

## **Bruno von Ulm: Physician, Artist, Unbeliever**

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Bruno von Ulm is no mystery man. If anything, we know more about him than we want to. Born in 1965, a native of the Silesian town of Racibórz in southern Poland, he grew up speaking German at home – at least some of the time; the household was as multilingual as the surrounding community. Bruno’s Catholic background was shared by many, if not most, of the children and neighbours he met in the first years of life. The ikons and spires of churches informed his first aesthetic and architectural visions, even as the theological underpinnings of the standard catechism, where belief, divine providence, and beauty form a trinity almost as holy as the official one of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Like so many of us raised amid the smell of incense and within the sound of bells large and small, he imbibed orthodox Roman theology as fish swim in water or other creatures breathe air. It is impossible to see the frame in which meaning itself is given shape, by which life is structured in daily hours of prayer with those resonant Latin monastic names: lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, and compline. Bruno was no monk – he was, in fact, as hellish a young boy as any schoolyard has ever seen – but the roots of the liturgy, its assumptions about good and evil, run deep.

Blessed with a fine mind as well as a mercurial disposition, Bruno followed his own brilliance into the practice of medicine. He convinced himself, indeed, that healing was his vocation – a call to duty and service. And this must explain his decision, deemed somewhat quixotic by at least some of his youthful acquaintance, to enlist for service with a humanitarian medical service. Many considered that Bruno’s love of pleasure, and a fundamental laziness only partly belied by his academic success, which came to him all too easily, would have disposed the young physician to, instead, a quiet and lucrative practice in some residential quarter populated by wealthy patients with minor ailments and lonely wives. And yet, Bruno surprises us – not for the last time – in seeking not merely the frontier but, in tribute to the humanitarian organization’s avowed transnational mission, to the lands beyond the boundary.

He was not disappointed in this somewhat perverse quest. Throwing himself into missions in Rwanda, Sudan, and Sierra Leone, Bruno quickly earned a reputation as an indefatigable and acute triage doctor, a swift and expert diagnostician as well as, when called for, a more than competent emergency-room surgeon. Like too many people who offer their lives and energy to aid, he suffered from an increasingly comprehensive form of compassion fatigue. But instead of issuing in emotional exhaustion or moral burnout, Bruno’s mind erupted in a fever of philosophical energy. He was never cynical; in fact, he seemed to by-pass altogether that common affliction of the war-torn

and atrocity-frayed. Instead, and perhaps to his detriment, he began reading Nietzsche. Here again, like so many before and since, Bruno settled on just the most incendiary and irresponsible of the German philosopher's remarks. In particular, he returned again and again to the ideas of *Beyond Good and Evil* (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886), finding there a new inner call – one towards nihilism.

Many readers of Nietzsche's book fail to mark the full significance of its subtitle: "Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future" ("*Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft*"). Nietzsche's critique of traditional morality, with its assumed binary of hermetically distinct metaphysical categories, is, as elsewhere, aimed at future possibilities. Nietzsche chides philosophers for resting easy on the false solidity of the distinction, especially in what we might call its "sorting" function: here are good acts (or evil ones); here are good men (or evil ones). The category of evil is thus revealed, as in the more accessible *On the Genealogy of Morality* (*Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 1887) as a self-protecting construct of the resentful weak. True strength lies not in choosing a path of evil as laid down by the morality, but rather in transcending its categorical reach entirely. That "polemic" is aimed at the same possible future: one where good and evil are relics of a primitive form of thinking that has outlived its usefulness; or rather, whose apparent usefulness has been shown to be always pernicious.

Bruno makes the common error of seeing this text as a kind of release into nothingness. Where Nietzsche perceived only great responsibilities – and great pain – for the man of the future, Bruno saw a kind of post-ethical permission to think, and do, anything. We can recall here both Dostoevsky's remark – "If God is dead, then everything is permitted" – as well as Slavoj Žižek's insightful riposte – "If God is dead, then nothing is permitted." Why the latter revision? Because, as the Lacanian inflections of Žižek's thought make clear, only God has the capacity to *grant permission*. Permission is a function of external authority; in the absence of that authority, there is nothing to constrain us from doing things but, by the same token, there is nothing to allow us to do things either. Action and choice are cut loose from the traditional moorings of obedience, duty, choice, and punishment. Bruno unconsciously takes a line something like this, sensing that, if we do not choose to shoulder Nietzsche's actual challenge – to take responsibility for creating all the meaning available to us – we enter a darkness so complete that the very idea of meaning no longer holds sway.

In the resulting precarious psychological condition, Bruno found himself no longer able to make sense of the good work he and others were doing under the auspices of his humanitarian service. The diseased and dead bodies formed piles in his

mind; the mutilated flesh and violence-addled minds haunted his dreams. He saw himself as thrown, or spat, into a region where no morality reigned. The notion of goodness was drained of its always fragile power, but the condemnatory concept of evil could obtain no traction in its wake: neither value seemed appropriate to a world where unspeakable torture and mayhem could co-exist so easily with decadent material luxury, the trivialities of popular culture, and the empty posturing of official politics. Bruno was Kurtz in the jungle, a man alone in his overwhelming sense of horror.

