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Spy fiction:
un genere per grandi autori

a cura di Paolo Bertinetti

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GARDEZ MON SECRET:
GIORDANO BRUNO
AND THE HISTORIAN'S SPY STORY

Lucia Folena

[Della] dissimulazione [...] talvolta sogliono servirsi anco gli dei; perché talvolta, per fuggir invidia, biasmo ed oltraggio, con gli vestimenti di costei la Prudenza suole occultar la Veritate. [...] Alla] studiosa Dissimulazione Giove fa lecito che talvolta si presente in cielo, e non già come dea, ma come tal volta ancella della Prudenza e scudo della Veritate.

*Giordano Bruno*¹

On April 29, 1583 – “counting in the French manner according to the new calendar instituted by command of the pope”² – a letter was directed by someone who lived in the French embassy in London to Sir Francis Walsingham, Queen Elizabeth’s secretary of state and spymaster³. This document, composed in faltering French, contained precious information. Written in the fragmentary, day-by-day form of a journal, it recorded every notable incident and visit that had taken place in or around Salisbury Court, where the embassy was located⁴, since the 24th of that month. More specifically, it told its addressee about the exchanges,

¹ *Spaccio de la bestia trionfante*, ed. M. Ciliberto, Milano, Fabbri, 1998 [Rizzoli, 1985], 206-207.

² Text 2 in J. BOSSY, *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair* [hereafter BOSSY], New Haven-London, Yale UP, 2002 [1991], 191 (orig. 189). In England it was April 19: the country remained on the Julian calendar until 1752, whereas the dates contained in this letter and in the ensuing ones refer to the Gregorian calendar, which had come into force during the previous year in Italy and France and was adopted by the Catholic states of the Empire in October 1583.

³ On Elizabeth’s secret service see e.g. S. BUDIANSKY, *Her Majesty’s Spymaster: Elizabeth I, Sir Francis Walsingham and the Birth of Modern Espionage*, New York, Viking Penguin, 2005; J. M. ARCHER, *Sovereignty and Intelligence: Spying and Court Culture in the English Renaissance*, Stanford (CA), Stanford UP, 1993.

⁴ Most scholars place it in Butcher Row; Bossy regards Salisbury Court as far more likely on the basis of contemporary evidence and maps of 16th- and 17th-century London (248-252).

whether direct or epistolary, that the ambassador, Michel de Castelnau, Seigneur de La Mauvissière, had had with some English, Scottish and French personages who were more or less explicit supporters of Mary Stuart. It was she – Elizabeth’s cousin and prisoner, the dowager queen of France and former monarch of Scotland – whom a large number of Catholics all over Europe hoped to see on the throne of England one day in the near future. There were among them people who regarded this end as important enough to justify any means used to attain it, including political assassination and civil war.

Castelnau might be defined a *politique*. Like most members of that party, he was an earnest Catholic who nonetheless regarded loyalty to his king and country as having priority over any other concern⁵. He was sincerely bent on encouraging and enhancing the alliance between him and Elizabeth, and certainly did not identify with the extremist views of the *ligueurs* headed by Henri, Duke of Guise⁶. Yet at the same time he interpreted his diplomatic role as requiring him to mediate between parts and to settle dissents in the supreme interest of peace. Moreover, after the failure of the long-prepared and hugely controversial project of a marriage between Elizabeth and the French king’s younger brother, François, Duke of Anjou, in which he had taken an active part, he had opened up channels of communication with Queen Mary and begun working secretly to set her free. His goal, though, was simply the reinstatement of her rule in Scotland, not the destabilization of the English

⁵ On the 16th-century *politiques* see F. DECRUE DE STOUTZ, *Le parti des politiques au lendemain de la Saint-Barthélemy*, Paris, Plon, 1892 (available at www.archive.org/, Aug. 2014).

⁶ The second *ligue catholique*, or *sainte ligue*, did not in fact appear until 1584, after the death of François d’Anjou had determined Henri III’s choice of Henri, king of Navarre and leader of the Huguenots, as his successor on the throne of France. During the previous two years, however, the Guisians had been receiving substantial funding from Philip II of Spain, interested in reaffirming Roman Catholicism as the only legitimate religion while at the same time weakening the French king and his policy of relative religious toleration. See J.-M. CONSTANT, *La Ligue*, Paris, Fayard, 1996. In the 1550s and 1560s Castelnau had been on excellent terms with the Guises, who had entrusted him with a series of important tasks. He gradually detached himself from their influence in the subsequent phase of his long diplomatic career, to the point where, after his return to France in 1585, he came into open conflict with them and their followers because of his resolutely siding with the Valois and Bourbon kings. The Duke of Guise is the first personage mentioned in the missive to Walsingham, as having “sent a letter to the ambassador, commending himself to him and earnestly begging him to manage the affairs of the Queen of Scots in England as secretly as he possibly can” (Text 2, BOSSY 191; orig. 189).

crown. He was working “for the prospect which would then arise of restoring French influence or control over Scotland”; he believed this would be “the right way to solve the external and internal problems which beset his country in his time, and had deprived it of its rightful grandeur among the nations of Christendom” (Bossy 13). His efforts to bring about such a conclusion obviously made him particularly interesting and worthy of close observation in the eyes of the English government. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the final years of Castelnau’s tenure⁷ Salisbury Court should have become the centre of an inextricable tangle of plots and counterplots, swarming with spies, double agents and moles.

