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‘Rents in the Veil of Time’: Annie Besant’s Auto-biographies of Giordano Bruno

Muriel PÉCASTAING-BOISSIÈRE

Sorbonne University

### Introduction

Annie Besant<sup>1</sup>, *née* Wood, was born in 1847 in London, into a Protestant-Irish, middle-class family. She married Frank Besant, an Anglican clergyman, in 1867, with whom she had two children, but the marriage proved a failure, partly because of Besant's religious doubts. After legally separating from her husband, Besant joined Charles Bradlaugh's National Secular Society (NSS), of which she soon became vice-president, as well as a regular contributor to the NSS weekly, *The National Reformer*. At the crossroads of her feminism and the NSS's belief in freedom of speech, Besant supported the right to information on birth control, during the Knowlton trial of 1877. From 1885, she also took an active part in the socialist revival of the Restless Eighties, mainly within the Fabian Society, and launched a socialist weekly, *The Link*, as well as a generalist monthly, *Our Corner*. In 1888, Besant famously supported the victorious matchgirls' strike, in the East End of London, and helped them organise their union.

In 1889, after much spiritual questioning, Besant joined the Theosophical Society (TS), an esoteric, syncretic movement, launched in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky, inspired by Neo-Platonism, Buddhism and Hinduism. In 1895, Besant settled in Adyar, India, where the international headquarters of the TS are located. She was president of the TS from 1907 until her death in 1933, and a tireless missionary of Theosophy, in India, Europe and the United States — especially from 1910, after she adopted Jiddu Krishnamurti, in whom she saw the new World Teacher. Besant, however, did not renounce her freethinking, her socialism, and her feminism: she actively supported Emmeline Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union in the early 1910s, and she joined the Labour Party in 1918. Meanwhile, she fought for Home Rule in India, alongside such figures of Indian nationalism as Nehru Sr. and Gandhi. Besant was placed under house arrest by the British authorities in 1917, and was elected president of the Indian National Congress upon her release that year.

Annie Besant published several autobiographical texts from 1878, starting with the preface to *My Path to Atheism*, when she was vice-president of the NSS. Her first full-length autobiography, *Autobiographical Sketches*, appeared in book form in 1885, the year she joined the Fabian Society, a decision she justified in 1886 with *Why I Am a Socialist*. When Besant converted to Theosophy in 1889, she wrote *Why I Became a Theosophist*, and her revised autobiography, *Annie Besant: An Autobiography*, was published in 1893, preceded by *1875 to 1891: A Fragment of Autobiography*. Besant's autobiographies have been extensively analysed and compared, notably by Carol Hanbery MacKay and Elizabeth Carolyn Miller.

Besant penned her first biography of the Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno in 1876, a short sketch published in *The National Reformer*. Bruno was tried for heresy by the Inquisition, and burned at the stake in Rome in 1600, because of his cosmological theories, his pantheism and his belief in the transmigration of souls.<sup>2</sup> By the Victorian Era, he was revered as a martyr to science and freethought. Besant wrote a more detailed *Story of Giordano Bruno*, in 1884-5, at the time she joined the socialist revival. Her fascination with Bruno took a new dimension from 1889, when she embraced the Theosophists' belief in reincarnation: she had probably come to the conclusion that she had been Bruno in a past life when she lectured on

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<sup>1</sup> On Annie Besant, see NETHERCOT, Arthur H. *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant*. U of Chicago P, 1960 & *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant*. U of Chicago P, 1963; PÉCASTAING-BOISSIÈRE, Muriel. *Annie Besant: Struggles and Quest*, London: TPH, 2017; TAYLOR, Anne. *Annie Besant: a Biography*. Oxford UP, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent, academic biography of Bruno, see ROWLAND, Ingrid D. *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic*, U of Chicago P, 2009.

*Giordano Bruno: the Man and the Teacher* in 1898, and delivered *Le Message de Giordano Bruno au Monde moderne*, in the Sorbonne, in 1911. Yet, so far, no study of Besant's writings on Bruno has been published.

The British biographer and literary critic Hermione Lee argued 'that all biography is a form of autobiography', because the biographer's 'choice of subject has been made for a reason', and that 'there is likely to be some shared experience between the writer and the subject' (Lee, 12). So, this paper intends to explore the reasons why Annie Besant wrote four biographies of Giordano Bruno between 1876 and 1911. Focussing on the 'shared experience' Besant put forward, I will retrace her personal and spiritual evolution through the study of her biographies of Bruno as occult autobiographies, that pursue the legitimization strategies of Besant's autobiographical texts, but also transgress gender boundaries, at a time when it was most unusual for a woman to write a man's historical biography.<sup>3</sup>

