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**SHADOWS OVER SHULAMITH:
GIORDANO BRUNO'S
DE UMBRIS IDEARUM
AND THE SONG OF SONGS**

Abstrakt: *This article focuses on the use of one verse from the Biblical Songs of Songs (2. 3) in central passages of Giordano Bruno's first published book on the art of memory. De umbris idearum [On the Shadows of Ideas] not solely aims at improving mnemonic capacities, it also envisages the preconditions and limits of cognition in Bruno's new infinitist cosmology. Taking relevant scholarly literature on the topic as a point of departure, this contribution presents De umbris in the context of Bruno's philosophy in general; it focuses on Bruno's evocation of Origen's commentary on that passage in the Song of Songs. The article analyzes in detail the reasons for Bruno's subversion of the traditional exegetic tradition that was massively influenced by Origen's spiritualized reading of the Song of Songs. Bruno's misappropriation of the Origen's commentary turns out to be a mise en abyme, a mannerist strategy of representation. It not only reflects the very method that underlies Bruno's art of memory, but is also to be understood as a conscious subversion of exegetic traditions in general.*

Keywords: *Giordano Bruno; biblical exegesis; Origen; art of memory; philosophical anthropology*

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**Stíny nad Šulamit:
De umbris idearum Giordana
Bruna a Píseň písní**

Abstrakt: *Článek pojednává o jednom verši z biblické Písně písní (2,3) v jedné z ústředních pasáží první publikované knihy Giordana Bruna, která pojednává o umění paměti. De umbris idearum [O stínech idejí] neusiluje jen o zlepšení paměťových schopností, ale předjímá také podmínky a hranice poznání v Brunově nové infinitní kosmologii. Tento příspěvek vychází z relevantní sekundární literatury k tomuto tématu a představuje De umbris obecně v kontextu Brunovy filosofie. Soustředí se na Brunovo napodobování Origenova komentáře k této pasáži z Písně písní. Článek detailně analyzuje důvody Brunovy subverze tradiční exegetické tradice, která byla výrazně ovlivněna Origenovým spiritualizovaným čtením Písně písní. Brunovo zcizení Origenova komentáře se nakonec ukazuje jako mise en abyme, manýristická strategie reprezentace. Ta jen odráží vlastní metodu, která tvoří základ Brunova umění paměti, ale která se dá chápat také jako vědomé rozvracení exegetických tradic obecně.*

Klíčová slova: *Giordano Bruno; biblická exegeze; Origenes; umění paměti; filosofická antropologie*

Introduction

In 1581, after long and protracted wanderings, Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) reached Paris as a fugitive.¹ Once there, he tried everything in his power to attract the attention of Henri III, the politically weak French king.² In order to gain contact with the monarch and his entourage, Bruno published his first two books in 1582.³ Here, under the protection of Henri III, the philosopher from Nola was beginning to work on what he would later become famous for: an infinitist metaphysics that not only acknowledged Copernicus' heliocentric cosmology but also superseded Aristotelian philosophy. Yet apparently, Bruno's first two published texts do not address these topics directly: the *Candelaio*, which came off a Paris press in 1582, is a salacious (albeit philosophical) Renaissance comedy, whereas *De umbris idearum* is an enigmatic book concerning the theory and practice of the art of memory.⁴

¹ For an account of Bruno's early years, see, for instance, Michele CILIBERTO, *Giordano Bruno*. Roma: Laterza 1990, p. 7–28, or, more recently, Ingrid ROWLAND, *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux 2008. For a concise introduction to Bruno's philosophy, see Paul Richard BLUM, *Giordano Bruno*. Munich: Beck 1999, pp. 38–96 and passim. For Bruno's cosmology, see Paul Henri MICHEL, *The Cosmology of Giordano Bruno*. London: Methuen 1973. For an excellent work on Bruno's science see Hilary GATTI, *Giordano Bruno and Renaissance Science*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1999.

² On this, see Katherine CRAWFORD, *The Sexual Culture of the French Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010, pp. 215–218.

³ Vincenzo SPAMPANATO, *Documenti della vita di Giordano Bruno*. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki 1933, pp. 84–85; Frances A. YATES, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. London: Routledge & Kegan 1964, pp. 190–192, 203–204; Saverio RICCI, *Giordano Bruno nell'Europa del Cinquecento*. Roma: Salerno editrice 2000, pp. 145–155.

⁴ The modern standard edition of the text is, Giordano BRUNO, *De umbris idearum*. Ed. Rita STURLESE. Florence: L.S. Olschki 1991 (see pp. liv–lv for an overview of the secondary literature). For an introduction to the *De umbris*, see BLUM, *Giordano Bruno*, pp. 23–37; on the history of scholarship of the *De umbris* as a magical text, cf. Rita STURLESE, “Per un'interpretazione del *De umbris idearum* di Giordano Bruno.” In: *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Classe di lettere e filosofia*, vol. 22, 1992, no. 3, pp. 945–947 (942–967); GATTI, *Giordano Bruno and Renaissance Science*, pp. 178–185. On the topic of the art of memory in Bruno's work, see Stephen CLUCAS, “Simulacra et signacula. Memory, Magic and Metaphysics in Brunian Mnemonics.” In: GATTI, H. (ed.), *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher of the Renaissance*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2002, pp. 251–272; and *idem*, “Giordano Bruno's *De imaginum, signorum et idearum compositione*. Art, Magic and Mnemotechnics.” *Physis: Rivista internazionale di storia della scienza*, vol. 38, 2001, no. 1–2, pp. 75–98. On the art of memory in general see Lina BOLZONI, *La stanza della memoria*. Torino: Einaudi 1995; Mary J. CARRUTHERS, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990; Frances A. YATES, *The Art of Memory*. London: Penguin 1969. Nicola BADALONI, “Il *De Umbris idearum* come discorso del metodo.” In: *Paradigmi*, vol. 18, 2000, no. 53, pp. 161–196.

The latter text is not only populated by more or less famous gods and heroes of Classical Antiquity and ancient Egypt; *De umbris* also employs biblical imagery to illustrate the intricate aspects of Bruno's gnoseology.⁵ In what follows I shall focus on one such instance, namely the persona of Shulamith from the Solomonic *Song of Songs* – whom Bruno uses to explain one of the central notions structuring the *De umbris*, namely the cognitive potential of shadows for human beings – and also focus on Bruno's subversive reading of Origen's commentary on that passage.