The letter to Walsingham was the first in a series, the final one being a report sent from Paris around New Year 1586⁸. The same writer addressed one missive to Queen Elizabeth herself⁹, and three to Sir Edward Stafford, the English ambassador in Paris¹⁰. All are in French and, with two exceptions¹¹, signed Henry Fagot. Without doubt, however, their author was not a Frenchman, as is made clear by the fact that, while his vocabulary is ample and mostly adequate and his syntax generally acceptable, his grammar and spelling are such as might have been picked up in conversations by an intelligent and educated foreigner with no schooling in the language. His French is essentially phonetic, and he has particular difficulties with verbs¹². He uses enough Italianisms to justify the hypothesis that he might have come from beyond the Alps (Bossy 17).

“Henry Fagot” is obviously a pseudonym, as is also made manifest by there being no mentions of a person by this name in either Castelnau’s correspondence or the detailed accounts of his activities and connections

⁷ He was in charge of the embassy from 1575 to 1585.

⁸ Text 16, BOSSY 238-240. There are in total seven communications addressed to Walsingham and signed Henry Fagot.

⁹ Text 11 (March 1584), BOSSY 214-218.

¹⁰ Texts 13-14 (late winter-spring 1585) and 17 (October-November 1586), BOSSY 226-233, 241-246. The latter is not signed, and Bossy himself has subsequently manifested doubts about its attribution (Preface to the 3rd ed., 2002, xiii). If the previous reconstruction is exact, the letters altogether cover a period of almost four years.

¹¹ Besides the November 1586 one to Stafford, the March 1584 one to Elizabeth, for which see n. 20 below.

¹² There is, however, a remarkable improvement in his orthography in the final phase of his stay at the embassy some two years later. Bossy ascribes this to the fact that in the autumn of 1583, when his wife and his five-year-old daughter had joined him in London, Castelnau had taken John Florio into his household as the latter’s tutor, so that a first-rate language teacher was constantly available at Salisbury Court (BOSSY 17, 23).

produced by Walsingham’s other secret agents in the embassy (Bossy 16). Furthermore, complete “Christian names were rarely used in signing sixteenth-century letters; a constant repetition of the signature in Fagot’s first two letters suggests that the writer was trying it out” (Bossy 18). The first name may sound as a rather predictable choice, considering that the struggle for political and religious supremacy in France revolved around three figures – the Valois monarch, the Bourbon king of Navarre, and the great antagonist of both, the Duke of Guise – who were all called Henri¹³. The last name is in all likelihood humorous – though in a strikingly grim fashion – in its alluding not only, generically, to the stake – the preferential form of capital punishment for heretics in late-Medieval and Renaissance Europe – but also, metonymically, to heresy and heretics themselves¹⁴. The *OED* records the usage of “fagot” or “faggot” in “reference to the practice of burning heretics alive”, especially in phrases such as “fire and faggot” and “to fry a faggot”, i.e., to be burned alive; the expression “to bear [or “carry”] a faggot” was applied to recanting heretics who were compelled to wear “the embroidered figure of a faggot [...] on their sleeve, as an emblem of what they had merited”¹⁵. Walsingham’s secret agent may not have been sufficiently fluent in English to know about all this; however, supposing he chose his *nom de plume* himself, his command of French was probably good enough to make him aware of the analogous senses in which the term was employed in that language. For instance, the idiom *sentir le fagot*, “to smell or smack of the faggot”, that is, “to sound or appear heretical”, said of both individuals and inanimate objects, particularly books, seems to have been fairly popular just a few decades later¹⁶.

So the new spy in the French embassy was either playfully defining himself a heretic, or at least benevolently allowing his contacts to recog-

¹³ As was also one of the foremost Huguenot leaders, the prince of Condé.

¹⁴ Bossy (99) sees “Fagot” merely as “one of the jokey references to the stake which he [Bruno] tended to come up with on such occasions” as his presumptive first interview with Walsingham around April 17, 1583.