### **“Giordano Bruno” (1876) — *My Path to Atheism* (1878)**

In *Autobiographical Sketches*, Annie Besant recalled that, during 'the 1876 Conference of the National Secular Society held at Leeds [...] was inaugurated the subscription to the statue to be erected in Rome to the memory of Giordano Bruno' (Besant 1884-5, 181). This was probably when she first became interested in him. In July that year, as part of the subscription campaign, she published a short biographical sketch of 'the grandest hero of Freethought' in the *National Reformer*. By then, according to Hilary Gatti, who researched 'Bruno and the Victorians', 'It was no longer such a difficult task to find Bruno's works, [...] while the first complete biography, by Christian Bartholomèss [...] greatly facilitated a knowledge of Bruno's dramatic and tormented life and death' (Gatti, 231). Besant's sketch was indeed 'mainly drawn' from this "'Vie de Jordano Bruno" par C. Bartolomèss"<sup>4</sup> (her footnote), published in French in 1846. Besant also cited G. H. Lewes' *History of Philosophy* (1867)<sup>5</sup>, to explain Bruno's complex thinking.

There already are hints at Besant's identification with Bruno in her short sketch: she concluded with Lewes that 'Bruno's creed is pantheism', but she interpreted this as 'veiled Atheism', a position Bruno had reached, she said, after his 'free inquiry led to disbelief in some of the dogmas of Christianity'. In 1878, she explained her own evolution in her preface to *My Path to Atheism*, a collection of her essays 'marking the gradual growth of thought [...] into the full-blown flower of Atheism', after she 'had steadily made up [her] mind to investigate, one by one, every Christian dogma'— the same as Bruno.

### ***The Story of Giordano Bruno* — *Autobiographical Sketches* (1884-5)**

Besant's second biography of Bruno, *The Story of Giordano Bruno*, was serialized in her monthly *Our Corner*, from February to September 1884. It was meant as an exemplary tale for 'young folks', that recalled her previous (lost) work on *The Lives of the Black Letter Saints* (1868): Although, in *The Story*, Bruno is 'the knight-errant of Freethought', she followed the 'standard pattern' of saints' Lives, or hagiographies, defined by Hermione Lee:

[...] early signs of spirituality shown through childhood incidents, followed by a break, often violent and difficult, with worldly connections (family, society, politics, government), perhaps a conversion, and a commitment to a holy life. The narrative then settles down to giving examples of the holy person's sayings, conversations, visions, and miracles, culminating in a farewell address, a holy death or martyrdom, [...] evidence of

<sup>3</sup> None of the 'Historical Biographies by Victorian Women' listed by Rohan MAITZEN are about men.

<sup>4</sup> More precisely BARTHOLOMÈSS, Christian. *Vie de Jordano Bruno*, Paris: Ladrangé, 1846.

<sup>5</sup> Besant probably meant LEWES, G. H. *Biographical History of Philosophy*, London: Cox, 1852.

lasting influence [...], conflicts with pagan authorities, torture, imprisonment – are always emphasized. (Lee 24-5)

*The Story of Giordano Bruno* ran parallel to Besant's *Autobiographical Sketches*, also serialized in *Our Corner*, from January 1884 to June 1885, and echoes between the two could hardly escape her readers. So much so that, at times, *The Story* reads like a children's version of the *Sketches*. Up to a point, Besant also saw herself as a martyr then, because her proclaimed atheism, and the Knowlton Trial of 1877 had cost her the custody of her daughter in 1878, and led to her exclusion from London University in 1883. This is why she introduced the *Sketches* 'as defence against unfair attack' (*Sketches* 57).

Both *The Story* and the *Sketches* open on their subjects' thirst for knowledge, that, combined to a naïve faith, led to mistaken life choices that Besant made sound similar: 'the boy was fanciful and superstitious, and he thought that perhaps the monastery would be the spot most approved of by his God' (*The Story* 63-4); 'the position of a clergyman's wife seems second only to that of the nun, and has therefore a wonderful attractiveness [... to] those who are most apt to self-devotion, most swayed by imagination' (*Sketches* 95). While Bruno soon longed 'to be free of the narrow round of his monastic duties, and to share in the intellectual struggle' (*The Story* 67), Besant, as a young clergyman's wife 'cared more for the great struggles outside than for the discussions of a housemaid's young man, or the amount of "butter when dripping would have done perfectly well"' (*Sketches* 105). Similar also are their resulting rebellions, Bruno being 'a youth who would never accept an answer to a question if the answer would not bear investigation, [...] refusing to accept as certain all that Holy Church taught' (*The Story* 66); while Besant, as already expressed in 1878, 'resolved that, whatever might be the result, I would take each dogma of the Christian religion, and carefully and thoroughly examine it, so that I should never again say "I believe" where I had not proved' (*Sketches* 116). In both texts, former spiritual guides reacted in exactly the same way: "'My son, my son," the gentle old monk would say, you seek to know too much. There is danger in your endless questionings and in your desire to be wise above that which is written.'" (*The Story* 66). Besant clearly was inspired by her discussing her own religious doubts with Edward Pusey: 'a short, stout gentleman, dressed in a cassock, and looking like a comfortable monk', who told her: 'you have read too much already. You must pray; [...] It is your duty to accept and to believe the truth as laid down by the Church; at your peril you reject it [...] You are full of intellectual pride' (*Sketches* 129-30). When Besant lost her Christian faith, she was served an ultimatum by her husband 'at least to conform to the outward ceremonies of the Church, and to attend the Holy Communion. This I was resolved not to do' (*Sketches* 138), and she left him. According to her, Bruno faced the same ultimatum in Paris, when he had to attend mass to be allowed to lecture in the Sorbonne: 'If he refused, not only would he lose the professorship, but the fickle and bigoted king might turn against him' (*The Story* 79). Besant drew this parallel even though it contradicted her 1876 biographical sketch, in which she had related: 'this [attending mass] Bruno would by no means do, and he was guarded from danger on his head by the protection accorded to him by the King, Henri III'.

