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# *The Edgar Wind Journal*

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*Publisher*

**Bernardino Branca**

Contact: Corso Magenta 48, 20123, Milan, Italy

Phone: 0039 3483605940

Email: [bernard.branca@gmail.com](mailto:bernard.branca@gmail.com)

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# **‘The Giordano Bruno Problem’: Edgar Wind’s 1938 Letter to Frances Yates**

Bernardino Branca

## **Abstract**

In September 1938, Edgar Wind wrote an eighteen-page letter to Frances Yates. In responding to her queries concerning Giordano Bruno’s relationship with the birth of modern science, Wind argued that Bruno ‘did not die as a martyr of Modern Science’. Wind saw in Bruno a follower of a specific feature of the culture of the Italian Renaissance, that is, the ‘allegorical’ method of biblical hermeneutics. This paper discusses how Wind’s letter deals with ‘the Giordano Bruno problem’ in connection with Aby Warburg’s theme of the survival of antiquity, and how it eventually impacted Yates’s seminal 1960s works on Bruno.

## **Keywords**

Aby Warburg; Allegory; Edgar Wind; Frances Yates; Giordano Bruno; Hermetic tradition; Renaissance magic; Survival of antiquity

## **Introduction**

This article investigates how Edgar Wind and Frances Yates interpreted Giordano Bruno and his legacy by discussing the content of the letter Wind wrote to Yates in 1938 and its impact upon Yates’s subsequent studies on Bruno. Other topics are discussed by Wind in this letter, but these are only indirectly connected to Bruno and are only briefly mentioned in this paper. Before addressing the subject of the present article, it is worth clarifying the background to the letter, and the connection of the two scholars to Aby Warburg and the Warburg Institute, to which they were both affiliated, albeit at different times.

In early 1928, Wind was hired by Aby Warburg as ‘Wissenschaftlicher Assistent’ for the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (KBW) in Hamburg, where the two worked closely together on the KBW’s ‘Nachleben der Antike’ (Survival of Antiquity) theme.<sup>1</sup> Both Warburg and Wind had taken an interest in Bruno, and in late 1928, they exchanged three

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Lloyd Jones, ‘A Biographical Memoir’, in Edgar Wind, *The Eloquence of Symbols*, ed. by Jayne Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. xiii-xxxvi (xvi).

letters concerning Bruno's works.<sup>2</sup> In the one, dated 21 November 1928, Wind writes from Hamburg to Warburg in Rome, mentioning a recent paper by 'Prof. Olschky' on Giordano Bruno. In this letter, Wind proposes that the KBW should start researching the role played by ancient cosmology in Giordano Bruno's 'revolutionary pantheism', with reference to 'Gnostic-Plotinian cosmology'.<sup>3</sup> According to Wind, although Bruno's pantheism also exhibits some 'modern' aspects, 'the Influence of the Ancient' on him is particularly important.<sup>4</sup> In his reply dated 3 December 1928, Warburg explains to Wind his new project: 'The role played by ancient mythological cosmology in Giordano Bruno's philosophical system'.<sup>5</sup> In the same letter, Warburg requests that Wind buy the German translation of Bruno's works by Ludwig von Kuehlenbeck, and that he start reading the 'Spaccio della Bestia Trionfante'.<sup>6</sup> In a letter dated 28 December 1928, Warburg thanks Wind for sending 350 volumes (*sic*) of Bruno's works to his suite at the Grand Hotel in Rome, which he shared with Gertrud Bing.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he again encourages Wind to read Bruno, so that 'the Giordano Bruno Problem becomes part of your own "secret chamber", where all the major question marks are kept'.<sup>8</sup> In the same letter, Warburg warmly thanks Wind for his contributions to the research work of the KBW.<sup>9</sup> Warburg's diary of his 1928–29 trip to Italy provides other examples of his thought on Bruno's cosmology.<sup>10</sup> In a series of short notes titled 'Giordano Bruno', Warburg wrote several rather cryptic statements, such as the following: 'With Gertrud Bing I have completed reading [Bruno's] *Eroici Furori*. A magical-monstrous conception reinterpreted into an intuitive-spiritual abstraction. The Nolan [Bruno] transforms a phobic reaction into *Sophrosyne* [rational wisdom]'.<sup>11</sup> A few months later, Warburg noted 'The Polarity of Antiquity in Giordano

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<sup>2</sup> Wind Archive, Special Collections, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS4, 5. The relevant excerpts of the original German text of these letters are published in Bernardino Branca, *Edgar Wind filosofo delle immagini: La biografia intellettuale di un discepolo di Aby Warburg* (Milan: Mimesis, 2019), pp. 63–65.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 63: '[...] Die Funktion der Antiken Kosmologischen Mythologie im Denksystem von Giordano Bruno. Es scheint naechmlich, dass die Verarbeitung des Gnostisch-plotinisch Sphaeressystemes'.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 64: 'durch eine ganz eigentumlich, sinnlich abstrakte Verwertung der ueberlieferten Gottertypen den Weg zu einem revolutionaeren (modernen) Pantheismus betreten hilft, sodas ein solcher Vortrag, gleichen massen auf die Geschichte des Denkens und die Psychologie der Bildhaften Ursachensetzung eingehend, den Einfluss der Antike in unserem Sinne neu und scharf beleuchten wuerde'.

<sup>5</sup> Warburg Institute Archive (WIA), London, General Correspondence, letter dated 21 November 1928.

<sup>6</sup> Branca, *Edgar Wind*, p. 65: 'Ist Eigentlich Giordano Bruno etwas? Ich wuerde sie bitten noch einmal, seine Werke in der Deutsche Uebersetzung von Kuhelenbeck noch ein zweites Mal fuer di K.B.W. anzuschaffen, und den "Spaccio della Bestia Trionfante" zu lesen'.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.: '[...] Gestern kam eine aus etwas 350 stuecken bestehende Giordano Bruno Bibliothek in unser Hotelzimmer'.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.: '[...] und hich hoffe vor allem, dass das Problem Giordano Bruno von innen heraus auch in Ihrer Gehaimkammer, wo die grossen Fragenzeichen aufhaengen, vertreten ist'.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.: '[...] Ich will das Jahr 1928 nicht in den Aktenschrank der Ewigkeit gelegen Wissen, ohne Ihnen und Ihren lieben Frau zu sagen, dass ich Ihren Eintritt in den engeren Kreis derer, fuer die K.B.W. ein wirkliches Lebenselement bedeutet, zu den wirklich guten Gaben eines Schicksals rechne, das es mit mir ernst meint'.

<sup>10</sup> *Tagebuch*, WIA, Ref. No.121.1.1.

<sup>11</sup> Aby Warburg, *Astrologica, saggi appunti 1908–1929*, ed. and trans. by M. Ghelardi (Turin: Einaudi, 2019), p. 431. Note dated 9 May 1928.