¹⁵ The *OED* (*faggot* / *fagot*, 2 a-2 b) provides attestations for these usages in the 16th and 17th centuries. Already in 1526 a group of recanting heretics, accused of reading Luther, were made to ride backwards on donkeys in a penitential procession to St Paul’s Cathedral with faggots tied to their backs (“Anglican Church Chronology”, www.lloydthomas.org/6-ChurchLifeIssues/anglo.html, Apr. 2014).

¹⁶ The *Dictionnaire de français Littéré* (*fagot*, 2) offers 17th-century examples drawn from La Fontaine’s *Fables* and the writings of Madame de Sévigné.

nize him as such. One might of course ask oneself with regard to which orthodoxy, the Roman Catholic or the Anglican. For both sides, like the other leading Christian denominations of Renaissance Europe, had gradually developed and extended the notion of heresy so as to adapt it to the representation of almost any variant of otherness. They had thus constructed a general repository suitable for enclosing practically all forms of dissent and deviance in connection with religion, scientific thought, worldview, and even social interaction and personal behaviour – all forms, that is, except those leading to utter marginalization. Now the name of Fagot would sound as a perfect pseudonym for a man like Giordano Bruno. He, the “universal” heretic, had already been forced, over and over again, to abandon the countries and cities – no matter whether Papist, Calvinist, or Lutheran – where he had initially believed he could obtain safety as well as audience, because his nonconformist teachings and publications had incurred the displeasure of authorities, intellectuals, theologians or Church establishments. In Walsingham’s perspective, Bruno’s reputation for heterodoxy had preceded him in London. His arrival had been announced to the secretary of state on March 28 (or April 7 Gregorian style) of that same 1583 by Henry Cobham, who was the English ambassador in Paris before Stafford, in these terms: “Doctor Jordano Bruno, Nolano, a professor of philosophy, intends to pass into England, whose religion I cannot commend”¹⁷. Rather than an expression of disapproval for a wholehearted adherence to an official Christian creed different from Cobham’s own, this might suggest a recognition of Bruno’s distance from *all* accepted versions of Christianity – an assessment which the philosopher’s subsequent teaching and publications would prove to be absolutely accurate.

Fagot was a priest, or at least acted as one, as emerges in particular in a conversation with the incoming French ambassador, Guillaume de L’Aubépine, Baron de Châteauneuf, transcribed in a letter dated from the beginning of September 1585, when the spy was preparing to return to France with Castelna¹⁸. The newcomer, he says, asked me whether I

¹⁷ *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign*, Jan.-June 1583, 214, cit. in F. YATES, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964, 204. Yates comments: “Note that it is Bruno’s religion, not his philosophy, which the ambassador feels that he cannot commend—perhaps an understatement.” See BOSSY 13.

¹⁸ Text 15, Henry Fagot to Sir Francis Walsingham, from Salisbury Court, BOSSY 234-237. See Bossy’s discussion of the interview on pp. 58-60, 76-77. The historian stresses, in partic-

was not afraid of going about the streets “pour autant que lon connoissoit que je estois [le pr *deleted*] cestuilla qui debvoit estre [...] congnu entre tous les autres”, “since it was known that I was the person who ought to be known above all others”. His attempt to avoid the word that would reveal a fundamental component of his identity – signalled by the deleted *le pr*, presumably for *le prestre*, *le prêtre* – here entangles the undercover agent in a hopeless tautology, absolutely incomprehensible to anybody except those who already share his secret: “I was known as he who should be known”. To Châteauneuf he replies that he has never received any verbal or physical harm because of his office (“pour mon office”). The nobleman then makes the implication even less ambiguous by demanding of him that he give instructions as to the proper behaviour in England to the two priests, one Italian and one probably French, whom he plans to have with him in London.

In his correspondence Castelnau never mentions Bruno as being his guest in the embassy for two and a half years; nor, for that matter, does he make references to anybody else who might be recognized as Henry Fagot. Furthermore, he is utterly silent on there being a resident priest on the premises. All this, in Bossy’s perspective, would make sense if the identities involved were reunited into a single one – Bruno’s. If he had indeed provisionally resumed the sacerdotal habit, which the Roman Church had debarred him from, the Nolan had very good reasons to conceal the fact, whereas his host had to take the Elizabethan context into account. In late-16th-century Europe there existed no international treaties allowing ambassadors to harbour representatives of a version of Christianity divergent from a country’s official one; in England, as Bossy hypothesizes, a kind of gentlemen’s agreement made such a presence acceptable provided it was absolutely undeclared. Castelnau evidently complied, but other sources attest that in those years a priest lived at Salisbury Court, where, in addition, Catholic rites were performed on a regular basis¹⁹.

