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PHILOSOPHICAL DEATH AND SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE IN GIORDANO BRUNO'S *FURORI*

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In the history of philosophy, death has not only represented the end of biological life. In the Platonic tradition, especially in its prolific interweaving with the Christian belief, death has come to symbolize the culmination of the philosophical effort, indeed even the very substance of philosophizing, which, as Plato said in the *Phaedo*, is a kind of exercise in dying. In this article we investigate the meaning and implications of this 'philosophical death', which, representing a moment of profound change in the cognitive subject, also involves a change in the relationship that it maintains with the philosophical discourse. Platonism, Christianity, symbolism: the Platonizing Christian Renaissance represents the historical moment in which these elements flourished together in an unequaled way. To investigate the aforementioned theme, we'll analyse Giordano Bruno's *Eroici Furori*: here the image of the *mors osculi* – which from the pages of the *Song of Songs* through the centuries is enriched with Neoplatonic interpretations – becomes a symbol of this transcending of individual subjectivity and rational discursivity into the intellectual contemplation of the One. In these pages we demonstrate how contemplative silence and symbolic production do not represent something extraneous to philosophical activity or even the cessation of it, but rather the highest and culminating moment of an intellectual and philosophical effort, as it is attested by a thousand-year-old tradition, today partly forgotten.

Keywords: death, symbol, subject, One, kiss, love, Giordano Bruno, Renaissance, Neoplatonism

For citation: Pirari, G. "Philosophical death and symbolic language in Giordano Bruno's *Furori*", *Filosofskii zhurnal / Philosophy Journal*, 2024, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 48–62.

In the eighties of the last century, a book of singular depth on ancient philosophy appeared in France, written by a scholar of ancient thought with a past as a priest, Pierre Hadot: *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*¹.

The basic idea that animates his reflections is that ancient philosophy represented not a merely theoretical activity, aimed at the elaboration, teaching

¹ Hadot, P. *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Paris, 1981.

and learning of abstract theories, and even less just an exegesis of texts, but a kind of art of living, the assumption of an attitude that involves one's entire existence. Therefore, philosophical activity would originally have been not a practice placed only in the order of abstract and rational knowledge, but on the contrary the conscious choice to undertake a path of conversion that changes the being of the one who carries it out, starting from a way of life recognized as inauthentic, overshadowed by unconsciousness, burdened by care and worries, to a condition of life animated by the effort to assimilate one's being to a model of beauty, truth and goodness².

In the introduction to Nuccio Ordine's book *La soglia dell'ombra*, Hadot recognizes in Bruno an authentic representative of this re-emergence of the ancient philosophical tradition in the era of the Renaissance, whose salient feature would be the work on oneself and the interior tension aimed at eliminating the point of partial and partisan view of the individual self, to finally discover oneself as a conscious and active part of the Whole, thus rising to a transcendent level of universality and objectivity³.

Undoubtedly for Giordano Bruno philosophy had to be an activity to be taken upon as a vocation and a destiny, until the point of maximum self-sacrifice. Bruno's own biography offers a bitter testimony to this attitude of the philosopher from Nola, who found a particularly meaningful poetic and symbolic elaboration in the philosophical dialogue *De gli eroici furori*.

Beyond being the title of the book, the heroic "furore"⁴ defines for Bruno the highest philosophical knowledge, which does not envisage a simple application of the rational faculty with which the subject is endowed by birth, but a strenuous effort of one's will, a total investment of the entire person's faculties, aimed at a cognitive path that does not leave the subject's cognitive structure unchanged, but rather envisage its transformation through assimilation to the object of his thought.

For Bruno, who adopts a gnoseological doctrine widespread among Renaissance authors, there is knowledge to the extent that the subject comes to assimilate himself to the object of his knowing.

According to Bruno, this is a "very difficult"⁵ path which not only does not leave the subject neutral, but "dismembers" him, imposes a sacrifice on him, even his own death. Not physical, but death of the 'natural' self, in order to attain the 'metaphysical' self.

Bruno represents the research of the *furioso* as an undertaking of risk and sacrifice, comparing it to the fate of a moth, which seeks the light despite knowing the risk it runs by approaching it, a risk which increases more and more as it approaches it; and yet it still seeks the light ever closer.

It is therefore an heroic undertaking, where the philosophical tension is such as to overcome self-preservation. As Bruno underlines several times, this search

² Ibid.; see also Hadot, P. *Qu'est-que la philosophie antique?* Paris, 1995, and also Hadot, P. *La philosophie come manière de vivre, entretiens avec Jeannie Carlier et Arnold I. Davidson*. Paris, 2001.

³ See P. Hadot's introduction to Nuccio Ordine: Ordine, N. *La soglia dell'ombra. Letteratura, filosofia e pittura in Giordano Bruno*. Venezia, 2003, pp. IX ff.

⁴ Translation, in the Italian language of the ancient greek word *mania* (μανία).

⁵ All English quotes of Bruno present in this article are my translations from the original Italian or Latin. Therefore in note the reader will find reported the original Italian and Latin texts.

is even a vice⁶, a divine vice, but in any case a subversion of natural dynamics, of wisdom that seeks balance, to attempt the hunt for the divine, at the cost of oneself.

