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The Composition of Images, Signs and Ideas by Giordano Bruno

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brought her to American readers with her autobiographical novel about growing up in a Sardinian mountain village. Deledda has been resurrected as a lost woman writer with whom all writers can identify, just as Stampa is for us in this new book from Italica. I will close with the quote in which Rilke refers us to Stampa as a model for love and poetry:

But, Nature, spent and exhausted,
takes lovers back
into herself, as if there were not
enough strength
to create them a second time.
Have you imagined
Gaspara Stampa intensely enough
so that any girl
deserted by her beloved might be
inspired
by that fierce example of soaring,
objectless love
and might say to herself, "Perhaps
I can be like her?"
Shouldn't this most ancient of sufferings
finally grow
more fruitful for us? Isn't it time
that we lovingly
freed ourselves from the beloved,
and quivering, endured:
as the arrow endures the bowstring's
tension, so that
gathered in the snap of release it
can be more than
itself. For there is no place where
we can remain.

DANIELA GIOSEFFI

*Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Stephen Mitchell, N.Y.: Vintage, 1989, as quoted in the introduction of the Italica book.

The Composition of Images, Signs and Ideas

By Giordano Bruno.

Translated by Charles Doria.

Edited and annotated by Dick

Higgins. New York: Willis, Locker & Owens, 1991.

Giordano Bruno has fascinated philosophers and revolutionaries for centuries. Now his spell has reached visual artists (I am thinking of the well-received Adam Berg 1992 multimedia installation at the Italian Cultural Institute in Toronto), *The Heretical View of Knowledge*, which drew its inspiration from the philosophy and life of Nolan). Dick Higgins, who edited and annotated this first and only English translation of Bruno's *On the Composition...* is a visual artist too—a performance artist who co-founded Happenings and Fluxus. Among other things, he translated Novalis's *Hymns to the Night* and wrote three books on "Intermedia", a concept he named and that he claims to have found in Bruno. Charles Doria, the translator, is the author of several books of poetry and has translated various classic texts. Manfredi Piccolomini, who signed the Foreword, is a well-known critic and a scholar of Renaissance painting. Are these signs that Bruno is becoming an art icon? Such a fate would not be totally disrespectful of Bruno's legacy. He was a visual thinker, after all, who attempted poetry and comedy as well. Attention to Bruno from the world of art is a sign of the semiotic nature of his thought, and it is welcome especially when the focus is on Bruno's most

neglected Latin works, as it is here. Doria and Higgins point out that Bruno wrote only his most accessible books in Italian, reserving Latin for the more ambitious and esoteric ones. It is a world of texts still waiting to be discovered. Published in Frankfurt in 1591, *De imaginum, signorum, & idearum compositione* appears now for the first time in a language other than Latin. (It was to be Bruno's last work: Mocenigo handed him over to the Inquisition before he could see the galleys.). The two curators describe it as

an engrossing multimedia/intermedia fable whose symbols are read not through the body's but the mind's eye—explored, searched, traversed with the same awe and wonder we experience when we walk through a labyrinth.

Bruno, they say, sees the world as a semiotic unity, where thinking is never disconnected from images, and images are organizers of thinking—even more, they are living thoughts. *De imaginum* is a proto-semiotic treatise indeed, the just and mature completion of his early work *De umbris idearum*. Bruno's claim that ideas are present to the mind only in the form of images accounts for his interest in visual mnemonic books, while the equivalence of ideas and images gives way to archetype. *De imaginum* . . . is a handbook of archetypes indeed, teaching the reader how to master mythological and astrological imagery. It is a text to be consulted when guidance is needed through the maze of the collective unconscious, but it is not devoid of theoretical interest either. A philosophical readjustment of *De imaginum* . . . is actual-

ly necessary. The curators of the present edition do not seem to be fully aware of Bruno's philosophical background. Why call him a "mystic"? How can one say seriously that Bruno proposes a "mystical meditation that puts him . . . in synchrony with the Catholicism of his day and age" (xiv)? How can Piccolomini say that Bruno promotes systems of thinking that "abhor rationality" (xix)? Bruno is not a mystic, and he is not hostile to rationality: He wants man to conquer and possess both the physical and the spiritual world. In *Spaccio della bestia trionfante* he extols the human capacity to transform and improve nature, and writes inspired pages on the power of the human hand—hardly a subject fit for a mystic. That he is not exactly Descartes does not put him in the unlikely category of "irrational" thinkers. Bruno relies upon the tradition of the Hermetic texts and intermingles philosophy with myth and cosmology, but the borders between the old qualitative science, and a new Galilean quantitative way of looking at the world were not clear-cut in Bruno's times. Even Newton believed in alchemy and wrote about it extensively. Furthermore, in dealing with Bruno's legacy, perhaps Doria and Higgins could explain better why Marxists loved Bruno on the account of his "idealism" (xxiv). Idealism is not a light word in philosophy, it does not merely indicate a generic disposition toward "ideas" or "utopias." And what does it mean that in the Italian works Bruno is "involved in dialectical method"? Is there such a thing as a "dialectical method" to be "involved in"? And

where is it to be found? In Plato's *Sophist* or in Hegel's *Phenomenology*? Bruno may be an art icon (he has always been an icon for someone) but he is primarily a philosopher, and he needs to be addressed with philosophical awareness. These flaws do not diminish the importance of Doria's and Higgins's translation. Scholars cannot blame them for having attempted, with passion and dedication, a difficult enterprise that no one had undertaken before. Now that *De imaginum . . .* is available even to non-specialists, thanks to Doria and Higgins, one has only to hope that it will find its place in Bruno's canon.

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**Saggio su John Ruskin:
Il Messaggio nello Stile.**

By Claudia Ruggiero Corradini.

Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1989.

This book is a welcome contribution to the long-overdue Ruskin revival of the past two decades. It admirably supplies what Ruskin criticism has needed, namely a study of his literary theory and literary style. Since Ruskin left no systematic stylistic treatise, the first chapter pieces together his stylistic theory from scattered statements; yet Corradini rightly rejects Croce's claim that Ruskin's stylistic concepts form no system. Valuing verbal precision, clarity, concision, and directness, Ruskin would reconcile metaphorical richness and simplicity, imagination and literal truth. Far from valuing style by itself

or as a superaddition to content, he believes that it should express its content while conveying empirical and moral truth (*ethos*). Ruskin realized that his early works tended toward floridity, and were being valued mainly for verbal beauty. His later writings stress truth's "bitter almond" over beauty of style—without, however, ceasing to be beautiful.

Central to Ruskin's stylistic theory is a concept of the sister arts uniting literature, painting, and drawing: each demands fidelity to nature and the imaginative capacity to penetrate essential form. Hence Ruskin encourages accurate seeing as essential to literary and visual art. He considers drawing as important as reading and writing, and recommends mandatory art education in British schools. Yet as Ruskin turns to socio-economic issues in the later 1850s, he increasingly emphasizes learning how to read. "Of King's Treasuries", the first part of *Sesame and Lilies*, showcases Ruskin's innovative method of close reading of classic texts while stressing etymology and verbal accuracy as the basis for good writing.

The second chapter relates Ruskin's stylistic values to his literary criticism. Besides noting his admiration for the Bible, Corradini demonstrates Ruskin's esteem for Turner, Byron, and Scott as exemplars of imaginative truth in the sister arts. Ruskin prefers Scott's historical romances over Dickens's urban novels, a new genre Ruskin was perhaps the first to define. However, the chapter focuses upon his reading of Dante in *Modern Painters*. Regarding Dante as a paragon of humanity, Ruskin admires his verbal accuracy, combin-