Bruno's theological upbringing

We certainly should not be surprised that Bruno used such imagery, since through his professional training he was steeped in Biblical knowledge. Between 1565 until the beginning of 1576 Bruno had received an education as a priest in the elite school of the Italian south, *Convento San Domenico Maggiore*, the seat of the Holy Roman Inquisition and the school where Thomas Aquinas had famously been teaching towards the end of his life. For more than a decade, Bruno had resided in this monastery under firm surveillance. (In the light of his later heretical philosophical works, one may find it more precise to say that Bruno *endured* his residence there.) The schooling in San Domenico was very exacting: for ten months a year the students had to virtually memorise counter-reformatory orthodox theology, as taught by Thomas Aquinas; prior to this stage, a three-year preparatory course was required in rhetoric (very important for preachers in the order's tradition), courses in Bible interpretation, but also lessons in natural philosophy, logic, and in metaphysics. It took Bruno eight years in order to graduate into a higher course and thus become a "formal student", but he managed to finish his studies in 1575, in the exact time prescribed for them.⁶ This was a remarkable achievement, and was in all probability also due to Bruno's prodigious memory. He was trained in the techniques of *ars memoriae*, which had been traditionally cultivated in the Dominican order. The friars used this art not only in order to learn sermons by heart, but also as a form

⁵ For a discussion of these lists, see YATES, *Art of Memory*, pp. 215–219, SURLESE, "Interpretazione," p. 951–954 on Bruno's sources see now Ornella POMPEO FARACOVI, *Lo specchio alto. Astrologia e filosofia fra Medioevo e prima età moderna*. Pisa: Fabrizio Serra 2012.

⁶ Michele MIELE, "L'organizzazione degli studi dei Domenicani di Napoli al tempo di Giordano Bruno." In: CANONE, E. (ed.), *Giordano Bruno. Gli anni napoletani e la 'peregrinatio' Europea*. Cassino: Università degli studi 1992, pp. 29–50.

of spiritual exercise, in which the structure of the entire and divine creation is to be memorized (naturally, with a homiletic purpose).⁷ One may thus say that Bruno fitted perfectly into this community and that in the light of his achievements he was destined for at least a respectable or even prestigious career as a professor in that order. But things took a different course: shortly after being ordained as a priest in 1575, Bruno fled to Rome in February 1576, in order to escape investigation for heresy.

The context and content of *De umbris*

Ostensibly and superficially, *De umbris idearum* describes a mnemonic system that enables the recollection of foreign words or abstract systems of classification.⁸ To this end, *De umbris* teaches a method for memorizing a mental grid of abstract spaces, then populating these imaginary *loci* with striking images (*imagines*), thus constructing a mental structure which accordingly allows the master of this art to link the content he wishes to these memorized places and images.⁹ As *imagines* Bruno employs ancient celestial gods, Greek and Egyptian alike, apparently derived from what was perhaps the most famous encyclopaedia of magic ever – Agrippa von Netetsheim's *De occulta philosophia*. Moreover, the title of Bruno's text, *On the Shadows of Ideas*, seems to have been borrowed from a medieval book of magic ascribed to Solomon and mentioned to by Cecco d'Ascoli. All this led Frances Yates to believe that *De umbris* is intended to be a magical *clavis* for memorizing the structure of the entire universe in the form of powerful and mantically charged images. In a series of influential publications, Yates maintained that this mental state was meant to put a master in the art of memory into a position for acting upon the universe: "Bruno is transferring such operations

⁷ YATES, *Art of Memory*, pp. 197, 200–203. Clucas (CLUCAS, "Imaginum compositione", p. 93) contends that Bruno's mnemonics deals with images, signs and that the "art does not consist simply in a rational understanding, but in a practical *experience* of the structures of universal reality, the operator enacts or performs his belief in the unity of the cosmos." On the contemplative aspects of Bruno's art of memory, see Stephen CLUCAS, "Amorem, artem, magiam, mathesim: Brunian Images and the Domestication of the Soul." *Zeitsprünge*, vol. 3, 1999, no. 1, pp. 19–22.

⁸ STURLESE, "Per un'interpretazione," p. 955

⁹ Bruno (BRUNO, *De umbris*, p. 74) even claims that he no longer requires the material *loci*: "Nobis autem cum datum est illam invenisse, et perfecisse [sc. artem illam], nec locis materialibus – verificatis scilicet per sensus exteriores – ultra non indiguimus, nec ordini locorum memorandorum ordinem adstrinximus, sed puro phantasiae architecto innixi, ordini rerum memorandarum locorum ordinem adlignavimus."

within, applying them to memory by using the celestial images as memory images, as it were harnessing the inner world of the imagination to the stars, or reproducing the celestial world within.”¹⁰ Rita Sturlese has firmly criticized this interpretation, and – importantly – has demonstrated that these images or icons have an arbitrary character.¹¹

Yet even Sturlese is aware that *De umbris* is more than a schoolboy’s manual to train the memorization of difficult words:¹² many other scholars, for instance, Michele Ciliberto or Pietro Secchi, have shown that *De umbris* evidences a close connection between theology, metaphysics and gnoseology.¹³ Ciliberto has emphasized the centrality of the motif of the shadow in Bruno’s philosophy in general.¹⁴ To complicate things further, Bruno also incorporated the ancient combinatory art of the Franciscan Raimundus Lullus (1235–1316) into his mnemonics.¹⁵ This *ars combinatoria* fitted well into the tradition of a monastic mnemonics, for Lullus had designed his art in order to explain how the manifold creation had emerged from the combination of a few and divine principles, *Bonitas, Magnitudo, Eternitas, Potestas, Sapientia, Voluntas, Virtus, Veritas, Gloria*. Lullus visualizes these metaphysical powers as letters, namely BCDEFGHIK, which he arranges in a maximum of three concentric and mobile circles: by moving them against each other according to a combination of these limited and basic

¹⁰ YATES, *Art of Memory*, p. 212; see also Alessandro G. FARINELLA, “Giordano Bruno: Neoplatonism and the Wheel of Memory in the *De Umbris Idearum*.” *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 55, 2002, no. 2, p. 609 (596–624).

¹¹ STURLESE, “Per un’interpretazione,” p. 955 [author’s translation]: “The units of expression which are employed in the five wheels taken for themselves, one by one, are not really ‘icons’, which are tied to a relationship of similitude that is indicated by them; therefore, they are not magical, or amulets: they are arbitrary signs.” For a discussion of the arbitrary character of words and their historicity, in Bruno, see Nicoletta TIRINNANZI, *Umbra naturae. L’immaginazione da Ficino a Bruno*. Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura 2000, pp. 253–258, 279–280.

¹² STURLESE, “Per un’interpretazione,” p. 956–958, calls the *De umbris* a “generatore linguistico” and a manual for “sperimentazione mentale” which has an “aspirazione pratico-operativa” leading to a “operosità prammatica”.

¹³ Michele CILIBERTO, *Introduzione a Bruno*. Bari: Laterza 1996, p. 30, Pietro SECCHI, “Elementi di teologia nel *De umbris idearum*.” In: *Bruniana et Campanelliana*, vol. 8, 2002, no. 2, p. 431 (431–447); see also Rita STURLESE, “Introduzione.” In: Giordano BRUNO, *De umbris idearum*. Florence: L.S. Olschki 1991, pp. lxi-lxiv.

¹⁴ Michele CILIBERTO, *La ruota del tempo. Interpretazione di Giordano Bruno*. Roma: Editori riuniti 1986, p. 66.