This research has a risky character. It is an adventure in a dense forest of shadows, through the multiplicity of things, conflicting drives and opposing faculties.

Therefore the author chooses to represent it with the image of the hunt, reinterpreting Ovid's myth of Actaeon⁷, which here comes to mean "the intellect in the hunt for divine wisdom, in the apprehension of divine beauty"⁸. Unfastened his mastiffs and greyhounds – images depicting intellect and will – the mythical hunter in following them moves away from the usually beaten paths to enter the depths of a forest, where human footprints are rare. Here at a spring he surprises Diana in her nakedness, while the goddess was refreshing herself together with the Nymphs. In Ovid's version of the myth, the goddess, to punish Actaeon's impudence, transformed him into a deer by throwing water on his face. Bruno elides this passage, contracting the action of the metamorphosis into a single very powerful line: "the great hunter became the prey"⁹, and setting that as an immediate consequence of the vision of the goddess.

Those dogs, which Actaeon had unleashed to help him find and chase his prey, now throw themselves upon him, devouring him with "raw and fierce bites"¹⁰.

Bruno reinterprets this myth making it the symbol of the philosophical research of foundation, and of the inner conflict that the subject suffers to free himself from the cares of everyday life, in an effort to become ever more capable of remaining in the peace of intellectual contemplation, in which only it is possible for brief moments to experience that beauty, from which he always again falls in the calls of sensuality.

The rare and fleeting epiphanies of beauty, like "wounds of eternal life"¹¹, ignite the philosopher's heart with love, make it "*furioso*", or as if torn from the worldly, discursive and sensual self, and nostalgic for that Origin that, although in everything present, is invisible and distant due to the imperfection of the human will and intellect¹².

The act of becoming a hunter, and then of separating oneself from the other hunters to follow more rugged and solitary paths, becomes a symbol of this inner journey of the subject, who as if split in two, fights against the 'lower' part of himself to amend his own faculty and make himself similar to that beauty and purity, which appears to him in rare moments of intellectual contemplation.

The Divinity, grounding and ultimate causation of every being, cannot be adequately grasped by the intellect, which can only grasp what is finite, determined.

⁶ *Furori*, Utet, p. 549 = BL, p. 107.

⁷ The hunter Actaeon, Cadmus' nephew, sees Diana naked while bathing, inside a cave, surrounded by Nymphs. For this involuntary sacrilege he is transformed into a deer and then mauled by his own dogs. The myth of him is narrated by Ovid, *Metamorphoses* III, 131. See also: Klosowski, P. *Le bain de Diane*. Paris, 1956.

⁸ *Furori*, Utet, p. 576 = BL, p. 155.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 575 = p. 153.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 576 = p. 155.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 671 = p. 155.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 664 = p. 155.

The intellect, which “apprehends things intelligibly, according to its own way”¹³, cannot logically, discursively grasp the overflowing fullness of divine beauty, goodness and truth. However, the will inflamed by heroic *furor* tends towards it. Proceeding in the amendment of himself and in the philosophical hunt, Actaeon comes to the vision of Diana, a pregnant symbol representing the divinity of nature, the presence of the Divine and at the same time its transcending the single *phaenomena* that it generates, founds and vivifies. The *vision of Diana* therefore constitutes a moment of high philosophical intensity, which symbolizes in the most pregnant way the fundamental thought at the basis of Bruno’s “shadow’s metaphysics”¹⁴.

According to this philosophy, the universe represents a single infinite organic life, a large animal, shadow and simulacrum of an inexhaustible and absolutely simple source of being: the One, which as world’s soul forms and vivifies matter from within, generating continuous metamorphoses, which, despite the suffering and mortality of the individual parts, all constitute moments of the infinite life of the One-All.

The One, in itself unrepresentable by the human intellect, can only be known by its shadow: nature¹⁵. Diana’s vision represents the experience of maximum intensity that the subject can have of the divine presence in the world, or of the divinity of nature itself, of which the subject itself is an integral part.

As Cassirer observes, in Bruno knowledge of nature and self-knowledge go hand in hand, indeed they germinate from each other in a relationship of interdependent connection¹⁶.

The knowledge of the metaphysical grounding of external reality is not achieved “by looking at the stars... at the empyrean sky... above the crystalline”¹⁷, but by turning our attention towards ourselves, towards the most intimate core of our vital presence. To do otherwise would be for Bruno to do like the dog in Aesop’s fable, who was looking outside himself, reflected in the water of a river, for the piece of meat that he already had in his mouth¹⁸.

In the *Cena delle ceneri*, Theophilus explains that in a finite and homogeneous universe it is not necessary to “search for the divinity removed from us”, because “we have it close to us, indeed from within, closer than we are to ourselves”¹⁹.

In this sense Cassirer correctly understands Bruno’s thought when he states: “Der Mensch findet sein wahres Ich erst, indem er das unendliche All in sich hinein zieht, und indem er auf der anderen Seite sich selbst zu ihm erweitert”, and again, as if to comment on the unveiling of nature through the self-sacrifice and the death of one’s own desiring individuality: “Hier verwischt sich auch die

¹³ Ibid., p. 578 = p. 159.

