



Uncertain portrait of Giordano Bruno (Juleum – Bibliotheksaal, Helmstedt)

GIORDANO BRUNO AND THE ROSICRUCIANS

A mystery unveiled, among magic, alchemy and philosophy

GUIDO DEL GIUDICE

The research aiming to create the first Italian translation of *Summa terminorum metaphysicorum*¹ helped me in enlightening a six-month period of Giordano Bruno's uneven *peregrinatio* which had been too long in the shadow. There have been found some clear proofs that strengthen the idea of a contact between the philosopher and a German group of the Rosicrucian brotherhood, which had only been hypothesized in the past². A relevant protagonist of this story is the Swiss theologian and alchemist Raphael Egli, who invited the Nolan in Elgg, near Zurich, in the castle of his patron Johann Heinrich Hainzel, with the official reason of holding a series of lessons about the Aristotelian terminology. Some years later he will publish, on two occasions, the text of these lessons, with the title *Summa terminorum metaphysicorum*. Egli has been long underestimated, because, after some unpleasant misadventures due to his love for alchemy, he took precautions by concealing his abundant production of alchemical and apocalyptic texts with a long series of pseudonyms. Only recently he has been considered the author of about sixty works,



which have displayed an incredible intellectual personality, a linking point between the mystical and alchemical currents of Germany and of the Italian Switzerland of the late XVI century and of the beginning of the XVII century. Here he covers several topics, from the analysis of the relations between macro and microcosm to the Paracelsian prophesy of Elia Artista's return; from the interpretation of the magical symbols to the Rosicrucian theories. Using the pen name of Filippo di Gabala, he was also the author of *Consideratio Brevis*, which was published in Germany together with *Confessio fraternitatis*, one the manifestos of the Rosicrucian movement, in which he refers to the "brotherhood of the Christians baptised with the rosy blood of Christ's Cross" as a source of the true revelation. It is probable that in 1591 the brotherhood was already at a recruitment stage and Raphael Egli was an ideal candidate for becoming a leader. If it is possible that during Bruno's stay in Zurich some Rosicrucian suggestions appeared, it is almost sure that Egli directed later many of the ideas he got associating with Bruno in the Rosicrucian doctrine, of which he was a sure



SVMMA
 TERMINORVM
 METAPHYSICORVM,
 ad capeffendum Logi-
 cæ & Philosophiæ
 studium,
 E X
 IORDANI BRVNI NOLANI
 Entis defcenfu manuſc.
 excerpta;
 Nunc primùm luci commiſſa;
 A
 RAPHAELE EGLINO
 ICONIO, TIGVRINO.



TIGVRI
 APVD IOANNEM VVOLPHIVM, TYPIS
 FROSCH. ANNO M.D.XCV.

Frontispieces of *Consideratio brevis* and *Summa terminorum metaphysicorum* (first editions)

inspicer in Germany. The circle of alchemists of Paracelsian inspiration, in which Bruno was received as a master, probably became the fundamental core of that “Giordanic” sect, which the philosopher had often boasted about founding in Germany, when talking to his cell mates in the Venetian jails. In the light of these new elements, it was necessary to ascertain if the relations between Bruno and the Rosicrucian circle had been an occasional stage of the eventful philosophical and existential itinerary of Bruno, or the evolutionary way out of previous connections within the confraternity. Thus, it has been extremely interesting analysing a manuscript kept in the ancient part of the National Library of Naples, which was already known

to the intellectuals interested in the Rosicrucian group, because of the implication of the presence, at the beginning of the XVI century, of a group of followers in Naples. It is a miscellany made of three different texts: the first one is an account of a talk during which the Pope Boniface VIII asks the great alchemist Arnaldo from Villanova some pieces of information about the philosophers’ stone; the second one is a collection of alchemical experiments; the last one is a document called *Inviolable observations that must be observed from the brothers of the Golden Cross or of the Rosy Cross preceding the usual profession*. The latter is the most ancient Rosicrucian statute that is now known, and what is even more interesting is