The publication of Besant's *Sketches* ended rather abruptly, on her losing custody of her daughter in 1878. However, there are echoes of her life between 1878 and 1885 in *The Story of Giordano Bruno*. First, of Bradlaugh's ongoing struggle to be allowed to sit in Parliament — in which she was involved — when she had Bruno wonder: 'After all, what was a mass? A number of foolish words, of senseless phrases. He need only pretend belief in it all, and he would be safe, and might pursue his philosophical studies in peace' (*The Story* 79), any secularist reader would have recognised Bradlaugh's dilemma when he was first returned to Parliament in 1880, but had to take the religious oath to sit. On 21 May 1880, in a letter to the *Times*, Bradlaugh had informed the public at large that he would take the oath, adding: 'so much

the worse for those who force me to repeat those words, which I have scores of times declared are to me sounds conveying no clear and definite meaning’ — a letter that was used to forbid him to take the oath and to sit (Bradlaugh 1882, 77). Significantly, a few days before, Bradlaugh had mentioned Bruno in his address to the NSS, informing its members of his controversial decision to take the oath: ‘the true, as Bruno’s spirit goes through the world, alive as years ago’ (Bradlaugh 1890, 183).

*The Story* also allowed Besant indirectly to allude to her eviction from London University in 1883. She had successfully matriculated in 1879 to study for a B.Sc. degree. In 1881, however, the Birkbeck Institute intentionally omitted her name from the list of students who had passed their exams. Then, in 1882, as she later recalled in *An Autobiography*: ‘When I asked permission to go to the botanical gardens in Regent’s Park the curator refused it, on the ground that his daughters studied there’, for he feared that they would be tainted by Besant’s reputation. Rosa Morison, the Lady Superintendent of the University, to whom Besant registered a complaint, responded evasively that there were ‘some prejudices against you’. Eventually, in May 1883, the University Council confirmed Besant’s exclusion. Furthermore, ‘when I had qualified as teacher, [...] Sir Henry Tyler in the House of Commons attacked the Education Department for accepting me.’ (Besant 1893, 250-1). In *The Story*, her account of Bruno’s eviction from Marburg University is strikingly similar: ‘the Rector of the University writes dryly that he is obliged to deny the permission asked for; there are “grave reasons” why Bruno should not be allowed to teach, [...] “Your views, Dr. Bruno, are not sound. They are not such as are safe in a teacher of the young”. “[Bruno replied] Erase my name from the lists of your University [...]”. “There is no difficulty in erasing your name,” sneered Nigidius, “from a list that ought never to have been dishonored [*sic*] by it”’ (*The Story* 84-5). Besant had mentioned this episode in 1876, but she had not dramatized it at the time: ‘the Rector of the University refused to allow Bruno to teach philosophy, a refusal which so irritated Bruno that he angrily refused to remain a member of the University, and his name was accordingly erased’. Clearly, it had acquired a stronger significance after her own eviction from London University in 1883.

Carol Hanbery MacKay wrote that Besant was ‘a decided seeker after meaning’ and that her autobiographies ‘repeatedly share the image of searching for the light’ (MacKay 26). There is much spiritual questioning also in *The Story*: ‘he fancied that Learning should be his comrade, and Truth itself should lift her veil before his eager reverent eyes’ (64); ‘up and down his narrow cell, struggling, thinking, wondering, praying for a light that never came’ (67); ‘his deep eyes full of search and longing, and of unsatisfied yearning after certainty of truth’ (70), but there is very little about what could be that ‘Truth’ that also eluded Besant at the time. This reveals her own spiritual dissatisfaction by 1884, that eventually led her to Theosophy in 1889 — a dissatisfaction on which she did not yet allow herself to dwell in the *Sketches*.