¹⁵ Bruno seems to have even claimed he understood the Lullian art better than its inventor did, cf. YATES, *Art of Memory*, p. 207.

principles, the entire universe is created. No wonder, therefore, that Lullus considered his system also as a tool for invention.¹⁶ In order to be able to transcribe and to memorize all words in the Greek, Latin and Hebrew languages, Bruno increases the number of Lullus' wheels by two and employs 750 fields.¹⁷

Bruno used this scheme for organizing memory – and he was acutely aware of the link between the *ars combinatoria* and cosmology, as well as his (not quite orthodox) Christian theology.¹⁸ The mutability of the memory images within a natural memory indicates the universal mutability (*vicissitudo*) of all things.¹⁹ The fact that these myriad and unstable forms can be memorized by means of a few principles points to a central tenet in Bruno's philosophy: every composite detail is connected to the whole, and each (unstable) individual reflects the totality of being, just as the fragments of a shattered mirror reflect everything, albeit in a fragmented and distorted form: *in umbra*.²⁰ Accordingly, *omnia in omnibus* is one of Bruno's watchwords²¹ as well as *omina ex omnibus*: for the art of memory, this means that the human mind is capable of signifying everything by means of everything.²² Bruno's other central axiom is, in Michele Ciliberto's brilliant formulation,

¹⁶ See, for instance, Raimundus LULLUS, *Ars brevis*. Hamburg: Meiner 1999. For a useful introduction to the *ars combinatorial*, cf. Anita TRANNINGER, *Müheleose Wissenschaft. Lullismus und Rhetorik in den deutschsprachigen Ländern der frühen Neuzeit*. München: Fink 2001, pp. 113–124 and *passim*.

¹⁷ YATES, *Art of Memory*, pp. 206–209. STURLESE, "Introduzione," p. lvi-lxi.

¹⁸ TIRINNANZI, *Umbra naturae*, p. 280 [author's translation]: "The magical and divinatory techniques which are developed by the savants at different times and in different places reflect the inimitable ways in which each civilization contracts in itself the shadow of this living *umbra*, which is the universe. As such magic and divine science are rooted in memory, in the capacity to constantly guard and to enlarge the systems that reproduce, in our inner lives, the actual forms of life. Once more the motif of diligence emerges here which allows for human beings to emulate the works of nature."

¹⁹ On the topic of *vicissitudo*, see the wonderful introduction by Miguel Ángel GRANADA, *La reivindicación de la filosofía en Giordano Bruno*. Barcelona: Herder 2005, pp. 245–258; Maria Elena SEVERINI, "Vicissitudine e tempo nel pensiero di Giordano Bruno." In: MEROI, F. (ed.), *La mente di Giordano Bruno*. Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 2004, pp. 225–258; and Severini's edition and presentation of Loys LE ROY, *De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l'univers*. Paris: Classiques Garnier 2014.

²⁰ CILIBERTO, *Introduzione a Bruno*, p. 45.

²¹ With regard to the *De umbris*, see STURLESE, "Per un'interpretazione," pp. 961–962; FARINELLA, "Giordano Bruno: Neoplatonism and the Wheel of Memory," p. 606.

²² BRUNO, *De umbris*, p. 32, and Rita STURLESE, "Arte della natura e arte della memoria in Giordano Bruno." *Rinascimento*, vol. 40, 2000, pp. 134–137 (123–141).

ut pictura philosophia.²³ Since the memory images are of a visual nature, our thinking as embodied human beings must necessarily occur in images. In its ability to combine elements, the productivity of the individual soul imitates the creativity of the world-soul. According to Bruno, this is also the reason why his mnemonic system is not merely an instrument for remembering foreign words, but also a tool for the invention of new things.²⁴

This is an important argumentative step, because it indicates Bruno's tendency to highlight the focal role of the *phantasmata* – the images derived from organs of perception – in all cognitive processes. Bruno thinks that our intellect is incapable of working without these *phantasmata*, which he therefore also uses to organize the natural memory. As Sturlese has shown, *De umbris* offers a tool for visualizing every word in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, in this way transforming words into images. In a later mnemonic work, the *spiritus phantasticus*, the organ that processes and also moulds sensory impressions thus becomes the “sense of senses” and the single mental faculty responsible for all kinds of cognitive processes in the human mind.²⁵ Bruno calls the *phantasmata* “shadows”; in turn, the ontology of the shadow becomes of crucial importance, for man cannot reside in the light, his domain is the shadow.²⁶ Thus (and in salient contrast to what would be expected from a Neoplatonic or Christian metaphysics of light), the shadow in the *De umbris* is not a merely negative concept: as a tracing of divine light,

²³ BRUNO, *De umbris*, p. 75.

²⁴ Lüthi rightly underscores this “[...] analogy between the soul's and the world's capacity to bring about new things through acts of combining basic elements anew, combinatorics being the world's and the soul's act alike.” Christopher LÜTHI, “Centre, Circle, Circumference: Giordano Bruno's Astronomical Woodcuts.” *Journal of the History of Astronomy*, vol. 41, 2010, no. 3, p. 321 (311–327). Sturlese writes: “In other words, Bruno delineates in the *De umbris*, on the level of the theory of conscience, those characteristic traits which will later become the fundamentals of his ontology of nature that are outlined in his *Dialoghi italiani*: namely the idea of the continuous transmutation in the one and infinite universe, and the idea of nature as an inwardly productive principle.” STURLESE, “Per un'interpretazione,” p. 963 [author's translation].

²⁵ On this and the idea that the individual's *spiritus phantasticus* is a figuration of the sun, radiating from a single source, LÜTHY, “Centre, Circle, Circumference,” pp. 223–224; on the concept of *spiritus phantasticus* see Thomas LEINKAUF, “Die epistemische Funktion der ‘imagination’ bei Giordano Bruno. Überlegungen zu *De imaginum compositione*.” In: BREDEKAMP, H. (ed.), *Imagination und Repräsentation: zwei Bildsphären der Frühen Neuzeit*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2010, pp. 29–30 (15–34). Tillmann BORSCHKE, “Denken in Bildern. *Phantasia* in der Erkenntnislehre Giordano Brunos.” In: HIRDT, W. (ed.), *Giordano Bruno*. Berlin: Stauffenburg 1993, pp. 93–106.

²⁶ See for instance SECCHI, “Elementi di teologia,” p. 432 and below.

the shadow is the only available means for obtaining an image of divine truth.²⁷ This positive assessment of the shadow does not exclude the idea that there are more and less useful shadows for organizing the mind – quite on the contrary. Bruno maintains that some “shadows” are more conducive to true cognition, for instance the images of stars, or as Frances Yates would have it: “In fact the star images *are* the ‘shadows of ideas’, shadows of a reality who are nearer to reality than the physical shadows of the lower world.”²⁸ Whether or not Bruno considered the images of his mnemonics as *magical* talismans, *De umbris idearum* turns out to be an eminently philosophical treatise that reconstructs human cognition in terms of images used for organizing the memory.