¹⁴ Ciliberto, M. *Introduzione a Bruno*. Bari, 1996.

¹⁵ Garin, E. *Bruno*. Roma; Milano, 1966, p. 57.

¹⁶ Cassirer, E. *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*. Darmstadt, 1963, S. 197 ff.

¹⁷ *Furori*, Utet, p. 658 = BL, p. 316.

¹⁸ Aesop, “The dog and its reflection”, in: Esopo. *Favole*. Milano, 1982, p. 211: “A dog was crossing a river with a piece of meat in his mouth. He saw his own reflection in the water, believed it was another dog with a bigger piece of meat, and, letting go of his, jumped down to grab that of the other. This is how it was that he was left without one and without the other: he didn’t get to one because it wasn’t there; to the other because it was carried away by the current”.

¹⁹ *Cena*, Utet, pp. 454–456 = BL, pp. 49–51.

Grenze vom Tod und Leben: denn im Tode, im Aufgeben der individuellen Daseinsform, wird erst die eigentliche Wahrheit und Universalität des Lebens selbst erfasst”²⁰.

Death by Kiss

The *furioso*, who by turning his attention towards himself “retreats as much as possible to unity, withdraws as much as possible into himself”²¹, can detach himself from material cares enough to welcome “the arrows of Diana or Phoebus”²², or the light that shines in nature and perhaps thus arriving at that “Anschauung der Welt sub specie aeterni”²³, when “everything looks as one, no longer sees by distinctions and numbers... He sees Amphitrite, the source of all numbers, of all species, of all reasons, which is the Monad, true essence of the being of all; and if he does not see it in its essence... he sees it in his parentage which is similar to him, which is his image: because from the monad which is the divinity, proceeds this monad which is nature, the universe, the world; where it is contemplated and reflected like the sun in the moon”²⁴.

This theophanic moment²⁵, in which immanence fades into transcendence and vice versa, coincides with that modification in the contemplating subject, which Bruno indicates metaphorically as the “death of the soul” and symbolically with the tearing apart of Actaeon by his dogs.

In order to attain the vision of Diana, the subject must gradually detach himself from the “snares of care”, or rather from a will bounded to material objects, and ascend “by virtue of contemplation... above the horizon of natural affections”. “At that time [the soul] conquered by high thoughts, as if dead to her body, aspires to high”²⁶.

The philosopher here calls ‘death’ the detachment from sensual appeals and the affections connected to them. It is the first of the meanings given by Bruno to the dismembering of Actaeon: “Here his great dogs and many kill him: here his life ends according to the mad, sensual, blind and fantastic world; and he begins to live intellectually”²⁷.

However, the symbol of Actaeon’s death has a further nuance in Bruno’s writing. The transcendence of the sensual self is also indicated with the biblical image of *death by kiss* (*mors osculi*), which here comes to signify the particular gnoseological quality of the contemplative act, in which the subject establishes an immediate relationship of such simplicity with the object, as to be beyond the very distinction between subject and object. Upon reflection, this moment appears as the achievement of a condition of identity, a contact in which the subject,

²⁰ Cassirer, E. Op. cit., S. 198–199.

²¹ *Furori*, Utet, p. 657 = BL, p. 315.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 671 = p. 341.

²³ Wittgenstein, L. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung*. Frankfurt am Main, 2003, prop. 6.45.

²⁴ *Furori*, Utet, pp. 696–697 = BL, p. 393.

²⁵ Leinkauf, T. “Metaphysische Grundlagen in Brunos ‘De gli eroici furori’”, *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, 2005, Anno 11, No. 1, p. 197 f., and Beierwaltes, W. *Denken des Einen: Studien zur neuplatonischen Philosophie und ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte*. Frankfurt am Main, 1985, S. 428.

²⁶ *Furori*, Utet, p. 596 = BL, pp. 193–201.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 579 = p. 159.

as if swooning, lives entirely in his object: “The death of the soul, which by Kabalists is called ‘death by kiss’... by others it is called ‘sleep’... for being dead in itself and alive in the object”²⁸.

The infinite tension of the philosophical hunt breaks down in an instant of ecstatic union, in which the subject has a dazzling revelation of consubstantiality with the world thus contemplated. The subject comes to the awareness that that same “soul of all souls”, which forms and vivifies nature, forms and vivifies himself.

In being prey to his own dogs, Actaeon discovers that the path of ultimate knowledge does not consist in a movement away, towards realities external to the self, but in a silent recollection in himself, in the effort to find contact, identity with the One deep inside one’s mind.

In a passage of the *Furori* Bruno²⁹ compares Diana with the image of Amphitrite, wife of Poseidon and queen of the sea: he calls her “the source of all numbers, of all species, of all reasons... the true essence of everyone’s being”³⁰.

In the *Lampas Triginta Statuarum* Bruno compares individual souls to an innumerable multiplicity of fragments of a single large shattered mirror. But, he continues, if “again, all the parts unite in a single mass, one will be the mirror, one the shape, one the soul, so if all the sources, all the rivers, all the lakes, all the seas converge in a single ocean, one will be Amphitrite”³¹.