The monument to Bruno in the Campo dei Fiori in Rome was inaugurated on 9 June 1889, one month after Besant joined the TS on 10 May 1889. In the same way as she reprinted whole passages from her articles and pamphlets in her autobiographies, though she no longer shared the views expressed in them, her 1884 *Story of Giordano Bruno* was again published in theosophical periodicals, with the addition of a footnote that reads: ‘This story was one of a series written by me when I was a sceptic. Giordano Bruno fascinated me much in the past’ (Besant 1913, 22). It is strangely worded, for Bruno went on fascinating Besant for many more years after her conversion to Theosophy.

### ***Giordano Bruno: The Man and the Teacher (1892-8) — An Autobiography (1893)***

Giordano Bruno already was an important figure in the Theosophical pantheon: in 1877 Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the TS, devoted several pages of her first opus, *Isis Unveiled*, to Bruno’s belief ‘in the Pythagorean metempsychosis’, arguing against the view that he was

an atheist (Blavatsky 1877, 95). In 1892, Annie Besant toured Britain with a lecture on the *Life and Teachings of Giordano Bruno*, that became *Giordano Bruno: The Man and the Teacher* when she revived it in 1898. Meanwhile, she published her revised autobiography, this time ending on her conversion to Theosophy.

*Annie Besant: An Autobiography* reads like an exemplar spiritual autobiography, that ‘best epitomizes [Besant’s] mode of self-discovery because it traces a pattern of spiritual progress that emerges from a succession of struggles between opposing forces’ (MacKay 27). Besant’s spiritual evolution can be traced through her various mentions of Bruno. She first listed him among ‘those great discoverers, most deep-thinking philosophers, most earnest reformers, most toiling pioneers of progress, [who] have in their turn had flung at them the name of Atheist’ (Besant 1893, 151) — the way she had in 1876. Bradlaugh had died in 1891, exhausted by his long fight for atheists’ civic rights. In her *Autobiography*, Besant recalled his arrest in 1881, after he tried to take his seat in the House of Commons, as a martyrdom on a par with Bruno’s: ‘Strong in the goodness of our cause [...] we await gravely and fearlessly the successors of the men who burned Bruno, who imprisoned Galileo, who tortured Vanini’ (Besant 1893, 276). Finally, she presented Bruno’s views in a theosophical light: ‘It was one of Bruno’s crimes that he dared to teach that other worlds than ours were inhabited [...]. All the Theosophists aver is that [...] all the universe is pulsing with life’ (Besant 1893, 356-7).

There is another, less explicit allusion to Bruno in *An Autobiography*, when Besant remembered that, as a child:

I would spend many an hour in day-dreams, in which I stood before Roman judges, before Dominican Inquisitors, was flung to lions, tortured on the rack, burned at the stake; one day I saw myself preaching some great new faith to a vast crowd of people, and they listened and were converted, and I became a great religious leader. But always, with a shock, I was brought back to earth. (Besant 1893, 42)

As studied by Julie Chajes, by the time Besant joined the TS, its members had already largely contributed to the development of a belief in reincarnation in the West. Blavatsky began to teach reincarnation in 1882, and she made it a central tenet of *The Secret Doctrine* in 1888 — the review of which<sup>6</sup> had spurred Besant’s conversion to Theosophy. Besant published on reincarnation as early as 1892, with a Theosophical Manual on the topic. Significantly, she mentioned Bruno twice in it: first, as one of the ‘great intuitional souls’ who ‘embraced [the truth of reincarnation] although the Church tried ineffectually to eradicate it’ (Besant 1892, 9); then, as an argument in support of reincarnation: ‘Whence comes [genius]? A Plato, a Dante, a Bruno, a Shakespeare, a Newton [...]? They spring from mediocre families [...] Wisdom is the fruitage of many incarnations’ (Besant 1892, 65). Like Blavatsky, Besant believed it possible to access memories of past lives:

As the true Self is increasingly able to affect its bodily habitation, glimpses of past incarnations will flash on the lower consciousness, and these will become less like flashes and more like permanent visions, until finally the past is recognized as ‘mine’ by the continuous thread of memory that gives the feeling of individuality. (Besant 1892, 13)

According to Jinarajadasa, who was vice-president of the TS under Besant in the 1920s, she embarked on a ‘clairvoyant investigation’ into her past lives with fellow Theosophist Charles Leadbeater in 1895, and they discovered that ‘Bruno was Dr. Besant’, and Bruno’s life was ‘looked up’ by her (Jinarajadasa 4). The research, centred on Krishnamurti’s past lives after

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Among the Adepts: Madame Blavatsky on the “Secret Doctrine”’. *Pall Mall Gazette* (25 April 1889): 3.

1909, was published as a series of articles in *The Theosophist* from April 1910 to February 1911, entitled 'Rents in the Veil of Time'.