De umbris may also be seen as an explanation *in nuce* of what Bruno eventually became most famous for: his infinitist heliocentric cosmology. In the Italian *Dialogues* which were to immediately follow *De umbris*, Bruno outlined a new metaphysics, where the absolute power of God is exhausted in the creation of an infinitely large physical universe. Here, he abolishes the important theological distinction between divine *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* in favour of a cosmology where all parts are analogously organised out of one universal matter: forms emerge and disappear from and in this universal matter. The universe consists of de-central, autonomous animated material beings which all mirror the totality of being, because the universe in its totality is an adequate expression of the ineffable godhead. Much of the appeal of Bruno’s later texts is due to how he underscores this aspect of the physical basis for perception and consciousness – a consequence of his infinitism.²⁹ Yet Bruno was acutely aware of the fact that an infinite universe cannot be perceived, since no phantasm corresponds to that infinity: for us, it has no shape. Even so, we are in dire need of such images.³⁰

²⁷ BRUNO, *De Umbris*, p. 24: “Non est umbra tenebrae: sed vel tenebrarum vestigium in lumine.” On a possible source for this, namely Gueric d’Igny who distinguishes between bad (*noxia*) and good shadows (*umbra salubris*) and on the positive *umbra lucis* see Nicoletta TIRINNANZI, “Il Cantico dei Cantici nel *De umbris idearum*.” *Lecture Bruniane. Bruniana et Campanelliana Supplementi Studi*, vol. 3, 2002, no. 1–2, p. 296 (287–306).

²⁸ YATES, *Art of Memory*, p. 213.

²⁹ Cf. BRUNO, *De umbris*, p. 70.

³⁰ All these structures, as Secchi (SECCHI, “Elementi di teologia,” p. 440–441) rightly remarks, are artificial, man-made and therefore not natural: “Now the Golden Chain which connects earth to heaven, what is subject to sensible perception to intellection, is the work of an artist, or of man who wants to know, and not the work of nature. One could say that the Golden Chain is a way to order the content and not the structure of the content itself.” *Ibid.*, p. 441 [author’s translation].

This creates an explicit tension within Bruno's system: what we are capable of perceiving – and thus thinking – is always different from what is true. Bruno believed that a memory is reliable only if and when it is organized in ways that reflect the actual structure of nature; such a memory also induces a state of mind in which the entire universe can be perceived in the correct way, as it was designed by its divine creator. Again, this idea is not new: it is actually reflected in one of the favourite axioms of Albertus Magnus, one of Bruno's important sources, *opus naturae est opus intelligentiae* (that the work of nature is the work of the intellect).³¹

Whether considered as magical talismans or as mere referents, the “shadows of the ideas” are the sole means for attaining a certain limited knowledge of the cosmos – a knowledge bound to be inadequate, since these “shadows” cannot reproduce the floating character of life.

Bruno accordingly describes the shadow as a “hide-out” for the light: *lucis vestigium, lucis particeps, lux non plena*.³² While deceptive, the shadows are our ways of connecting to and organizing the world; thus, the art of manipulating shadows of ideas consists in manipulating what is admittedly a deception. As we shall presently see, Bruno does not believe that such deceptions are without power (a shadow may have the *efficaciam et actum veritatis*).³³ In the absence of other means towards attaining a vision of truth, Bruno thus recommends the method of a Promethean trickster – a sophist, as it were – who by means counterfeiting evidence achieves his or her goals.³⁴ In that vein of thought, Bruno contends that shadows allow us to perceive in a clothed form what we cannot see when the same things are laid bare.³⁵ To illustrate this gnoseological context Bruno quotes a Biblical

³¹ Cf. Aristoteles, *Gen. animalium*, II, 1, 704b11–18. On this topic, see James A. WEISHEIPL, “The Axiom *opus naturae est opus intelligentiae* and Its Origins.” In: MEYER, G. - ZIMMERMANN, A. (eds.), *Albertus Magnus – Doctor Universalis*. Mainz: Mathias Grünewald 1980, pp. 441–463.

³² BRUNO, *De umbris*, p. 25; SECCHI, “Elementi di teologia,” p. 433.

³³ BRUNO, *De umbris*, p. 25

³⁴ Sergius KODERA, “Introduction to *Cabala del asino pegaseo*.” In: Giordano BRUNO, *Cabala del asino pegaseo. Kabala des pegaseischen Pferdes*. Hamburg: Meiner 2008, pp. lxxxiv–xc.

³⁵ BRUNO, *De umbris*, p. 37. On a possible source for this idea in Bernard Clairvaux, see TIRINNANZI, “Cantico dei Cantici,” p. 302. See also *ibid.*, p. 303 [author's translation]: “In this sense [...] the relationship between ‘nudum’ and ‘involutum’ refers to the asymmetric relationship between finite and infinite, between eternity and transitoriness. In the course of our earthly lives, man grasps only the data of natural science in their ‘nude’ form. Absolute truth, on the contrary, remains approachable only under the veil of symbols.”

verse in the Solomonic *Song of Songs*: (2: 3 b) “I sat under the shadow of him that I desired.”³⁶

Shulamit under the shadow

Hominis perfectionem, et melioris quod in hoc mundo haberi possit adeptionem insinuans Hebraeorum sapientissimus; amicam suam ita loquentem introducit. SUB UMBRA ILLIUS QUEM DESIDERAVERAM SEDI. Non enim est tanta haec nostra natura ut pro sua capacitate ipsum veritatis campum incolat, dictum est enim. Vanitas homo vivens. Universa vanitas, et id quod verum est atque bonum, unicum est atque primum. Quî autem fieri potest ut ipsum cuius esse non est proprié verum, et cuius essentia non est proprié veritas; efficaciam et actum habeat veritatis? Sufficiens ergo est illi atque multum: ut sub umbra boni, verique sedeat. Non inquam sub umbra verî bonique naturalis atque rationalis (hinc enim falsum diceretur atque malum) sed Methaphysici, Idealis, et supersubstantialis: unde boni et veri pro sua facultate particeps efficitur animus, qui et si tantum non habeat ut eius imago sit; ad eius tamen est imaginem: dum ipsius animae diaphanum, corporis ipsius opacitate terminatum, experitur in hominis mente imaginis aliquid quatenus ad eam appulsum habet: in sensibus autem internis et ratione, in quibus animaliter vivendo versamur: umbram ipsam.³⁷

As the most wise of the Hebrews [Salomon] wanted to indicate the highest perfection of man and [in order to show] how to obtain the most perfect attainment of knowledge in this world, he presents his lover, who says: “I have been seated in the shadow of my beloved one.” And indeed our nature is not so powerful as to allow us to remain in the field of truth. For this reason it has been said that “Living man is vain, everything is vain.” (Eccl. I, 2) And what is true and good is the one and first [principle]. Apart from this how can something which is not properly the true and whose essence is not truth, have in the same way actuality and efficacy of the true? But for her [Shulamit] it is sufficient to sit in the shadow of the good and the true. I do not mean in the shadow of the natural and rational true and good (in that way one would be off the mark) but rather in the shadow of the metaphysical, the ideal and the supersubstantial true and good, in which the soul to a degree participates: not in an image of the good and the true, but rather in the image of the true and the good. Therefore the transparency of the

³⁶ For an introduction to that specific topic, see CILIBERTO, *Introduzione a Bruno*, pp. 23–37.