that here “*the most strict laws and pacts*” are dated back to 1542-43, so even long before. This date coincides perfectly with the foundation of a philosophical academy in Naples, thanks to the intellectual Girolamo Ruscelli from Viterbo, who, around the year 1541, moved from the Roman residence of the Cardinal Grimani, to the Neapolitan one of Alfonso D’Avalos, the Marquis of Vasto. A prolific intellectual, editor of the works of great poets (such as Ariosto, Boccaccio, Petrarca) for the important Venetian publisher, Ruscelli owes his reputation to the publishing of several collections of “secrets” (with the pseudonym of Don Alessio Piemontese), recipes of various kind, most focused on the alchemical aspect, which became true best-sellers at the time, with dozen of editions in the main languages. In the proem of *Secreti nuovi di maravigliosa virtù*, a new edition published in 1567, one year after his death, Ruscelli describes the foundation and the organisation of a “secret” philosophical academy, basically of an alchemical kind, in the provinces of the kingdom of Naples. The “Prince and Lord of the land” to whom he refers probably is Ferrante Sanseverino, the prince of Salerno, allied to D’Avalos, in whose court, where a lot of intellectuals passed, he received a warm welcome and was taken under patronage. The failure of the conspiracy hatched in 1552 against the viceroy Pedro Alvarez de Toledo, who made the prince fall in disgrace, made Ruscelli leave in a rush the kingdom of Naples to go to Venice. The manuscript of Naples, entirely written in Italian, belonged to a certain Andrea Segura, who has often been identified with Francesco Maria Santinelli, a Rosicrucian author who was very active in Naples in that period. As many other alchemical texts, it comes from the convent of S. Domenico Maggiore, as a catalogue written in 1764³ attests. The library of the convent had a section full of esoteric texts, which were obviously prohibited, not only for their

function of control and censure, but also for the genuine interest that wise devout men, starting from popes, had for hermetical and alchemical themes. Thus, it is not surprising that the young Nolan could feed his insatiable need for knowledge gaining secretly access to the texts of important authors of the magical-hermetical tradition, such as Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa, Hermes Trismegistus and many others. Among the frequent visitors of the academy founded by Ruscelli we can recall the young Giovan Battista Della Porta, whose noble family was under the protective wings of Sanseverino. *Magia naturalis*, that he says to have written when he was only 15 years old, might be the transcription of the experiments done in the Academy of Ruscelli⁴. Some years later, around the 60s of that century, Della Porta founded the “Academy of the Secrets” in Naples, with the same purpose of wanting to try recipes and products, the aforesaid “secrets”, to test its true efficacy. It is said that in 1566, when coming back from a long journey to Italy and Europe, he examined all the experiments of his academy, approving only those supported by the clearness of the results. At that time, Bruno had just entered the convent of S. Domenico as a novice, and it has often been suggested that there he might have met Della Porta. Besides his interest for topics like the *ars memoriae*, the physiognomy and the natural magic, they joined because of the admiration for the Egyptian tradition. The alchemical circle, even though it was inspired by a Telesian panpsychism that Bruno knew quite well, didn’t ever convince him completely; in fact, it will become the main theme of the funny irony of *Candelaio*, set in a version of Naples full of mocked alchemists, sharp courtesans and skilful cheaters.

The definition of “academic of no academy”, that the philosopher gives to himself in the comedy, might well be referred to the proliferation of these secret academies,



Clockwise from top left:
The German statute of “Sincerus Rhenatus”; The pages of the manuscript with the reference to the years 1542-1543; The frontispiece of the “Neapolitan manuscript”; The last page of the manuscript.

that Bruno felt close to him for its formation and cultural interests, but to which he was “reluctant” to adhere because of his spirit of independence and of his unwillingness to submit to a hierarchy or a system. A speculative instinct of an extensive kind steered his studies in an infinitistic sense, considering the hermetic Egypt, “fluvial cradle of all religions”, a wonderful society, “siege and column of the sky”, repository of that pantheism overflowing with infinite from which all the other cults derived. In 1562, just

before the arrival, in Naples, of the fourteen-years-old Filippo, of Bruno’s family, to study with his first teachers, the high altar of S. Domenico’s Church was destroyed. This because the choir, that was set in the middle of the Church, had to be moved behind the high altar. Under the altar they found a marble memorial tablet with eight verses starting with “Nimbifer ille deo mihi sacrum invidit Osirim”. This tablet is now walled up on the bell tower next to the main gate of the Convent, and it might prove that the present



Naples, fresco found in the underground of the ancient villa of G.B. Della Porta
(courtesy of *napoliunderground.org*)

that Bruno felt close to him for its formation and known as “delle Due Porte”⁵. Close to the latter, some recent discoveries of urban spelaology made it possible to find some underground sites, where the followers of the academy used to have their secret meetings, and where we can still see frescos and inscriptions attesting the custom of hermetic rites.

These ceremonies are linked to that Egyptian tradition well rooted in Naples, which goes back to the “Nile colonies” of Alexandrian merchants, settled in Naples, in the same zone where Bruno used to live during the years of his education, and where one can still find the

statue of God Nile. This influence helps us understanding that important element of “egyptianism” that we can easily find in Bruno’s thought, that is what made Yates call him “hermetic magician”. Thus, the philosophical academy of Girolamo Ruscelli and the Academy of the Secrets of Giovan Battista Della Porta might be considered as the forerunners of the Rosicrucian associations that Segura’s manuscript of 1678 attests as active in Naples⁶.