It was as a priest that in March 1584 Fagot received the confession of a Spanish merchant, Pedro de Zubiaur, who told him how Philip II’s former ambassador, Bernardino de Mendoza – expelled from England

ular, that “when Castelnau went home, he only had one priest to take with him. Since both Bruno and Fagot went with him, they must have been the same person” (76).

¹⁹ J. BOSSY, “Postfazione” to the Italian ed., *Giordano Bruno e il mistero dell’Ambasciata*, tr. L. Salerno, Milano, Garzanti, 1992, 336.

two months earlier because of his role in the Trockmorton plot – had entrusted him, along with four other men, with the assassination of the Queen, “by arms, by poisons, bouquets, underclothes, smell, waters or by any other means”²⁰. Since no action was taken at the time against the prospective regicides, one is led to imagine that both Walsingham and the monarch herself received this revelation with remarkable scepticism. Such a tepid reaction may also explain why at that point the spy “ceased transmitting for a year” (Bossy 37).

For all his formally belonging to the Roman Church, Henry Fagot “was extremely hostile to the pope, and to those Catholics whom he regarded as papists, which is a strong term in his vocabulary”. This enmity was forceful enough for him to manifest himself recurrently in his reports as “a spontaneous anti-papalist of a very intense kind” even when dealing with more malleable interlocutors than the staunchly Protestant secretary of state (Bossy 18).

As far as can be inferred from his writings, this mysterious individual’s ideas about European politics and religion remained fairly unaltered in the years in which he worked officially for Castelnau and covertly for Walsingham. On the contrary, a considerable evolution may be traced in his relationship with the context where he found himself and with his role as clandestine observer and informer. Leaving his doubtful mastery of the French language aside, his initial letters, besides being composed in an awkward and overly pedantic diary-like form – subsequently replaced by a more cohesive narrative structure – disclose his being entirely unaccustomed to the environment he is attempting to describe and his ignoring even the names of people who were habitual visitors of the embassy. All this shows that at the time “he was a newcomer both to the house and to the profession of spying, and had either entered the household as a spy or become one shortly after he arrived” (Bossy 18).

The highlights of Fagot’s career as a secret agent for Her Majesty are basically two – his recruiting Castelnau’s “secretary” as a mole²¹, and his

²⁰ Text 11 (BOSSY 215-218), addressed directly to “la serenissime Royne dangleterre france et yrlande”, provides a summary of Zubiatur’s confession. It is not signed otherwise than simply “Celuy que connoissez”, “He whom you know”, and asks the recipient to keep the sender’s secret (“Gardez mon secret”). It is accompanied, however, by an enclosure signed Henry Fagot, which provides a full transcript of the confession, most probably meant for Walsingham only (Text 11a, 219-221).

²¹ Text 4 (late May-early June 1583, BOSSY 197-200): “I have made the ambassador’s secretary so much my friend that, if he is given a certain amount of money, he will let me know

fundamental contribution to the discovery of the Trockmorton plot. Sir Francis Trockmorton, who had been present in the spy's reports from the very beginning as an assiduous visitor of the French embassy and had very soon been indicated, together with Lord Henry Howard, as "the chief agent for the Queen of Scots"²², was arrested in November 1583. His confession under torture uncovered a conspiracy aimed at preparing an invasion of England – led by the Duke of Guise with the support of Spain and the Pope and accompanied by an insurrection of English Catholics – in order to remove and murder Elizabeth, placing Mary Stuart on the throne and restoring Catholicism as the official religion of the country. He was convicted of high treason and executed in July 1584. Howard was arrested, interrogated and kept in custody for six months, after which, notwithstanding Fagot's implacable hostility²³, he was released. The French ambassador's at least indirect implication in the conspiracy cast a dark shadow over his excellent relationships with the monarch and her secretary of state – a shadow that he eventually managed to dispel: "During the autumn [of 1584] Castelnau had patched up his relations with the Queen and the Council, and a good deal of amiable socialising had been going on, most of it under the patronage of the Earl of Leicester" (Bossy 128).

It is essentially on these grounds that in 1991 John Bossy, emeritus professor of history at the University of York, constructed what he defined a "true" spy story (Bossy 1), in which he unhesitatingly identified Henry Fagot as Giordano Bruno. In later years, especially after he had

everything he [Castelanu] does, including everything to do with the Queen of Scots and the cipher which is used with her. He tells me that, after your excellency has inspected any packet addressed to her, he can put something else in it without anybody knowing". Fagot's French is particularly obscure here, and Bossy hypothesizes that the last suggestion may also refer to mere alteration of incoming letters. For the identity of the mole, see n. 24 below.