Bruno's Microcosmic world of ideas'.<sup>12</sup>

The 1928 Warburg-Wind letters show that, thanks to Warburg, in 1928 Wind already had clearly in mind the close relationship between Giordano Bruno's cosmology and the 'influence of the ancient' – that is, Warburg's theme of the *survival of antiquity*. Closely related to this is Warburg's theme of the *polarity of antiquity*, that is, the coexistence of 'magic' with 'logos', or 'irrational' and 'rational' stances coexisting in the cultures of antiquity and of the Renaissance. The theme of the polarity of antiquity would also be taken up by Wind.<sup>13</sup> Actually, it could be argued that Warburg and Wind, at that very moment, were focusing the KBW's direction of research on Warburg's theme of the survival of antiquity and its polarity, with specific reference to texts of late Medieval and Renaissance philosophy.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that in 1931, the KBW, under the editorial direction of Wind, started a vast publication programme entitled the *Bibliography of the Survival of Antiquity*.<sup>15</sup> Of the many titles shown in its table of contents, several refer to the topics raised in the 1928 correspondence and, as we shall see, the 1938 letter – for example:

'Nachleben der Antiken Poetik' [survival of ancient poetics], 'Nachleben antiker Dichter' [survival of ancient poets], 'Symbolik der Altchristlichen Kunst' [symbolism of early Christian art], 'Christliche und heidnisch-antike Seelenbildung' [Christian and pagan education of the soul], 'Origenes' [Origen], 'Kosmologie von der Renaissance bis Newton' [cosmology from the Renaissance to Newton], 'Mirabilien' [mirabilia], 'Magie und Naturwissenschaften' [magic and natural sciences], 'Skolastiks Philosophische Tendenzen' [philosophical trends in scholasticism], 'Humanismus und Renaissanceliteratur in Italien' [humanism and Renaissance literature in Italy], 'Philosophie im Zeitalter der Gegenreformation' [philosophy at the time of the Counter-Reformation].<sup>16</sup>

In the Introduction, Wind states that: "This Overview upon Culture – seen as one and total entity – is driven by a specialist interest in the role played by the elements of Antiquity which have survived. This is the methodological approach used in this Bibliography."<sup>17</sup> The issues raised by Warburg and Wind in the 1928 letters are thus closely related to the programme of the *Bibliography of the Survival of Antiquity*. Such issues also provide the methodological approach for the letter that Wind sent to Yates in 1938.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 432. Note dated 22 December 1928.

<sup>13</sup> Edgar Wind, 'Warburg's Begriff der Kulturwissenschaft und seine Bedeutung fuer die Aesthetik', in *Beilageheft zur Zeitschrift fuer Aesthetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1931), XXV, pp. 163-79; Edgar Wind, 'Warburg's Concept of Kulturwissenschaft and its Meaning for Aesthetics', in *The Eloquence of Symbols*, ed. by Jayne Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) (ES).

<sup>14</sup> Branca, *Edgar Wind*, p. 64; in the letter dated 21.11.1928 Wind mentioned to Warburg that Eric Auerbach was available to deliver a lecture on Dante at the KBW.

<sup>15</sup> *KulturWissenschaftliche Bibliographie zum Nacheleben der Antike*, Vol. 1 – *Die Erscheinungen des Jahres 1931*, Heraus gegeben von der Bibliothek Warburg (London: Kassel & Co., 1934). Unfortunately, this vast programme was not pursued any further after the publication of the first volume.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-26. The titles taken from this Introduction have been translated by Bernardino Branca.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 5: 'Die Blickrichtung auf die Gesamkultur, gelenkt von einem spezialisierten Interesse fuer die Funktion der nachleben antiken Elemente, gibt der vorliegenden Bibliographie ihre methodische Form'.

Warburg died in October 1929. Because of Hitler's rise to power, Wind had settled in London with the Warburg Library in 1933.<sup>18</sup> In November 1936, Yates was introduced to Wind, then the Warburg's Institute's deputy director.<sup>19</sup> They met at the house of Dorothea Waley Singer and Charles Singer in Cornwall.<sup>20</sup> Waley Singer was translating Bruno's works and writing a biography on him.<sup>21</sup> There is no evidence that Yates knew anything about Aby Warburg and the Warburg Institute before meeting Wind; nonetheless, she had already been studying Bruno's stay in Oxford, and she had contacted Wind to discuss the translation and introduction she was about to complete for Bruno's *Cena delle Ceneri* (*Ash Wednesday's Supper*).<sup>22</sup> As she later recalled, she wanted to offer a new interpretation of Bruno's 'bold' defence of the Copernican theory.<sup>23</sup>

### Allegory and Martyrdom

The immediate impact of Wind's letter can be found in two articles that Yates published in the Warburg journal a few months later, in which she partially accepted Wind's interpretations of Bruno.<sup>24</sup> For example, in the first article, Yates admits that

[o]ur study of Bruno and Oxford may suggest that to view this extraordinary man as a 'philosopher of the Renaissance' in the sense of one who was in revolt from medievalism in the name of 'modern science' may possibly be a distortion of his true place in the history of thought.<sup>25</sup>

However, as she would later recall, these articles were still missing the most important aspect of her interpretation of Bruno, that is, the role played by the survival of the ancient hermetic tradition in Bruno's philosophy.<sup>26</sup> It would take Yates two more decades of research on Bruno, following the path shown to her by Wind, to discover this.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Daniel Snowman, *The Hitler Emigrés: The Cultural Impact on Britain of Refugees from Nazism* (London: Pimlico, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. See also Frances Yates, 'Autobiographical Fragments', in *Ideas and Ideals in the North European Renaissance*, Collected Essays, III (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 314-15.

<sup>21</sup> See Dorothea Waley Singer, *Giordano Bruno, His Life and Works* (New York: Schuman, 1950).

<sup>22</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. xi. See also Claudia Wedepohl, 'Mnemonics, Mneme and Mnemosyne: Aby Warburg's Theory of Memory', *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, 20.2 (2014), 385-402 (385-86).

<sup>23</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. xi.

<sup>24</sup> Frances Yates, 'Giordano Bruno's Conflict with Oxford', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 2.3 (1939), 227-42; Frances Yates, 'The Religious Policy of Giordano Bruno', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 3.3-4 (1939-40), 181-207.

<sup>25</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno's Conflict with Oxford*, p. 241.

<sup>26</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



In June 1945, Wind left the Warburg Institute because of disagreements with the director, Fritz Saxl.<sup>28</sup> In 1946 he wrote to Frances Yates – who by then had been offered a fellowship by Fritz Saxl – complaining that she had not acknowledged him in some of her recent publications.<sup>29</sup> In her answer, Yates apologised, citing the difficulties and confusion caused by the war.<sup>30</sup> In his reply, Wind categorically refused her apologies; there is no evidence that Yates and Wind ever exchanged letters after that point, let alone collaborated again.<sup>31</sup> Yates wrote several further studies on mnemotechnics and Bruno, initially sparked by the feedback that Wind gave her in the 1938 letter. However, in her seminal work *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964), Yates mentioned Wind only once.<sup>32</sup>

Concerning the direct influence of the letter upon Wind's own research path, he unfortunately did not pursue his interest in Bruno any further after 1938, but for a passing mention in *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, in reference to the 'Concordance of the Opposites'.<sup>33</sup> This was followed by an even shorter mention of Bruno in *Giorgione's Tempesta*, in reference to Giorgione's *Three Philosophers* and the symbolic meaning of different types of sailor's knots during the Italian Renaissance.<sup>34</sup>

The immediate purpose of Wind's letter was a response to Yates's statement that Bruno died as a 'martyr of modern science'.<sup>35</sup> Wind's short but sharp discussion of these issues tries to give Yates an interdisciplinary perspective that is both philosophical and cultural-historical. Because of the colloquial nature of this letter, Wind ventures to draw a broad sketch of the Italian Renaissance, focusing on the 'allegorical as mystical' tradition.<sup>36</sup> This letter is indeed an important document for understanding Yates's intellectual biography. Her seminal works on Bruno, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* and *The Art of Memory*, would have been rather different without Wind's original 1938 feedback.<sup>37</sup> However, it cannot actually be said that she appropriated Wind's ideas.