The great hunter, in the contemplation of nature as the unity of universal life, obtains the revelation that behind the appearance of fragmentation in multiplicity there is a single omnipresent soul, inhabiting and forming everything from within, including Actaeon himself.

The *death by kiss*, the culmination of the philosophical hunt, represents the ineffable moment in which the subject becomes so present and close to what is most profound in himself and in the world, that he “loses his being like a drop of water that vanishes into the sea”³².

In a passage from the *Furori*, Bruno distinguishes empirical knowledge, the “hunt of particular things” in which “the hunter comes to capture other things for himself, absorbing them with the mouth of his own intelligence”, from the philosophical quest of the One, inasmuch as in the latter he comprehends so much that he is necessarily still comprehended, absorbed, united”³³.

The truth is a “fleeting and savage prey” because it escapes the grip of the subject who claims to grasp it only intellectually, without exposing himself entirely to this enterprise.

But the hunt of the *furioso* requires sacrifice. The sacrifice of the more general distinction: the separation between subject and object, on which both identity and individuality of the cognitive subject are based, as well as “all the other species of hunt that one makes of particular things”³⁴.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 583 = p. 163.

²⁹ “Nolan” is a common way of referring to Giordano Bruno, as he was born in the Italian city of Nola, not far from Naples.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 658 = p. 317.

³¹ My translation. For the latin text: Bruno, G. *Opera latine conscripta*, Vol. III. Neapoli; Florentiae, 1891, p. 60; Bruno, G. *Opere Magiche*. Milan, 2000, pp. 1056–1059.

³² *Furori*, Utet, p. 682 = BL, p. 365.

³³ Ibid., p. 695 = pp. 391–393.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 695 = p. 391.

Empirical knowledge – where by this term we mean in a broad sense the knowledge of everything that is a possible object of experience – knows by thinking the empirical intuitions in schemes which make the object knowable and therefore recognizable. This knowability and recognizability of an object presupposes the ‘subject-object’ form, within which a type of intentional and transitive relationship can be maintained³⁵. But in the search for what cannot be the object of any possible experience, and by definition always exceeds any distinction, this very general form of knowing is questioned.

The *psychagogical* force of love, which makes knowing possible by assimilating to what is known, culminates in the absorption, inclusion, and union of the subject with the thought divinity: “To see the divinity is to be seen by it”³⁶.

Bruno describes this movement as a sacrifice, which deeply involves the individual and requires from him the availability to intense physical, emotional and intellectual suffering.

It therefore requires a more intense love than any *filautia*, a term with which Bruno designates self-love and the instinct of self-preservation³⁷.

We are faced with a model of knowledge that imposes on the subject an existential, radical choice.

Bruno’s language communicates the conviction and experience of this choice, expressing the hunt with a language that communicates both the drama and the enthusiasm for the beauty of the ascent.

Love, which “the loved thing converts into the lover” is represented as a fire, since “it is powerful in converting all those simple and compound others into itself”³⁸. Like fire, it illuminates and transforms into light, but destroys the form of individuality by transforming it into the unity and strength of the flame.

The *furioso* is aware of the painful and ultimately destructive nature of his uncompromising love of divinity. Unlike what happens for other entities, aimed at self-preservation, he consciously faces the “peril of death” that his hunt entails, which causes him “to die for his studious affection before all other things”³⁹.

To describe this exceptional contemplative experience, Bruno uses the image of the *mors osculi*: the death of the soul ‘kissed’ by God⁴⁰.

In *Pagan mysteries in the Renaissance*, Edgar Wind dedicates a chapter to “Amor as a god of death”, observing how a vision of love closely related to the theme of death was widespread in the Italian Renaissance. Death understood as a sign of the abandonment of imperfect things in the ascent towards the more perfect ones, or as a sign of divine favor, or even as an initiation into union with God.

The sacrifice of the *furioso* brings together all these meanings.

³⁵ For any deepening of the most general form of any possible knowledge, I cannot fail to mention the most fundamental of the treatises on the subject: *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, by A. Schopenhauer, in particular book I.

³⁶ Meister Eckhart, “Sermon 12: Qui audit me”, in: Meister Eckhart, *I Sermoni*. Milan, 2002, p. 172.

³⁷ Bruno, G. “De vinculis”, in: G. Bruno, *Opere Magiche*. Milan, 2000, p. 470–471 (art. XIII).

³⁸ *Furori*, Utet, p. 534 = BL, p. 77.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 633 = p. 269.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 666 = p. 333.

Wind recalls how Lorenzo de' Medici, in a commentary on his sonnets, speaks of love arguing "the principle of amorous life proceeds from death, because whoever lives in love dies before other things"⁴¹.

The ascent of the *furioso* is a death of this kind, a continuous and progressive death: the more the absolute object is loved, the less the subject lives in other things, up to the moment of *death by kiss*, in which the subject also dies in itself, to live for an instant completely in the object.

The love from which such a death proceeds is γλυκύπικρον, bittersweet: "Love is called bitter by Plato, and not wrongly because death is inseparable from love. And Orpheus also called love γλυκύπικρον, that is *dulce amarum*, because love is a voluntary death. As death it is bitter, but being voluntary it is sweet"⁴².