³⁷ BRUNO, *De umbris*, p. 25.

soul in itself, which is limited by the opacity of the body, experiences something of the image in the human mind, every time it is confronted with that image; but in the inner senses and in reasoning, in which we are leading our organic existence, we experience the shadow. [author's translation]

In order to illustrate his doctrine of shadows at the very beginning of the *De umbris*, Bruno employs a bible verse, which also seems to function as one of the memory images discussed above. The context of the biblical verse is as follows: in *Song of Songs* a woman, who is often identified as Shulamith ("little Solomon") is sitting under the shadow of an apple tree which she compares to her beloved, (mostly) identified as Solomon. *Song of Songs*, 2, 3: "Sicut malus inter ligna silvarum,| sic dilectus meus inter filios.| Sub umbra illius quem desideraveram sedi,| et fructus ejus dulcis gutturi meo." (In the King James translation: "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.") Following the strategy outlined in the *De umbris*, Bruno here forges an image out of a text in order to use it for his own ends.³⁸ The *Song of Songs*, its passionate language and descriptions of the beauties of physical love is here employed to emphasize the idea that true cognition is excruciatingly emotional and that it is embodied.³⁹

Shulamith in the ecclesiastical tradition

It is well known that *Song of Songs* has given the exegetes many headaches.⁴⁰ According to modern philological scholarship, it is a collection either of marriage songs, popular love poems, or liturgies for ancient fertility cults of disputed date, and these texts entered probably the Biblical canon only at

³⁸ On the the image character of words, see BRUNO, *De umbris*, p. 75–76.

³⁹ In the years to follow the publication of the *De umbris*, Bruno elaborated this somatic approach, most notably in *De gli eroici furori* (1585).

⁴⁰ For a good overview of these problems and divergent interpretations, see Hugh THOMPSON-KERR, "The *Song of Songs*." In: BUTTRICK, G. A. (ed.), *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*. Vol. 5 (*The Book of Ecclesiastes. The Song of Songs. The Book of Isaiah. The Book of Jeremiah*). New York: Abingdon Press 1956, p. 91 (91–148). For a brilliant contemporary feminist perspective on the text, see J. Cheryl EXUM, "Ten Things Every Feminist Critic Should Know about the *Song of Songs*." In: BRENNER, A. – FONTAINE, C. R. (eds.), *The Song of Songs: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*. Second series. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2000, pp. 24–35.

a very late juncture.⁴¹ In the Jewish tradition, the *Song of Songs* is usually read as a celebration of the reciprocal love between God and his chosen People,⁴² whereas Christian exegesis identifies the relationship between Solomon and his beloved with the love between Christ and his Church and also with the love between Christ and the individual soul.⁴³ In Origen's commentary on the *Song of Songs*, which was highly influential through the entire Latin tradition until the Renaissance, Shulamith became also identified with the Virgin Mary and the immaculate conception.⁴⁴ According to Origen the *Song of Songs* is a marriage song, and also an allegory of the conversion of the pagans (embodied by the female lover) to the true religion of Christ, who is prefigured by Solomon. The woman is identified either with the individual soul or the pagan community whose soul is purified by love for Christ.⁴⁵ In Origen's version, Shulamith is also an allegory of pagan philosophy, which progressed to Mosaic wisdom, and culminated in Christian theology.⁴⁶ Again drawing on Origen's reading, the Christian exegetic tradition connected the biblical verse to a passage in *Luke* 1, 35, which recounts that during conception the Virgin Mary was "adumbrated" (*obumbratus*) by the holy ghost in order to protect her from the full impact of the divine light.⁴⁷ In the commentary tradition the term *obumbratio* is often associated with *vicissitudo*, that is, the constant change to which all things in the world are

⁴¹ THOMPSON-KERR, "Song of Songs," p. 93–95.

⁴² For a typical example with a cosmologic bent and close to Bruno's time, see Leone EBREO, *Dialoghi d'amore*. Bari: Laterza 1929, p. 258.

⁴³ ORIGEN, *Commentaire sur le Cantique des cantiques*. Vol. 1. Paris: Éd. du Cerf 1992, p. 528 (III, 5, 9).

⁴⁴ In spite of the fact that this author was considered heretical, Erasmus edited the text. Angela GUIDI, *Amour et sagesse. Les "Dialogues d'amour" de Juda Abravanel dans la tradition salomonienne*. Leiden: Brill 2011, p. 156; see also TIRINNANZI, "Cantico dei Cantici," p. 288–291.

⁴⁵ In contrast to the Jewish tradition, where the love between Shulamith and God is more reciprocal.

⁴⁶ ORIGEN, *Commentaire*, p. 530–32 (III, 5, 13–15); cf. also TIRINNANZI, "Cantico dei Cantici," p. 292.

⁴⁷ ORIGEN, *Commentaire*, p. 530 (III, 5, 11). And see Bernhard DE CLAIRVAUX, "In natiuitate B. Vergine sermo, x." *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 183, col. 439: "At mater sane eumdem ipsum in splendore non genuit, sed in umbra, nonnisi ea tamen, qua obumbravit Altissimus. Merito proinde canit Ecclesia, non illa quidem Ecclesia sanctorum, quae in excelsis et in splendore est, sed quae interim peregrinatur in terris: *Sub umbra eius quem desideraveram sedi, et fructus gutturi meo* (Cant. II, 3). Lucem quippe meridianam, ubi pascit sponsus, sibi petierat indicari: sed repressa est, et pro plenitudine luminis umbram, pro satietate interim gustum recepit."

being subjected and from which only God is exempt. As we have seen, this is an important topic in Bruno's philosophy.⁴⁸

Bruno's evocation and subversion of Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*

With this theological backdrop in mind, it becomes clear that Bruno must have known Origen's commentary, for Origen says that human life is marked by floating shadows and that Shulamith's *sessio sub umbra* coincides with the highest perfection available to men, which is the prerequisite for the cognition of absolute truth in the life to come.

[E]fficiamur primo in umbra *vitae* et in umbra *veritatis* et *comprehendamus ex parte et in speculo ac in aenigmate* (I Cor, 13, 12), ut post haec, si incedamus per hanc viam quae est Christus, pervenire possimus in hoc ut *facie ad faciem comprehendamus* (I Cor, 13, 12) ea, quae prius in umbra et in aenigmate videramus. Non enim quis poterit ad illa quae vera sunt et perfecta pervenire, nisi prius desideraverit et concupierit in hanc umbram residere. [...] Omnes ergo qui in hac vita sunt, necesse est, umbra quadam esse.⁴⁹

We must first be fashioned in the shadow of the life and in the shadow of the truth, and apprehend in part and in a glass and in a riddle, in order that later on, if we persevere in this way that is Christ, we may be able to achieve the face-to-face apprehension of those things which formerly we had beheld in the shadow and in a riddle. For no one will be able to reach the things that are true and perfect who has not first desired and longed to sit in his shadow. [...] So all who are in this life must of necessity be in the shadow in some sense.⁵⁰

The quote from Origen links the whole episode to the famous dictum in St. Paul and hence to mirror images. Like Origen, Bruno emphasizes the idea that human beings are wholly dependent on shadows in this life.⁵¹ For Christian exegesis, the term *umbra* in this context often assumes the quality

⁴⁸ See, for instance, von Reichersberg (Gerhoch von REICHERSBERG, "Commentarium in Psalmos." *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 193, col. 811/12, pars prima, Ps. 12) who discusses the topic of "vicissitudinis obumbratio."

⁴⁹ ORIGEN, *Commentaire*, p. 532 (III, 5, 15–6)

⁵⁰ ORIGEN, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*. New York: Newman Press 1988, pp.183–184.