Wind's specific and rather hasty 1938 reply to Yates's query regarding Bruno could be briefly summarised in the following key points. First, Wind accepts the importance of her reconstruction of the Oxford group, which fought against Bruno during his stay there. Second, he agrees that Bruno does not fight against medieval scholasticism as such, but against the 'pedantic grammarians'. Thus, Wind deducts that Yates implies that Bruno was

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<sup>28</sup> Wind Fund 1945, Warburg Archive, Warburg Institute, London.

<sup>29</sup> Wind Archive, Special Collections, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Wind 154, 1945–46 correspondence between Edgar Wind and Frances Yates.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (Boston: Norton Books, 1968) (PM), pp. 196–97.

<sup>34</sup> Edgar Wind, *Giorgione's Tempesta* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) (GT), p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Wind Archive, Special Collections, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Wind 154, Letter of Edgar Wind to Frances Yates, dated 8 September 1938 (LFY).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> I refer to Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*; and to Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

not against Catholic or Protestant views as such, but against their method – that is, the pedantic ‘literal’ interpretation of the Bible shared by both. Third, Wind agrees with Yates that ‘this fight against the unimaginative pedant goes hand in hand with a depreciation of mathematics as “the instrument of rational science”’.<sup>38</sup> Finally, contrary to Yates’s opinion, Wind states that ‘Bruno did not die as the martyr of modern science’.<sup>39</sup> This point appears to be very important for Wind because, at the end of the letter, he reiterates yet again that the propositions which Yates brought forward are inconsistent with her thesis: ‘To conclude, you completely missed that Bruno did not die as a martyr of modern science’.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Wind asks, ‘The question is: exactly what did he fight and die for?’.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, I would like to draw attention to two further statements by Wind in this letter: (1) ‘Ultimately it amounts to the fight of the Allegorical as Mystical interpretation against the Literal one’<sup>42</sup> and (2) ‘I think I can make that this mystical approach to Christianity was one of the strongest forces in the revival interest in Paganism, which is called Renaissance’.<sup>43</sup> In order to understand what Wind is trying to say, I will now explain what he meant in these two crucial sentences.

### **Ancient Allegorical Hermeneutics as the Key to Interpreting Bruno**

The ‘literal’ interpretation of the Bible that Wind refers to in this letter asserts that a biblical text is to be interpreted according to the ‘plain meaning’ conveyed by its grammatical construction and historical context.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, the ‘Allegorical as Mystical’ interpretation of the Bible that he mentions is an alternative type of hermeneutics, and is that which employs the largest number of analogies, metaphors, and allegories.<sup>45</sup> Wind links this method of interpretation to the psychological state of mind of ‘mirth and revelry’, which originated in the pagan cults of Dionysian mysteries.<sup>46</sup> According to Wind, such ‘Elements of Antiquity’ survived in Renaissance allegorical hermeneutics. The allegorical method interprets biblical narratives as having a second level of reference beyond those persons, things, and events explicitly mentioned in the text, often related to ancient mythology.<sup>47</sup> An example of such allegories can be found in Wind’s discussion of Dante vis-à-vis Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling. According to a 1936 paper by Wind, Dante’s allegories in the *Commedia* are instrumental for the understanding of Michelangelo’s

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<sup>38</sup> LFY, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-12.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

ceiling:

The program of the Sistine Ceiling is a symbol of the anticipation of salvation. Michelangelo rejected the original plan of representing the twelve apostles, who possess in themselves the truths of salvation. He replaced them with the Prophets and Sybils, who belong to a world in which the savior has not yet appeared, and announce his coming through allegories. [...] A complete explanation may be obtained from the Bible and Dante's *Divine Comedy* alone. Anyone who reads these two books with Michelangelo's pictures before him must be overpowered by the almost monomaniacal energy with which a simple religious idea asserts itself against an incomparable richness of plastic imagination.<sup>48</sup>

Wind's 1936 study of the Sistine Chapel ceiling is an example of the importance he placed on allegorical hermeneutics of the Bible and on ancient mythology as a tool with which to interpret the meaning of Renaissance works of art. Moreover, in 1954, Wind devoted an article to 'The Revival of Origen', which deals precisely with a 'revival of a survival', that is, the revival of late antiquity's allegorical biblical hermeneutics during the Renaissance.<sup>49</sup> In this article, Wind draws a brief history of the fortunes of Origen during the Renaissance in terms of 'the psychology of a great historical revival'.<sup>50</sup> According to Wind,

a long period of fermentation during which interest in Origen was strong, but dispersed, was followed by a crisis of considerable violence (1486), and this was attended by attempts at suppression. These attempts having failed, there ensued a period of quiet (1493–1503), after which Origen emerged as a classic.<sup>51</sup>

Origen was a third-century-CE Platonist from Alexandria, best known for believing in Plato's myth of the pre-existence of the soul and introducing the allegorical method into biblical hermeneutics. Wind notes that in the *Apologia*, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola conceded that Origen's doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul, while not heretical in the light of their time, had no biblical evidence to support it.<sup>52</sup> Wind affirms that in the *Oratio De Hominis Dignitate* (1486), Pico drew from the Platonist Origen 'the definition of man as

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<sup>48</sup> Edgar Wind, *The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo – The Sistine Ceiling*, ed. by Elizabeth Sears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) (RS), pp. 24–25. In this book, Wind refers to the *Commedia*; however, it is in the *Convivio* that Dante discussed in detail the fourfold subdivision of biblical hermeneutics. In the *Convivio*, which was written in Italian between 1304 and 1307, Dante commented on his canzone from the *Vita Nova*, 'Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete'. He stated that the literal interpretation must be balanced with the allegorical and anagogical ones in order to understand the ultimate meaning of the Scriptures. Moreover, in the second part of the letter to Can Grande della Scala, Dante reiterated this concept, writing that the difference between the literal and allegorical meanings (divided into moral, allegorical as such, and anagogical) is crucial for understanding his *Commedia*. See Dante Alighieri, 'Epistola XIII a Can Grande della Scala', in Saverio Bellomo, *Filologia e critica dantesca* (Brescia: La scuola, 2008); and Dante Alighieri, *Convivio* (Milan: Garzanti, 1999), pp. 6–8.