In the *Symposium*, Plato speaks of the ennobling effect of love, under which lovers give evidence of sacrifice for the good of their loved ones, even at the cost of their own lives.

In the *Commentary on a love song*, Pico takes up these Platonic passages, recalling "the example he [Plato] brought up of Orpheus, of whom he says that, desiring to go and see his beloved Eurydice, he did not want to go to her though death... but he tried to get to her alive, and therefore Plato says that he could not achieve the real Eurydice, but could only find a shadow and a ghost of her"⁴³.

Pico implicitly states that one cannot attain wisdom without being willing to sacrifice oneself. Orpheus, who tried to recover his Eurydice alive, had to lose her, finding only a ghost. Only by accepting self-sacrifice, 'death', can the subject aspire to wisdom.

This leads us to the theme of the *hieros gamos*, which, according to the opinion reported by Wind, defines an ecstatic union with God, which the neophyte of the pagan mysteries would have experienced as an initiation into death⁴⁴.

The ecstatic union with God, coinciding with the 'death' of the subject, is expressed by Bruno in the *Furori* with the biblical image of death by kiss, or *mors osculi*, which had a certain diffusion in the Italian Renaissance.

The verse I, 1 of the *Canticum canticorum* (*Song of Solomon*) "Osculetur me osculo oris sui" has been interpreted over the centuries as a metaphor of individual death in contact with the divine, a moment of fracture of the limits inherent in the human condition, which entails at the same time death and supreme bliss.

The theme of the *mors osculi* had been introduced into the philosophical reflection of the Renaissance by G. Pico della Mirandola's *Comment on a love song composed by Girolamo Benivieni*, but it had a long tradition behind it – albeit non linear in its interpretations.

Solomon's *Song of Songs* opens with the longing voice of a woman "Oh, if He would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth". The voice of this soul ready for union was initially interpreted as a poetic image of the mutual love between God and Israel. The theme of the death of the righteous was subsequently associated with the hope of the kiss, read as a divine kiss.

Death by divine kiss thus becomes a sign of a particular favor, a mark of grace given to the saints. In a series of medieval legends known as the *Peçirat*

⁴¹ Lorenzo de' Medici, *Commento sopra alcuni de' suoi sonetti* (Simioni), I, pp. 24 f. See Wind, E. *Pagan mysteries in the Renaissance*. Oxford, 1980, p. 157.

⁴² Ficino, *De amore*, II, VIII, *Opera*, p. 1327. See Wind, E. *Op. cit.*, p. 161.

⁴³ Pico della Mirandola, G. "Commento sopra una canzone d'amore", in: G. Pico della Mirandola, *De Hominis Dignitate, Heptaplus, de Ente Et Uno, e Scritti Vari*. Florence, 1942, pp. 554 ff.

⁴⁴ Wind, E. *Op. cit.*, p. 156.

Moshé (The Departure of Moses) the scene of death by God's kiss is placed at the culmination of a life of holiness⁴⁵. In the *Talmud* it is written that the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron and Miriam died "by the mouth of the Lord"⁴⁶.

Further developments occurred under the influence of Greek philosophy, especially Platonic thought.

It is in Plato that we find the distinction between natural, physical death, followed by the decomposition of the body, and death understood as an exceptional path for the philosopher, who struggles against his own passions to prepare the soul for an encounter with divine wisdom⁴⁷.

In the *Phaedo*, philosophy is presented as a preparation for death, a way of detachment, which purifies the soul and frees it from the ties that keep it bound to the body and to its conservation, thus allowing it to gather within itself.

Those who exercise themselves properly in the pursuit of wisdom exercise themselves for nothing else than to die and be dead... Death is nothing other than the fact, for the soul, of being separated from the body... The soul of the one who seeks wisdom despises the body and runs away from it, seeking to be alone with itself... Purification... consists in separating the soul from the body as much as possible, enclosing it alone with itself... gathering it and reuniting it, making it dwell, as far as possible, now and in the future, alone with herself and as if freed from the bonds of the body. Now this, the detachment and separation of the soul from the body, is death⁴⁸.

As Socrates says, we are dealing here with a "practice of death"⁴⁹ or rather with an effort of progressive detachment of the mind from the bonds with the body, to concentrate it more and more on the thought of the One.

In Hellenistic Judaism these ideas were introduced by Philo of Alexandria, who teaches to "purge the soul from its passions"⁵⁰, and in a commentary on *Leviticus* 10, 1–2 tells that the sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, "died in order to live, receiving eternal life... in exchange for mortal life"⁵¹.

An early Jewish Neoplatonist, Isaac Israeli, commented on the *Talmud* referring to the authority of Plato: "Plato said that philosophy is a zeal, a struggle and a commitment to death... By saying 'commitment to death' the wise man understands it in the sense of killing bestial lusts and desires"⁵².

In the *Guide for the Perplexed* Maimonides places death by divine kiss as the culmination of the intellectual ascent to God: "The teachers said, in relation to the deaths of Moses, Aaron and Miriam, that all three died from a kiss. <...> To define the understanding reached in a state of intense and passionate love for

⁴⁵ Cfr. Fishbane, M. *The kiss of God. Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism*. Seattle; London, 1994, p. 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁷ See: Kantor, V. *Dostoevskij in dialogo con l'Occidente*. Venezia, 2022, pp. 103–122, where the author starting from Platonic thoughts on 'philosophical death' develops a literary itinerary that combines European and Russian classical literature.