²² "Le grand facteur de la Royne decosse", Text 4, BOSSY 199. See Text 2, 190. For the Trockmorton plot see BUDIANSKY, 123-139. According to Bossy's reconstruction, some of the information on the conspiracy reached Walsingham indirectly through the intermediation of William Herle, an agent for William Cecil, Lord Burghley, who acted as Fagot's contact in the months between November 1583 and January 1584 (Texts 5-8, 201-209).

²³ Through Herle he describes him as "a preest [... and] in the secret register of the popes cardynalls" (Text 5, 202); he then attacks Howard's *Defensative against the Poyson of supposed Prophecies* as a book containing "sundrie Heriesies and spyces withall of Treson" (Text 6, 205); finally, he declares himself convinced that the Queen "is furnisshed with matter of her self to convince the *Lord Henry* Haward criminallye" (Text 7, 207). See BOSSY 99-104, and, for Bruno's comparable animosity towards the future Earl of Northampton, 117-125.

gone back to the documents connected with the case in order to write a sequel to the book²⁴, he revised this certainty into a strong likelihood²⁵. Undoubtedly, the story sounds plausible, despite the negative reactions of the few Bruno specialists who choose to take it into consideration²⁶.

In addition to the facts mentioned above, there are some significant coincidences between the dates of Fagot's messages and those of Bruno's movements from 1583 to 1586. If the sequence established by Bossy is correct²⁷, there is a gap in the embassy spy's correspondence between June 1583 and January 1584. It was precisely in that month of June that Bruno left London, together with Sir Philip Sidney and some other prominent courtiers, to accompany the Polish prince Albert Laski, who had previously visited the Queen and was now bound for Oxford. There the Nolan took part in the disputes organized in the university for the prince's entertainment. Later that summer he returned to Oxford, after a brief stay in London, for a series of lectures where he attempted to

²⁴ *Under the Molehill: An Elizabethan Spy Story*, New Haven-London, Yale UP, 2001. This second study focuses on the identity and doings of the French embassy mole who was passing Castelnau's confidential papers to Fagot, and through him to Her Majesty's secret service. Here Bossy clears Courcelles, the ambassador's secretary, whom he had resolutely indicated as responsible for the leaks in the previous volume, and builds a plausible case against Laurent Feron, the clerk.

²⁵ BOSSY, *Molehill*, 34 ff, 56 ff; *Embassy Affair*, Preface to the 3rd ed. (2002), xiii. In the *Embassy Affair* Bossy also provides a detailed comparative analysis of the handwritings of Fagot and Bruno and a number of other *pièces d'appui* to support his argumentation.

²⁶ Along with N. Ordine and G. Giorello, who expressed their scepticism repeatedly in interviews released after the Italian translation of Bossy's work, this small group includes S. RICCI, *Giordano Bruno nell'Europa del Cinquecento*, Roma, Salerno, 2000, 580-581; and I. D. ROWLAND, *Giordano Bruno Philosopher Heretic* [2008], It. trans. G. Ernst, *Un fuoco sulla terra. Vita di Giordano Bruno*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2011, 158-159.

²⁷ In order for the identification to work, the date indicated in the endorsement made by Walsingham's office on the back of one letter (Text 4, BOSSY 197-200) needs to be changed from early April to late May 1583. Since the beginning of this missive refers to the author not having written to the secretary of state "for a long time", the endorsement, if accurate, would rule out Giordano Bruno, who had not reached London before the middle of April. Once again, however, Bossy sounds rather convincing in the explanation he provides for his chronological alteration. Possibly, he says, this letter was in a packet with the two from April (Texts 2 and 3) which he regards as having preceded it, so that the clerk, "lacking a date for this, deduced from the beginning of it that it was the first of the three". On the contrary, a comparison of the three documents makes it evident that this one displays an increased awareness of the situation in the embassy and a better knowledge of its visitors, and is written in a less "experimental" form, by someone to whom his task as a secret agent is gradually becoming a matter of routine (197).

combine the new Copernican science with the Hermetic tradition as reformulated by Marsilio Ficino. His teachings, however, were received so badly by the academic and religious establishment that he was forced to shorten his sojourn and resume his previous role as, possibly, Castelnau's chaplain, or simply, as he stated later, the ambassador's "gentleman"²⁸.