The existence, in the second half of XVI century, of this Italian circle of the movement, is certified by the acts of the trial made in 1676 by the venetian Inquisition against the

German gentleman Federico Gualdi, charged with practising the magical arts. The news concerning him, between reality and legend, ascribes him the role of initiate or master of an hermetic brotherhood, the paternity of several alchemical works, as well as a secret that should have made him able of extending life until being 400 years old! However, the documentation concerning the trial, which is kept in the Public Records Office of Venice, clearly attests the existence, in Italy, of a *Brotherhood of the Golden Cross*, whose behaviour conformed to the rules written in Segura's manuscript. The fact that the Order of the Golden Rosicrucian is a sort of Italian "import good" is confirmed by the analysis of the first German organized statute, which goes back to 1710. In that year Samuel Richter, a Lutheran minister close to the ideas of pietism, who was a disciple of Paracelsus and Jacob Böhme, published in Silesia, with the pseudonym of Sincerus Renatus, the work "*Gesetze oder Regeln der Brüderschaft des göldnen Creutzes*" ("Laws or Rules of the Brotherhood of the Golden Cross"). These can be considered as the translation of the 47 articles of the Neapolitan manuscript, which are split into 52 in the German version. The slight differences that we can notice are caused by the fact that the Italian system is much more ecumenical than the German one, which is clearly marked in a Lutheran way, as the Elgg's circle was. Nonetheless, in the statute there is no reference at all to Christian Rosenkreuz and to the original manifestos of the Rosicrucian, which can be dated back to 1614-16 (*Fama* and *Confessio fraternitatis*), whereas there is a reference to the catholic religion, to the emperor and to the use of the philosophers' stone, showing the tendency of the later societies to get linked to the original Italian group, rather than to the German one. It is worth noticing that, in the rituals of the esoteric societies of the late '800 – beginning of '900, the mystical name of the Magister, "Pedemontanus de Rebus"⁷ seems to recall

that Alessio Piemontese (Alexius Pedemontanus), which is the pseudonym used by Giacomo Ruscelli to publish *Secreti nuovi di maravigliosa virtù*. Considering these elements, Giordano Bruno might be seen as the *trait-d'union* between the associative tradition of the Italian "academies" and the proto-Rosicrucian German brotherhoods. The interest shown by Egli and Hainzel, two important collectors of alchemical texts coming from everywhere, who went to pick him up in Frankfurt, might be caused by the fact that Bruno came from an extremely interesting reality, as the Neapolitan one was, whose fame had surely reached them too. Bruno probably had to disappoint them, if they had hoped him to be an active militant, maybe as a new Magister in the movement.



Frontispiece of *Secreti nuovi di maravigliosa virtù*



Above: Naples, Statue of God Nile
 On the left: The memorial tablet of S. Domenico Maggiore

However, it is necessary to notice that some striking elements of his way of thinking, from the egyptianism to the theory of macrocosm and microcosm, are still a constant reference of the Rosicrucian doctrine. Nevertheless, we shall never forget Bruno's drastic anti-

Christianity, most of all when estimating these analogies. He considers Christ only as a man, and no man can be ascribed to that intermediary function that everybody already have. He can't accept any kind of human authority in relating to a God that is completely unknowable in his true essence. The genealogy of the ancient wisdom, according to Bruno, stops in Egypt. His way and that of the Rosicrucian, after a common journey, diverge when crossing with the Christianity.

NOTE:

¹ *Somma dei termini metafisici* with the essay *Bruno in Svizzera tra alchimisti e Rosacroce*, edited by G. del Giudice, Roma, Di Renzo, 2010

² Yates F. A., *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972

³ Tommaso Kaeppli. O.P., "Antiche biblioteche domenicane in Italia", *Archivum Fratrum Predicatorum*, Roma, XXXI, 1966, p.44

⁴ Sarnelli P., *Vita di Gio. Battista Della Porta Napoletano [1677]*, in G.B. Della Porta, *Le zifere o della scrittura*

segreta, a cura di R. Lucariello, Filema, Napoli, 1996

⁵ It's a pun about the Italian words "della", which means "of", and "porta", which means "door", which in this case are used both as a reference to the family name of the owner of the house and to the actual doors of the house.

⁶ Gualdi, Federico, *Philosophia Hermetica*, a cura di A. Boella, A. Galli. Roma, 2008

⁷ MacKenzie, Kenneth R.H., *The Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia of History, Rites, Symbolism and Biography*, New York, 1877