⁴⁸ Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a–67b.

⁴⁹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 67e: Plato says *apothnēskēin meletōsi*.

⁵⁰ Philo, *De specialibus legibus* I, 48, 257, quoted from Colson, F. (ed. & tr.) *Philo*, Vol. 2. Cambridge, 1929, p. 502.

⁵¹ Filone, *De fuga et inventione*, 59. See Fishbane, M. *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁵² Fishbane, M. *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

Him... they call it 'kiss', in accordance with the verse 'Oh, if he kissed me with kisses from his mouth!'"⁵³.

Ascetic love for God is understood as an intellectual progression that can come into contact with the divine. This contact is symbolically represented with a kiss, through which one dies according to the body to be reborn in contact with God. The exegetical tradition is gradually defining itself in peripatetic terms of a contact of the individual intellect with the agent intellect.

Moses Ibn Tibbon interpreted verse I, 1 of the *Song* as an indication that "the adherence of the human soul to the Separate Intellect is possible"⁵⁴. Isaac Ibn Latif asserts that the adherence of the human intellect to the active intellect takes "the form of the kiss"⁵⁵.

By another author, R. Isaac of Acre, contact with God by kiss is also described as an absorption, a being 'swallowed' by the Divine. The soul struggles to unite with God, and in the contact is devoured. Rabbi Isaac further describes this contact as a 'sinking' in the ocean of divinity⁵⁶.

But it was through the work of Rabbi Menahem Recanati that the 'death by kiss', as an image of the separation of the soul from the body, entered the Christian Kabbalah of the Renaissance, also influencing Pico della Mirandola.

Pico himself, with his *Comment on a love song composed by Girolamo Benivieni*, would have introduced the theme of the *mors osculi* into Renaissance philosophical literature. Here he writes: "And because the wise kabbalists want many of the ancient fathers in this rapture of intellect to be dead, you will find among them to be dead of *binsica*, which in our language means death by kiss...; it is when the soul in the intellectual rapture unites itself so much with separate things that it abandons the body... This is what our divine Solomon in the *Canticum* of him desiring exclaims: 'Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth'"⁵⁷.

According to a syncretism inherent to him and in any case already present in the Jewish exegetical tradition, Pico interprets the death by kiss as the highest moment of the entire Platonic erotic ascent. From a more properly Christian perspective, Valerian in the *Hieroglyphica* explains that "there are many types of death, but the most appreciated and praised... is this: when those... who long for God and wish to be united with him... are raptured into heaven and released from the body by means of a death which is the deepest sleep; thus Paul longed to die when he said, 'I long to dissolve and be with Christ'. This type of death was called a 'kiss' by symbolic theologians, and of it Solomon also seems to have spoken when he said in the *Song of Songs*: 'Osculetur me osculo oris sui'"⁵⁸.

In *Furori* the 'morte di bacio' (*mors osculi*) is distinguished by its different metaphysical background. Indeed, Bruno explicitly excludes that the soul turns to a divine sphere separated from the worldly horizon⁵⁹.

The suffered *psychomachia* of the *furioso* does not lead towards "separate things", as in Pico, nor to being "raptured into heaven", as Valeriano imagines,

⁵³ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III, 51. Also Fishbane, M. Op. cit., p. 40.

⁵⁴ Fishbane, M. Op. cit., p. 27.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

⁵⁷ Pico della Mirandola, G. *Commento sopra una canzone d'amore*, pp. 557 ff.

⁵⁸ Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica*, fol. 430, in: Wind, E. Op. cit., p. 154.

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, F. *Also sprach Zarathustra*. München, 1999, S. 35.

but represents an ascent towards the “best part of oneself”, in the very depth of the inner man, called by Bruno now mind, now *synderesis* or spirit⁶⁰.

Bruno tends to express the ascent movement of the soul towards the One in dramatic terms. This produces a “disruption” in the soul, a torment, a constant and passionately suffered “inhaling” which leads to “expiring”: in the moment of maximum unification, the subject is “torn to pieces” by his own thoughts, which, depicted as dogs, tear it apart with “raw and fierce bites”.

As Edgar Wind observes, the use of depicting extreme moments of metaphysical and spiritual thought with dramatic images is widespread in the Neoplatonic tradition.

In particular, the figure of “dismemberment” is recurrent in the writings of Neoplatonist philosophers⁶¹. The act of creation which takes place through the descent of the One into the many is depicted as a cosmogonic sacrifice, by which the divine power from its original concentration is dispersed into the multiplicity, as if the One were torn to pieces. In this way the myths of the castration of Uranus, the dismemberment of Osiris, Attis and Dionysus are interpreted and symbolically used. Bruno too depicts the descent of the One into the many through a destructive image, that of a shattered mirror which is dispersed into infinite fragments.

Plutarch confirms this philosophical *topos*: “When the god changes and distributes himself into winds, water, earth, stars, plants and animals, they allegorically describe this experience and transformation with the terms ‘laceration’ and ‘dismemberment’. They call him Dionysus, Zagreus, Nichelio, Isodaite, and create allegorical myths in which the transformations described are presented as death and destruction followed by a return to life and rebirth”⁶².