Bruno's gender was no obstacle to Besant's spiritual beliefs, for the TS's prime object was to bring in 'Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour', and the theosophical doctrine of reincarnation taught that all individuals experienced male and female rebirths. Besant explained:

The Ego itself is sexless, and each Ego, in the course of its myriad reïncarnations [*sic*], dwells in male and female bodies. As the building up of the perfect humanity is the object of reïncarnation, and in this perfect humanity positive and negative elements must find complete equilibrium, it is easy to see that the Ego must by experience develop these characteristics to the fullest in their appropriate physical subjects, and therefore that an alternation of sexes is necessary. (Besant 1892, 57)

In *Representing Femininity*, Mary Jean Corbett discussed the strategies devised by Victorian female autobiographers, including professional actresses, to try and remain identified with the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, if Besant's autobiographies reflected on her roles as daughter, wife and mother, she unapologetically rejected that domestic sphere, and proudly recalled her stepping into the public one as a paid lecturer and writer. Besant had denounced gender discrimination from her very first lecture, on *The Political Status of Women*, in 1874, and already envisioned an evolution towards a less gendered humankind:

Co-workers in every noble labour, co-partners in every righteous project, co-soldiers in every just cause, men and women in the time to come shall labour, think, and struggle side by side. The man shall bring his greater strength and more sustained determination, the woman her quicker judgment and purer heart, till man shall grow tenderer, and woman stronger, man more pure, and woman more brave and free. Till at last, generations hence, the race shall develop into a strength and a beauty at present unimagined, and men and women shall walk this fair earth hand-in-hand, diverse yet truly one. (Besant 1874, 17)

Symbolically, Besant recalled finding her lecturer's voice from a male standpoint, her husband's pulpit: 'alone in the great, silent church, [...] I shall never forget the feeling of power and delight — but especially of power — that came upon me as I sent my voice ringing down the aisles' (Besant 1893, 116). The preface to *An Autobiography* opens from the point of view of a male-gendered 'autobiographer', who 'does his work because he thinks that, at the cost of some unpleasantness to himself, he may [...] stretch out a helping hand to some brother who is struggling in the darkness'. Then it shifts to that of a non-gendered 'soul', 'that went out alone into the darkness and on the other side found light' (Besant 1893, 5-6). To Besant, reincarnation explained why 'we meet noble types of each physical sex showing some of the characteristics historically developed in the other' (Besant 1892, 57). So, her belief that she had been Bruno in a past life was not so much a transgression of gender boundaries, as a merging, and eventually a transcending of and a liberation from gender.

What Laura Marcus wrote of D.H. Lawrence, who, in his autobiographical novels, 'imagine[d] a past which did not yet contain him, but which would, quite literally, bring him into being' (Marcus 113-4) could apply to Besant's exploration of Bruno's life after she became a Theosophist. In 1898, she delivered her lecture on Bruno to a London audience to whom she asked to 'summon to your mind's eye something of the surroundings in which [Bruno's] life has passed'. In 1876 she had said 'Nothing is known with certainty regarding Bruno's family'; in 1898, she described Bruno's mother as 'a Catholic, passionately devoted to the Church, longing that her son should make his way among the learned priests of the Roman Catholic

community' (Besant 1898, 179) — which sounded like her own pious mother, who had pressured her into accepting Rev. Frank Besant's proposal, arguing: 'You will have more opportunities for doing good as a clergyman's wife than as anything else' (Besant 1893, 70). Further, Besant again explained that Bruno 'could have stayed [in Paris], honoured and shielded under royal protection, if he had gone to mass', but his anger that recalled Bradlaugh's is absent from her narrative: 'So, as ever, he risked royal displeasure, declined the offer, and set off for England' (Besant 1898, 186). She still wrote about Bruno's expulsion from Malburg University in the same terms as in 1884: 'grave reasons', 'not safe as an instructor of youth' (Besant 1898, 222) but, there again, Bruno's angry reaction is no longer mentioned. To understand why, one only needs to remember the last lines of *An Autobiography*: 'Quiet confidence has taken the place of doubt; a strong security the place of anxious dread. In life, through death, to life, I [...] can never again look upon the world save through eyes made luminous with the radiance of the Eternal Peace' (Besant 1893, 364). Evidently, Bruno's angry outbursts no longer suited her belief that they partook of the same soul.

In 1884-5, *The Story of Giordano Bruno* still mentioned Bartholmèss's biography — 'A book that you, young folk should read when you are old enough to understand it', Besant advised in a footnote — but her 1898 lecture no longer cited sources. This is unusual, for Besant prided herself on her research: 'I would go and study all day at the British Museum' (Besant 1893, 127); 'Mr Scott's valuable library was at my service' (Besant 1893, 131). So she made it sound as if she were writing from memory, be it of her previous readings on Bruno, or from her memories as Bruno in a past incarnation. Besant quoted from him in 1898, something she hardly did in her previous biographies, and she intervened in her narrative: 'I remember one phrase which shows the quaint turn of his mind' (Besant 1898, 184) — a phrasing ambiguous enough to feed in the feeling that she had somehow been there when he spoke. Her comments on Bruno's style could also easily apply to hers, resulting in a *mise-en-abyme*: 'all his books are more like lectures' (Besant 1898, 186). A prolific writer herself, she observed that Bruno wrote forty-four books 'in that stormy life of his; activity so tremendous that it seems well-nigh impossible'.<sup>7</sup>

