GIORDANO BRUNO (1548 – FEBRUARY 17, 1600)

Giordano Bruno was a controversial figure of the Italian Renaissance. Burned at the stake for heresy and pantheism in 1600, Giordano Bruno is viewed by many as a martyr for free thought and modern scientific advancement. His views on infinite worlds, his mnemonic techniques, and his approach to mathematics all make him an important figure. He was very outspoken and led a challenging life full of travel and a rotating list of supporters as well as enemies. Wherever Giordano Bruno went, his passionate opinions found opposition.

Born Filippo Giordano Bruno in 1548 in Nola (in Campania, then part of the Kingdom of Naples), he was the son of a soldier, Giovanni Giordano Bruno and his wife Fraulissa Savolino. After studies in Naples and tutoring at the Augustinian monastery there, at the age of 17 he entered the Dominican Order of the monastery of San Domenico Maggiore in Naples (where the infamous Thomas Aquinas had taught). There he was primarily instructed on Aristotelian philosophy and changed his name to Giordano, the name of his metaphysics tutor, and became an ordained priest by the age of twenty-four.

Giordano Bruno’s abilities in the art of memory were soon recognized Pope Pius V who invited him to give a demonstration. It was also at this time that Giordano Bruno developed his penchant for free thinking and was caught participating against religious doctrine by owning a banned Erasmus book, which he had also notated along with other discrepancies. Unfortunately for Giordano Bruno, an indictment was being prepared against him by the Inquisition causing him to flee Naples in 1576. He traveled for a time in Italy where he was still able to publish his now lost work, On The Signs of the Times, 1577. By 1579 he was in Geneva, a protestant city, but was soon arrested due to a publication he produced that was critical of another professor at the University. For the next seven years he lived in France lecturing on various subjects and attracting the support of powerful patrons.

While still in France Giordano Bruno published his book De Umbris Idearum (the Shadows of Ideas, 1582), and dedicated it to the French King, Henry III. The King took an interest in Giordano Bruno, and specifically in his lectures on the art of memory. The Italian Friar benefitted much from his newfound French patronage and continued to publish: Ars Memoriae (The Art of Memory, 1582), and Cantus Circaeus (Circe’s Song, 1582). Both books from 1582 addressed his discussions on mnemonic models. During this time he also wrote Candelao, an outrageous dramatic comedy centering on the male midlife crisis and incorporating ‘avant-garde’ mannerisms employing ‘proto-Brechtian’ devices, vulgar language and jokes.

From 1583 to 1585 he lived in London at the house of the French ambassador, Michel de Castelnau. He met members of the Hermetic circle and established a relationship with the poet Philip Sidney and dedicated two of his books to him. He then travelled to Oxford to lecture yet never received a teaching post, as his views, particularly on Copernicus, were considered highly controversial. And in 1584 Giordano Bruno published the book Cena de le Ceneri (The Ash Wednesday Supper), in which he defended Copernicus’ heliocentric theory. Giordano Bruno was a follower and supporter of Copernicus’ theories believing that the Earth did in fact revolve around the sun and that the daily rotation of the heavens was a result of the Earth’s own rotation around its axis.

He also published De l’Infinito, Universo e Mondi (On the Infinite Universe and Worlds), in 1584. Here Giordano Bruno boldly argues that the universe was infinite and contained an infinite number of worlds inhabited by intelligent beings. This was the first representation of the modern concept of an infinite universe, although one cannot view Giordano Bruno as a modern philosopher necessarily. Further, he alleged that the universe reflected God in his infinite nature. God was an immanent God, existing everywhere and not as a singular remote heavenly deity. He abandoned the idea of a hierarchical universe with the result being that the Earth became just one more heavenly body and the sun, simply one more star. He also held the belief that the stars were other suns and planets similar to our own.
Giordano Bruno believed that the universe was homogenous and, therefore, as on earth, the stars also contained the four elements (water, air, earth and fire). Because of this the same physical laws would, and should, apply. In Giordano Bruno’s cosmology, space and time are infinite and the universe is isotropic with planetary systems evenly distributed throughout. Furthermore, he believed that matter is intelligent and made up of discrete atoms. He felt that every part of the universe, mineral, plant and animal, had a soul and that all souls are akin. In a sense, Giordano Bruno could be considered a pantheist.

Leaving England in October 1585, Giordano Bruno returned to Paris where the political climate was tense for him. Due to his writings against Aristotelian natural science, and, in particular, a publication against Fabrizio Mordente, the mathematician, Giordano Bruno was becoming controversial and unaccepted. He soon left for Germany and lectured in Wittenberg for two years. He then went to Prague, and then Helmstedt, but continued to run into trouble as his views were becoming increasingly problematic. Though during this time of travel and upheaval, he was still able to complete many works in Latin. These works are known as, *De Magia* (On Magic), *Theses De Magia* (Theses On Magic) and *De Vinculis In Genere* (A General Account of Bonding). He also managed to publish *De Imaginum, Signorum, Et Idearum Compositione* (On The Composition of Images, Signs and Ideas, 1591). In this same year, 1591, he returned to Italy and eventually became a tutor to Giovanni Mocenigo. Sadly, this tutorship became tragic and traumatic for Giordano Bruno as his apprentice denounced him and his teachings to the Venetian Inquisition. The enigmatic friar recanted while in Venice, yet was still sent to Rome for another trial.

He was imprisoned in Rome in 1592 and died there eight years later. Although many, presumably important, documents are missing from this period, others still exit. The many charges against Giordano Bruno were based on his writings as well as on witness testimonies. Some of these charges included blasphemy, immoral conduct, engaging with magic, and heresy that could be found in the doctrines of his philosophy and cosmology. Giordano Bruno was of course rather controversial as he held many opinions contrary to the Catholic faith, such as his theory of multiple worlds and transubstantiation. He was asked to recant his philosophy but he only attempted a partial recantation so as to retain the basis, and perhaps integrity, of his philosophy. Unfortunately, this was not enough for the Pope who recommended that he be put to death. To be sure, as there was not an official Catholic Church position on the Copernican system in 1600, Bruno’s views on Copernicus were not the ‘sole’ reason he was declared a heretic.

Giordano Bruno was greatly influenced by Bernardino Telesio (1509-1588) who was part of a group of independent philosophers of the late Renaissance who attempted to develop philosophical and scientific ideas outside of the constraints of the Aristotelian-scholastic tradition. Nicholas de Cusa (1401-1464), an ecclesiastical reformer, administrator and cardinal, was also a great influence on Bruno. The idea of evolution appears in Nicholas de Cusa in a somewhat pantheistic form, but is further developed by Giordano Bruno with greater clarity both for physics and metaphysics.

Giordano Bruno’s unitary concept of nature found admiration by very important philosophers/scholars such as, Baruch de Spinoza, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. While his overall contribution to the birth of modern science is still open to debate, many believe Giordano Bruno to be much more a philosopher than a scientist. Issac Asimov disregards him as a “philosopher and poet” rather than a scientist, though he sees scientists as dreamers. Scholars such as Frances Yates believe his ideas on an infinite universe without geocentric structure were a critical shift between the old and new modes of thought. Bruno’s concept of multiple worlds is also viewed by some as a forerunner to Everett’s many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics. Some also believe Giordano Bruno was one of the precursors to Sir Isaac Newton’s theory of place and absolute space.

Other references:

http://www.esotericarchives.com/bruno/home.htm
http://www.giordanobruno.info/nolano/download.htm