This is an example of that “poetic theology” to which Pico announced his intention to dedicate a book⁶³. The ultimate themes of mysticism, due to their solemnity and sacredness required in the eyes of these ‘symbolic’ theologians to be depicted with dramatic and catastrophic images.

In his *Orationes* Giuliano confirms the need to read these bloody myths in an allegorical way, in the awareness of inserting himself, through their use, in an excellent philosophical tradition: “When I say... ‘cut to pieces’ no one must take this expression in its material meaning... but he must understand this expression in another sense, the one intended by Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry and the inspired Iamblichus”⁶⁴.

Descending along the scale of beings, the One is “torn”. But the descent is followed by the resurrection of the God and his recomposition in the original unity, through the dialectical return of the soul to the One.

Thus Pico speaks of discursive art as a ladder, along which “sometimes we will descend, with titanic violence tearing the one into the many as if it were

⁶⁰ *Furori*, Utet, p. 660 = BL, p. 319.

⁶¹ This ‘drastic’ symbology would have its progenitor in Plato, who in the *Phaedo*, 67c ff. speaks of the need to “recompose” the soul, “divided” throughout the body, in its original unity. According to P. Boyancé (*Culte des Muses chez les philosophes grecs*. Paris, 1937, pp. 83–88) the Neoplatonic allegory of the dismemberment and resurrection of Dionysus-Zagreus originates in the passage from Plato’s *Phaedo* quoted above. See Wind, E. Op. cit., p. 133, n. 18.

⁶² Plutarch, *On the ei of Delphi*, 9 (*Moralia*, 388f–389a). See Wind, E. Op. cit., p. 135.

⁶³ Pico della Mirandola, G. *Commento sopra una canzone d’amore*, pp. 580 ff. (book III, chap. XI, stanza 9).

⁶⁴ Giuliano, *Orationes*, VII, 222a–b. See Wind, E. Op. cit., p. 158, n. 19.

Osiris, and sometimes we will rise again by recomposing the many into one with the strength of Phoebus, like the limbs of Osiris”⁶⁵.

Just as the act of creation was represented by a death, and the dispersion in the manifold as a dismemberment, the resurrection too is symbolized by catastrophic images. Plutarch depicts the return of things to the One as a cosmic conflagration: the god “sets nature on fire and reduces all things to a single semblance”⁶⁶. The act of terrible cannibalism, with which Uranus devours his own children, is thought by Plotinus as a symbol of the return of the many to the One⁶⁷.

Actaeon’s sacrifice in the *Furori* offers a significant example of this tradition: The ascent towards the One, finding contact with it *in interiore homine*⁶⁸ is represented by Bruno through an act of laceration, in which the *furioso* is devoured.

In the violence of this representation we recognize the influence of a widespread symbol in the Italian Renaissance, that of “flaying” as purification, through which the ugliness of the external man is lacerated to reveal the beauty of his inner self.

In the *Symposium* Alcibiades calls Socrates ‘Marsyas’, immediately after having said that he resembled a “figure of Silenus”: these in ancient Greece were a type of images present in the workshops of sculptors, which on the outside showed the appearance of an unpleasant man, but, within, images of gods.

That Alcibiades compares Socrates, who made the Delphic precept “Know thyself” his own, to a Silenus, arouses a certain astonishment. “*Gnoti seautòn*” was in fact the motto of Apollo’s oracle at Delphi, while Marsyas, as Silenus, was a follower of Dionysus, who was condemned by the god to be flayed for having challenged Apollo with the sound of his flute.

Starting from Raphael’s “Apollo and Marsyas”, located in the *Stanza della Segnatura* in the Vatican, Wind proposes some interesting reflections, useful for clarifying Bruno’s “death by kiss”. Socrates, pressing his interlocutor with questions, practiced a maieutic aimed at bringing out the divine knowledge buried under the shell of opinions and inveterate preconceptions.

This, Wind observes, was a cathartic practice, through which “the terrestrial Marsyas was tortured so that the heavenly Apollo might be crowned”⁶⁹. Dialectical practice, philosophy, would therefore amount to torture, a dismemberment necessary to bring out the best part of us. The painting of Raphael discussed by Wind would therefore represent, through the symbols of the coronation of Apollo against the background of the flaying of Marsyas, this sort of “triumph” of philosophy: “The cruelty inflicted on Marsyas by Apollo... expresses the supreme sense of disproportion by which the god attacks the human frame, which is agonized as it succumbs to the divine extasy”⁷⁰.

In fact, Plato himself conceived Socratic philosophy as a practice of purification from the body, to “collect and unite the soul, making it dwell... alone with

⁶⁵ Pico della Mirandola, G. “De Hominis Dignitate”, in: G. Pico della Mirandola, *De Hominis Dignitate, Heptaplus, de Ente Et Uno, e Scritti Vari*. Florence, 1942, p. 116.

⁶⁶ Plutarch, *On the ei of Delphi*, 9 (*Moralia*, 388f–389a). See Wind, E. Op. cit., p. 135.