Besant still narrated Bruno's journey as 'a life of struggle and debate, a life of fierce antagonism and passionate friendships', but he mainly appears as a precursor of Theosophy: 'his mission to bring back to Europe the oriental Pantheism of Pythagoras' (Besant 1898, 177). She insisted on what she considered to be Bruno's belief in reincarnation, saying that he 'taught the immortality of soul, with transmigration' (Besant 1898, 220). Her 1876 and 1884 biographies had closed on Bruno's apocryphal last words: 'To know how to die in one century, is to live for all centuries to come'. Besant quoted them again in 1898, but followed by a three-page long demonstration that Bruno 'died for the very teaching that we are spreading forth today' (Besant 1898, 229). In 1889, she had ended her lecture *Why I Became a Theosophist* on those words: 'I ask no other epitaph on my tomb, but "She tried to follow Truth"'. In 1898, to her question: 'And what for did [Bruno] die?', she answered 'as the inevitable end of a life devoted to the following of truth' (Besant 1898, 228) — that truth, by then, being Theosophy to her.

Besant's quote from Bruno's 'tribute to the town of Würtemberg [*sic*]<sup>8</sup>' sounds like a rebuke of those who had excluded her from the NSS after her conversion to Theosophy. In *1875-1891: A Fragment of Autobiography*, her last address to the NSS, she had told them: 'What is it you are saying? that you will have no word from your platform save that which you already know [...]; you ought to be strong enough to hear a lecturer put views you don't agree

<sup>7</sup> A feeling shared by Besant's biographers: Kurt LELAND's bibliography of Annie Besant's writings lists over 130 full-length books, besides hundreds of articles and lectures. <https://www.kurtleland.com/annie-besant-shrine/books> (last accessed 15 April 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Besant got Wittenberg (the city where Bruno taught) mixed up with the then Duchy of Würtemberg.



with' (Besant 1891, 20-1). This can be contrasted to Bruno's tribute to Wittenberg: 'Far from restraining liberty of thought [...] you did not question me as to my faith which you did not approve [...]; you did not forbid me to proclaim freely opinions contrary to the doctrines received among you' (Besant 1898, 223). It is tempting to see Wittenberg as a metaphor of the TS. However, Besant's mention that Bruno spoke and wrote 'in the common language of the people [...] in a tongue they could understand, teaching them in a way they could follow' (Besant 1898, 223), was her way to vindicate her missionary strategy, inspired by her experience as a secularist and socialist lecturer, that had met with disapproval from some less democratically-minded Theosophists. In 1891, in 'Ought Theosophists to be Propagandists?', an editorial Besant published in *Lucifer*, the London theosophist weekly, she had denounced their elitism: 'It is alleged that to teach them by books is right, to teach them from the platform is wrong. Bluntly put, this means that [...] the poor shall be left in darkness and ignorance', and she reminded her opponents that 'the Theosophical Society is a Brotherhood that recognises no distinction of class'. So, *Giordano Bruno: The Man and the Teacher* also enabled Besant to address issues left out of her 1893 autobiography, that glossed over tensions within the TS.

### **Annie Besant and Giordano Bruno's *Message au Monde moderne* (1911)**

By 1911, Besant lectured to audiences who, Theosophists or not, believed she saw herself as Bruno's reincarnation. After she lectured on Bruno during her 1909 American tour, *The Daily Mirror* ran an article entitled 'Mrs. Besant's Lives: Claim That She Remembers Two Previous Existences. Hypatia and Bruno'. The claim had been made by 'Mrs. Peets, President of the Theosophical Society in Cleveland, Ohio', who was 'responsible for the assertion that Mrs. Besant can remember every day of her existence as both characters'. The news item made such an impression, that it was taken up again by British papers when Besant was back in Britain in the spring of 1911. The *Islington Gazette* thus reminded their readers of those 'remarkable claims [...] that in another of her lives, Mrs. Besant was Giordano Bruno'. The rumour also spread to France: The metaphysician René Guénon, attended Besant's lecture at the Sorbonne in 1911, and explained in his later critique of Theosophy: 'to understand the title, one has to know that Mrs. Besant claims to be Giordano Bruno's reincarnation'<sup>9</sup> (Guénon 202-3, my translation). There is no evidence that Besant ever publicly said that she had been Bruno in a past life. This is quite understandable. In 1889, Blavatsky devoted a chapter of her *Key to Theosophy* to 'Re-Incarnation or Re-Birth', with a section on 'Why do we not Remember our Past Lives?', in which she admitted there were 'exceptions', 'But who believes in their report? Such sensitives are generally regarded as hallucinated hysteriacs, as crack-brained enthusiasts, or humbugs, by modern materialism' (Blavatsky 1889, 131). Still, Besant never denied the rumour either. Not only did she deliver Bruno's *Message* well aware that she was believed to be his reincarnation, but she used this.