⁵¹ TIRINNANZI, "Cantico dei Cantici," p. 291.

of divine protection through faith in Christ.⁵² Yet there is a salient difference between Bruno's and Origen's understanding of the biblical verse: Whereas for Origen Christ is the solution to the problem of knowledge of divine truth (as His revelation will eventually allow for true sighting of the godhead face to face), Bruno precludes that possibility outright. He does concede that the state of Shulamith under the divine shadow is a state of grace: but it is one that is inexorably temporal, an event that may even be out of and beyond time and thus definitively unattainable for human beings.⁵³ Bruno writes:

Umbra in materia seu natura, in naturalibus ipsis, in sensu interno atque externo, ut in motu et alteratione consistit. In intellectu veró, intellectumque consequente memoria est ut in statu. Ideo sapiens ille viraginem supranaturalem et suprasensualem quasi notitiam consequam: sub illius primi veri bonique desiderabilis umbra sedentem inducit. Quae sessio seu status quia in naturaliter degentibus non multum perseverat (mox n. atque statim sensus isti nos insiliunt atque deturbant, ipsique nostri duces phantasmata nos circumveniendo seducunt) sessio illa potius praeterito absoluto vel inchoato, quam praesenti tempore designatur. Dicit. n. sub umbra sedi, vel sedebam.⁵⁴

The shadow in matter or in nature, in the natural things themselves, in the inner and outer senses consists in movement, and in change. But in [the mental faculties] of the intellect and of the memory, which latter follows the intellect, the shadow is at rest. And this is the reason why this wise [Salomon] shows that heroic woman (*virago*), sitting under the shadow of this first and desirable principle, as though she had experienced a supernatural and supersensual cognition. But this state and this sitting is not very durable for living beings, because they are assaulted by disturbing sense-impressions. And hence by surrounding us, these same *phantasmata* which are leading us, seduce us [at the same time]; and therefore this sitting [under the shadow] is indicated as a remote past, or as a conditional past, and not as present, for he says, "I have been seated" or "I sat". [author's translation]

⁵² See, for instance, von Reichersberg, (Gerhoch von REICHERSBERG, "Expositio in Psalmis VIII, (in PS. LXVII)." *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 194, col. 189): "Umbra ergo dicitur gratia, quae ab aestu carnalium concupiscentiarum defendit carnem et a flammam vitiorum spiritualium, ut est ira, superbia, invidia, refrigerat mentem. Fit autem umbra lumine et corpore. Similiter gratia fit verbo et carne. Verbum enim lumen est, caro corpus. [...] Qui quoniam gratiae suae umbra credentes in se protegit a malis et fovet in bonis tanquam gallina congregans pullos suos sub alis protegit a milvo ac fovet calore suo, recte Selmon, id est umbra nominantur."

⁵³ TIRINNANZI, "Cantico dei Cantici," p. 299.

⁵⁴ BRUNO, *De umbris*, p. 29.

Bruno clearly characterizes Shulamith sitting under the shadow of her divine lover as an extraordinary event that occurred in the remote past (as opposed to a future event) and as a *temporal* event (as opposed to an eternal state of bliss). A direct comparison with Origen's *Second Homily* on the *Song of Songs* reveals the difference to Bruno's use of the Biblical verse:

Quam pulchre non ait: "in umbra illius" concupisco, sed: "in umbra illius concupivi" et non: sedeo, sed: sedi. Siquidem in principio non possumus cum eo proprius conferre sermonem, verum in principio, ut ita dicam, quadam maiestatis illius "umbra" perfurimur; unde et in prophetis legitur: "Spiritus faciei nostrae Christus Dominus, cui diximus: in umbra eius vivemus in gentibus "et ab" umbra" ad "umbram" aliam transmigramus; "sedentibus" enim "in regione et umbra mortis, lux orta est iis", ut transeamus ab "umbram mortis" ad umbram vitae. (Lam 4, 20 and Is, 4, 9). Semper istiusmodi sunt profectus, ut in exordio desideret quispiam saltem in virtutum "umbra" consistere. Ego puto ideo et nativitatem Iesu ab "umbra" coepisse et non "in umbra", sed in veritate finitam; "Spiritus" inquit "sanctus veniet super te, et virtus altissimi obumbrabit tibi." (Lc 1, 35) [...] Fac igitur, ut possis capere "umbram" eius et, cum "umbra" fueris dignus effectus, "veniet ad te," ut ita dicam, corpus eius, ex quo "umbra" nascitur; nam "in modico fidelis et in maioribus erit fidelis." (Lc 16, 10)⁵⁵

How lovely is it that she says "Beneath his shadow I desired" and not "beneath his shadow I desire" and not I sit but "I sat"! Indeed, strictly speaking, we cannot converse with Him at first; rather, we enjoy at the beginning what may be called a sort of shadow of His majesty; and it is for that reason that we read also in the prophets: *The breath of your face, the Lord Christ, to whom we said, "Under His shadow shall we live among the Gentiles"* and pass over from one shadow to another; for *to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, to them light is arisen*; so that our passing over is from the shadow of death to the shadow of life. Advances are always on this pattern: a person desires at the outset to be at least in the shadow of the virtues. And I think myself that the birth of Christ also originated *from not in the shadow*, but was consummated in the truth. *The Holy Spirit, it as said, shall come up upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee.* [...] His body, from which the shadow is born, will in a manner of speaking come to you; *for he that is faithful in a little will be faithful also in greater things.*⁵⁶

⁵⁵ ORIGEN, *Homélie sur le cantique des cantiques*. Paris: Éd. du Cerf 1954, pp. 90–91.

⁵⁶ ORIGEN, *The Song of Songs*, pp. 293–294.

In elaborating his doctrine of the shadow Bruno thus makes a precise intertextual reference not only to the *Song of Songs* but also to Origen and the important exegetical tradition he inaugurated. According to Origen's analogical reading of the passage, Shulamith was sitting under the shadow of the Mosaic Law (Solomon); but this shadowy law is to be superseded for once and all by the direct vision made possible through the god-man Christ and his true religion. Bruno not only evokes these ideas, he even seems to embrace Origen's interpretation. Yet he actually subverts this approach: for according to Bruno's reading, Shulamith's temporal and exceptional (or perhaps more accurately, primordial) *sessio sub umbra* is already all there is: the supernatural, super-intellectual divinity is and remains ineffable. Nicoletta Tirinnanzi, who has published a series of texts on these passages in Bruno and in Origen, rightly emphasizes the exceptional character of Shulamith's experience.⁵⁷ She notes that whereas Origen had identified *umbra* with faith, for Bruno, mere faith has no value in attaining knowledge of the absolute: the shadow is a vehicle for the cognition of species, which is an action as opposed to blind faith.⁵⁸

One may ask why Bruno referred to Origen at all. One reason was no doubt that Bruno wanted to present his novel ideas in a garb that appeared less unfamiliar than it really was; another reason would be that by dint of his education, Bruno was steeped in these exegetic traditions. Bruno's evocation of Origen's interpretation thus encompasses a conscious subversion of the original intentions, and is in fact an implicit criticism of Christian theology in general. In the larger context of his later works, this comes as no surprise, for Bruno believed Christ to be a false Mercury, a false prophet, whose revelation was tied to a wholly wrong-headed cosmology. Bruno will expound

⁵⁷ TIRINNANZI, "Cantico dei Cantici," p. 290: "L'insistenza con cui Bruno sottolinea che la 'sessio sub umbra' appartiene all'ambito metafisico e ideale testimonia pertanto come l'immagine della Sulamita sia interpretata, fin dall'inizio, come emblema di una esperienza che non rientra nell'ambito naturale, né si fonda sulle argomentazioni della ragione ma individua l'istante di massima vicinanza tra l'anima del uomo e il 'campum veritatis'."