⁶⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads* V, I, 7.

⁶⁸ Augustine’s Confessions are a constant presence in Bruno’s pages.

⁶⁹ Wind, E. Op. cit., p. 173.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

itself and as if freed from the bonds of the body”⁷¹. Now, this purification, despite Plato’s *Phaedo* referring to the “Sacred Discourses” (*Ierói lógoi*) of the Pythagoreans, does not consist in an asceticism made up of abstinence, fasting, prohibitions and ritual prescriptions, but in the dialectical confutation: “The greatest of purifications is the confutation. Anyone who does not submit to the confutation, even if he were the king of the Persians, being impure in what matters most, must consider himself uneducated in what is most necessary”⁷².

Pico also shows that he has a similar conception of Socratic dialectical practice, capable of freeing man and elevating him to God: “Let us allow ourselves to be carried away by Socratic deliriums: that they place us to such an extent outside our mind, as to place us and our mind in God”⁷³.

These elements all appear at work in the *Furori*’s writing. The ascent of the *furioso* is described as a dialectical struggle, an arduous *psychomachia* with which the subject tries to free himself from the bonds of the “*appulsi contrarii*”, which attack him like an enemy army, hindering him in his path of research.

The end of the ascent is never presented as a peaceful goal, but always with painful images, with symbols of a supreme sacrifice. The *furioso* who pursues his hunt, despite being aware of the difficulties and of the risk it entails, is compared to a moth that approaches the flame in which it will burn alive, to a deer close to the source where it will be pierced by a deadly arrow. Emblems of a child wrapped in flames, of turbulent winds, give the measure of the existential scope of this research, which deeply transforms the *furioso*, involving all his powers in an enterprise in which his whole inner being, intellectual, physical, as well as passional, is at stake.

Anyway, despite the dramatic intensity of the language used, at the height of his own sacrifice, in the instant of *death by kiss* the *furioso* does not receive an exceptional revelation, an unheard-of word that justifies the natural universe.

The fulfillment of Actaeon’s intellectual and erotic hunt doesn’t represent a miraculous event⁷⁴, but a natural revelation that consists in nothing more exceptional than the matured capacity to look at nature with new eyes, with a simple and calm gaze, to which it does not appear loaded with daily cares, as if disfigured by it, but as a perfect and beautiful correlate of such a gaze. It appears as one, intact, suspended in time, shining with a light that is not only sensible, but also manifestation of the divine One present in it, communicating itself in it, through it, with a freedom that inexhaustibly, necessarily, springs from the infinite power of the metaphysical Origin.

The infinity of God and the universe, impossible prey of the philosophical hunt, are now revealed to the purified gaze of those who have been able to place themselves “in the gates of the acquisition of light”⁷⁵, not as a supernatural apparition, but as Diana-Nature: the infinite manifestation and mirror of God’s infinite power and goodness.

⁷¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 64a–67d.

⁷² Plato, *Sophist*, 230d–e.

⁷³ Pico della Mirandola, G. *De Homini Dignitate*, p. 122.

⁷⁴ See Ordine, N. *Op. cit.*, pp. 141 ff.

⁷⁵ *Furori*, Utet, p. 508 = BL, p. 39.

Abbreviations

- BL – Bruno, G. *Œuvres complètes*, T. I–VII, sous la dir. G. Aquilecchia, A. Segonds et al. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1993–1999.
 Utet – Bruno, G. *Opere italiane*, Vol. I–II, a cura di G. Aquilecchia et al. Turin: Utet, 2007.

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Философская смерть и символический язык в “Furori” Джордано Бруно

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В истории философии смерть не только представляла собой конец биологической жизни. В платоновской традиции, особенно в ее плодотворном переплетении с христианской верой, смерть также стала символом кульминации философских усилий, даже самой сути философствования, которое, как сказал Платон в «Федоне», является своего рода упражнением в умирании. В этой статье мы исследуем значение и последствия этой «философской смерти», которая, представляя собой момент глубокого изменения в когнитивном субъекте, также включает в себя изменение в его отношениях с философским дискурсом. Платонизм, христианство, символизм: платонизирующее христианское Возрождение представляет собой исторический момент, в котором эти элементы сочетались уникальным образом. Исследование темы проведено на основе анализа текста Джордано Бруно «О героическом энтузиазме» («De gli eroici furori», 1585), где образ *mors osculi*, со страниц «Песни Песней», на протяжении веков обогатившийся неоплатоническими интерпретациями, стал символом преодоления индивидуальной субъективности и рациональной дискурсивности в интеллектуальном созерцании Единого. В заключение в статье утверждается, что созерцательное молчание и символ не являются чуждыми философской деятельности или даже ее прекращению. Скорее, они могут представлять высший и кульминационный момент интеллектуального и философского усилия, о чем свидетельствует тысячелетняя традиция, сегодня отчасти забытая.

Ключевые слова: смерть, символ, субъект, Один, поцелуй, любовь, Бруно, Ренессанс, Неоплатонизм

Для цитирования: Pirari G. Philosophical death and symbolic language in Giordano Bruno's *Furori* // Философский журнал / Philosophy Journal. 2024. Т. 17. № 4. С. 48–62.