



## GIORDANO BRUNO AND JEWISH THOUGHT: RECEPTION AND REINTERPRETATION<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*This article is focused on the philosopher Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and the references to Jewish culture in his oeuvre. We discuss about Bruno's reception of Jewish thought and describe this subject in a comprehensive way. We highlight Bruno's view on the Jews and their religion, also explaining the reasons behind his polemic against the Jewish people. Furthermore, we underline the influence of the Kabbalistic tradition and Jewish philosophy on various aspects of Brunian thought. Specifically, we discuss about the use of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in Bruno's works on the art of memory, the relation between Brunian infinitist cosmology and Kabbalistic concepts such as ensoph and the ten sephirot, the relation between Brunian thought and the philosophical theories of Avicenna, Moses Maimonides, Hasdai Crescas and Leo the Hebrew.*

**Keywords:** Kabbalah; Jewish Philosophy; Renaissance Philosophy; Hermeticism;

### INTRODUCTION

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, Giordano Bruno's thought has been interpreted in several ways and several aspects concerning his philosophical doctrines came to light. It is worth to remember the famous view of Frances Yates, who described the Nolan as a mage and showed the connection between his philosophy and the *Hermetica* in her seminal study *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964). Despite the fact that Yates' approach to the study of Brunian works has been discarded, the paths outlined by this scholar were followed by others and the esoteric themes in Brunian works still awake interest. In a relatively recent publication, Karen Silvia De León-Jones shifted the focus from Bruno's hermetic background to the use of Kabbalah and the presence of Jewish symbolisms in his oeuvre. Her *Giordano Bruno and the Kabbalah* is the only monograph dealing with this compelling and less known subject in the field of Renaissance studies. De León-Jones depicted the philosopher of Nola as a kind of Kabbalist, claiming that the "dialogue *Cabala* is exactly what its title claims it to be: a work of Kabbalah".<sup>2</sup> However, we do not share this

<sup>1</sup> In this study we re-examine the issues discussed in Francesco Malaguti, "Sul ruolo della Qabbalah e della filosofia ebraica nelle opere di Giordano Bruno", in *Materia giudaica* 24 (2019), pp. 547–70. We translated most of the Italian and Latin quotations.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Silvia De León-Jones, *Giordano Bruno and the Kabbalah. Prophets, Magicians, and Rabbis*, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven CT-London, 1997, p. 17. Cf. Id., "Giordano Bruno e la Kabbalah", in *Il Mondo* 3 2 (1995), pp. 328–64. On the inadequacy of De León-Jones' methodology and the inconsistency of some of her assertions, cf. S. Campanini, "Review of *Giordano Bruno and the Kabbalah. Prophets, Magicians, and Rabbis*", in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 49/2 (1998), pp. 385–86. On the term *cabala* in this context, cf. Fabrizio Meroi, "Il lessico della *Cabala*", in Id. (ed.), *La mente di Giordano Bruno*, Olschki, Firenze, 2004, pp. 211–23 and Id., "Cabala, cabalista, cabalístico (caballístico; cabalisticus)", in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Giordano Bruno*.



opinion. We are quite sure that, unlike Italian humanists such as Pico della Mirandola and Francesco Zorzi, Giordano Bruno did not learn Hebrew: therefore, he could not read the main sources of the Kabbalistic tradition.<sup>3</sup> Bruno's knowledge of Kabbalah was scarce and indebted to the contents of Latin sources like Pico's *Conclusiones cabalisticæ* and Cornelius Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, which surely Bruno knew quite well. In addition to this, it is not unlikely that Bruno read works of other Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance, e.g. Johannes Reuchlin's *De arte cabalistica* and *De verbo mirifico*, Francesco Zorzi's *De harmonia mundi* and Arcangelo Pozzi's writings on Jewish themes. However, the Nolan does not make reference to these sources, as far as we know. De León-Jones does not make any comparative analysis on the Kabbalistic doctrines outlined in the sources mentioned above and what can be found in Brunian works.

In our opinion, her thesis should be revised and the gaps in her research, which also overlooks Bruno's relation to Jewish philosophy, should be filled. De León-Jones is not the only scholar who missed her target, since also David Harari made questionable assumptions about Bruno's knowledge of Jewish culture, which should be discarded: for instance, he claimed that "the plot of the Italian play *Candelaio* is based on two midrashim. The first is in the midrash, written in Aramaic, from the treatise *Kiddushin*, and the second from the midrash *Bambidar Raba*".<sup>4</sup> However, there is no proof that Bruno knew those texts or intermediate sources about them: therefore, we discard Harari's hypothesis.

Both De León-Jones and Harari jumped to false conclusions, basically because they did not consider the sources of Bruno's knowledge concerning Jewish culture and assumed that the Italian philosopher read Hebrew sources, instead. Moreover, these two scholars did not always analyze Brunian assertions in relation to their theoretical context. Various aspects concerning the relation of Bruno with Jewish culture have been studied and described more carefully by other researchers: Saverio Ricci wrote on the reception of Jewish intellectual heritage in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe and described the Nolan's perspective on Jews; Fabrizio Meroi, who studied Bruno's opinion on the Jews too, analyzed the meaning of the term *cabala* within Brunian terminology; Mariassunta Picardi showed interest in Brunian magic and its possible connection with the Kabbalah; Michael Spang put Bruno's monadology into relation with Neoplatonism and Kabbalah. Other authors, whom we quote in the next paragraphs, dealt with Bruno's reception of Jewish philosophy (specifically regarding Avicbron, Maimonides, Hasdai Crescas and Leo the Hebrew).

In this article, we take into account the results of the previous scholarship in order to provide a comprehensive overview on Giordano Bruno's relation to Jewish culture. We also make some personal remarks about the following issues: the interconnection of Judaism and Hermeticism in Brunian works; the relation between Bruno's art of memory, the theories of Ramon Llull and the combinatorial art of the Kabbalists; the possible influence of Jewish philosophical and esoteric doctrines on Brunian cosmology and metaphysics.

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*Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 1, Edizioni della Normale-Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, Pisa-Firenze, 2014, pp. 271–74.

3 Cf. Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1964, ch. 14. According to Yates, it is improbable that the Nolan read Hebrew texts. She believed that Bruno was interested in Hermetic magic, rather than in the Kabbalah, because he criticized the Jews in his works and despised Pico della Mirandola in a conversation with Guillaume Cotin.

4 David Harari, "Some Lost Writings of Judah Abravanel (1465?-1535?) Found in the Works of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600)", in *Shofar* 10/3 (1992), pp. 62–89: 79.



## 1. JUDAISM AND HERMETICISM

In order to understand what Jewish culture really represented for Giordano Bruno, we should first look at his opinion on religion. It is acknowledged that the Nolan's effort to develop an innovative philosophical system is linked to his anti-religious polemic: the will to obtain "the freedom to use the words we prefer and choose definitions and names"<sup>5</sup> leads him beyond the limits of religious dogmatism. According to Bruno, religions are first and foremost instruments of power:

*Teofilo*. [...] the same Scripture lies in the hands of Jews, Christians and Muslims, such different and contrary sects, which are, in turn, giving birth to innumerable other most contrary and different sects, all of which know how to find in the Scripture the meaning which pleases them and suits them better, but also its exact opposite, by making a no from a yes and a yes from a no."<sup>6</sup>

This argument explains the reasons behind Bruno's critique of Judaism, but we should also consider other aspects. Bruno's attitude against the Jews and their cultural tradition is unique in its kind and, as Ricci claims, "it does not only seem to be incompatible with the Jewish and the Christian Kabbalistic point of view, or that of the heretic and messianic philosemitism, but opposite to the pragmatic tendency of the greatest European courts",<sup>7</sup> which have been tolerant with the Jews in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

More detail about Bruno's opinion on the Jewish people is implicitly present in his preadamite theory, which contrasts with the biblical account of history. The Nolan believed that Adam was not the first man on earth and suggested that ethnic groups do not share a common origin. In Bruno's Latin pomes, three patriarchs are listed: Enoch, Leviathan and finally Adam, who is the ancestor of the people of Abraham.<sup>8</sup>

This point of view highlights Jewish diversity in terms of ethnicity: in other words, the Jews would be different from the other peoples of the world, insofar they would descend from Adam and not from Enoch or Leviathan. Though, the uniqueness of the Jews is due also to their cultural tradition. Bruno expresses different opinions about it, which makes it difficult for us to understand his view: the wisdom of Talmudists and Kabbalists is praised in *De la causa, principio e uno*, *De gli eroici furori* and in the Latin works; on the other hand, in the *Cabala del cavallo pegaseo* and the *Spaccio de la bestia trionfante* we can find a fierce mockery of the Jewish people. In these dialogues, Nolan writes about "the Jews, who are by nature, genius and fortune saturnine and lunar – a vile, servile, mercenary, solitary, uncommunicative people, unable to converse with others, whom they bestially hate and by

5 Giordano Bruno, "Cabala del cavallo pegaseo", in Id., *Dialoghi italiani: dialoghi metafisici e dialoghi morali*, eds. Giovanni Gentile-Giovanni Aquilecchia, Sansoni, Firenze, 1958, II-I, p. 890.

