchemists as heretics); Bruno used occult ideologies as one of many ways to reveal Truth, and thus to reach enlightenment. The Church wished to obfuscate, to dominate, to suppress dangerous truths; Bruno called for freedom of information and the open exchange of learning—he embraced change, debate, and free thought.

White observes that Bruno knew he was destined for a flaming death, but he persisted.

Early in his life Bruno became a priest and studied in a monastery where he got in trouble for being enthused about the Arian heresy, which rejected the doctrine of the trinity and of transubstantiation, and asserted that Christ was created by God of the same substance of which God is made, but "there was a time when he was not." (page 19). Bruno thought this worthy of reconsideration and got into trouble and ran away from his monastery. He spent most of his life on the run after he was excommunicated in absentia for secretly reading banned materials in the monastery. He lived during times of extreme violence in the name of religion, on the part of Catholics and the newer Protestant religions. He was relatively safe publishing his works from France, Britain and Germany, yet chose to come back to Italy in part driven by the vain hope of convincing the new pope of the rightness of his (Bruno's) views, and opening a new age of tolerance of belief and conscience. Fat chance. He was tricked, imprisoned, interrogated and burnt after an 8-year process including cruel, inhuman imprisonment and torture. He never recanted. That is the backdrop of the story, covered in many chapters.

Getting back to Bruno's beliefs, White says that (page 48)

. . . what made Bruno unique was his ability to take the protoscience of his day, combine it with vast erudition and a natural empathy for the ideologies of pre-Christian religion, and teach the resultant doctrine with unparalleled gusto. This heady brew was in part a non-mathematical form of science (or natural philosophy as it was then known) and in part a spiritual doctrine. Bruno, like others before him, believed he could rediscover the lost *harmonia mundi*; he sought the *prisca sapientia*, the unity of all knowledge, the ultimate truth.

On page 49 he mentions that the methods of Hermes Trismegistus and the knowledge of the pre-Christian world were not used by Bruno only in making new observations on the world and furthering science, Magnus, Bacon, Da Vinci, Aquinas were others. But even among them Bruno was unique, according to White.

White explains Bruno's most dangerous belief on pages 71 through 73: there is an infinite universe with many worlds like ours with populations of beings like us. The world was not the center of the universe. Man was not the center of the universe. The observer was always at the center, because his or her position is always defined with respect to other bodies. This was extreme heresy on all fronts. Did these other worlds crucify their own saviors, asks White? This was the reason for the vehemence of the Church's opposition to the little man, it was simply unthinkable. "For this most extraordinary of thinkers, God existed in a ray of sunshine and in the soldier's sword, the whore's breath and the saint's healing robe." He loved his God, but he was a pantheist. On page 73 he observed:

We are part of a greater whole, Bruno believed; we are in direct communication with the divine, we are all part of the infinite.

White observes further that:

Yet in spite of such adventurousness, Bruno's philosophy could be seen as little more than a loose connection of ideas, diaphanous, without anchor. But, to save it, there was one other element of Bruno's thinking that focused his view of the universe. To a love of God, and extreme Pantheism, a belief in the purity of original faith, and a model of universal Copernicanism, he added what would soon become a

dying art, a branch of the Hermetic tradition no one today would even consider mystical at all, the "art of memory."

Bruno wrote five books on the topic and White has an extended discussion on the non-uniqueness of Bruno's contribution in this area of memory enhancement. On page 76 he explains that he used the idea of the symbolic enhancement of memory to . . . "provide a structure for his carefully designed Christian-Hermetic system." White calls Bruno "a disillusioned Catholic, but unconvinced by Protestantism," and suggests he was creating a new theology that could replace and unite them both. He was enthused about making the Eucharist into a celebration of . . . "the Oneness of nature" (p. 82).

I found it interesting that there was rumor and more to connect Bruno with the Rosicrucian movement that published its manifesto in 1614 (p. 161). They taught "a form of Christian Hermeticism." They spoke of "unification," and invoked "natural philosophy." Was it influenced by Bruno? Probably. Did he start it? Maybe, suggests White. Since my parents were Rosicrucians, this is interesting to me.

After stirring chapters on his incarceration and trial, White puts Bruno into historical perspective. And in doing this he summarizes his philosophy (pages 208-209):

For the radical religious philosopher, the central principle that emerges from Bruno's teaching is that there is no personal God. Bruno made this most clear when he wrote that "[God] has nothing to do with us except insofar as he imparts himself to the effects of nature.

Elsewhere he declared that the myth of the personal extramundane God was created by theologians

merely for consumption by the uneducated masses and that the educated philosopher and thinker should reject this and adopt the pantheistic position. In *God, Man and His Blessedness*, Spinoza echoed this with the remark "God is indwelling and not the transient cause of things." In other words, according to Spinoza, God created the universe but played no part in its day-to-day running, a notion mirroring Bruno's own analysis.

White observes that the world is now tolerant of persons like Bruno. Not only is he tolerated, he is venerated and celebrated in some circles. His stature has grown while his persecutors' convictions have become marginalized. But Bruno sacrificed himself willingly to sow the seeds of this more tolerant world, as Bruno shows citing the man's own words presaging his death, referring to himself as having . . . "preferred a courageous death to a noncombatant life." (pp. 209-210).

I quite liked this book. I quite liked the person who is its subject. I share some of his key beliefs, I am a universalist and a pantheist at heart. Some of his ideas I can live without. It is always that way. Unless I am reading my [auto-]biography. But even then I would disagree with the earlier person who I morphed through into the person I am now. Bruno was right about this (p. 72) as he is cited by White:

"This entire globe, this star, not being subject to death and dissolution and annihilation being impossible anywhere in Nature, from time to time renews itself by changing and altering all its parts."

That is how I feel too. And though some of the changes and alterations are progressive, many are not. Oh well, either way it is change.