Characteristically, Bruno's heart of darkness displayed a Catholic tinge. His mind turned to the traditional – and unsolvable – problem of theodicy. This vexing issue concerns the nature of God's justice in the world. How can an all-loving and all-powerful divine being created and maintain a universe in which senseless suffering is so common, and so apparently ineradicable? How can this allegedly beneficent creative being stand by while children die in agony, populations are wiped out for the most perverse minor differences, and twisted agents of free will inflict suffering on others for the sheer pleasure of it? Free will is, in fact, a key to the problem, at least for Christian apologists. God created the world, but that world includes beings such as us, who can choose. We must act out that responsibility to the best of our ability; God cannot choose for us. And yet, how does this account for natural disasters and other "acts of God" that claim innocent lives to no obvious purpose? It was the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, for example, which excited the rational anger of Voltaire. He came to despise the theodical fast-footwork of the philosopher Leibniz, who notoriously claimed that this was, and must be, "the best of all possible worlds." Voltaire's celebrated *Candide* (1759) mocks the metaphysical evasions of the Leibnizian system, which in effect lets God off the hook by squaring human-scale evil with the circle of divine perfection. Rousseau and, later, Kant would also find the earthquake – one of the deadliest natural disasters in history – an essential moment of revelation concerning the limits of theological reasoning.

We know that Bruno relished Voltaire's slim fable of *Candide*, the optimistic youth whose blithe confidence in goodness is serially challenged by a string of disasters large and small. As a schoolboy, he read it with the fascination of forbidden fruit; in 1762, the book was included on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum, Roman Catholicism's perverse library of banned books, which has featured such other disagreeable figures as Montaigne, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, not to mention André Gide and Jean-Paul Sartre. Bruno returned to *Candide* later in life, when its playful but bitter tone amused him anew; and, while he rejected what seems like a placid fatalism at the book's end ("tending one's own garden"), he was

energized by the hint that the only sane response to an insane world is to create apparently meaningless things and experiences. In short, he became, if at first in his own mind alone, an artist.

Bruno likewise immersed himself, at this time, in the work of Polish philosopher and historian Leszek Kołakowski. Like Bruno himself, Kołakowski was a Pole who grew up under the influence of German culture, in the older man's case forcing him into a kind of underground autodidacticism in the absence of formal schooling. When he eventually was able to enter university, at Warsaw, Kołakowski's singular intelligence and elegant style made an immediate impact. It is surely the case that Bruno had read some of Kołakowski's writing even in his schooldays, especially as it had, by then, acquired a certain outlaw reputation. Kołakowski, like so many an enthusiastic Communist as a youth, famously turned against the Stalinist deformations of the post-war Soviet regime. His distaste was the spur to his most influential work, arguing that totalitarianism was not incidental, or aberrant, but indeed the logical outcome of orthodox Marxist thought. A disputable claim, perhaps, but one that Bruno found exhilarating in its honesty and intellectual depth. Bruno also fancied, in later life, Kołakowski's work on Spinoza, Husserl, and philosophy of religion. Indeed, Bruno may be the origin of a minor Kołakowski mystery. The philosopher's Wikipedia entry notes claim that he is responsible for articulating something called "the law of the infinite cornucopia." The entry goes on to define this law, sometimes indeed called "Kołakowski's Law," as the human-all-human idea that "for any given doctrine one wants to believe, there is never a shortage of arguments by which one can support it." This version is now widely quoted on the Internet, but no reference to Kołakowski appears to support it. The standard citation is to an essay by the journalist Timothy Garton Ash, "Neo-Pagan Poland" (*New York Review of Books*, 11 January, 1996), which acknowledges the definition as a paraphrase but does not provide a firm footnote. But we know that Garton Ash toured Europe as a foreign correspondent in 1994, at a time when Kołakowski himself was a visiting professor at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, though his ideas were still prominent in Europe.