6 Id., "La cena de le Ceneri", in Id., *Dialoghi italiani*, IV, 126.

7 Saverio Ricci, "Lo "spaccio" della *Cabala*. Bruno e il giudeo-cristianesimo", in Eugenio Canone (ed.), *La filosofia di Giordano Bruno. Problemi ermeneutici e storiografici. Convegno internazionale. Roma, 23-24 ottobre 1998*, Olschki, Firenze, 2003, pp. 217-61: 259. See also Fabrizio Meroi, "Ebrei, ebreo (*Hebraei, hebraeus, hebraicus*)", in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 1, pp. 579-81.

8 Cf. Bruno, "De innumerabilibus, immenso et infigurabili", in Id., *Opera latine conscripta*, ed. Francesco Fiorentino, vol. 1-2, Domenico Morano, Napoli, 1884, p. 284: "Propheticum est illud et populi cuiusdam celebritas, quod omnia hominum genera ad unum primum genitorem referantur, vel ad tres, ut ex Ebreorum monumentis accipimus et firmiter credimus, quorum quidam solum optimum genus, id est, Iudaeorum, ad unum protoplasten referunt; et reliquas gentes ad duos priores, qui biduo ante creati sunt". Cf. Bruno, "De monade, numero et figura", in Id., *Opera latine conscripta*, ed. Francesco Fiorentino, vol. 1, Domenico Morano, Napoli, 1879, IV, p. 363: "Et ternae genti ternus datus est Patriarcha, Cum peperit Tellus genitrix animalia, primum Ennoc, Leviathan, et quorum est tertius Adam; Maxima Iudaeae ut credebat portio gentis, Cui erat ex Uno tantum generatio sancta".



whom they are hated for every possible reason”.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Bruno defines the Jews with negative terms such as “leprous people”<sup>10</sup> and “excrements of Egypt”.<sup>11</sup> According to Bruno, Egypt is the cradle of civilizations and the land where the mythical prophet Hermes Trismegistus transmitted his wisdom to mankind. In this perspective, the Jews are heirs and keepers of Hermetic magic, including the mysteries of the letters and sacred names, which play a fundamental role in the Kabbalistic combinatorial art.<sup>12</sup> Bruno appreciates the Old Testament’s wisdom literature and has a sincere admiration towards the Kabbalists. However, for him, the Jews are unable to practice the purest form of magic, because the primordial wisdom of Egypt was lost: therefore, the Jews are not different than “some senseless and foolish idolaters, who no longer imitate the excellence of the Egyptian cult [...] and seek the divinity [...] in the excrements of dead and inanimate things”.<sup>13</sup> According to this view, the prophet Moses was “he who learned all those sciences of Egyptians at the court of Pharaoh, he who in the multitude of his manifestations surpassed all those experts in magic”,<sup>14</sup> but also a “very smart mage; [...] who did many tricks and went alone to the mountain so that no one could witness, and those clouds that could be seen were caused by fumes and igneous spirits, and the law he gave was fake and not divine, because it was tyrannical and bloody”.<sup>15</sup>

We rule out that Bruno planned to restore a Hermetic cult, as Yates used to believe, but we agree on the idea that for Bruno the Hermetic revelation represented the starting point of a history of cultures and religions. It is no coincidence that, in *De monade*, Bruno mentions Ieovah and Adonai alongside the names of other deities, which would be cultural

<sup>9</sup> Id., “Cabala”, I, p. 868.

<sup>10</sup> Id., “Spaccio de la bestia trionfante”, in Id., *Dialoghi italiani*, I–III, p. 625. Cf. ibidem, I–III, p. 616.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. ibidem, III–II, p. 799. Here Bruno claims that the Greeks used to believe that their wisdom was rooted in that of the Egyptians. On the contrary, one of the principal arguments of Jewish apologetics in the Hellenistic age was that Jewish revelation is the source of human knowledge.

<sup>12</sup> See the following passages referring to the Kabbalists and the magic of the letters and names: Id., “De magia naturali”, in Id., *Opere magiche*, eds. Simonetta Bassi-Elisabetta Scapparone-Nicoletta Tirinnanzi, Adelphi, Milano, 2000, p. 160: “Antequam de magia, sicut antequam de quocunque subiecto disseratur, nomen in sua significata est dividendum; totidem autem sunt significata magiae, quot et magi. Magus I sumitur pro sapiente, cuiusmodi erant trimegisti apud Aegyptios, druidae apud Gallos, gymnosophistae apud Indos, cabalistae apud Hebraeos, magi apud Persas, qui a Zoroastre, sophi apud Graecos, Sapientes apud Latinos”; Id., “De rerum principiis et elementis et causis”, in Id., *Opere magiche*, pp. 702–04: “Magna mysteria Cabalistae habent super numero litterarum et mysteriis quae sunt circa ea, ut in virtute nominum et cognitione eorum summam omnium operationum et intelligentiarum intelligant esse sitam, quod dicunt de Messia, de nomine dato illi supra omne nomen, sed addant quasdam rationes occultas, quae illi nomini graphico intelligibiliter adiiciuntur”; ibidem, pp. 696–98: “Ad haec etiam principia pertinet considerare vim magnam insitam esse in nominibus, cum quorum virtute fortunam et statum rei nominatae currere existimant, praetereaque cum nominum mutatione convenire mutationem fortunae vel genii plurimi affirmant. Hoc credidisse Hebraeos, Graecos et alias gentes, per edita est valde manifestum; primum vero hii qui magis religioni et fidei sunt addicti, et qui Deum nihil perperam facere habent pro principio et axioma, non sine causa pluribus patribus nomina mutasse concionantur. Mutatum fuit enim nomen Abrahami, et dicunt Cabalistae in virtute unius litterae ך̄ illum acquisivisse facultatem generandi. Idem dicunt quod deberet Iacob praeesse fratri et gentibus per benedictionem et primogenituram, mutatum fuisse eius nomen in Israëlem. Item de Isaac, de Sarai in Saram”.

<sup>13</sup> Id., “Spaccio”, III–II, pp. 777–78. Cf. Ilenia Russo, “Escremento (*excrementum*)”, in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 1, pp. 650–51.

<sup>14</sup> Bruno, “Spaccio”, III–II, pp. 791–92. See also ibidem, III–II, pp. 782–83: here the character Saulino talks about “Kabbalah of the Jews, whose wisdom [...] comes from the Egyptians, among whom Moses was instructed”. Cf. Laura Carotti, “Mosè”, in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 2, Edizioni della Normale-Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, Pisa-Firenze, 2014, pp. 1286–88.

<sup>15</sup> Luigi Firpo, *Il processo di Giordano Bruno*, ed. Diego Quagliani, Salerno editrice, Roma, 1993, p. 274.



variants of the same god. He also shows the presence of the divine name יהוה in different traditions, including Kabbalah and Pythagoreanism.<sup>16</sup> This association was first made by Johannes Reuchlin, according to whom the Biblical *tetragrammaton* is in direct correspondence to the Pythagorean *tetraktys*, a triangular figure consisting of ten points arranged in four rows. In Reuchlin's view, which makes us think of Neoplatonic metaphysics, the *tetraktys* would represent the descent from the unity of the God into the plurality of creation.<sup>17</sup> As pointed out by Michael Spang, Bruno might have developed further these Kabbalistic and Neoplatonic discourses in his theory of the monad. The monad, to which Bruno dedicated one of his Latin poems, is also known as “metaphysical minimum”, since it is the elementary unit on which every complex form is based.<sup>18</sup> Despite his more or less implicit references to Jewish esotericism, the Nolan does not provide any systematic and exhaustive description of the doctrines related to that tradition and he does not even give a clear definition of “Kabbalah”. In the *Cabala del cavallo pegaseo*, the Nolan plays with words and makes an association between three distinct disciplines: “Kabbalah, theology and philosophy: I speak of a Kabbalah of theological philosophy, a philosophy of Kabbalistic theology, a theology of philosophical Kabbalah”.<sup>19</sup>

Bruno assigned a personal meaning to the term *cabala*, referring to a sort of metaphysical wisdom, but he knew nothing about the practices of Jewish mystics, because his knowledge about Jewish esotericism was superficial and limited to what he could draw from Latin authors. According to Mariassunta Picardi, Bruno would have used the terms of renaissance magic to describe Kabbalistic practices through figures like the enchantress Circe, a recurring character in Brunian works.