<sup>49</sup> Edgar Wind, 'The Revival of Origen' ES, pp. 42–55.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 48–49. See also Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Apologia: L'autodifesa di Pico di fronte al Tribunale dell'Inquisizione*, ed. by Paolo Edoardo Fornaciari (Florence: SISMELE-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2010).

an undecided angel, whose place in the universe is not fixed, so that he can move freely, up and down, between the angelic and the animal spheres, belonging to both and bound to neither'.<sup>53</sup> Although Wind believes that Pico's standpoint is not identical to Origen's in any details, Pico was attracted to Origen's ideas because they allowed for the self-transformation of man. Throughout the church's history, Wind notes, Christian Platonists like Origen and Pico 'were rare and at risk'.<sup>54</sup> The suspicion of heresy constantly loomed over them; in this context, Wind quotes Paolo Cortese's *In Sententias* (1503):

While [Origen's] manner of life was Christian ... he played the Greek ... for he was always consorting with Plato, and was conversant with the Pythagoreans ... from whom he learnt the figurative interpretation, as employed in the Greek mysteries, and applied it to the Jewish writings.<sup>55</sup>

Yet, according to Wind, '[t]his character of an Alexandrian Father reconciling Plato with Moses by employing the figurative method of the Greek mysteries could have been invented for Marsilio Ficino'.<sup>56</sup>

If it was Ficino who introduced Origen to Pico, Wind notes that 'it was Pico who produced the crisis that released Origen from the cave of shadows' and 'it was for Aldus to inaugurate the classical period of Origenist studies'.<sup>57</sup> It should be noted that Pico stands out conspicuously in Edgar Wind's studies, which focused on the embodiment in the art of the Italian Renaissance of Pico's allegorical Platonist metaphysics. Wind was particularly interested in Pico's philosophy of 'concordance' between ancient philosophy and the Bible, as embodied in the imagery of Renaissance art.<sup>58</sup>

As mentioned by Wind in his 1938 letter, Bruno too was 'a true Renaissance figure', as a Platonist and magus.<sup>59</sup> Bruno entered the Dominican Order in 1563; according to Frances Yates, his training included an intense focus on the Dominican art of memory, filled with memory techniques from antiquity.<sup>60</sup> In Naples, Bruno was a disciple of the Platonist Augustinian friar Teofilo da Vairano.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> ES, p. 44. See also Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio De Hominis Dignitate*, ed. by Eugenio Garin (Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1994).

<sup>54</sup> ES, p. 49

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>58</sup> See PM, pp. 36-52 and 141-51; and Bernardino Branca, *Edgar Wind's Raphael Papers: The School of Athens* (Wrocław: Kindle Direct Publishing, 2020), pp. 7-8, 69-71, 74-75, 123-24, 147-48, and 172-73.

<sup>59</sup> LFY, p. 10. A quintessential example of a magus was Paracelsus (Basel, 1493–1541). His polymathic knowledge of botany, mineralogy, anatomy, alchemy, astrology, and philosophy interacted with his practice of medicine.

<sup>60</sup> Yates, *The Art of Memory*, p. 197.

<sup>61</sup> Giovanni Aquilecchia, 'Bruno, Giordano', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giordano-bruno\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giordano-bruno_(Dizionario-Biografico))> [accessed 11 October 2021].

Bruno wrote several treatises related to *magia naturalis* or 'white magic', which discussed the function of amulets, charms, and spells to help human action, together with the influx from heavenly bodies.<sup>62</sup> Bruno's metaphysics was also part of the ancient hermetic tradition and of allegorical hermeneutics.<sup>63</sup> Bruno's *Dialoghi* (*Dialogues*) frequently mention 'allegorical versus literal' dichotomies; in *De Umbris Idearum* (*Of the Shadows of Ideas*) Bruno describes a dramatic scene between the ancient god Hermes and the magus Philoteus (who stands for Bruno himself), on one side, and Logifer, the pedant, on the other.<sup>64</sup> *De Umbris Idearum* is an example of the allegorical hermeneutics narrative discussed above, that is, that of a Platonic magus at loggerheads with an Aristotelian rationalist.<sup>65</sup> Hermes and Philoteus defend the hermetic art of memory based on allegorical imagery of 'mirth and revelry'.<sup>66</sup> Logifer, the literal-minded pedant pursuing 'sorrow and humility', attacks it.<sup>67</sup> Yates states that 'the book which Hermes hands to the philosopher is the book "on the shadows of ideas contracted for inner writing", that is to say, it contains a list of magic images of the stars to be imprinted on memory'.<sup>68</sup> To underscore the link between images and words in Bruno's 'allegorical' philosophy, Yates translates and quotes one of Bruno's significant passages in the *Ars Memoriae*: 'Whence philosophers are in some ways painters and poets; poets are painters and philosophers; painters are philosophers and poets. Whence true poets, true painters, and true philosophers seek one another out and admire one another.'<sup>69</sup>

Bruno's 'mystical translation', as Wind calls it in the 1938 letter, 'needs to be deciphered' and is a form of 'modified Catholicism', as it opposes only the Thomist-Aristotelian rationalist approach to biblical hermeneutics.<sup>70</sup> But in this letter, Wind substantially understates the radically alternative nature of Bruno's philosophy and theology, which was too 'marginal' and extremist to be acceptable to Counter-Reformation Catholics and Protestants alike. According to Yates's *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 'by his rejection of Christianity, and his enthusiastic adoption of Hermetic Egyptianism, Bruno moves back towards a darker kind of necromancy'.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, according to Yates, the 'survival of antiquity' in Bruno's thought was overwhelming, as

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<sup>62</sup> See Giordano Bruno, *Opera latine conscripta* III, ed. by Felice Tocco and H. Vitelli (Florence: Le Monnier, 1948): specifically, *Lampas triginta statuarum*, *De umbris idearum*, *De magia et Theses de magia*, *De magia mathematica*, *De principiis rerum, elementis et causis*, *Medicina Lulliana*, *De vinculis in genere*.

<sup>63</sup> See Frances Yates, 'Giordano Bruno in England: The Hermetic Reform', in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2002), pp. 226-57.

<sup>64</sup> Yates, *The Art of Memory*, p. 200.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>66</sup> LFY, pp. 5-6.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248. See also Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 282. Concerning the relationship between text and images, see Edgar Wind, 'Bild und Text', in *Edgar Wind Kunsthistoriker und Philosoph*, ed. by Horst Bredekamp, Bernhard Buschendorf, and John Krois (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998), pp. 259-62.

<sup>70</sup> LFY, p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> See also Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 218.

Bruno ‘took back Renaissance magic to its pagan source’.<sup>72</sup> Following his expulsion from Lutheran Frankfurt (he had previously been sent away from Calvinist Geneva and was not liked in Oxford either), in 1591, Bruno, whom I would characterise as an itinerant magus, decided to take refuge in Venice; he went there in the delusional belief that the Venetian Republic was still a tolerant haven.<sup>73</sup> In 1592, the ‘literal’-minded and ‘pedantic grammarians’ of the Catholic Inquisition in Venice, and subsequently in Rome, charged him with heresy for a number of his ‘allegorical’ statements.<sup>74</sup> In *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, Yates rejects what she describes as the ‘legend that Bruno was prosecuted as a philosophical thinker, was burned for his daring views on innumerable worlds or on the movement of the earth’.<sup>75</sup> On the contrary, Yates believes that ‘the Church was [...] perfectly within its rights if it included philosophical points in its condemnation of Bruno’s heresies’, because ‘the philosophical points were quite inseparable from the heresies’,<sup>76</sup> which advocated the return to a pagan religion.

