

tian revelation seems to have held its line valiantly, but it is now contradicted by the proliferation of other teachings, hypotheses and sects. Then there are the errors of Aristotle and the School, the evidence unearthed in recent centuries, the wisdom and experience of old and new nations. Bodin is then a typical Renaissance man, impressed by and assimilating the new erudition; he remains a Christian, nay a Catholic, precisely because he cannot make up his mind. Like a little later Descartes, he adopts a temporary attitude, a conformist one, until new light is shed on the controversy. Unlike Descartes, however, he could not well afford to "advance under a mask" ("*larvatus prode* . . . , wrote Descartes), he was a public official.

We should watch therefore, for better identification, to whom does Bodin's preference go among the seven discussants of the *Colloquium*. Coronaeus, the host, represents the Roman Church, as is fitting—but he is not much more than a distinguished and courteous moderator of the six debates. Fridericus is the Protestant; like Montaigne, Bodin has no great liking for Luther and even less for "a certain theologian," never referred to by name, Calvin. Octavius is an always pleasant spokesman for Islam, etc. But the important things are said by the other three: Salomon, the Jew, is undoubtedly the star of the seances; he brilliantly defends his religion, while devastatingly criticizing other creeds and systems. For example: "... Christianity turned away from true worship and put a dead man in the place of God." Salomon has the *beau rôle*, he is surrounded by toleration, but the rules do not seem to apply to him although he too keeps his dignity and courtesy, even under the somewhat brutal questioning by Fridericus.

Toralba, the man of science and partisan of natural religion, also enjoys Bodin's favor, even though less than Salomon. He says things like this: It is ridiculous for a God to remain incorporeal for infinite times, then suddenly to hide himself in a woman's womb, suffer punishment, be

buried, then "take to heaven a bodily mass which was unknown there before" (p. 327)—but also: "When the hope of rewards and the fear of divine punishment are removed, no society of men can endure." (p. 6) Religion is basically an untrue convention, but it is a useful social cement.

The third to express Bodin's views is the already mentioned Senamus. He, the sceptic, has for all intents and purposes the last word since the summing-up (by Curtius) cites the Emperor Jovianus who gathered together "Pagans, Christians, Arians, Manichaeans, Jews and almost two hundred sects in harmony" and instructed them to "challenge the people to mutual love." Is there any argument left after five hundred pages against such oecumenism? At any rate, Senamus-Bodin was fortunate that the manuscript of the *Colloquium* was almost unobtainable in the seventeenth century, even for Queen Christina of Sweden who wanted to possess a copy. Otherwise, it would have been interesting to hear from Pascal, critic of Montaigne and Descartes, what he thought of it.

Reviewed by THOMAS MOLNAR

## *The Hermetic Sage*

**The Ash Wednesday Supper (La Cena de le Ceneri)**, by Giordano Bruno; translated with an Introduction and Notes by Stanley L. Jaki, *The Hague & Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1976. 174 pp. hrl 32.50 (about \$13.00).*

ATTENTION FOCUSES in many centuries on a hero-figure who earns his prestige in the eyes of posterity less by real and precise achievements than by a combination of the spectacular, the popular, and the intuitive.

The latter is an important element because one does not become a hero-figure by mere charlatanism; one must sense the crucial issues of one's age and although expressing them in a possibly amateurish way, represent them convincingly. Such a hero-figure was Voltaire in his, and Sartre in our, century. Were they philosophers, moralists? political spokesmen? street agitators? — none of the labels applies completely, they were intellectuals, yet something more too: expressions of their age.

Giordano Bruno was the hero-figure of the sixteenth-century. Brilliant, unorthodox, persecuted, daring, arrogant, dabbling in many branches of knowledge—like Sartre and Voltaire. I must have been thirteen or fourteen years old when I read my first book about Bruno, a *biographie romancée* as was fashionable in the 1930's—and he became instantly my hero. Later, when reading his works, the disappointment was all the sharper: they were shoddy, superficial, verbose, although perfectly representative of the kind of virtuosity that such men possess who are not themselves scholars but superb imitators of scholarship.