Picardi suggested that her evocations, rites and seals might be Kabbalistic, insofar as they have little in common with the magic of the Circe of the *Odyssey*.<sup>20</sup> However, we do not find this hypothesis convincing, because the Nolan could not know those Jewish ritual practices in detail for the reasons discussed above.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bruno, “De monade”, V, p. 390: “Hinc fortasse nomen Dei quadrilaterum ubique gentium ab antiqua institutione comperitur, praesertim vero apud Cabalistas ineffabile illud ex decimo, et quinto, decimo, et sexto Hebraeorum elementis, cuius loco explicatur illud ex primo, et quarto, et quartodecimo et decimo. Sic et ex iis quas novimus linguis principes, et eae quae originalibus et primitivis proprius accedunt, quadrilatero nomine Deum significant: IEOVAH et ADONAI enim Hebraeis. Theut Aegyptiis. ORSI Magis. SIRE Persis. THEOS Graecis. Deus Latinis. Alla Arabibus. GOTT Germanis. DIEU Gallis. DIOS Hispanis. IDIO Italis: et hi sunt omnes quorum hodie cultiores sunt linguae, et qui soli loqui videntur. ITA PER VENERANDAM TETRADEM iureiurando affirmabant Pythagorici”. The *tetragrammaton* is also mentioned in relation to the *sephiroth*. Cf. Bruno, “De magia mathematica”, in Id., *Opere magiche*, pp. 43–44.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Moshe Idel, “Johannes Reuchlin: Kabbalah, Pythagorean Philosophy and Modern Scholarship”, in *Studia Judaica* 16 (2008), pp. 30–55.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Michael Spang, “Brunos *De monade, numero et figura* und christliche Kabbala”, in *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 5/1 (1999), pp. 67–94; Felice Tocco, “Le fonti più recenti della filosofia del Bruno”, in *Rendiconti della R. Accad. dei Lincei. Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, 1/7-8 (1892), pp. 503–538; 534; Marco Matteoli, “Reuchlin Johann”, in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 2, pp. 1651–52. Bruno never mentioned Reuchlin, but we do not rule out that he read his works. Even if this hypothesis is not valid, Bruno surely found his doctrines in Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*. Cf. Marco Matteoli, “Agrippa di Nettesheim Heinrich Cornelius”, in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 1, pp. 55–57.

<sup>19</sup> Bruno, “Cabala”, p. 837.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Mariassunta Picardi, “La magia dell'asino. Filosofia e cabalismo in Giordano Bruno”, in *Studi filosofici* 32 (2009), pp. 55–78.



## 2. THE KABBALAH AND THE ART OF MEMORY

While it is certain that Giordano Bruno read Latin sources concerning the Kabbalah, we rule out that he read Hebrew texts, since he did not understand the language. Though, he knew the Hebrew alphabet and used its letters for his art of memory, adding them to other letters and symbols. Mnemotechnics are based on the use of graphical devices such as diagrams, tables and concentric circles in order to associate signs with textual information. Every possible combination of signs gives a specific mental picture as a result. Using this combinatorial method, Bruno intended to fill the mind of the practitioner with images representing the knowledge of the world and also open a pathway to the intelligible world: for this reason, the art of memory plays a relevant gnoseological role within Brunian thought. In *De umbris idearum*, a relevant work on the art of memory, the Nolan represents combinatorial wheels with Latin, Greek and Hebrew letters written upon them (23 alphabetic letters followed by  $\nu, \zeta$ ,  $\epsilon$  and  $\delta$  of the missing Hebrew and Greek letters. The Nolan developed a new mnemonic alphabet, extending the possibilities of the standard alphabet previously adopted by the medieval friar Ramon Llull, whose art of memory inspired Bruno consistently.<sup>21</sup>

It seems that the Nolan's wheels and tables of memory have no relation to any kind of esotericism. As Eugenio Garin claims, "the 'wheels' in *De umbris idearum* show traces of the astrological decans, but they are deprived of their occult meaning"<sup>22</sup> and their function is mainly practical. The same can be said of the tables exposed in the *Explanatio triginta sigillorum*, in which the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet are displayed diagonally in mnemonic cells. It is almost sure that these tables are inspired by a table of Agrippa von Nettesheim,<sup>23</sup> who numbered the Hebrew letters according to the symbolic values of Kabbalistic numerology: probably, this philosopher and mage intended to use this table to compose the names of demons and angels (that would be a magical method to summon them). Bruno knows Agrippa's numerology,<sup>24</sup> but the 22 Hebrew letters in the table of the

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Bruno, "De umbris idearum", in Id., *Opere mnemotecniche*, eds. Marco Matteoli-Rita Sturlese-Nicoletta Tirinnanzi, vol. 1, Adelphi, Milano, 2004, p. 224: "Ex iis ergo triginta tua notitiae inhaerentes ad triginta elementorum expressionem faciendam eligantur, quae completum reddunt numerum eorum, quae diversis inserviunt in tribus idiomatibus prononciationum differentiis. Neque enim necessarium est triplex instituire elementarium, cum A ipsum equivalenceat ipsi  $\alpha$  et  $\alpha$ , B ipsi  $\beta$  et  $\beta$ , similiter et alia multa aliis. Ubi vero super nostri generis elementa sunt Graeca, ut  $\psi$ ,  $\omega$ ,  $\theta$ , et ultra haec et illa sunt Hebraea, propriis sunt notata caracteribus. Et ita unum simplex elementarium deseruit tribus linguis et iis quae illis sunt subalternatae".

<sup>22</sup> Eugenio Garin, *Lo zodiaco della vita. La polemica sull'astrologia dal Trecento al Cinquecento*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2007, p. 124. Cf. Bruno, "De umbris idearum", pp. 84–85, 116–17, 210–21, 224–25, 230–31, 234–35, 256–57, 340–41, 378–79; Id., *Corpus iconographicum. Le incisioni nelle opere a stampa*, ed. Mino Gabriele, Adelphi, Milano, 2001, pp. 103–04; Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Ark, London-Melbourne-Henley, 1984, pp. 173–230; Harvey J. Hames, *The Art of Conversion. Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century*, Brill, Leiden-Boston-Köln, 2000, pp. 1 ff.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia libri tres*, ed. V. Perrone Compagni, Brill, Leiden-Köln-New York, 1992, II, 19, pp. 304–06; Bruno, *Corpus iconographicum*, pp. 200–11; Id., "Explicatio triginta sigillorum", in Id., *Opere mnemotecniche*, eds. Marco Matteoli, Rita Sturlese-Nicoletta Tirinnanzi, vol. 2, Adelphi, Milano, 2009, pp. 180–85.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Bruno, "De magia mathematica", p. 50: "Est et alius modus – olim apud Cabalistas veneratione habitus, nunc vero et apud prophanos locum sortitus –, qui fit dividendo viginti septem characteres Hebraeorum in tres classes". Bruno's source on these topics is Agrippa, who re-elaborated the Kabbalistic numerology exposed in Francesco Zorzi's *De harmonia mundi*.



*Explanatio* are numbered from 1 to 22 in a simple consecutive order: this makes us believe that the function of Bruno's tables is (mnemo)technical, rather than magical or Kabbalistic.<sup>25</sup>

Just like in the art of memory, letters and combinations play an important role in the Kabbalah, which is considered as a kind of numerology, as mentioned above. For this reason, it has been supposed – but not yet proven – that, centuries before Bruno and Lull, the *Sefer Yetzirah* was used also for mnemonic purposes.<sup>26</sup> In the Renaissance, Pico della Mirandola noticed similarities between the mnemonic art of Ramon Lull and the Kabbalistic use of letters, which he called *Alphabetaria revolutio*.<sup>27</sup> Also Giordano Bruno acknowledged that the Kabbalah is a combinatorial art, just like mnemotechnics. This explains why, in the letter of dedication prefixed to *De specierum scrutinio*, he refers to his *Lampas triginta statuarum* as *Lampas cabalistica*, despite not being a work of Kabbalah. Moreover, we highlight that the Nolan knew the pseudo-Llullian treatise *De auditu cabbalistico*, which has nothing to do with the Kabbalah, but the title. Bruno believed that that work was written by Lull and this probably led him to find a correspondence between Kabbalah and Llullism.<sup>28</sup> Actually, Lull never made use of the Kabbalah, but it should not be ruled out that the doctrines of the Jews of Spain, with whom he lived in contact, drew his attention.<sup>29</sup> The use of the attributes of God as combinatorial elements in Llullian mnemotechnics might be related to the function of the divine names in the Kabbalah. It is very likely that Bruno made a similar conjecture, since in his *De compendiosa architectura* the virtues previously listed by Lull are associated with the emanations of God called *sephirot*.<sup>30</sup>