In the final part of the year – supposing Bossy is right – Fagot performed his secret task by merely delivering oral reports to Herle²⁹, while Bruno entered a very fruitful intellectual phase, concentrating on the composition and revision of the important philosophical, ethical and political works he published in England³⁰. The correspondence was resumed in the first three months of 1584, then interrupted for almost a year, until February 1585, at which time Fagot was in Paris for a couple of months digging out information on another plot³¹ and addressing his reports to Stafford rather than Walsingham. He was back in London in April (Bossy 58), but apparently had nothing worthwhile to communicate until September³². His and the ambassador's definitive departure took place at the end of that month or in early October. His last missive to Walsingham, from Paris, came in January 1586. Five months later

²⁸ For these visits to Oxford see YATES, pp. 206 ff.; M. CILIBERTO, "Giordano Bruno 1582-1583. Da Parigi a Oxford", *Studi storici*, 26 no. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1985), pp. 151-155. Bruno pokes fun at the Oxonian "pedants" who rejected him in the 4th dialogue of his *Cena de le ceneri* (1584). In the account of his life in Paris and London which he gave to the Venice inquisitors in May 1592 he declared that in Castelnau's house he had "had no position", except that of "acting as his gentleman" ("non faceva altro, se non che stava per suo gentilhomo", *Documenti della vita di GB*, ed. V. Spampanato, Firenze, Olschki, 1933, p. 85. See Text 1, BOSSY 188). Of course, supposing he had really been the embassy's priest, he could not have admitted it, since, as has already been said, the Church had formally inhibited him from officiating.

²⁹ See n. 22 above.

³⁰ His first volume in England, dedicated to Castelnau, includes an Art of Memory reprinted from the one in his *Cantus Circaeus*, along with two work entitled *Explicatio Triginta Sigillorum* and *Sigillus Sigillorum* (1583). In 1584 he produced *De la causa, principio e uno* as well as *La cena de le ceneri* and *Lo spaccio de la bestia trionfante*, the following year the *Cabala del cavallo pegaseo* and the *Eroici furori*. Both the *Spaccio* and the *Eroici furori* are dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney. For these works see YATES, 205-290; M. CILIBERTO, *Giordano Bruno*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2010 [1990], 29-195; ROWLAND, 157-209.

³¹ That of William Parry, Thomas Morgan and others (BOSSY 54 ff.). There seem to be no traces of a trip to Paris in early 1585 in Bruno's biographies, which of course does not necessarily mean much, since some details of his wanderings through Europe between 1576 and 1592 are not completely clear.

³² Text 15 (see n. 18 above). This is the account of the interview with the new ambassador suggesting that the writer is a priest.

Giordano Bruno left France. He eventually reached Wittenberg, whence, as Bossy conjectures, he returned for a brief stay in Paris in October or November of the same year. It was at that time that a final message, unsigned but attributable to Fagot, was sent to Stafford.

In sum, if Bruno was really involved with the secret service during the English segment of his life, such an assignment was not so demanding as to prevent him from pursuing his studies and producing an impressive amount of writing. Nor did it impede him from working on his own ambitious political project, that is, the liberation of European states from the theocratic claims of all churches – the Roman Catholic as well as its Protestant opponents – through the construction of stable, unyielding monarchic powers. The kings and queens whose favour he sought – Henri III of France, Elizabeth I of England, and later the Emperor Rudolf II and Henri IV of France – were, in his view, to take control over the institutionalized religions of their countries so as to turn them into instruments for knitting societies together and ensuring peace and prosperity³³. In light of this ultimate mission, his possible role as Walsingham's intelligencer would not appear excessively strange, considering the historical context in which these events are supposed to have taken place. It was essential, above all, to fend off the risk of the only strong European nation where no conflict was possible between established church and secular power – the former having been assimilated into the structure of the latter with Henry VIII's 1534 and Elizabeth's 1559 Acts of Supremacy – falling back under papal domination.

During his previous stay in France the Nolan had developed a good rapport with Henri III, who was personally interested in the most esoteric aspects of his thinking as well as in his research on the art of memory. He had arrived at Castelnau's embassy with one or more letters of introduction written by the king, and perhaps with a secret task to accomplish on his behalf³⁴. Even leaving this latter conjecture aside, his entering the

³³ On this aspect of Bruno's political thinking and activity, besides YATES, cf. the enlightening studies by G. SACERDOTI, *Sacrificio e sovranità. Teologia e politica nell'Europa di Shakespeare e Bruno*, Torino, Einaudi, 2002; and N. ORDINE, *Contro il Vangelo armato. Giordano Bruno, Ronssard e la religione*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2007.

³⁴ It was Bruno himself who told the Venetian inquisitors about his crossing the Channel in 1583 "con littere dell'istesso Re" (*Documenti della vita di GB*, 85). Yates regards the statement as "probably true", commenting: "That [while in England] he published what he did, and was not imprisoned or punished in some way, strongly suggests [...] that he had some kind of diplomatic protection, such as a letter of introduction to the French ambassador from the

country with the official endorsement of such a prominent figure would no doubt have attracted the attention of those in power. In particular, it would have, if not entailed, at least greatly facilitated his getting directly in touch with Queen Elizabeth in a more private context than that of the entertainments organized for Prince Laski, on the occasion of which, assuredly, he paid one of his first visits to her as the French ambassador's "gentleman". Little is known about his subsequent face-to-face contacts with her³⁵, other than his going to court with Castelnau towards the end of the following year, presumably over Christmas, to offer her a precious volume. Bound "in black morocco and bearing the arms of England", this book contained the four Italian dialogues he had by then completed – *Cena de le ceneri*, *De la causa, principio e uno*, *De l'infinito universo e mondi* and *Spaccio de la bestia trionfante* (Bossy 126-127).

