

Article On Contemplation on the Gods

Post by “Joshua” of March 19, 2024 at 6:58 PM

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Quote

During his stay in England, Bruno wrote and published a flood of strange works. The extraordinary daring of these works may be gauged by taking in the implications of a single passage from one of them, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, printed in 1584. The passage—quoted here in Ingrid D. Rowland’s fine translation—is long, but its length is very much part of the point. Mercury, the herald of the gods, is recounting to Sofia all the things Jove has assigned him to bring about. He has ordered

that today at noon two of the melons in Father Franzino’s melon patch will be perfectly ripe, but that they won’t be picked until three days from now, when they will no longer be considered good to eat. He requests that at the same moment, on the jujube tree at the base of Monte Cicala in the house of Giovanni Bruno, thirty perfect jujubes will be picked, and he says that several shall fall to earth still green, and that fifteen shall be eaten by worms. That Vasta, wife of Albenzio Savolino, when she means to curl the hair at her temples, shall burn fifty-seven hairs for having let the curling iron get too hot, but she won’t burn her scalp and hence shall not swear when she smells the stench, but shall endure it patiently. That from the dung of her ox two hundred and fifty-two dung beetles shall be born, of which fourteen shall be trampled and killed by Albenzio’s foot, twenty-six shall die upside down, twenty-two shall live in a hole, eighty shall make a pilgrim’s progress around the yard, forty-two shall retire to live under the stone by the door, sixteen shall roll their ball of dung wherever they please, and the rest shall scurry around at random.

This is by no means all that Mercury has to arrange.

Laurenza, when she combs her hair, shall lose seventeen hairs and break thirteen, and of these, ten shall grow back within three days and seven shall never grow back at all. Antonio Savolino’s bitch shall conceive five puppies, of which three shall live out their natural lifespan and two shall be thrown away, and of these three the first shall resemble its mother, the second shall be mongrel, and the third shall partly resemble the father and partly resemble Polidoro’s dog. In that moment a cuckoo shall be heard from La Starza, cuckooing twelve times, no more and no fewer, whereupon it shall leave and fly to the ruins of Castle Cicala for eleven minutes, and then shall fly off to Scarvaita, and as for what happens next, we’ll see to it later.

Mercury's work in this one tiny corner of a tiny corner of the Campagna is still not done.

That the skirt Mastro Danese is cutting on his board shall come out crooked. That twelve bedbugs shall leave the slats of Costantino's bed and head toward the pillow: seven large ones, four small, and one middlesized, and as for the one who shall survive until this evening's candlelight, we'll see to it. That fifteen minutes thereafter, because of the movement of her tongue, which she has passed over her palate four times, the old lady of Fiurulo shall lose the third right molar in her lower jaw, and it shall fall without blood and without pain, because that molar has been loose for seventeen months. That Ambrogio on the one hundred twelfth thrust shall finally have driven home his business with his wife, but shall not impregnate her this time, but rather another, using the sperm into which the cooked leek that he has just eaten with millet and wine sauce shall have been converted. Martinello's son is beginning to grow hair on his chest, and his voice is beginning to crack. That Paulino, when he bends over to pick up a broken needle, shall snap the red drawstring of his underpants....

Conjuring up in hallucinatory detail the hamlet where he was born, Bruno staged a philosophical farce, designed to show that divine providence, at least as popularly understood, is rubbish. The details were all deliberately trivial but the stakes were extremely high: to mock Jesus' claim that the hairs on one's head are all numbered risked provoking an unpleasant visit from the thought police. Religion was not a laughing matter, at least for the officials assigned to enforce orthodoxy. They did not treat even trivial jokes lightly. In France, a villager named Isambard was arrested for having exclaimed, when a friar announced after mass that he would say a few words about God, "The fewer the better." In Spain, a tailor named Garcia Lopez, coming out of church just after the priest had announced the long schedule of services for the coming week, quipped that "When we were Jews, we were bored stiff by one Passover each year, and now each day seems to be a Passover and feast-day." Garcia Lopez was denounced to the Inquisition.

But Bruno was in England. Despite the vigorous efforts that Thomas More made, during his time as chancellor, to establish one, England had no Inquisition. Though it was still quite possible to get into serious trouble for unguarded speech, Bruno may have felt more at liberty to speak his mind, or, in this case, to indulge in raucous, wildly subversive laughter. That laughter had a philosophical point: once you take seriously the claim that God's providence extends to the fall of a sparrow and the number of hairs on your head, there is virtually no limit, from the agitated dust motes in a beam of sunlight to the planetary conjunctions that are occurring in the heavens above. "O Mercury," Sofia says pityingly. "You have a lot to do."

Sofia grasps that it would take billions of tongues to describe all that must happen even in a single moment in a tiny village in the Campagna. At this rate, no one could envy poor Jove. But then Mercury admits that the whole thing does not work that way: there

is no artificer god standing outside the universe, barking commands, meting out rewards and punishments, determining everything. The whole idea is absurd. There is an order in the universe, but it is one built into the nature of things, into the matter that composes everything, from stars to men to bedbugs. Nature is not an abstract capacity, but a generative mother, bringing forth everything that exists. We have, in other words, entered the Lucretian universe.

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This is a long passage from Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve*, in which Ingrid D. Rowland's translation of Giordano Bruno takes to task the claim of divine providence by elevating it to the level of the absurd. It is very long, and I *hope* the 'spoiler' effect shortens it. In any case, it goes a long way toward deconstructing one of the central misconceptions of the gods, and the last paragraph is excellent.