Bruno mentions the ten Kabbalistic *sephirot* several times in his oeuvre and we suppose that he attached to them a gnoseological value: in fact, in *De monade* they are associated with the ten Aristotelian categories of being, whose function is to define and determine the entities of reality.<sup>31</sup> Though, in order to completely understand the role covered

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, II, 19, pp. 304–06; Bruno, *Corpus iconographicum*, pp. 200–11; Id., “Explicatio triginta sigillorum”, pp. 180–85. Brunian tables might be related to magic, however the Nolan does not explain how they work and also the function of the 30<sup>th</sup> seal in the *Explicatio* is not cleared.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Giuseppe M. Cùscito, “Mnemotechnics in the *Sefer Yesirah*?”, in *Materia giudaica* 23 (2018), pp. 307–16.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Ioannes Picus Mirandola, “Apologia”, in Id., *Omnia opera*, vol. 2, S.H. Petri, Basileae, 1601, pp. 119–20: “In universali autem duas scientias, hoc etiam nomine honorificarunt, unam quae dicitur ars combinandi, & est modus quidam procedendi in scientiis, & est simile quid, sicut apud nostros dicitur ars Raymundi, licet forte diuerso modo procedant. Aliam quae est de uirtutibus rerum superiorum, quae sunt supra lunam, & est pars Magiae naturalis suprema. Utraque istarum apud Hebraeos etiam dicitur Cabala, [...] et de utraque istarum etiam aliquando fecimus mentionem in conclusionibus nostris: illa enim ars combinandi, est quam ego in conclusionibus meis uoco, Alphabetariam reuolutionem, est ista quae de uirtutibus rerum superiorum, quae uno modo potest capi, ut pars Magiae naturalis, alio modo, ut res distincta ab ea: est illa de qua loquor in praesenti conclusione, dicens: Quod adiuuat nos in cognitione diuinitatis Christi ad modum iam declaratum, & licet istis duabus scientiis nomen Cabalae, ex primaria & propria impositione non conueniat, transumptiue tamen potui eis applicari”.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Bruno, “Explicatio triginta sigillorum”, p. 68. *De auditu cabalistico* is mentioned also in the dedicatory letter prefixed to Bruno's *De specierum scrutinio*.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, pp. 173–98.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Bruno, “De compendiosa architectura et complemento artis Lullii”, in Id., *Opere lulliane*, eds. Marco Matteoli-Rita Sturlese-Nicoletta Tirinnanzi, Adelphi, Milano, 2012, p. 80: “Quae omnia Iudaei Cabalistsae ad decem Sephiroth et nos ad triginta, haud quidem illis addentes sed easdem explicantes, redegimus indumenta. Quod ad dignitates et proprietates spectat, colunt Hebraei nomen, quod divinae substantiae proprius appellant, quod est tetragrammaton ‘Iehova’”. In the next lines, this Kabbalistic reference emphasizes the bond between creation and the metaphysical level of God. Cf. Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, pp. 209 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Bruno, “De monade”, XI, pp. 461–462. On the role of the *sephirot* in Brunian works, cf. Marco Matteoli, “Sephiroth (*sephirot*, *sephiroth*)”, *Parole, concetti, immagini*, ed. Michele Ciliberto, vol. 2, pp. 1762–63.



by the *sephirot* in Brunian mnemotechnical works, we should go back to *De umbris idearum*, in which Bruno makes a fundamental distinction between the light of truth and the shadows of ideas, which are God's projections through the lens of nature. According to the theory outlined in the book, the human cognition cannot see the light, but only the shadows and their relation to the ideas. The Nolan has this in mind, when he refers to the archetypal ideal world of the *sephirot* in later works.<sup>32</sup> Similarly to the shadows of the ideas, the *sephirot* are the Kabbalistic keys of truth. Though, divine truth goes beyond human understanding and remains covered by veils: one can get closer and closer to it, but he will never grasp the ultimate truth. The *sephirot* are mentioned again in the following passage of the *Cabala*, which underlines what we just said and also brings us back to our previous discourse on Judaism and Hermeticism:

"Saulino. [...] according to the Kabbalistic revelation Hocma, corresponding to the forms or wheels called Cherubim, which influence the 8<sup>th</sup> sphere, where Raziel's virtue of intelligence is placed, the ass or asinity is the symbol of wisdom. [...] Some Talmudists understand the moral reason of that influence, tree, scale or dependence; though, they say that the ass is the symbol of wisdom in relation to the divine Sephirot, since he who wants to penetrate the secrets and occult wisdom of that [i.e. the ass] must be necessarily sober and patient and he must have the mustache, the head and the back of the ass; he must have a humble, self-controlled and modest soul, and his sense should not confuse thistles with lettuces.

*Sebasto*. I would rather believe that the Jews stole those mysteries from the Egyptians and, in order to hide [their] kind of shame, they have raised the ass and asinity to the heavens."<sup>33</sup>

Saulino shows the correspondence between asinity and Hokhmah, the *sephirah* of wisdom.<sup>34</sup> In the dialogue *Cabala del cavallo pegaseo*, the ass is also a symbol of wisdom: the character Onorio, the reincarnation of the wise Aristotle, has the body of an ass; also the Jews are described as "those saturnine asses [...] receiving the influence from the so-called Sephiroth, from the archetypal ass".<sup>35</sup> From this passage, we deduce that asinity also stands for the wisdom of the Kabbalists and defines the traits of a "learned ignorance": the knowledge of a divine truth situated between the light of revelation and the darkness of occultation.

### 3. KABBALAH AND COSMOLOGY

An in-depth reading of the *Cabala del cavallo pegaseo* shows that Bruno's reflection on the Kabbalah may concern also cosmological issues. In a passage of the dialogue, he lists the "dimensions Ceter, Hocma, Bina, Hesed, Geburah, Tipheret, Nezah, Hod, Iesod, Malchuth", the *sephirot*.<sup>36</sup> Here the Italian term *dimensioni* replaces the Latin *numerationes*, which can be found in Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, while in the later work *De magia mathematica* the Nolan remains loyal to Agrippa's text, using the term *numeratio*. Though, it is still not clear why in the *Cabala numerationes* has been translated with *dimensioni*. This word makes us think of the physical concept of space: it should not be

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Bruno, "Cabala", I, p. 873.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, I, pp. 866–67.

<sup>34</sup> On the variety of meanings of asinity in Brunian works, cf. Fabrizio Meroi, "Asinità", in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 1, pp. 179–82; Id., "Asino", in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 1, pp. 182–83.

<sup>35</sup> Bruno, "Cabala", I, pp. 870–71.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, I, p. 865. Cf. Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, III-10, pp. 424–27; Bruno, "De magia mathematica", pp. 44.



ruled out that Bruno wanted to give another shade of meaning to the original term. It remains unclear why he made this linguistic choice, though.

In the *Cabala*, the Nolan also refers to angelological themes: in particular, he mentions the Jewish names of celestial intelligences and their bond with the *sephirot*. There are further references to the angels in *De magia mathematica*. It is acknowledged that medieval angelology regained importance after the recovery of the Rabbinic culture in the Renaissance.<sup>37</sup> Even if Bruno has a scarce knowledge of these topics, he has a general idea of the Kabbalistic systems of the world, despite the fact that his cosmology is very different: in fact, he refused geocentrism and the medieval theory of the great chain of being, which describes the cosmos as a hierarchical system based on “influx, tree, scale or dependence”.<sup>38</sup> Despite of this, we have reason to believe that the Kabbalah might have influenced the development of Brunian cosmology. When the Nolan talks about the doctrine “of the enlightened Kabbalists”,<sup>39</sup> he speaks of the “deep abyss of the unwordly and ensophic universe: in order to contemplate those ten Sephiroth, which we call members and induments, they penetrated, saw, conceived what a man can say within his limits”.<sup>40</sup> *En soph* is the essence of God understood as “nothingness without end”. Bruno could have found information on this in Agrippa and in Pico. Infinity plays a central role in Jewish esotericism as well as in Brunian philosophy. Even though the Brunian doctrine of the infinity of the universe is based on other sources, he might have drawn inspiration also from the concept of *en soph*.