As in Wind’s 1938 letter, in Yates’s subsequent works the statement that Bruno was not a ‘modern’ seventeenth-century scientist, but a Renaissance thinker deeply affected by the ‘survival’ of the ancient hermetic tradition, is often reiterated. For example, one of the targets of Yates’s critique of Bruno’s ‘modernity’ is the latter’s art of memory, described in *De Umbris Idearum* and *Ars Memoriae*, both published in Paris in 1582. In her 1966 *The Art of Memory*, a history of memory techniques throughout the ages, Yates highlighted that ‘Bruno’s mind is working on lines which are extremely difficult for a modern to recapture’.<sup>77</sup> Yates criticised the twentieth-century narrative that Bruno was a ‘modern’ thinker by discussing his cosmology as well, which was based on the notion of God being

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 210, 373.

<sup>74</sup> The report of the aristocrat Zuan Mocenigo to the Venetian Inquisition stated that ‘Giordano Bruno said that Christ was a charlatan and an evil magus’ (‘Dinuntio aver sentito dire da Giordano Bruno Nolano che Christo fu un tristo, et che [...] Christo faceva miracoli apparenti et che era un mago’; Venice, Archivio di Stato, Sant’ Uffizio 68, processo 59, 11 July 1592). But Bruno firmly denied this accusation during his trial, and there is no evidence that he wrote this particular statement anywhere. However, during the trial he candidly admitted that ‘[t]he Person of Christ was only human, not God’ and that ‘[t]he Universe is Infinite and there are several worlds in it’. But only in 1599, when the Roman Inquisition got hold of a copy of his radically anti-Christian dialogue *Lo Spaccio de la Bestia Trionfante*, printed in England in 1584, did his position worsen considerably. See Michele Ciliberto, *Giordano Bruno* (Rome: Laterza, 2005), p. 276; and Luigi Firpo, *Il Processo a Giordano Bruno* (Rome: Salerno, 1993), pp. 143-45.

<sup>75</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, pp. 354-56.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Yates, *The Art of Memory*, p. 212.



*immanent* in nature.<sup>78</sup> For Bruno, nature, God, and the cosmos are one, and thus infinite.<sup>79</sup> Although Bruno's metaphysical intuitions concerning the notion of an infinite cosmos may appear to anticipate the subsequent findings of modern science, according to Yates, Bruno 'pushed back' the Copernican theory too within the cosmological framework of the ancient hermetic tradition.<sup>80</sup> Bruno's natural philosophy was still deeply rooted in the Renaissance's 'analogical' approach to knowledge.<sup>81</sup> Thus, Wind's stark statement that '[t]o conclude, you completely missed that Bruno did not die as a martyr of modern science', meant that Bruno, unlike Galileo, was not a 'modern' at all. This judgement strongly affected Yates's subsequent approach to Bruno.<sup>82</sup>

### Wind on Warburg and the Italian Renaissance

When Wind, in the 1938 letter to Yates, writes that '[u]ltimately it amounts to the fight of the Allegorical as Mystical interpretation against the Literal one' and that 'this mystical approach to Christianity was one of the strongest forces in the revival interest in Paganism, which is called Renaissance', he is trying to explain a crucial point: that is, how the survival of the ancient mystical tradition through allegorical hermeneutics clashed with the literal-Aristotelian and rationalist view based on a transcendental God and Aristotelian logic.<sup>83</sup> These two opposing *Weltanschauungen* (views of the world) coexisted during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and, in doing so, produced the art and culture of the Renaissance – an unending struggle between magic and *logos*. Wind himself explained such Warburgian polarities in an article published in 1931:

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<sup>78</sup> 'Ma non manca per questo, che quelli [gli Egizii] non intendessero essere una la divinità che si trova in tutte le cose, la quale, come in modi innumerevoli, si diffonde e comunica, così ave nomi innumerabili, e per vie innumerabili, si ricerca, mentre con riti innumerabili si onora e cole [...] Il quale abito si chiama Magia: e questa, per quanto versa in principi sopranaturali, è divina; e quanto versa circa la contemplazon de la natura, è naturale'. Giordano Bruno, *Spaccio della Bestia Trionfante* (1584), in *Dialoghi Italiani*, 2 vols., ed. by Giovanni Aquilecchia (Florence: Sansoni, 1985), II, p. 783.

<sup>79</sup> 'Nun, si iubeat, quare me: ubi est locus, spacium, vacuum, tempus, corpus? In Universo. Ubi est Universum? In omne loco, spacio, tempore, corpore'. Giordano Bruno, *De Immenso et Innumerabilis* (1591) (Florence: Francesco Fiorentino, 1879), p. 325.

<sup>80</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 225. Bruno's methodological approach to cosmology was 'mystical'; it was taken from the hermetic tradition, as well as from Epicurus and Lucretius. See also Valentina Zaffino, *Giordano Bruno e il Pensiero Antico* (Milan: Mimesis, 2020), pp. 51-79.

<sup>81</sup> See also Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); Michel Foucault, *Le parole e le cose, un'archeologia delle scienze umane*, trans. by Emilio Panaitescu (Milan: Rizzoli, 2016), pp. 31-60. In this chapter, Foucault discusses the role played by the analogical approach to knowledge in the study of nature during the Renaissance.

<sup>82</sup> LFY, p. 15. Wind's view of Bruno is substantially different from that of his Warburgian colleague Ernst Cassirer, as the latter still saw Bruno's cosmology as a 'forerunner' of modern science. See Ernst Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (1927); *Individuo e Cosmo nella Filosofia del Rinascimento*, ed. by G. Targia, F. Plaga, C. Rosenkranz, and M. Ghelardi (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2021), pp. 24-30, 35, 35-36, 54-55, 84-86, 111-13, and 208-11.

<sup>83</sup> LFY, pp. 8, 11.

We have then, a whole spectrum of possibilities. At one extreme lies the pure concept, expressed by an arbitrary, lifeless, and unambiguously determinable sign which relates to the extension of the concept only by convention. At the other extreme lies the ritual act, which, dominated by the power of the incarnate symbol, literally grasps the symbol, consuming it, or being consumed by it. *The critical point, however, lies in the middle of the spectrum*, where the symbol is understood as a sign and yet remains a living image, where the psychological excitation, suspended between the two poles, is neither so concentrated by the compelling power of the metaphor that it turns into action, nor so detached by the force of analytical thought that it fades into conceptual thinking. It is there that the ‘image’, in the sense of artistic illusion, finds its place.<sup>84</sup>

In connection with this, Wind underscores the importance of the ‘survival of antiquity’ theme in Warburg’s Renaissance studies:

Warburg showed how important just these two intermediate levels are for the theory of the formation of the images, once again referring to the example of the continuing vitality of features of the ancient world. For time and again it was the expressive gestures of antiquity, the ‘pathos formulae’ of that civilization, which were taken up by later art and polarized in being redeployed.<sup>85</sup>

Warburg, according to Wind, chose such middle and ‘impure soils’: Warburg studied festivals and pageantry because they lie between social life and art; he focused on astrology and alchemic magic because they lie halfway between religion and science.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Warburg, in Wind’s view, ‘always chose to study those intermediate fields in precisely the historical periods he considered to be themselves times of transition and conflict: for example, the early Florentine Renaissance, the Dutch Baroque and the Orientalizing phases of classical antiquity’.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, Wind adds, Warburg tended to apply himself to the study of ‘ambiguous’ persons who, because of their profession, fortune, or position in society, were constantly treading on an ‘impure soil’: merchants who were also art collectors, astrologers who combined religious politics with science to create a double truth of their own, and, finally, ‘philosophers, such as Bruno, whose pictorial imagination is at odds with their logical order’.<sup>88</sup>