Annie Besant was as charismatic and talented orator, and she had dwelt on Bruno's own oratory skills in her 1898 lecture: 'all the youth of Paris crowd to his lectures, fascinated by his fiery eloquence, by the grace and power of his thought' (Besant 1898, 186). In 1911, she embarked her Sorbonne audience on a time travel: 'Come with me up the stream of history to the sixteenth century. We are in the year 1576', and she turned her lecture into a re-enactment of Bruno's: 'it was in this same famous Sorbonne that he set forth his theories', among which, at the core of his *Message*, 'the Immortality — or rather, the Eternity — of the human Spirit'<sup>10</sup> (Besant 1913, 1). Shortly after the Sorbonne lecture, Charles Leadbeater published 'Mrs Besant as Orator' in *The Central Hindu Magazine*, and expressed what most that night either believed or thought Besant to believe, namely that they heard 'the same ego delivering the same message

<sup>9</sup> 'Pour comprendre ce titre, il faut savoir que Mme Besant prétend être la réincarnation de Giordano Bruno'.

<sup>10</sup> All quotes from the English translation of the lecture, *Giordano Bruno. Theosophy's Apostle in the Sixteenth Century* (1913).

in the same spot and in the same language, though through a different body'. According to Leadbeater, 'this same quality of eloquence was one of her leading characteristics [...] as the monk Giordano Bruno' (Leadbeater 305). It is quite doubtful that Besant should have let Leadbeater's article go to print in a theosophical periodical she edited if she had rejected his claim.

Carol Hanbery MacKay's reasons why Annie Besant 'never again undertook a major writing of her life story' are unconvincing: 'Those subsequent forty years, primarily spent in India, were solidly packed with her writings and activities on behalf of the TS, the Home Rule movement, and educational reform. It is no wonder that she did not find the time to address her life again when she was so busy living it' (MacKay 19): Besant's life before 1893, as a secularist lecturer and essayist, an advocate of birth control, a science student and teacher, and a socialist activist, sitting on the London School Board, had been just as busy. A more valid argument would be that if Besant had embarked on a sequel to her second autobiography, she would have contradicted her preface, that presented it as 'the tale of one soul that [...] struggled through the Storm and on the other side found Peace'. Besant sounded like John Henry Newman in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, who spoke of his 'perfect peace and contentment' since his conversion to Catholicism, but she delivered *Le Message de Giordano Bruno au Monde moderne* at a difficult time for the TS she had been presiding since 1907.

After the death of Blavatsky in 1891, Besant had been caught in a power struggle between William Q. Judge in the United States, and Colonel Olcott in India, respectively vice-president and president of the TS — a conflict that had caused the schism of a great portion of American Theosophists in 1895. Yet, when Olcott died twelve years later, Besant should not have had much trouble in succeeding him — were it not for a sex scandal involving Leadbeater, accused of sexual abuse on a fourteen-year-old American boy he tutored. Leadbeater was excluded from the TS, but Besant went on supporting him, to the dismay of many Theosophists. She retorted that their outcries 'are of the spirit of the crowd that [...] yelled execrations round the stake of Bruno in the Field of Flowers' (Besant 1907, 367). Although she managed to be elected president of the TS, her adversaries still used the sex scandal against her in 1911, all the more so since she had reinstated Leadbeater as early as 1908.

Furthermore, it was the same Leadbeater who had discovered Krishnamurti, aged fourteen, in Adyar, in 1909. In 1900, Besant had published *Avataras*, from a Sanskrit word meaning 'descent'. To her, an Avatar was a human incarnation of the World Teacher, 'descended' to guide humanity in its evolution. She considered Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus and Muhammad to be Avatars, and believed Krishnamurti to be the next one. She adopted him and, early in 1911, launched the Order of the Star in the East, to prepare the World for the coming of its Teacher. Nevertheless, reactions were mixed amongst Theosophists, either because they retained some of their Christian faith,<sup>11</sup> or because Besant's 'neo-Theosophy' was denounced as 'a great betrayal' of Blavatsky's.<sup>12</sup>

In June 1911, those controversies were raging. Many Christians, not least the French Catholics, were quite angry at the idea that Krishnamurti could be presented as the reincarnation of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> Krishnamurti was among the audience in the Sorbonne, and the French press reported on clashes between the students who had come to listen to Besant, and Catholics who protested outside. So, when Besant recalled that 'eager to spread his ideas, [Bruno] asked permission of the Sorbonne to lecture' (Besant 1913, 2), this echoed her own controversial request to vice-chancellor Louis Liard, who gave her permission to lecture in the Grand Amphithéâtre. *La Presse*, for instance, ran an angry article, wondering why a 'fat, foreign

<sup>11</sup> Hence the secession of the German and Austrian lodges, whose president, Rudolf Steiner, founded Anthroposophy, in 1913.