There may be also a link between Jewish esotericism and Bruno’s idea that an invisible and immanent force operates within things and animates them. In fact, the Kabbalah does not distinguish between the natural and the spiritual world, since in this tradition the manifestation of God is conceived as the creative process of nature. Bruno’s vitalistic pantheism is similar to this perspective, but it goes even further, since it identifies God and nature as one. In order to justify this view, the Italian philosopher relies on the authority of the “extraordinary wise Solomon, esteemed by the Jews”.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4. AVICEBRON

We believe that Jewish philosophy influenced Brunian cosmology even more than the Kabbalah actually did. In *De la causa*, Bruno mentions thrice “a certain Arab called

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Elisabetta Scapparone, “Angelo”, in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 1, pp. 90–92.

<sup>38</sup> Bruno, “Cabala”, I, p. 867.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, I, p. 864.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, I, p. 865. See also the reference to *en soph* in Id., “De magia mathematica”, p. 44: “Sunt nomina divina eminentissimae virtutis, quae in proposito oportet non ignorare. Horum quaedam pertinent ad hierarchias ternas, quorum singulae tribus distribuuntur ordinibus qui Curetes appellantur et Dii intemerati ab Orpheo, quos timore divino appropriant Cabalistae: unde Ensoph in Cabala ab Orpheo Nox vocantur; Zamael in Cabala, Typhon ab Orpheo”. The correspondence between the Orphic *nox* and the *en soph* was already present in other Latin sources: Picus, “Conclusiones cabalisticæ”, in Id., *Opera omnia*, XI, 15; ibidem, LXXI, 4; Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia*, III-10, p. 424.

<sup>41</sup> Bruno, “De la causa, principio e uno”, in Id., *Dialoghi italiani*, II, p. 246. Cf. ibidem, V, 324: “All philosophers, commonly known as physicians, say that nothing is generated with substance and nothing is corrupted, if we do not want to call the transformation in this way. Solomon understood this. He said that ‘there is nothing new under the sun, but what already was before’ [cf. *Qo* 1: 9-10]. You now understand why all things are in the universe, and universe is in all things; we are within it, that is within us, and then everything is a perfect unity”. Cf. Simonetta Bassi, “Salomone”, in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 2, pp. 1686–90.



Avicbron”,<sup>42</sup> who actually was a medieval Jewish Andalusian called Ibn Gabirol. His *Fons vitae*, which was originally written into Arabic and later translated into Latin, is a philosophical work inspired by Arabic Neoplatonism. Like his contemporaries, the Nolan is mistaken about Avicbron’s origin, because in the *Fons vitae* there is scarce information about the author’s religious affiliation.

Bruno’s knowledge of the *Fons vitae* is mainly mediated by the writings of Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas criticized the theory of “composition of form and matter in intelligences and souls, an opinion that seems to have begun with Avicbron, the author of *The Fountain of Life*”.<sup>43</sup> Avicbron claimed that every degree of reality consists of matter and form: this means that souls and angels are not simple and immaterial. According to Avicbron’s universal hylomorphism, all things are progressive emanations of the universal matter and the form existing in God’s mind.<sup>44</sup> Unlike his creations, God “can have no form by which to become a unity and be distinguishable from others. This is why the eternal Existent is illimitable, because of being without form”.<sup>45</sup>

If we examine Brunian thought, we can notice some affinities to Gabirolian philosophy. What is said about God in the passage above reminds of Bruno’s concept of divine matter: in *De la causa*, we find that matter is not defined by a specific form, because it contains all the possible forms in itself;<sup>46</sup> according to Bruno – but not to Avicbron and the Peripatetics – matter is the producer of forms. The Aristotelian distinction between matter and form is maintained, but the Nolan does not need it anymore, since matter *per se* is enough to define entities, according to his view.

We now take a look at Brunian passages on Avicbron. The first time the Nolan mentions this Jewish philosopher, he erroneously associates him with the materialistic monism of the Greeks:

“*Teofilo*. Democritus and the Epicureans, who call nothingness what is not a body, consequently claim that matter is the sole substance of things and that is also divine nature, as claimed by a certain Arab called Avicbron in a book called *Fountain of Life*. The same thinkers, along with Cyrenaics, Cynics and Stoics, believe that forms are nothing else than certain accidental dispositions of matter. I shared this opinion for a long time, only because the principles of this theory correspond to nature more than the Aristotelian principles do. Though, after having maturely meditated on the basis of more aspects, I found it is necessary to acknowledge two kinds of substance in nature: one is form and the other is matter [...]”<sup>47</sup>

What Bruno says about the *Fons vitae* is inaccurate. It is possible that he did not read that work and based his assertions on Gabirolian philosophy on secondary sources about the *Fons vitae*. If the Nolan had a deep knowledge of Avicbron, he would have not compared him with the ancient atomists: in fact, according to Gabirolian hylomorphism, substance is not composed only by matter. Here Bruno also claims that, in order to define

<sup>42</sup> Bruno, “Causa”, III, p. 262.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, ed. A. Maurer, The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, 1968, p. 51.

<sup>44</sup> This topic is present also in Leo the Hebrew, who writes that if soul and angels “are not composed of matter and form, neither they are part of chaos, their own essence is separated from bodies and lost in contemplation of God. If they are composed of matter and form, just like substance and incorporeal matter, then they are part of chaos, common mother, as our Albenzubron claims in his book *De fonte vitae*” (Leone Ebreo, *Dialoghi d’amore*, ed. Delfina Giovannozzi, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2008, III, p. 233).

<sup>45</sup> Avicbron, *The Fountain of Life*, eds. A.B. Jacob-L. Levin, The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, 2005, 4, IV, p. 201.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Bruno, “Causa”, III, pp. 264 ff.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, III, pp. 262–63.



substance he found necessary to maintain the Aristotelian theory of matter and form. Though, this Aristotelian distinction is not significant anymore for the Nolan: form and matter, act and potential, cause and principle are seen as unified aspects according to his philosophical vitalism.

Bruno refers to Avicbron critically also in another passage of *De causa* and this time he describes this “Arab” as a supporter of Aristotelian philosophy, probably because of his extensive use of the Aristotelian lexicon.

*Dicsono.* [...] according to them [i.e. peripatetics], the principle [of matter] is necessary, eternal and divine, just like that Moor [named] Avicbron means, calling it God in all things.

*Teofilo.* This is the mistake of those who were convinced that the accidental form is the only knowable kind of form; and this Moor, although he accepted the [theory of] substantial form from the peripatetic doctrine he had fed on [...], however, considering it as a corruptible thing, not just as mutable around matter, and as what is birthed and does not give birth, what is founded and does not found, what is rejected and does not reject, he despised it and considered it vile, in comparison to stable, eternal, progenitor, maternal matter.”<sup>48</sup>

Bruno means to say that Avicbron did not go beyond the limits of Aristotelian philosophy and undervalued the ontological status of sublunar matter, depriving it from its active role and considering it as a passive receiver which “does not give birth” to the form. However, the Nolan also points out that Avicbron shed light on the divine nature of matter, supporting the idea that God is in all things. Though, we must clarify that this opinion is not really present in the *Fons vitae*. Bruno supports this idea again in a later work and claims that “not unreasonably, David of Dinant and Avicbron [...] used to call matter ‘God’”.<sup>49</sup> The Nolan is mistaken once again. Avicbron’s doctrine is very different from the pantheism of David of Dinant: as a supporter of Neoplatonic theory of emanation, Avicbron preserves divine transcendence and the distinction between God and the cosmos, unlike David of Dinant and Giordano Bruno. According to a study of Terracciano, the Nolan’s misunderstanding might be due to the fact that his knowledge of the *Fons vitae* is (consistently?) based on Aquinas’ writings and this scholastic criticized both Avicbron and David of Dinant.<sup>50</sup> On the basis of the above, we claim that Bruno does not provide a correct explanation of Gabirolian philosophy, but rather a reinterpretation of its main concepts, and he made an instrumental use of them to support a pantheistic view.

## 5. MAIMONIDES

Avicbron is the only Jewish philosopher explicitly mentioned by Bruno. However, it seems that the Nolan knew other figures of the Jewish philosophical tradition. According to a hypothesis of Miguel Granada, he could have read also the work of Moses Maimonides. This assumption is based on possible references to his *Dux perplexorum* in some passages of

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, III, pp. 273–74. See also ibidem, IV, p. 298.

<sup>49</sup> Id., “De vinculis in genere”, in Id., *Opere magiche*, p. 520. On the Brunian reference to David of Dinant, cf. Pasquale Terracciano, “David di Dinant”, in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 1, p. 454.