### **‘The Giordano Bruno Problem’ and the Survival of Antiquity**

There are a few points that we can draw from this letter and other related texts by Wind concerning his interpretation of what Warburg – in the 1928 Warburg-Wind exchange of

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<sup>84</sup> Edgar Wind, ‘Warburg’s Concept of Kulturwissenschaft and its Meaning for Aesthetics’, in ES, pp. 28-29, my italics.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.



letters – defined as ‘the Giordano Bruno problem’.<sup>89</sup> According to this exchange, the survival of ancient magical elements is considered a paramount aspect of Bruno’s thought.<sup>90</sup> For Pierre Hadot, such ancient magical elements during the Roman Empire were ‘rationalised’ by Stoic philosophy’s identification of the mythological gods with the sheer forces of nature, and by ancient Neoplatonic philosophy’s identification of mythological gods with Platonic ideas.<sup>91</sup> Bruno was preaching his own version of Neopaganism; such esoteric doctrines were lingering among learned circles in Italy during the Renaissance, and were inspired by the philosophical monotheism of late antiquity’s paganism.<sup>92</sup> To put it into Warburg’s terminology, such rationalisations of mythological beliefs are an aspect of the *polarity of antiquity*, which resurfaced again during the early Italian Renaissance and lasted until Bruno.<sup>93</sup> The *survival* of such ancient magical and mythological elements coexisted with the rationalistic attitudes of Aristotelian scholasticism, producing the same polarity. This coexistence was exemplified by the allegorical and the literal methods in biblical hermeneutics. This very coexistence and struggle fertilised the ‘impure ground’ that fostered the development of the art and culture of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>94</sup>

Another important and connected point in this letter is the notion that Bruno ‘did not die as a martyr of modern science’.<sup>95</sup> Bruno did not anticipate seventeenth-century science, based upon mathematics and quantitative evidence, as Galileo did.<sup>96</sup> As Wind writes in this letter, Bruno would, in fact, have been starkly opposed to Galileo’s mathematical approach.<sup>97</sup> And, as Yates pointed out in her subsequent studies, Bruno’s philosophy and theology, based upon the ancient and ‘marginal’ hermetic tradition, was

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<sup>89</sup> Wind Archive, Special Collections, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS4, 5. The relevant excerpts of the original German text of these letters are published in Branca, *Edgar Wind*, p. 65.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.

<sup>91</sup> Pierre Hadot, ‘La fin du Paganisme’, in *Histoire de Religions*, ed. by C.H. Puech (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1970–6); Pierre Hadot, ‘La fine del Paganesimo’, in *Le Religioni del Mondo Classico*, trans. by M.N. Pierini (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), p. 306.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 324–25.

<sup>93</sup> Warburg, *Astrologica*, p. 432. See also Aby Warburg, ‘Italian Art and International Astrology in the Palazzo Schifanoja, Ferrara’ (1912), in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. by David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999), pp. 563–91.

<sup>94</sup> PM, p. 16.

<sup>95</sup> LFY, pp. 2, 16.

<sup>96</sup> According to Ingrid D. Rowland, ‘Bruno’s scrutiny of the universe reflected a different kind of mind than Galileo’s. Astronomers like Copernicus, Tycho Brahe and Galileo all had the mental habit of counting everything they saw. They could happily spend night after night watching the stars, measuring and tallying, until their individual observations added up to a larger theory. Bruno’s mind ran, more spectacularly than most, to visual imagery. [...] Geometry intrigued him in a way that calculation did not’. Ingrid D. Rowland, *Giordano Bruno, Philosopher and Heretic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 107.

<sup>97</sup> LFY, p. 2. See also Edgar Wind, *Experiment and Metaphysics*, trans. by C. Edwards (Oxford: Legenda, 2001) (EM), p. 34: ‘[Galileo’s] propositions formulate methodological rules intended to direct the process of measurement and calculation’.

meant to provide an original and radical impulse to political and religious reforms.<sup>98</sup> Bruno's 'marginal' thought – deeply rooted in ancient hermeticism – provided a radical alternative to both Christianity and Aristotelian rationalism.<sup>99</sup>

Wind and Yates underscored Bruno's deeply rooted belonging to the Italian Renaissance's *Weltanschauungen*, if not to ancient and outright pagan ones. From this perspective too, Bruno was definitely not a forerunner of Galileo's new scientific paradigm.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, there are some intuitive aspects of Bruno's thought, such as the concept of infinity, which are interesting from an 'existential' point of view. For example, in 1929 Warburg noted that Bruno caused 'the liberation of the cosmos from the boundaries of its shell, and from its monstrous border guardians which will now find a job in civil society'.<sup>101</sup> The very peculiar features of Bruno's cosmology, which Wind and Yates discussed in the letter of 1938, were interpreted in this way by Alexandre Koyré in 1957:

As a matter of fact, Bruno's world view is vitalistic, magical; his planets are animated beings that move freely through space of their own accord like those of Plato and Patrizzi. Bruno's is not a modern mind by any means. Yet his conception is so powerful and so prophetic, so reasonable and so poetic that we cannot but admire it and him. [...] we cannot but assign to Bruno a very important place in the history of the human mind.<sup>102</sup>

According to Ben Thomas, Wind was very interested in the study of 'marginal' cultural traditions in modern art, such as Surrealism.<sup>103</sup> In terms of the Italian Renaissance, he was interested in the marginal traditions that survived from antiquity, such as the Dionysian mystery rituals discussed in *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*. Moreover, the study of such rituals by Wind implied the understanding of another 'marginal' tradition; the Renaissance's

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<sup>98</sup> 'Bruno's "Egyptian" or Hermetic reform is envisaged by him as having a close relevance to the times in which he lived. The *Spaccio* contains a politico-religious message which is announced by the Ancient Gods, that is, in the discussion about the images of the forty-eight constellations and their reform'. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 248. It should also be noted that Bruno shared with the philosopher Tommaso Campanella and the German humanist Cornelius Agrippa the 'millenarian' desire for cultural and political reforms. See Paolo Rossi, *Il Tempo dei Maghi* (Milan: R. Cortina Editore, 2006), p. 104.

<sup>99</sup> See *Gnosis and Hermeticism, from Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. by Roelof Van den Broek (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998). According to Van den Broek, the renewed interest in ancient hermeticism during the Renaissance rested upon its radical spiritual appeal. Gnosis and hermeticism, based upon mystical doctrines and rituals, were the expression of a marginal but long-standing philosophical tradition. They were the bearer of an alternative spiritual view to both Aristotelian Greek rationalism and Christian monotheistic theology, elaborated by St Paul.

<sup>100</sup> See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 120.

<sup>101</sup> Warburg, *Astrologica*, p. 432. Note dated 25 January 1929.

<sup>102</sup> Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p. 54.