⁵⁸ BRUNO, *De umbris*, pp. 36–37: "Umbra igitur visum preparat ad lucem. Umbra lucem temperat. Per umbram divinitas oculo esurientis, sitientisque animae caliganti, nuncias rerum species temperat, atque propinat. Ea igitur umbras quae non extingunt: sed servant, atque custodiunt lucem in nobis; et per quas ad intellectum, atque memoriam promovemur, atque perducimur, recognosce." TIRINNANZI, "Cantico dei Cantici," p. 300–301 [author's translation]: "Due to its singularity, the 'sessio' is situated in the remote past, it is the result of an endeavor which strains the highest cognitive faculties to their utmost degree, it is the conquest of a state of perfection that is never definite, [...] the shadow of which Bruno speaks does not transmit to the human soul a trace of the divine light, but it is the vehicle through which these interior 'species' are communicated, which 'announce' the external realities, thus enabling human beings to know the natural world and to modify it."

these and other heretical theses in the *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*, and the *Cabala del cavallo pegaseo*.⁵⁹ By now, Bruno thinks of himself as the prophet of a new religion.⁶⁰ His precise allusions to the Christian biblical exegetic tradition may, therefore, also be read as a deliberate *mise en abyme* of the Christian tradition.⁶¹ For Bruno these exegetes were perhaps and at best an adumbration of his own true teachings. At least sometimes (and in an utterly preposterous pose, one must add) Bruno seems to have considered himself to be the true prophet of a dawning new age: an age in which the true pagan philosophy, now restored to its old lustre by Copernicus (and most importantly by Bruno himself) would return to supersede the erroneous teachings of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.⁶² As Miguel Angel Granada has shown in a similar context, the literary strategy of evocation and concurrent subversion is typical for Bruno, whether he quotes the Bible or other philosophers.⁶³ Hilary Gatti describes this literary strategy as Bruno's *ri-scrittura*, a re-writing of the Bible.⁶⁴ She has shown how Bruno adopts a very similar interpretive freedom in his later Italian dialogues, with the aim of gathering Biblical evidence for his inifitist philosophy.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ KODERA, "Introduction to *Cabala del asino pegaseo*," pp. xxv-xxvi, xlvi-lix.

⁶⁰ YATES, *Giordano Bruno*, p. 312, 345. Cf. Alfonso INGEGNO, *Cosmologia e filosofia nel pensiero di Giordano Bruno*. Florence: La nuova Italia 1978, pp. 26–53.

⁶¹ With respect to Bruno's use of the Bible, Gatti remarks: "To a shattering and traumatic effect, the Bible thus becomes a part of his philosophical discourse, it is integrated in his vision of an infinite universe. In this way, the overcome interpretations are blurred, but also the new ones of the reformers; and, for Bruno, the new philosophy of the infinite universe, becomes the new sacred text." Hilary GATTI, "La Bibbia nei Dialoghi italiani di Giordano Bruno." In: CANONE, E. (ed.): *La filosofia di Giordano Bruno. Problemi ermeneutici e storiografici*. Florence: L. S. Olschki 2003, p. 215 (199–216) [author's translation].

⁶² On this topic, and for similar strategies towards appropriating the work of Copernicus, see Sergius KODERA, "Timid Mathematicians vs. Daring Explorers of the Infinite Cosmos: Giordano Bruno, Literary Self-Fashioning, and *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*." In: NEUBER, W. – RAHN, T. – ZITTEL, C. (eds.), *The Making of Copernicus: Early Modern Transformations of a Scientist and His Science*. Leiden: Brill 2014, pp. 229–250.

⁶³ Miguel A. Granada (Miguel Angel GRANADA, *Giordano Bruno, universo infinito, union con Dios, perfeccion del hombre*. Barcelona: Herder 2002, p. 179) has shown (with many references) that when Bruno mentions authors such as Ficino, Nicolas of Cusa or Copernicus, then this is frequently indicative of a simultaneous dependence and an intellectual rupture with the author in question.

⁶⁴ GATTI, "La Bibbia," p. 199 and *passim*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 203 [author's translation]: "What counts is not any more the interpretation of the text in the light of a series of dogmas which are believed to be objectively true, but rather the truth of the emotional impulse, of the personal search for the sacred, which lends the text its tension." See also *ibid.*, p. 204.

Bruno's Promethean stratagem: *mise en abyme* or the principles of the art of memory at work

Building on these observations, I would like to propose a specific interpretation of this strategy as far as the *De umbris* is concerned. I would like to emphasize that this text not merely discards passive faith and credulity as a true means to attaining truth; Bruno advocates outright a theory of cognition which depends on conscious deception, on the trickster's logic. Bruno presents his interpretive strategy in a typically mannerist mode of expression: in a *mise en abyme*, the *De umbris* reapplies the Promethean strategy of the trickster, who cunningly uses deceptive images – shadows – towards attaining a glance at the truth, to his own text, which is entitled “on the shadows of ideas.”⁶⁶

One must not forget that *De umbris* is a treatise on the art of memory; its method consists in memorizing a series and arraying images in an ordered form. This referential system of arbitrary *loci* and *imagines* may be tied to a content perhaps completely unrelated to the images. A master of the art of memory may thus use the biblical image of Shulamith sitting under the shadow of her lover as what it is: as an *image*, which may be inserted into any series of images in order to remember any given content. This method for structuring memory is itself a manifestation of our capacity for recollection. Yet this does not mean that memory images are *totally* contingent, for in order to be effective they have to be remembered easily, and thus must be striking: this is why the masters of the art of memory frequently recommended the use of erotic images, for instance, women one has made love to.⁶⁷ With the help of these images, one may memorize the gravest, the most

⁶⁶ In that context it is instructive to read what Bruno has to say about the concept of form, that is, the way in which a thing appears to all the senses – see Giordano BRUNO, “Explicatio triginta sigillorum.” In: *Opera latine conscripta*. Vol. II/2. Naples – Florence: Apud Dom. Morano, 1886, p. 202 (121–160): “Figura vero quaedam est non sine qualitate quantitas, non sine quantitate qualitas, sed in quantitate qualitas, non lux, non color, non lucis colorisque vestigium (hanc etenim quandoque tactu iudicamus), non pura quantitas, non pura qualitas, sed ex utraque et in utraque unum. In eius tamen genere per hanc, quae visui per lucem se praesentat, maxime profundorum arcanorumque natura est revelatrix, per figuram inquam visibilem formarum nobis rationes indicat natura. Haec est ignis ille, quem Prometheus a Diis clam surreptum tribuit hominibus, haec est arbor scientiae boni atque mali; ipsa enim est similitudo formae.”

