

Manuel Mertens, *Magic and Memory in Giordano Bruno: The Art of a Heroic Spirit*, (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, 283.) xix + 243 pp., bibl., index. Leiden: Brill, 2018. €85.00 (cloth), ISBN 9789004358928.

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Manuel Mertens's monograph offers a useful reassessment of Bruno's operational conception of knowledge as it was instantiated by the close connection of his views on the art of memory, or mnemotechnics, and magic. Although scholars influenced by Frances Yates' interpretation of Bruno have regarded this connection as revealing of two important poles of Bruno's inquiry, recent studies—most significantly those by Rita Sturlese—have shown us a different Bruno by focusing on mnemotechnics independently of magic. Contra Sturlese, Mertens aims to reestablish the link between the two by writing a “meticulous comparison of the two corpora” (p.27). In his view, this approach will help to overcome the partiality of previous accounts, which were often built upon preconceptions rather than an adequate analysis of Bruno's work taken as a whole.

In the first chapter, Mertens discusses the diverging interpretations of Bruno's mnemotechnics. On the one hand, Yates offered a magical interpretation of mnemotechnics but overemphasized its dependency on the Hermeneutic tradition. On the other hand, Sturlese marginalized magic issues and, in this manner, unduly separated the epistemic and the operative areas. In chapter two, Mertens reflects upon whether the context of censorship could explain the cryptic style of Bruno's mnemonic and magical writings, an interpretation that draws upon Leo Strauss's analyses on the close connection between writing style and social pressure. In the end, however, Mertens argues against such an interpretation since Bruno was not a cautious intellectual who would have hidden his most controversial ideas. Mertens also states that one cannot explain Bruno's crypticism on the basis of an artificial opposition between printed books and manuscripts, or even between the natural and the demonic, because the reasons behind the magical works remaining unpublished were contingent and not of Bruno's making. According to Mertens, Bruno's style should instead be explained in terms of economics—teaching mnemonics provided his livelihood, and therefore he distinguished between exoteric communication and esoteric knowledge, according to the dictum that the truth is only destined for a small number of initiates. In order to shed further light on Bruno's case, Mertens discusses the example of Lambert Thomas Schenkel, who also taught mnemotechnics in the same time period. The work of this Flemish scholar attests to the ways in which censorship and crypticism could both enhance the visibility of doctrines that were partly concealed and also attract customers. Chapter three investigates the foundations of the connection between the epistemic and the ontological, and between the cognitive and the operative. Mertens regards mnemotechnics and magic as “two sides of the

same coin: the coin of the wise and operating soul or [...] the consciously acting soul that is not acted upon by external influences like deceptive demons” (p. 95). According to him, it is impossible to completely separate cognition from operation in Bruno’s thought. Their connection is guaranteed by what Bruno called ‘*similitudo*’ (similitude), which establishes the connection between words and the things they refer to, as well as between the various levels of reality. “*Similitudo* constitutes the web keeping both the natural and rational universes together [...]” (p. 109). This concept plays a pivotal role in Bruno’s epistemology and natural philosophy, and also constitutes a bridge between magic and memory: while magic uses similitude to unfold its action in the world, memory uses it to interiorize the world. The last chapter, the fourth, deals with Bruno’s soul theory, or psychology, and its sources. Bruno acquired the idea of the *anima mundi* that penetrates the world from neo-Platonism and Ficino. However, unlike these predecessors he also conceived of an infinite space that resulted from divine omnipotence; this cosmology bears a closer similarity to the Spinozian worldview than earlier cosmologies. Following the Platonic tradition, Bruno’s reality is populated by demons, which are natural and spiritual forces that can be channeled through the two arts of magic and memory. Just as a good magician can direct demonic forces towards positive goals, the capable mnemonist can cultivate the good activity of his own psyche and avoid negative demonic influences. However, since the demonic is found within the natural realm, both mnemonic and magical action are two sides of the same operational knowledge.

Mertens has written an accurate study of a very important area of Bruno’s philosophical inquiry. His aim has clearly been to reunite fundamental threads of Bruno’s work and describe the philosopher’s theoretical-practical approach to knowledge. This is an important first step towards an all-encompassing understanding of Bruno’s writings and thoughts in their complexity. In particular, a detailed reappraisal of his art of memory and magic in connection with his most influential contributions to the history of astronomy and cosmology is still a desideratum in the history of science and philosophy. Mertens’ scrupulous inquiry into Bruno’s *technics* reminds us of the difficulty of reaching a total comprehension of his epistemology and science that extends beyond the separation between Bruno’s natural philosophy—which includes metaphysics, cosmology, astronomy, and physics—and his magical-mnemotechnic work.