<sup>50</sup> For example, see the reference to Avicbron in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles seu de veritate catholicae fidei*, Marietti, Torino, 1933, I, p. 17. On Bruno’s interpretation of Avicbron, cf. Michael Wittmann, “Giordano Brunos Beziehungen zu Avencebrol”, in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 13 (1900), pp. 147–52; Ernst Bloch, *Avicenna und die aristotelische Linke*, Rütten & Loening, Berlin, 1952; Pasquale Terracciano, “Nemici et impazienti di poliarchia”. Riflessioni sul rapporto tra Bruno e Shelomon Ibn Gabirol”, in Olivia Catanorchi-Diego Pirillo (eds.), *Favole, metafore, storie. Seminario su Giordano Bruno*, Edizioni della Normale, Pisa, 2007, pp. 551–75; Laura Pinato, “Avicbron”, in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 1, pp. 209–11; Felice Tocco, “Le fonti più recenti”, pp. 529–31.



*De la causa, principio e uno.*<sup>51</sup> In Bruno's dialogue, the character Dicsono claims that divine substance can be known only in "a way of veils [*indumenti*], as the Kabbalists say, of shoulders and back ["*spalli e posteriori*"], as talmudists say, of mirrors, shadows and enigma, as Apocalypitics say".<sup>52</sup> The theme of the hidden God veiled by *indumenti* (standing for the accidental forms, which veil substance) is related to Kabbalah and occurs more than once in Brunian works. Undoubtedly the above quotation is based on Biblical sources, but it should not be ruled out that one of the "talmudists" mentioned might be Maimonides, who commented a Biblical passage, in which Moses asks God to show him His essence and attributes. The expression "shoulders and back" in Bruno's text might allude to these.<sup>53</sup> Other possible references to Maimonides are present in the fourth part of the dialogue, in which the characters Poliinnio and Gervasio argue about the figure of the woman. Poliinnio adopts a misogynist point of view and sees the woman as the primary cause of original sin, claiming that the first man stopped contemplating God because of his attraction for feminine bodily matter:

"*Poliinnio*. [...] the woman is nothing but matter. If you do not know what is woman and therefore you cannot understand what is matter, then study the Peripatetics, who will teach you what is the woman in order to teach you what is the matter."<sup>54</sup>

Matter, which continuously changes form, is represented as a prostitute constantly seeking for the carnal union with man. Gervasio (who impersonates Bruno) dislikes this analogy, which was quite popular among the Aristotelian thinkers of the Renaissance: "he [Poliinnio] gave me headache with the similitude of the woman and matter, and the idea that the woman is not content of men and matter of forms and so forth".<sup>55</sup> At the end of his reply, Gervasio says that "not only the castles of Poliinnio are fallen, but also those of *others*",<sup>56</sup> maybe alluding also to Maimonides, who compared sublunar matter to a prostitute, as it can be seen in the passage below.

"*Quam dulcia sunt verba Salomonis in sapientia sua cum comparat et assimilat materiam mulieri vagae et conjugatae: quia non invenitur materia nisi cum forma ullo modo. Quod si*

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Miguel Á. Granada, "Bruno and Maimonides: Matter as a Woman and the Ontological Status of Matter", in *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 23/2 (2017), pp. 458–72.

<sup>52</sup> Bruno, "Causa", II, pp. 227–28. Cf. *1Cor* 13: 12 and *Ex* 33: 20–23. See also the reference to *indumenti* in the following passages: Id., "De compendiosa architectura", p. 80: "Quae omnia Iudaei Cabalistae ad decem Sephiroth et nos ad triginta, haud quidem illis addentes sed easdem explicantes, redegimus indumenta"; Id., "De monade", XI, p. 462: "Hinc Decem illi Indumenta (quae Sephiroth Mecubales appellant) adtribuuntur. Indumentorum nomine celebrata, quia deum in substantia absoluta innominabilem et incomprehensibilem non significant, sed externis quibusdam respectibus, tamquam lucis inaccessibilis *velaminibus*. Ipsa sunt EHIEH, HOCMA, BINAH, KEIHER, NEZAH, HOD, TYPHERETH, GEBURAH, MALCUTH, HESED"; Id., "De magia mathematica", p. 44: "Sunt deinde decem divina nomina veluti numina, quae per decem Sephyrot – id est numerationes vel indumenta, vel instrumenta, vel explementaria omnium creaturarum [quae] influunt in omnia a supernis usque ad infirmas". Cf. Marco Matteoli, "Indumenta", in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 1, p. 959.

<sup>53</sup> See also Bruno, "De gli eroici furori", in Id., *Dialoghi italiani*, II–V, p. 1093: "[...] la difficoltà con la quale egli fa copia di far vedere al meno le sue spalli ["shoulders"], che è il farsi conoscere mediante le cose posteriori ["backs"] ed effetti". Cf. Moses Maimonides, *Dux seu Director dubitantium aut perplexorum, in treis Libros divisus, & summa accuratione Reverendi patris Augustini Iustiniani ordinis Praedicatorii Nebiensiu[m] Episcopi recognitus*, Badius Ascensius, Parisiis, 1520, I, 54; ibidem, I, 21, f. 9r ("Posteriora mea videbis"); ibidem, I, 37 ("Videbis post me, hoc est apprehendes quod ex me manat, et sequitur ex voluntate mea, ac si diceret omnes creaturas meas").

<sup>54</sup> Bruno, "Causa", IV, p. 296.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, IV, p. 315.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, IV, p. 316 (emphasis added).



ita est, semper est uxor alicuius viri: nec invenitur sola. Licet autem est uxor viri, non abstinet quin quaerat alium virum. Eodem modo se habet materia.”<sup>57</sup>

In this passage, Maimonides emphasizes an Aristotelian point of view and puts it into relation with Jewish ethics. He connects moral vices to the corruption of matter and virtue to form (to which God would have assigned the capacity to “dominate” matter, in the case that moral norms are respected). In accordance with this idea, Maimonides invites to moderate the excesses and to follow the way of Solomon and the prophets. Therefore, Maimonidean ethics condemns the sense of touch and concupiscence. Bruno knows Aristotelian-Maimonidean analogy between woman and matter, but he has a completely different view and considers bodily pleasure as one of the ways to achieve knowledge: in the next paragraph, we aim to show that the Nolan gave an effort to re-evaluate the ontological status of matter.

## 6. LEO THE HEBREW

In Brunian thought, knowledge is something which must be achieved. In *De gli eroici furori*, the search for wisdom is metaphorically described as a divine hunt conducted by the wise man who seeks the Divinity in nature. In the Italian dialogues we also find the idea that God is present in all material things. This is why the matter has great importance in relation to Brunian epistemology and Bruno attaches to it a positive and creative role.

In the Renaissance, also the Jewish philosopher Judah Abravanel, known as Leo the Hebrew, who wrote about this issue in his *Dialoghi d'amore*:

“*Filone*. This [i.e. matter], as Plato claims, has an appetite for all generated things and loves them, just like the woman loves the man. And, since his love, appetite and desire of the presence of other forms in actuality is not satiated, she falls in love with the other [forms] she has not taken and, leaving that [form], she takes this [other form]: in this way she acquires all forms sequentially, one after another, since she cannot hold all of them together in actuality. She still owns all forms together in many of its parts, but each of them has to transform continuously into the other, since one is not enough to satiate her appetite and love, which cannot be satisfied, because only one of these forms is not enough to satiate her insatiable appetite. And, being the cause of the continuous generation of those forms she does not own, she is [also] the reason of the corruption of her forms. For this reason, they call her the prostitute, since she does not have a single stable lover; when she has one, she wants to leave it for another. Despite this adulterous love, the sublunar world is adorned with such a wonderful diversity of such beautiful things. This is why the generative love of this matter and her desire for a new partner and the pleasure for the new union is the reason of generation of all sensible things.”<sup>58</sup>

Leo the Hebrew changes the meaning of the Aristotelian matter-woman analogy to emphasize the productive potential of the material principle: according to him “Generative love is in the elements and in the matter of all inferior [sublunar] things”.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the continuous process of change is not seen as an imperfection of matter, because it opens the path to the search of beauty, showing its various expressions through different forms. We do not rule out that Leo the Hebrew had also Maimonides in mind, when he wrote on this topic: as pointed out by Sergius Kodera, the re-evaluation of matter in the *Dialoghi d'amore* may be

<sup>57</sup> Maimonides, *Dux*, III, 9, f. 74r. Maimonides knows that this topic was present in Plato: “Plato et qui praecesserant eum vocabant materiam foeminam, et formam masculum” (cf. *ibidem*, I, 17, f. 8v). Though, his view is more similar to the Aristotelian one. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 50d; Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, III, 10, 1118b; Id., *Physics*, 1, 9, 192a 20-25.