<sup>103</sup> See Ben Thomas, *Edgar Wind and Modern Art: In Defence of Marginal Anarchy* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020).

encyclopaedic approach to learning.<sup>104</sup> For example, in the Introduction to the *Bibliography of the Survival of Antiquity*, Wind writes that the bibliography's method of historical research is connected to that of Jacob Burckhardt, 'for whom the concept of Culture encompassed all expressions of life in a given historical epoch'.<sup>105</sup> According to Wind, when Burckhardt described the culture of a given epoch, he would compare works of art with family customs and pageantry, or rational scientific culture with the superstitious culture of magic.<sup>106</sup>

Following Wind's 1938 letter, Yates too would dedicate the rest of her life to studying 'marginal' traditions that survived from antiquity, and whose study encompassed different disciplines. On the very 'Warburgian' concluding page of *The Art of Memory*, she writes:

The art of Memory is a clear case of a marginal subject, not recognized as belonging to any of the normal disciplines, having been omitted because it was no one's business. And yet it turned out to be in a sense, everyone's business. The history of the organization of memory touches at vital points on the history of religion and ethics, of philosophy and psychology, of art and literature, of scientific method.<sup>107</sup>

According to Yates, no student of the Renaissance can ignore the glimpses into the Renaissance mind that such marginal traditions offer.<sup>108</sup> Following the extraordinary letter that Yates received from Wind in 1938, she joined his research path. It is therefore surprising that Yates's works from 1945 hardly mention Wind. For example, Wind's *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958) shares with Yates's *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964) and *The Art of Memory* (1966) the same focus on the 'irrational' or 'Alexandrian' aspects of the Renaissance mind, rather than the 'Athenian' or logical ones.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, it is surprising that even in the 1968 revised edition of *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, Wind does not mention Yates's *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* or *The Art of Memory* at all.

In 1964, Yates reminisced:

Many years ago, I planned to make an English translation of Giordano Bruno's *La Cena delle Ceneri*, with an introduction emphasizing the boldness with which this advanced philosopher of the Renaissance accepted the Copernican theory. But as I followed Bruno along the Strand to the House in Whitehall where he was to expound the Copernican theory to the knights and doctors, doubts arose. Was that journey imaginary and was the Supper really held at the French Embassy? And was the Copernican theory really the

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<sup>104</sup> See Edgar Wind's discussion of 'The Renaissance Encyclopedia', in Branca, *Edgar Wind's Raphael Papers*, pp. 106-19.

<sup>105</sup> *KulturWissenschaftliche Bibliographie*, p. 5: '[...] die historische Arbeit Jacob Burkhards, fuer den der Begriff "Kultur" die Gesamtheit der Lebensausserungen einer geschichtliche Epoche bedeutete'.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Yates, *The Art of Memory*, p. 374.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>109</sup> The place of this letter in Wind's own intellectual biography will be further discussed in a separate paper.

subject of the debate, or was there something else implied in it? The Bruno problem remained with me thereafter as the real center of all my studies.<sup>110</sup>

The allegorical approach to biblical hermeneutics, which Wind discussed in the 1938 letter, was very much influenced by the survival of ‘elements’ of antiquity. Eventually, the letter would turn out to be instrumental in indicating to Yates the right path towards the solution of Warburg’s ‘Giordano Bruno problem’.<sup>111</sup> In 1964, Yates added:

It was not until a few years ago that it dawned upon me, quite suddenly, that Renaissance Hermetism provides the long-sought-for major clue to Bruno. The right key was found at last; my former Bruno studies fell into place; and this book was written fairly quickly.<sup>112</sup>

### Conclusion

The specific purpose of this paper has been to discuss how, in this letter of 1938, Wind dealt with ‘the Giordano Bruno problem’ in connection with the *survival of antiquity* and the related *polarity of antiquity*; two issues he set forth to investigate with Aby Warburg as early as 1928. Although Wind did not pursue his interest in Bruno any further after 1938, this important scholarly document provides us with insights into his thought on the culture and imagery of the Italian Renaissance, as his approach was very much based upon the study of allegories and symbols. Moreover, the letter provided Frances Yates with the tools which eventually helped her to find in the survival of the ancient hermetic tradition the clue to solving ‘the Giordano Bruno problem’.

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<sup>110</sup> Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. xi. Concerning her discovery of the link between Bruno and Renaissance hermeticism, Yates also acknowledges Eugenio Garin’s *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento Italiano* (1960).

<sup>111</sup> Aby Warburg to Edgar Wind, letter dated 28 December 1928 (see footnote 8).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

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**Works by Edgar Wind (with abbreviations)**

**BNA:** *KulturWissenschaftliche Bibliographie zum Nacheleben der Antike*, Erster band – Die Erscheinungen des Jahres 1931, Heraus gegeben von der Bibliothek Warburg (London: Kassel & Co., 1934).

**EM:** *Experiment and Metaphysics*, trans. by C. Edwards (Oxford: Legenda, 2001).

**ES:** *The Eloquence of Symbols*, ed. by Jayne Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

i) 'Warburg's Concept of Kulturwissenschaft and its Meaning for Aesthetics' (1931).

ii) 'The Revival of Origen' (1954).

**LFY:** Wind Archive, Special Collections, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Wind 154, Letter of Edgar Wind to Frances Yates, dated 8 September 1938.

**MS:** 'Mathematics and Sensibility', *The Listener*, 1 May 1952.

**PM:** *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (Boston: Norton Books, 1968).

**GT:** *Giorgione's Tempesta* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

**RS:** *The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo – The Sistine Ceiling*, ed. by Elizabeth Sears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Wind Archive, Special Collections, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Wind 154, 1945–46 correspondence between Edgar Wind and Frances Yates.





Edgar Wind, 1939 (Courtesy of The Warburg Institute, London).





Frances Yates, undated (Courtesy of The Warburg Institute, London).



Aby Warburg, 1925 (Courtesy of The Warburg Institute, London).

Sturton,  
4. 9. 38.

Dear Miss Yates:

I cannot tell you how very grateful I am that you will let me keep your manuscript even longer than I already have it. I have read it twice (both translation and introduction), but there are several points which I should like to reconsider.

As there is one rather important point on which I shall expect you let me begin by telling you of those which I find completely convincing. I think (and I am not exaggerating my impression) that your reconstruction of the Oxford group against which Bruno is fighting, is the most important dis-

The first page of the letter (Courtesy of the Trustees of the Wind Estate, Oxford).

## Appendix: The full transcript of Wind's 1938 letter to Frances Yates<sup>113</sup>

4.9.38

Dear Miss Yates,

I cannot tell you how very grateful I am that you will let me keep your manuscript even longer than I already have it. I have read it twice (both translation and introduction), but there are several points which I should like to reconsider.