<sup>12</sup> See *H.P. Blavatsky: A Great Betrayal* (1922) by Theosophist Alice LEIGHTON CLEATHER

<sup>13</sup> See for instance TALMEYR, Maurice. 'Le Message du Serpent,' *Le Gaulois* (29 juin 1911) :1.

woman [...] great priestess of the Theosophical cult', had been granted such an honour, while the Sorbonne's Theology Department had been closed, as a result of the 1905 law on the separation of Churches and State.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Besant's lecture was widely advertised, included from the front page of *Le Figaro*, with a two-column biographical article entitled 'Annie Besant', which introduced her as 'one of the most interesting and original women of our times'.<sup>15</sup> This certainly contributed to the success of a lecture that drew about three thousand people — a success that even the Catholic *La Croix* acknowledged in its critical review of a 'Pompous praise of Giordano Bruno'.<sup>16</sup> Besant had clearly anticipated the polarised reactions her wish to deliver *Le Message de Giordano Bruno* in the Sorbonne might create, for she described Bruno's own lecturing there as more controversial than she had in 1898: 'How seat him a chair in the Sorbonne? [...] A way must be found lest King should be angered and students rise in revolt' (Besant 1913, 2). To an audience who had just walked through a protest to reach the amphitheatre, it really must have felt like a time travel.

Besant also mentioned Bruno's supposed past incarnations when she commented on *Della Causa Principio e Uno*: 'his philosophy recalls the Vedantic doctrine — which must have been in him as the result of his past' (Besant 1913, 12). In 'Rents in the Veil of Time', Besant too is said to having lived in India in previous incarnations. Since she had settled there in 1895, she wore a white sari, the colour of mourning, as a tribute to the sufferings of Indian people, a choice commented on by the French press. Committed to a spiritual and cultural Indian revival in India, Besant already worked alongside some of the main Indian nationalists, notably Gokhale and Tilak. A few days before, on 26 May 1911, she had talked on *England and India* to the Fabian Society, in London. For the first time in one of her biographies of Bruno, Besant spoke of 'nations' in 1911, in a sentence in which it was no longer clear whose *Message* she was delivering: 'The message that here, to-night, I have sought to expound, is a message not only to individuals, but to nations, for there are souls of nations, as well as souls of individuals' (Besant 1913, 20).

According to Laura Marcus:

Autobiography also asks of its readers that they be open to the complexities of truth. These include the work of memory and the gaps produced by forgetting; the distinction between experience revived (as if, for example, from the child's point of view) and recalled (from the perspectives of an adult narrator); the conception of the self from the 'inside' and from the 'outside'. (Marcus 4)

This could apply to the way Besant recalled her own struggles from Bruno's revived point of view, with the understanding of most of her audience.

### Conclusion

Despite the shift in Annie Besant's interpretation of Giordano Bruno's philosophy, her long fascination for him, shared by freethinkers as well as Theosophists, nonetheless constitutes one of those continuities neglected by Besant's biographers, who have often struggled to find coherence in her thinking and commitments. Besant strongly identified with Bruno from the first, in 1876, and, by the 1890s, most probably believed she was his reincarnation. Yet, she still used her biographies of him to relate episodes of her own life, and to express some of her own difficulties, at times when it would have been difficult for her to do so openly — to the

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<sup>14</sup> 'une grosse dame étrangère à laquelle le vice-recteur, M. Liard, a tenu à faire lui-même les honneurs de la maison. Il s'agit de Mrs. Annie Besant, qui exerce la profession de grande prêtresse du culte théosophe'.

<sup>15</sup> 'une des femmes les plus intéressantes et les plus originales de notre temps'. See also 'La Théosophie en Sorbonne', *Paris-Midi* (15 June 1911).

<sup>16</sup> 'Un pompeux éloge de Giordano Bruno'.

point that Bruno often appears more like Besant's reincarnation than the other way round in her texts. Laura Marcus pointed to 'one of the essential paradoxes of the autobiographical genre: that the record of a fully completed life could only be written by a dead man' (Marcus 5). For a long time, Besant's belief that she had been Bruno in a past life offered her such a perspective, including the heroic death of a martyr she longed for: 'The message stifled by the smoke of his martyrdom is ringing through Europe to-day. His voice died in his throat, but it is now echoing around us' (Besant 1913, 10). In the end, Besant asked for her body to be disposed of on a traditional Hindu funeral pyre. So, although martyrdom eluded her, her ashes, like Bruno's over the Campo dei Fiori, were scattered, in her case over the Ganges and a garden of remembrance at Adyar.

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