In spite of it all, Bruno remained on one of the pedestals I kept in my intellectual memory, until I read, years ago, Frances Yates' marvellous study of the Renaissance, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. That book was preceded and followed by others, so that Bruno finally descended from his pedestal and the way was cleared for me to read him without a favorable prejudice. Other readers too were impressed by Yates' findings, as witness the editor and translator of the latest Bruno book in English, *The Ash Wednesday Supper*. Prof. Stanley L. Jaki refers to Yates in his excellent introduction, as the scholar who finally put Bruno in a realistic and genuine context, by which he means that in the scholarly world Bruno has now ceased to be the great thinker summing up the pre-Renaissance from Oresme to Cusanus and anticipating the scientific age of Galilei and Newton, Bruno, Jaki holds following Yates, participated only margin-

ally in the great thrust of science; the truth is that he had his own line to sell, hermeticism, which at certain points happened to coincide with the work of genuine scientists like Cusanus, Copernicus, Tycho Brahe and Kepler, but in fact diverged decisively from it. To prove this point, Jaki permits himself perhaps a bit more than an editor ought: many of his footnotes are almost malicious in calling attention to the hermetic (unscientific) streak in Bruno's text, even where the point may be debatable and the doubt resolved in Bruno's favor. Let us hasten to add that this method is not unscholarly—the Renaissance writers, whether Luther, Rabelais, or Erasmus, certainly practised it—it is indeed played by both sides, as when Fr. H. de Lubac argues against Cassirer, Garin, Yates, and others in favor of Pico della Mirandola's orthodoxy. At any rate, the many new and excellent works on Renaissance savants, erudites, publicists, humanists, and so on, by D. P. Walker, Busson, G. H. Hexter, Kristeller, Koyré, E. Namer, E. Garin, etc. have created a picture so new and original as to compel the reader to pick his way toward a conclusion with a great deal of caution.

To focus on Bruno, it seems now evident that the "Nolan" (as he refers to himself in his dialogues) entertained a grand project that he pursued like a virtuoso from his departure from Italy until his arrest in Venice. This project was a *heroic* one if we take this word in the sense he gives it himself in *De gl' Heroici Furori* (Of Heroic Frenzies), namely that although conscious of the final failure, the philosopher must not deviate from the attempt to achieve a superior synthesis of all knowledge (and also power?). What Bruno calls *heroic love* should not be confused with the platonic *eros*; it is, rather, according to P.-H. Michel's careful definition, "the active pursuit of an inaccessible objective, implying suffering and even death, in view of achieving a superior life." What is the content of the grand project? First, assisted by the new science, but not necessarily using its mathematical and geometrical computa-

tions, to show the wrongness of the Aristotelian view about the planets; the earth, the movers (spirits, angels) and the movables (celestial bodies); second—and here is the deviation from the new scientific theories and methods—establish the truth of the Hermetic position, namely that the infinite universe is a pulsating, never-ending, self-renewing (in cycles) animal, in which interacting life-forces affect every place at every time. Since everything existing is alive, nothing is subordinated or dominant, the whole is the infinite god (*pan-theos*), not personal, of course, but like ether permeating every particle. It is obvious that such a living totality could not be meaningfully measured by mathematics and geometry, the chief instruments, together with observation, of contemporary scientific breakthrough.

The third part of the grand project—if one may speak here of phases—was to restore (?) the great original religion of the sages of Egypt, teachers of Moses and Pythagoras, a restoration in which Bruno himself would occupy a high rank (*capitano*). As he wrote in the *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*, the Copernican sun will dispell the darkness; but as we see, only for mankind to transit from the concept of one mythical heaven peopled by moving spirits and animated planets (the worldview of the Chaldaeans but also of Aristotle) into another concept of magical forces vibrating through the great animalistic universe. Science here is not in the center of attention, it plays a marginal role in the service of an occult system.

Theophilus, Bruno's spokesman in the *Supper*, describes in detail the new men of the new age, the hermetic restoration. They are

moderate in their way of life, expert in medicine, judicious in thinking, outstanding in divinations, marvelous in magic, cautious with superstitions, observant of laws, irreproachable in morality, divine in theology, heroic in all things. As is also shown by their prolonged life, less infirm bodies, lofty in-

ventions, verified prognostications, by the substances transformed through their efforts, . . . familiarity with the good and protective spirits, . . .

These are the kind of characteristics we encounter in utopian literature from the Renaissance till today, from Campanella and Diderot to Trotsky and the New Left.