As there is one rather important point on which I shall attack you, let me begin by telling you of those which I find completely convincing. I think (and I am not exaggerating my impression) that your reconstruction of the Oxford group against which Bruno is fighting, is the most important dis- [page 2] covery that has been made since the historical study of Bruno began. I think there can be no doubt that you are right in claiming that he does not fight the medieval scholastics, but the humanist grammarians; and that implies that he opposes not the Catholic but the Protestant view. You are also quite certainly right in pointing out that this fight against the unimaginative pedant goes hand in hand with a depreciation of mathematics as “the” instrument of rational science: all of which leads to the conclusion that Bruno did not die as the “martyr of modern science”. [page 3]

The question is: Exactly what did he fight and die for? And here your answer did not convince me. You have discovered that the old antithesis “Renaissance versus Middle Ages” does not function if the parts are distributed in such a way that the progressive man represents the “Renaissance” and the reactionary one the “Middle Ages”. But you do think that the antithesis can be made to function – if one exchanges the parts. The “progressive” Bruno becomes in your eyes an orthodox Catholic whose fight against the “reactionary” Protestants consists in an [beginning of page 4] attempt to revive the Medieval philosophy. You do admit that, as a fervent catholic, Bruno is in an ambiguous position; and you attribute to the anomalies of his situation (-the fact that he is persecuted as a refugee and has to seek the protection of those whom he detests-) those patent contradictions for which he was burned by the Catholic party. Ultimately (if I understood you correctly) Bruno was killed by an error of the Inquisition which was deceived by his makeshifts [sic] and mistook him for a heretic though he was fighting their own cause.

Now it is this “cause of Catholicism” which makes [beginning of page 5] me doubtful. You seem to take it as something simple and find its prototype in the Middle Ages.

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<sup>113</sup> Wind Archive, Special Collections, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Wind 154, Letter of Edgar Wind to Frances Yates dated 4<sup>th</sup> of September 1938, (L.FY).



But it is certain that the medieval philosophy and theology was always split in two camps which one might call the mystical and the rational. The mystical tradition (beginning with St. Augustine and continuing through St. Bonaventura to Scotus) was strongly Platonic; the rational tradition (culminating in Thomas Aquinas) was strictly Aristotelian; and there was always a tendency on the part of the rational theology to suspect the mystical one of heresy. The reason is very plain. If two people (beginning of page 6) believe in opposite creeds, and both take their creed "literally", that is "rationally", it is impossible to reconcile them. Take, for instance, the relation of Christianity to the Pagan mysteries. The man believing in a literal interpretation of the Gospels must reject it as heresy to sympathize with worshipers of Dionysus. Dionysus was a god of mirth and revelry, Christ a god of sorrow and humility. Taken literally, their traits contradict each other. Yet in the mystical interpretation, sorrow can become a form of revelry, and humility a form of mirth; and it will be found that both the Dionysian and Christian agree in teaching that the soul [end page 6] must be purged of sin, that this purge is a form of a death, and that both describe this death as "passion". A Christian mystic will, therefore, have a very much more tolerant attitude to doctrines which the rational Christian rejects as heresies. He will say of the "Dionysians": - these people believe exactly what St. Paul taught to us. They only use a somewhat different language. We must teach them our language, that is the only way to make them Christians. But we cannot teach them our language successfully unless we take the trouble to learn theirs. [end page 7].

I think I can prove that this mystical approach to Christianity was one of the strongest forces in the revived interest in Paganism, which is symptomatic of the so-called Renaissance. The philosophy of Pico della Mirandola is really the most systematic attempt to develop a "technique" of mysticism by which the Orphic and Dionysian mysteries as well as the secrets of the Kabbalah and the Chaldean magic can be "translated" into Christian terms and not only be proved to be "concordant" with the Christian faith but also to be a very powerful aid for explaining the mysteries [end page 8] of that faith itself. It is quite striking how much the method of Bruno resembles in this respect that of Pico: the same fight against the literal-minded grammarians and mathematicians, the same glorification of enthusiasm and heroic virtue, the same ironic use of imagery, the same insistence on the "esoteric" character of the mysteries, and - last but not least - the same display of mnemotechnics: which is really based on the use of a very few fundamental "schemes of translation" from which the most extraordinary [end page 9] number of propositions can be derived. Pico printed 900 theses which he offered to defend publicly without any aid to his memory. But the mere statement of the themes induced the Pope to interfere, to accuse him of heresy and to make him publish an Apology (in which he actually retracted nothing).

I am practically certain that it is this tradition which is expressed in Bruno; and since the classical exposition of this philosophy was achieved by a man who, in every sense, was a true "Renaissance"- figure [end page 10], I feel very uncomfortable that you call Bruno's Philosophy "anti-Renaissance". Even "anti-Humanist" seems to me dangerous, for

Catholic humanists, including Erasmus, were never quite so literal-minded as the Protestant Erasmians. Ultimately it amounts to the fight of the allegorical or mystical interpretation against the literal one. The Protestants had carried literal-mindedness to the point of schism. But the Catholics also insisted, especially if they were Aristotelians, that there were limits beyond which the mystical interpretation ought not to be permitted to go. [end page 11] And the propositions which they demanded should be taken literally were of course those which the Protestants would not accept.

I don't know if you ever interested yourself in Cardinal Poole [sic] and Contarini. With regard to Contarini I am certain, and with regard to Reginald Poole I suspect, that their attempts to overcome the schism of the Church and to bring the Protestants back to the mother- church, were based on Pico's "techniques of mystical translation". By making the Catholic Church concede that those tenets which most offended [end of page 12] the Protestants, could be interpreted allegorically, they hoped to induce the Protestants to admit that those tenets of theirs which had been condemned as heresies, were also to be taken in a mystical, and not in a literal sense. The cure was to inject to both patients an appropriate dosis of mysticism; but both patients refused to take it. That is to say, the Pope and Luther refused to sanction what Contarini and Melanchthon had worked out between themselves as "ambassadors" of the two parties. It is rather remarkable, however, that Contarini and Melanchthon did manage to [end of page 13] agree, even on much vital questions as the interpretation of the Sacrament and the "justification by faith".

And now I hardly need to draw the conclusion with regard to Bruno; for you have drawn it yourself in several places, in which you say that he thought of himself as a "reformer" of the Catholic Church. If this is the reform of which he dreamt, it explains 1) why he ridiculed the Protestants as well as the Papists, 2) why he frequented Protestant circles and had Protestant friends, though he could justly say that he did not [end of page 14] share their heresies; 3) that he desired to be accepted by the mother Church, but not in the character of a monk; 4) that he wrote a panegyric on Luther and yet ridiculed the "reformed" manner of taking the sacrament; 5) that he could believe that he had a good case before a Catholic tribunal, and that the Catholic tribunal could satisfy themselves that he was a heretic.

To conclude: I think that you have completely proved that Bruno did not die as a martyr of modern science (which he would have abhorred if he had known it), but I [page 16] don't think you have disproved that he died as a martyr of "free-thinking". That mysticism should be more favourable to the freedom of thought than strict mathematics, is something of a shock to the popular view of natural science. But it is a fact that mathematical science breeds literal-mindedness, and literal-minded people are intolerant.

What all of that means to the imagery of Shakespeare, you know much better than I. With Pico's imagery in mind, I have re-read "Love's Labour's Lost", and I should like to tell you the results in detail when we are both [page 17] in London. In fact, I should like to ask

you a very great favour. Could we sit down together and go through the play point by point?

By then, I shall also have taken down some notes on those details in your argument and your commentary which I found less convincing than the rest. In principle, I absolutely agree with your claim that Bruno's statements must be "deciphered". But in some cases I would read the cipher differently, - that is, in the sense of a modified Catholicism, not an orthodox one. One [page 18] of the advantages of that view is that there is less "spying".

Please judge the pleasure I have had from your book, by the length of this letter; - which you will excuse, I hope.

With very kind regards,

Yours sincerely,

Edgard Wind

P.S. Though I am in the country, the safest way of reaching me is through the Warburg Institute.