What is attested by his writings is that, as the course of European events probably led him to understand how unrealistic he had been in concentrating his hopes of political regeneration on Henri III, from whom no clear signs of reaction to the hegemonic policy of the papacy and the Spanish crown were now coming, he gradually became a more and more enthusiastic supporter of Elizabeth. Like most of the intellectuals among the aristocrats and gentlemen who surrounded her – not least his friend Philip Sidney – he took an active part in the elaborate collective transfiguration of her person into an object of worship and spiritual love, a semi-divine entity. She, the "diva Elisabetta, [...] col splendore de gli occhi suoi, per cinque lustri e più s'ha fatto tranquilla il grande Oceano che col continuo afflusso e flusso lieto e quieto accoglie nell'ampio seno il suo diletto Tamesi"³⁶. This "unica Diana" occupies among the nymphs of England the same position as the sun among the stars, to the point where the two become perfectly interchangeable, as the god of heaven, Jupiter, says to Ocean³⁷:

French King himself would have provided". His having been sent to England by the Valois monarch "on some mission, albeit *sub rosa*", is likewise hypothesized by Yates (204). Other scholars, including Bossy, deem this unlikely.

³⁵ To the Venetian inquisitors he said she knew him well because he was continually going to court with the ambassador (*Documenti* 122).

³⁶ *De la causa*, ed. G. Aquilecchia, Torino, Einaudi, 1973, 24.

³⁷ "Iscusazione del Nolano", ll. 13-14, and "Canzone degl'illuminati", ll. 13-32, in *Eroiici furori*, ed. N. Tirinnanzi, Milano, Rizzoli, 2010 [1999], 76, 372-373. The lines here quoted constitute the final quatrain of the "Canzone".

Vag'l sol tra tue ninfe per costei;
E per vigor de leggi sempiterne,
De le dimore alterne,
Costei vaglia per sol tra gli astri miei.

It would in fact be impossible to find a male sovereign “megliore o simile a questa Diva Elizabetta, che regna in Inghilterra” surpassing all human excellence: “non è chi sia più degno in tutto il regno, non è chi sia più eroico tra’ nobili, non è chi sia più dotto tra’ togati, non è chi sia più saggio tra’ consulari” (*De la causa* 24). But the Nolan’s hyperbolic celebration of the English queen reaches its apex in the *Cena*:

Non hai qua materia di parlar di quel nume de la terra, di quella singolare e rarissima Dama, che da questo freddo cielo, vicino a l'artico parallelo, a tutto il terrestre globo rende sì chiaro lume: Elizabetta dico, che per titolo e dignità regia non è inferiore a qualsivoglia re, che sii nel mondo; per il giudicio, saggezza, consiglio e governo, non è facilmente seconda ad altro, che porti scettro in terra: ne la cognizione de le arti, notizia de le scienze, intelligenza e pratica de tutte lingue, che da persone popolari e dotte possono in Europa parlarsi, lascio al mondo tutto giudicare qual grado lei tenga tra tutti gli altri principi. Certo, se l'imperio de la fortuna corrispondesse e fusse agguagliato a l'imperio del generosissimo spirto ed ingegno, bisognerebbe che questa grande Amfitrite aprisse le sue fimbrie, ed allargasse tanto la sua circonferenza, che sì come gli comprende una Britannia ed Ibernica, gli desse un altro globo intiero, che venesse ad uguagliarsi a la mole universale, onde con più piena significazione la sua potente mano sustente il globo d'una generale ed intiera monarchia³⁸.

The justification he later provided to the Venetian inquisitors for calling her *diva* was that he had simply conformed to a common Elizabethan practice (*Documenti* 121). It appears that his fervour was not repaid with equivalent enthusiasm on the Queen’s part. Despite a relative amelioration in her relations with the papacy at the turn of the century, she took no steps in his defence when he was sentenced to death, at which time, according to a later source (1612), she shared her subjects’ general view of him as “a dreamer, a criminal and an atheist” (Bossy 167).