⁶⁷ On the difficulties in using abstract notions, such as “usia, ypostasis, mens” as memory images, see BRUNO, *De umbris*, p. 73. On the use of erotic images see CARRUTHERS, *The Book of Memory*, p. 109: “For the sake of vivid images, unusual ones of the sort the memory can easily fix on he can make use of a sort of human alphabet to indicate the various letters. [Peter

difficult and abstract content.⁶⁸ The cognitive act of recalling purportedly abstract content thus becomes tied to erotic images which have the capacity to arouse strong physical reactions in the individual.⁶⁹ The erotic memory image, viewed from Bruno's perspective, of course testifies to the inexorable presence of the shadow, of the *dissimilar* image in all our cognitive processes and to the emotional character of cognition.

In that sense Bruno's choice of the image of Shulamith's *sessio sub umbra* is more than fitting: for taken at face value, the Biblical verses embody a female voice⁷⁰ who is describing her experience of sexual enjoyment during intercourse with her lover. It is a highly erotic image. If we now go one step back and look at what is done to the *Song of Songs* in Origen's exegesis,⁷¹ we see how the experience of female orgasm (*horribile dictu!*) becomes covered in endless layers of allegorical, tropological and analogical readings that associated the most disembodied concepts of Christian theology with this image. In the process, Shulamith's experience may become virtually anything apart from what it is: namely, the metaphorical description of an intensive somatic experience, an experience described by a female voice not as imaginary but rather as something that actually happened to her. It is marked as an event that happened *in the past*, whereas in Origen's exegesis, Shulamith's gratifying sexual experience with Solomon becomes the stakeholder of a future event, and also becomes a reference to desire – of something that is not present, that has *not* been experienced. Shulamith's orgasm becomes the Virgin's immaculate conception, becomes the Church in her desire for

of Ravenna] even suggests using the forms of enticing women in such a role: illae enim multum memoriam meam excitant." For an example much closer to Bruno's time, see Giovan Battista DELLA PORTA, *Ars Remiscendi. L'arte di ricordare*. Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiane 1996, p. 68 [author's translation]: "If you try out the rules laid down by us, you will also realize how leisurely and clearly one comes to the place where a person has been positioned, which one has made love to or has desired, whereas the other persons allow us to memorize just one word, these will show us one or two entire verses."

⁶⁸ This practice is of course reflected in Bruno's idea that some shadows are more useful in attaining dissimilar images of truth than others.

⁶⁹ On this topic, see Ioan P. COULIANO, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987, pp. xviii, 23, 72, 87.

⁷⁰ I am, of course, not implying that the *Song of Songs* or the passage under consideration is a genuine feminist text.

⁷¹ For a monographic discussion, see J. Christopher KING, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture: The Bridegroom's Perfect Marriage-song*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005. For a sophisticated literary theory of this kind of misreading see Harold BLOOM, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1982, pp. 64, 229, 238 and passim.

Christ, becomes the individual soul's desire for his or her Saviour.⁷² I find it interesting to note that Bruno, in his reference to Origen's Homily, calls Shulamith not a *virgo* exactly but rather a *virago*, a heroic woman (and not a virgin!).⁷³

Origen's interpretive practice, an act of violence against the integrity of a text,⁷⁴ is therefore identical to the key method in the art of memory. A Biblical verse is here turned into an image and this image is used to link completely unrelated texts and images to it. But this is not the only instance where mnemonic practice and the traditions of exegesis and homiletics overlap: an integral part of the commentary tradition consists in (objectively quite arbitrary) associations. Christian homiletics revels in a free-floating combination of lines from the *Old* and *New Testaments* to refer to what is actually a completely unrelated content. This tradition displays an amazing disregard for the unity of and the historical difference between texts. The books of the Hebrew and Christian Bible are effectively broken up into mere lines, which are then freely combined with each other. In this process, the verses often become visualized in art. Oscillating between text and image as fragmented entities, bereft of their original context, these text/images become hosts, *topoi*, which serve as repositories for unrelated sets of more or less abstract other texts or images. This is the practice of the art of memory: it is thus no wonder that many Dominicans cultivated this art, as it was so closely related to their practice of preaching.

Conclusion

In this context, I find it remarkable that Bruno used the image of Shulamith under the shadow as subversive evocation of these intersecting traditions. Just as the use of biblical images out of context has the tendency to empty the image of its original meaning and to turn it into a mere placeholder, so Bruno uses the ancient gods of the zodiac and the Egyptian star demons to struc-

⁷² On this, see Marvin H. POPE, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday 1977, pp. 371–374. Bruno uses similar strategies in his *Candelaio*, where the fool and the mastermind, the matron and the prostitute may become interchangeable. See Sergius KODERA, "Introduction to *Candelaio*." In: Giordano BRUNO, *Candelaio. Der Kerzenzieher*. Hamburg: Meiner 2013, pp. lxxii-lxxxiii (ix-cix).

⁷³ *Virago*, for Bruno's contemporaries a "heroic woman", famously appears in the *Vulgata Genesis* 2:23 as a denomination for Eve, and her masculine origin: "Dixitque Adam hoc nunc os ex ossibus meis et caro de carne mea haec vocabitur virago quoniam de viro sumpta est."

⁷⁴ It is, of course, also an act of violence against this female voice and her experience.

ture his memory, but these names do not seem to be powerful in themselves. (How could they, as the representatives of a dated, geocentric cosmology?) Rather, they are dissimilar to the absolute, divine reality that is unavailable to human beings.⁷⁵ Any image may, therefore, be charged with any meaning as it is combined with any other image. And in this respect, images may be powerful towards structuring our perception of reality: our capacity to combine unrelated images resembles or echoes the universal combinatory art of nature bringing forth myriad things. To that aim, one may well employ any image, any word: although there seems to be a sort of cultural coherence necessary in order to be able to communicate. Bruno therefore uses the images of a (dated) religion and the tenets of several obsolete philosophies as vehicles for expressing his novel ideas. Precisely because these images are fixed, they cannot conform to the universal vicissitude: they become obsolete, and may become filled with new meanings. This is exactly what Bruno shows his readers in his misappropriation of Origen's commentary of the Biblical verse from the *Song of Songs*. Bruno's deliberate misappropriation of Origen's reading of the text should, I believe, be understood as a practical application of Bruno's own doctrine that divine truth is only attainable by means of vestiges, by traces which are delineated by deceptive images. Or, in a Promethean metaphor, Bruno steals the image of Shulamith back from Origen.⁷⁶ For Bruno, his trick seems to consist precisely in not being carried away by one's own imaginary, but instead using that well-organized treasury of images as what they are: material and dissimilar vestiges of a higher and divine reality. Our mental world confusedly mimics a reality which in its totality must remain opaque to us, and which therefore can only be represented in a constant series of *mise en abyme*: to remain conscious of this condition is an active cognitive process, one involving the constant negotiation of the shadows of ideas. This activity is the exact opposite of blind faith.

⁷⁵ On the historicity and the plasmatic qualities of language in Bruno, see TIRINNANZI, *Umbra naturae*, pp. 253–259.

⁷⁶ On such strategies, see also KODERA, "Timid mathematicians," pp. 246–247.