In spite of his readiness to accept the failure of the grand project, did Bruno expect to see his mission for Hermetic restoration accomplished in any sense? He maintained, naturally, that what he wanted to restore was "ancient philosophy," but as we saw, not the Hellenic *philosophia* was meant but a mixture of esoteric doctrines, pseudo-Christian speculations, and the late averroism of the Paduan school. The work here reviewed also helps us to understand how Bruno mapped out his activity. *The Ash Wednesday Supper* should be read with this programme in mind: to persuade the scholars and courtiers of Europe to defect from Aristotle, the Roman religion, and the old worldview, and adhere to the new through disputations with its illustrious representative, the "Nolan." Both Yates and Jaki suggest that Bruno, no matter how random his itinerary appears to have been, visited only courts and universities where he could expect an attentive and favorable hearing for his project: the focal points of Protestantism: Geneva, London, Wittenberg, and of heretical teachings: Toulouse, Padua. He expected Protestantism to be the winner of the wars of religion: with Elisabeth of England over Philip of Spain; with Henri of Navarre over Henri III; with the northern seats of learning over the universities maintained by the Church. He believed that the reformed world would be more amenable than Rome, just then reaffirming her rigor at the Council of Trent, to make one further step away from orthodoxy and to embrace his own Hermetism.

The grand project could not succeed (although it seems triumphant in our own century!), partly because Bruno was arrogant, sarcastic, full of himself, and he usually destroyed the credit he was in the pro-

cess of acquiring. The *Supper* is full of derogatory descriptions of the rude English, of the muddy and unsafe London streets, the barbaric Oxford doctors, the inability of the English to speak any but their own language. Previously, in an altogether different milieu from Elisabeth's England, in post-Calvin Geneva, Bruno had also irritated the authorities who were ready to put him on the stake—and had burned his anti-Reformation tracts.

Yet, his project was not so impossible of realization as one thinks when looking at it in isolation of later centuries. He made attempts not only in foreign courts and centers of learning, also in Rome; in fact, he was eager to be transferred from the Venetian to the Roman prison (of the Inquisition) because he hoped to gain the Pope himself for his cause! Before we feel tempted to laugh at such a wild dream, let us consider a similar attempt much nearer to us in time, that of Teilhard de Chardin. Like Bruno, the French Jesuit too expected to convert Rome to his own evolutionist Christianity, more precisely, as he wrote, "to graft the new shoot onto the old Roman stem." He too made an amateurish use of contemporary science in order to accredit his fantasies, he too went beyond what that science authorized (namely to conclusions from the biological to the moral and spiritual) and built on it something heavier than it could sustain. And Teilhard, like Bruno, was in the habit of making little side remarks calling into question the entire doctrinal edifice of the Church to which both belonged: Teilhard scoffed privately at original sin, Bruno wrote that Christianity had substituted the worship of dead things to a natural religion.

Teilhardism has proved successful in ecclesiastic and lay milieux not so much by turning evolutionism into a respectable referent for the changing content of faith—this was more thoroughly achieved by Heidegger and Bultmann—as by contributing to the dissolution of the concept of *substance*. Bruno may also be said to have largely succeeded, although he too only as

a link in the chain. Teilhard's intellectual predecessors were Bergson, Blondel and Laberthonnière; Bruno's had been Pico, Agrippa of Nettesheim, and the long line of Renaissance alchemists and occultists; so able studied by D. P. Walker in his book, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*. Thus it would be wrong to say that Bruno's extravagant notions left no trace in the history of thought. For twentieth-century man, *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, attentively read under the severe, but in the whole just supervision of its commentator, Professor Jaki, is a useful document about how some brilliant minds speculated then—and now.

Reviewed by THOMAS MOLNAR

### *The Deepening Darkness*

**Twilight of Authority**, by Robert Nisbet,  
New York: Oxford University Press,  
1975. 287 pp. \$10.95.

DECADENCE, according to the philosopher, C. M. Joad, is the loss of an object. For Russell Kirk, one of the finest social critics of our times, decadence is pervasive moral and political disorder in society, which results from disorder in the soul. Robert Nisbet, Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University and author of *Twilight of Authority*, believes that Western Civilization and, in particular, America is in a state of decadence; he discerns America's decline in such indices as the decay of values; the deification of the self, of egoism; the erosion of patriotism; the militarization of society and pernicious centralization of power in the hands of the state; the decline of faith in our institutions; the widespread crime and disorder in our society; increasing hedonism in society; the decline of heroes; the corruption