<sup>58</sup> Leone Ebreo, *Dialoghi d'amore*, II, 73.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, I, 72.



seen also as an anti-Maimonidean critique, if considered in relation to the cultural context of Judaism.<sup>60</sup>

The concept of matter in the *Dialoghi d'amore* reminds us of ideas expressed by in *De la causa* and *De gli eroici furori*. Could Bruno have drawn inspiration from Leo the Hebrew while writing those Italian dialogues? Despite he never mentioned him, he could have made an implicit reference to him during a conversation with Guillaume Cotin: in fact, in a note of 12<sup>th</sup> December 1585, the librarian of the Saint-Victor abbey wrote that “Among the preachers, [Bruno] praises only the Jew for its eloquence, rather than for his wisdom”.<sup>61</sup> However, Felice Tocco underlined that it is unlikely that the Jew mentioned in that conversation is really Leo the Hebrew: more probably, he is referring to a contemporary. In any case, we do not need historical proofs to demonstrate that Bruno read the *Dialoghi d'amore*: the comparative studies of David Harari and Salvatore Carannante showed strong resemblances between the *Dialoghi d'amore* and *De gli eroici furori*. These works share the same style, sources and Neoplatonic topics (e.g. the relation between finite and infinite, the world soul and mental happiness).<sup>62</sup>

Just like Leo the Hebrew, Bruno intended to speculate on the theme of love in a philosophical way. Basing on a classical Platonic and Aristotelian view, the Jewish philosopher makes a distinction between “bestial love, human love and divine love”<sup>63</sup> and exalts “the love of wisdom and eternal cognitions”<sup>64</sup> that makes men “partakers of divine beauty”.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the Nolan defines the heroic frenzies as the greatest kind of love and makes a distinction between “three kinds of Platonic rapt. One tends to contemplative or speculative life, the other to the active moral life, the other to the idle and voluptuary life; these are three kinds of love of which one raises from the aspect of corporeal form to the speculation of the spiritual and divine form; the other is just concerned by the pleasure of sight and conversation; the other one falls from the sight to the concupiscence of touch”.<sup>66</sup> Even the most “vulgar, animal, bestial love”<sup>67</sup> somehow leads to truth, since matter is divine,

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Sergius Koderá, *Disreputable Bodies: Magic, Medicine and Gender in Renaissance Natural Philosophy*, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Toronto, 2010, p. 42.

<sup>61</sup> Felice Tocco, “Di un nuovo documento su Giordano Bruno”, in *Nuova antologia di lettere, scienze ed arti* 185 (1902), pp. 86–97: 90.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Salvatore Carannante “...sotto la scorza d'amori et affetti ordinarii’. Essere e apparire nei Dialoghi d'amore di Leone Ebreo e negli Eroici furori di Giordano Bruno”, in *Rinascimento* 50 (2010), pp. 21–53; Id., “Leone Ebreo”, in Michele Ciliberto (ed.), *Parole, concetti, immagini*, vol. 2, pp. 1063–68; David Harari, “The Traces of the Fourth Dialogue on Love by Leone Ebreo in *Eroici Furori* by Giordano Bruno”, in *Italia* 7 (1998), pp. 93–155 (Hebrew); Id., “Léon l'Hébreu et Giordano Bruno; leur rapports: solution des enigmes”, in *Revue des études juives* 150/1-2 (1991), pp. 305–16; Id., “Some Lost Writings”. Basing on the analogies between those works, Harari even suggested that Bruno might have left traces of a lost fourth dialogue of love in the last dialogue of the *Furori*: since the conclusions of the first and the second dialogue of the *Dialoghi d'amore* make an anticipation of the topics exposed in the second and the third one, Leo the Hebrew could have written a fourth dialogue on the effect of love on the lovers, the topic mentioned at the end of the third dialogue. For Harari, it is no coincidence that, in the last part of the *Furori*, Bruno introduces the figures of nine blind lovers – hypothetically, the topic of the fourth dialogue of love. From a philological point of view, we cannot accept this conjecture. The dialogue II-V of the *Furori* includes elements of the autobiographical experience of Bruno (hidden under the allegories of the lovers and the feminine characters of Giulia and Laodomia) and the theme of the “blind lover” is a classical theme, which Bruno could have easily found outside of the *Dialoghi d'amore*.

<sup>63</sup> Leone Ebreo, *Dialoghi d'amore*, III, p. 345.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, III, p. 346.

<sup>65</sup> Ibidem, III, p. 346.

<sup>66</sup> Bruno, “Furori”, I-II, p. 983.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, I-II, p. 935.



according to Brunian pantheism. That said, the refusal of the matter-woman analogy is significant: love is the medium through which God governs the world and the boundary between microcosm and macrocosm; for the “furioso”, it the way to get closer to the divine. In the *Furori*, Bruno describes this path of knowledge through the myth of Actaeon, the hunter who seeks Diana (the divinity) and ends up being turned into a deer (symbolizing nature) and eaten by his own hounds: according to the Nolan’s interpretation, the death of Actaeon indicates that he achieved his goal, becoming nature and understanding that nature is divine. Going back to the previously analyzed topics, that is also “the death of souls that the Kabbalists call kiss of death, which is mentioned in the *Song of Salomon*”.<sup>68</sup>

## 7. HASDAI CRESCAS

There is a fourth Jewish philosopher we must consider in our investigation on Bruno’s reception of Jewish thought. In a study concerning the influence of Aristotelianism on Jewish and Arabic philosophy, Harry Wolfson suggested that the Nolan might have been influenced by the Spanish Jew Hasdai Crescas (1340-1410). More recently, Mauro Zonta developed Wolfson’s early hypothesis and, in order to strengthen it, he provided a textual comparison between Crescas’ *Or Adonai* (IV, 2) and Bruno’s *De l’infinito* (V) and *De immenso* (VII). In this paragraph, we add a further comparison to those previously made by Zonta and make some remarks on this case of study.<sup>69</sup>

Firstly, we must consider that Bruno never mentions Hasdai Crescas and it is highly improbable that he read the Hebrew treatise *Or Adonai*. Though, as underlined by Wolfson, there are significant resemblances between the cosmological doctrines of the two authors in question. Moreover, they address philosophical problems in a similar way: in *Or Adonai*, Hasdai Crescas strongly attacked the Aristotelian philosophers Averroes and Maimonides, just like two centuries later Bruno provided a systematic critique of Aristotelianism. Furthermore, both authors justify theories, which would not be valid within an Aristotelian framework. For instance, Crescas called into question the Stagirite’s argument for the uniqueness of the world, in order to support the idea of plurality of worlds. According to him, God could have created more than one world, because his grace has no limits:

“For with respect to its own perfection, each world is independent of the others. And since the oneness that this world exhibits is not in any way dependent on another world, the plurality in the number of worlds need not detract from the perfection of the oneness that

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, I–IV, p. 1010. Cf. Nicoletta Tirinnanzi, “Il *Cantico dei Cantici* tra il *De umbris idearum* e gli *Eroici furori*”, in Bruno, *Gli eroici furori*, ed. Nicoletta Tirinnanzi, Rizzoli, Milano, 2015, pp. 5–50. The *Song of Songs* is also one of the sources of Leo the Hebrew: “*Philo*. That has been the death of our blessed, who left the body in a state of contemplation of the divine beauty with the greatest desire and converted their whole soul into it; where the Sacred Scripture talks about the death of the two saint pastors Moses and Aron, it says that they died at the behest of God and the wise men metaphorically affirm they died kissing the divinity, that means captured by the amorous contemplation and divine union, if you understood what I mean” (Leone Ebreo, *Dialoghi d’amore*, III, p. 169).