At any rate, his sojourn in England had given Bruno the opportunity

³⁸ *Cena de le ceneri*, in *Opere di Giordano Bruno e Tommaso Campanella*, ed. A. Guzzo and R. Amerio, Milano-Napoli, Ricciardi, 1956, 21. See YATES 275-290.

to make and cultivate a direct acquaintance with the monarch. The same, though on a shadier and more equivocal level, may be said about Fagot, whose letter to Her Majesty³⁹, apart from its content – Zubiaur’s somewhat ludicrous plot – seems indeed to suggest that he was not a common spy. The very fact of providing information to her without passing through an intermediary like Walsingham is in all likelihood a sign of some kind of personal relationship between him and his addressee; and the writer identifying himself as “he whom you know” points in the same direction. For Elizabeth would probably have ignored the names, and even the existences, of most of the sleuths employed by her secretary of state. Besides, the spy has a “secret” which the recipient knows, and he asks her not to reveal it. This would make little sense if it were connected with the bare fact of his having, like all his peers, two identities – a public face and a clandestine self – since, once again, there is no reason why a sovereign would take such an interest in an ordinary agent as to risk breaking his cover. Things would be different, obviously, if the public face were that of an already prominent European intellectual – what is more, one who was constantly forced to shun the searching eyes of his Popish, and Puritan, enemies⁴⁰.

If it was he who donned the mask of Henry Fagot, this was another of the jokes he enjoyed so much throughout his life: spying on others to avoid being spied on, turning himself from the object into the subject of a dangerous gaze. It would be tempting to see this hypothetical shadow of Bruno reflected in his Actaeon staring at Diana. The figure of the “gran cacciatore” who “dovenne caccia”, and who embodies the heroic fury of the philosopher in his implacable, self-annihilating quest for knowledge and union with the divine⁴¹, may no doubt seem incompara-

³⁹ Text 11: see n. 20 above.

⁴⁰ In dealing with this letter, Bossy concentrates on a discussion of its content, but also states that since Fagot “signed the account of the confession with his usual signature written in a particularly bold style, we are surely to deduce not only, as the text of the letter claims, that he had met and talked to Elizabeth, but also that Elizabeth knew who he was, though she might not hitherto have known him as Fagot” (35).

⁴¹ *Eroici furori*, I.iv. The quotation is from l. 8 of the first sonnet in the dialogue (157). G. BARBERI SQUAROTTI synthesizes Bruno’s Actaeon as follows: “l’empio cacciatore tebano diviene l’eroe positivo del *furor* della filosofia, l’emblema più completo e pregnante dei processi della conoscenza intesa come *deificatio*, come morte a sé stessi per amore, come annullamento dell’io contingente che permette il contatto intellettuale con il divino” (*Selvaggia diletta. La caccia nella letteratura italiana dalle origini a Marino*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2000, 348). Diana

bly nobler than that of the sordid undercover agent intent on disclosing conspiracies and exposing deceivers and turncoats. But if undertaking that kind of work had appeared to the Nolan as a necessary first step in the direction of a grand ultimate goal like the political, and ethical, regeneration of Europe, that would perhaps have invested it in his eyes with equivalent dignity.

Bossy sees things differently. He is extremely harsh on his protagonist:

Against Bruno's virtues and talents [...] we have to set the discovery that he was not an honourable man. Spying is a dishonourable profession [...] which] always entails betraying your friends, or people you have caused to believe are your friends. Bruno [...] systematically betrayed his master Castelnau, who did nothing but good for him, was extremely loyal to him, and regarded him as a friend. He persuaded his secretary to betray him. He procured, so far as it was in his power to do it, the arrest, torture and execution of Francis Trockmorton, whom Castelnau said that he loved as himself, and by whose fate he was appallingly harrowed. He did all this while buttering up Castelnau in three dedicatory epistles with fulsome professions of esteem, friendship and undying gratitude for looking after him and sticking up for him. [...] He betrayed all those he informed against [...]. His betrayal of Henri III was not quite so disgraceful as his betrayal of Castelnau, as he did not share a house with him for two years and more. But unless we imagine that the king sent him to London to do what he did, which would be perfectly gratuitous, betrayal is what it was. It, too, was not simply treason in the public domain, since the king, like Castelnau, was his friend and was extremely kind to him⁴².

Human lives are often far more complex than this. Irreconcilable conflicts occasionally arise among the diverse loyalties one owes, forcing one to choose and to establish priorities. Bruno's main flaw, if he was Fagot, was not treachery or falsehood, but the abstractness implicit in seeing allegiance to a cause as taking precedence over any personal tie or bond of affection.

here becomes the mirror of nature which reflects the Apollonian light of divinity, joining together intelligible world and infinite universe (cf. N. ORDINE, *La soglia dell'ombra. Letteratura, filosofia e pittura in Giordano Bruno*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2003, 143).

⁴² BOSSY 143-145. In the "Postfazione" to the Italian edition he is far less vehement in judging the Nolan (333-345).

Stampato in Torino