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Harry Austin Wolfson, *Crescas’ Critique of Aristotle. Problems of Aristotle’s Physics in Jewish and Arabic Philosophy*, Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge MA, 1929, pp. 35 ff.; Mauro Zonta, “Due note sulle fonti ebraiche di Giovanni Pico e Giordano Bruno”, in *Rinascimento* 40 (2000), pp. 143–56; Id., “The Influence of Hasdai Crescas’s Philosophy on some Aspects of Sixteenth-Century Philosophy and Science”, in J. Helm-A. Winkelmann (eds.), *Religious Confessions and the Sciences in the Sixteenth Century*, Brill, Leiden-Boston-Köln, 2001, pp. 71–78. The discussion on Bruno and Crescas is summarized in Y. Tzvi Langermann, “East and West in Hasdai Crescas: Some Reflections on History and Historiography”, in Id.-Josef Stern (eds.), *Adaptations and Innovations: Studies on the Interaction Between Jewish and Islamic Thought and Literature from the Early Middle Ages to the Late Twentieth Century. Dedicated to Professor Joel L. Kraemer*, Peeters, Dudley MA, 2007, pp. 229–48.



this world exhibits. Even if [generally] the emanated must be one since the emanator [is one], nevertheless, since the end of His emanating is benefaction and grace, a plurality of recipients of His benefaction is not precluded. This is self-evident.”<sup>70</sup>

In this passage Crescas claims that the plurality of worlds is not absurd, since the existence of a world does not preclude the existence of other worlds: one system can be independent from another, in the full respect of the physical laws. This view theoretically allows the idea that infinite worlds exist – however, Crescas seems hesitant to claim this explicitly and believes that the existence of an infinite moving thing is impossible.<sup>71</sup> Despite this, in the *Or Adonai* we still find the idea of an infinite (but empty) space.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the problem of the limit of creation is similarly addressed by Marcellus Palingenius Stellatus, who believed in the existence of an infinite light outside the cosmos. Though, in his *Zodiacus vitae* Palingenius does not speak of plurality of worlds. His view is justified on the basis of the idea that God has no limitations in the process of creation: if nothing can impede God to create an infinite universe, why should God limit His own unlimited power? Bruno, who was strongly inspired by Palingenius on this issue and used basically the same argument in *De l’infinito* and in *De immenso* to justify the infinity of universe and worlds:

“Why should we or could we imagine that divine power were otiose? [...] Why should infinite amplitude be frustrated, the possibility of an infinity of worlds be defrauded? Why should be prejudiced the excellency of the divine image which ought rather to glow in an unrestricted mirror, infinite, immense, according to its way of being?”<sup>72</sup>

This reflection is similar to that of Crescas in content and argumentative form. We also underline that both Bruno and Crescas reinterpret the Aristotelian concept of natural place. In their view, there is not just one world, to which all bodies move towards, but many worlds independent from each other, each of which has its own natural place: according to this perspective, a body cannot move from a world to another world. Crescas says this clearly:

“According to him [Aristotle], if we concede the existence of many worlds, we eliminate natural places. For he said that if we accept them, it would follow necessarily that, for example, parts of the earth in one world would move to their natural place in another world. But these are seductive words that are baseless. For in positing many worlds, we accept that there are natural places in each one. That is, earth will find its center in its world, and fire will find its periphery in its world.”<sup>73</sup>

Similarly, Giordano Bruno harmonizes the Aristotelian concept of natural place with the infinity of worlds in the following passage:

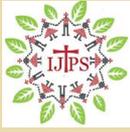
“To this we reply that in the very manner that our earth revolves around our region in this infinite universal space and occupies this part thereof, so also the other stars occupy their parts of space and revolve around their own regions in the immense field. [...] we say that there is indeed likeness between all the stars, between all worlds, and that our own and the other earths are similarly organized. [...] as particles of our fire tend toward our main fire, and the fiery particles of other worlds tend toward the main fire thereof, and as the [elemental] particles of our earth tend toward our whole earth, so do the particles of

<sup>70</sup> Hasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord* (Or Hashem), ed. Roslyn Weiss, Oxford Univ. Press., Oxford, 2018, IV-2, pp. 336–37.

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem, I-I, pp. 37–47.

<sup>72</sup> Bruno, “De l’infinito, universo e mondi”, in Id., *Dialoghi italiani*, I, pp. 380–81. This argument is present also in Id., “De immenso”, II, 292–93, in which Palingenius is quoted explicitly. Cf. Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1957, ch. 1-2; Miguel A. Granada, “Il rifiuto della distinzione fra *potentia absoluta* e *potentia ordinata* di Dio e l’affermazione dell’universo infinito in Giordano Bruno”, in *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* 49/3 (1994), pp. 495–532.

<sup>73</sup> Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, IV-III, p. 337.



another earth tend similarly toward her. So only by constraint and against their nature could the particles of that earth which we call the moon, with the waters thereof, be brought to move to this earth, or the particles of this earth move toward the moon.”<sup>74</sup>

A further concept taken into account by Crescas and Bruno is void. According to Crescas, void is not the total absence of things, but the virtual space, in which creation takes place: “it would be necessary that there be empty space before there could be a universe. And this is because the empty spaces in which the universe resides must contain the possibility for a body to reside in them. For empty space is nothing but this”.<sup>75</sup> Crescas also believes that “if between the worlds there is emptiness, no absurdity will ensue”.<sup>76</sup> In Brunian works, the concept of void has a similar meaning: in *De l’infinito*, the void in the interstitial space between the worlds is defined by the terms “vacuo” and “aere”, while in *De immenso* “the accessible place is called ether” (though, we find also “vacuum”).<sup>77</sup> The opinions of Crescas and Bruno are in line with the perspectives of the moderns, who revised ancient physical concepts – e.g. “natural place” and “place”, that according to Aristotle is “the limit of encompassing body” – in order to put the emphasis on concepts like spatial infinity and void, as well as spatiality and corporeality.<sup>78</sup>

Despite all these analogies between Bruno and Crescas, we cannot demonstrate with certainty that the Nolan knew the doctrines exposed in the *Or Adonai*. He never mentions Hasdai Crescas by name and it is very improbable that he knew his Hebrew text directly. Harari suggested that Bruno could have found Crescas’ doctrines in *De coeli harmonia*, which was written by Leo the Hebrew (maybe on the request of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola). In fact, Leo the Hebrew is known to have made use of Crescas in the *Dialoghi d’amore* and he could have exposed doctrines of this thinker also in *De coeli harmonia*.<sup>79</sup> However, we do not know the content of that treatise, which has been lost. Furthermore, Leo the Hebrew never deals with the problem of plurality of worlds in his other writings. The texts of Christian Kabbalists and Renaissance humanists versed in Jewish studies might offer new hints and stronger arguments for Harari’s opinion. Though, we do not find this scholar’s hypothesis solid enough, since our current knowledge of *De coeli harmonia* is scarce.

## CONCLUSION

A large variety of topics were covered in the previous pages. In the first part of this study, we underlined that Bruno’s perspective on Judaism is influenced by syncretistic views, which very likely owe much to Marsilio Ficino’s *prisca theologia*: the Nolan believes that Hermeticism is the origin of all philosophies and religions, including Judaism and

<sup>74</sup> Bruno, “De l’infinito”, IV, pp. 475–76.

<sup>75</sup> Hasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, III A-I, p. 256.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, II, p. 335.

<sup>77</sup> Bruno, “De immenso”, II, p. 79. Cf. *ibidem*, II, p. 80: “Sedes vero Dei est universum ubique totum immensum caelum, vacuum spacium cuius est plenitudo”; Id., “De l’infinito”, V, p. 230: “Because in our heaven regions and distances are placed between the worlds; it [i.e. heaven] spreads everywhere, it penetrates everything and it is containing, contiguous and continuous to the whole [universe], and it does not leave vacuum; [...] if we intend it as something persistent, we call it the ethereal field containing the worlds; if we intend it as something consistent, we call it the space in which the ethereal field and the worlds are placed”.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Giorgio Israel, “L’origine dell’idea moderna dello spazio tra matematica, fisica e teologia”, in Michele Emmer (ed.), *Matematica e cultura 2011*, Springer, Berlin, 2011, pp. 213–22.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. David Harari, “Who Was the Learned Jew that Made Known Hasdai Crescas’s *The Light of the Lord* to Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola?”, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 14 (1998), pp. 257–69 (Hebrew). On *De coeli harmonia*, see also Eugenio Garin, *Storia della filosofia italiana*, vol. 2, Einaudi, Torino, 1966, p. 596.



Christianity. Bruno “redeems” the Jews, despite the fact that he portrays them in a bad light: in fact, according to the Nolan, the Jews are heirs of the magical knowledge of the Egyptians, the first keepers of the Hermetic wisdom. This belief partly explains why the Nolan includes themes of the Kabbalah in his oeuvre every now and then, despite the fact that his knowledge of the Jewish esoteric tradition is very poor and inaccurate. Kabbalistic concepts like the *sephirot* and the magic of letters are reinterpreted in a new way by the Nolan, who adopts them as conceptual details of his arguments in order to support original philosophical perspectives.

All things considered, we found Bruno’s use of the Kabbalah less interesting than his reference to Jewish philosophy. It seems in Brunian works the theories outlined by Avicbron and Leo the Hebrew are used in a more conscious and functional way in comparison with the Kabbalistic notions, which Bruno does not even introduce with a proper description or contextualization. Though, also the indirect influence of the Kabbalistic tradition might have played its role in the development of Brunian physical and cosmological theories, as we claimed in the previous pages on the basis of the analysis of Brunian lexicon. In our opinion, the current state of the art concerning the studies on Bruno’s reception of Jewish culture needs to be pushed further and we hope that our study can give new suggestions for future researches on the various topics discussed above.

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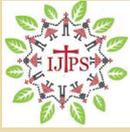
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