Is it possible the savvy British journalist met, at some reception or cocktail gathering in Berlin or Prague or London, Bruno, the sly Polish artist and intellectual? Is it inconceivable that they fell to talking about the intellectual mastery of Kołakowski, an intellectual lodestar for both of them? Might Bruno, in a mischievous mood, have recited the nugget of wisdom he claimed to recall from the depths of Kołakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism* (1976, in English 1978), a three-volume work of some 1300

pages total? We shall never know – but of course *there is never a shortage of arguments by which can support this speculation!*

The next stage of the story is well known. Bruno moved to back to Berlin, where he had executed his medical studies, and fashioned himself as a one-person school of aesthetic revolution. At first, he presented as a dandy of urbane sociopathology Hitchcock's film adaptation of the Patricia Highsmith thriller *Strangers on a Train*, which appeared in 1951, a year after the novel, and the visual aspects of Robert Walker's superbly creepy performance as the murderer Bruno Anthony. In Highsmith's novel, her first published work, the character is called Charles Anthony Bruno; there is no clear record of why Hitchcock – or early screenwriter Raymond Chandler, later fired because of creative differences – reversed the name. There are many other plot changes, including the fact that co-protagonist Guy Haines is an architect rather than a tennis star; his wife is pregnant by another man, and Guy actually commits the "criss-cross" murder of Bruno Anthony's hated father. In any case, during the early 1980s, Bruno attended screenings of this excellent and unnerving film at repertory cinemas in the Zoo area of West Berlin, and he fashioned a wardrobe to mimic Walker's tailored pin-stripe suits and classy two-tone brogues. He even had a jeweller create a replica of the "Bruno" signature tie-pin that we glimpse when Bruno Anthony gives lunch to the handsome, athletic Guy Haines (Farley Grainger) in his train compartment, along the way proposing the perfect murder plot that provides the story's suspense and action. The West Berlin of this time, just before the destruction of the wall and subsequent reunification, wrapped itself in tattered remnants of the louche Weimar era, a bombed-out diorama of a city, not quite real. Cabaret-style performance art blurred into the everyday life of the streets, where everyone seemed to be playing a role. Bruno's self-mythologizing seemed no more than typical.

But Bruno would emerge triumphant over the next decade and a half, as Germany changed and the new world order settled into the relative stability broken only by the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks. His work of this period does not, as might be expected, feature the dark visions he had witnessed as a young physician. There were no machete-disfigured faces or piles of burnt corpses. Rather, with every appearance of sincerity, Bruno advocated his notion of "therapeutic art," anticipating by some decades the idiotically cheerful tones of "philosopher" Alain de Botton and therapists everywhere declaring the healing value of beauty. At a time, indeed, when beauty was decidedly out of fashion in sophisticated art-world circles, Bruno maintained a smiling face – the face of a clown, his critics complained – and counselled artists to salve the world's wounds.

We now know that this period of creative activity, which was remarkably prolific within its own conceptual borders, was a sort of extended double blind. Bruno was playing a long con, one whose ultimate aesthetic payoff was postponed for a remarkably long time. It was not until the early years of the new millennium that critics and fans were treated to the “reveal,” Bruno’s long-planned “reversal of moral polarity” (as he has called it). His treatment of his existing audience at this time, labelling them “suckers” and “sheeple,” has been compared to the cheerful cynicism of Banksy or perhaps Andy Warhol; but there is a tonal difference. Bruno is not cynical, and he is not cheerful. His nihilism is trenchant, sincere, and comprehensive. This makes him yet another kind of outlier in the now high-flying art world of biennales and fairs. He shows in Chelsea and fetches high prices, but he will not attend openings or give interviews. He does not drink or eat meat, nor are there any romantic or conjugal relationships in the official record. His sexuality is unknown. The images we have of him are always of his own creation, since he will not agree to be photographed. None of this is particularly notable in itself, but Bruno’s sly conjunction of the whimsy of Beuys, say, with the murky politics of Richter, make his work enduringly odd. He will not be placed or categorized; in short, he is a one-man school.

The work itself has excited so much critical comment that little is required here to supplement the response. Most interesting, for some followers of his eccentric practice, is that each of the major pieces is accompanied by a short philosophical tract, written in Bruno’s version of a “Nietzschean” style, which are produced in small letterpress editions of ten to a dozen each, with hand-drawn titles and doodles on the covers. These “explanatory” pamphlets are as coveted as the visual works they purport to address, if not more so, and have a rarity value that is impossible to estimate, so difficult are they to obtain. Meanwhile, the texts themselves are “dropped” in wide web-based releases, mixing the postmodern economy of excess with the traditional commodity-based one of scarcity. There has, of course, been much speculation about the precise authorship of the tracts since, though they exhibit a fair degree of stylistic consistency, there is no firm proof that Bruno himself can write in their manner. Given Bruno’s range of acquaintance, some have come to believe that anyone from W. G. Sebald to Martin Amis to Michel Houellebecq might have penned them, or some of them. (The last is a favourite current choice, not least for the traces of Lovecraftian fancy that have begun to invade the writing – dark ghostly figures of subtle menace and overripe tropes of decay.) Owners of the letterpress works, meanwhile, have formed an impromptu cartel of secrecy, for the most part refusing to show or share their prized possessions, or to relate the details of how they came to obtain one in the first place. Thus, like the number of those who attended Woodstock or witnessed the

assassination of President Kennedy, the rumoured or hinted population of lucky owners almost certainly exceeds the real figure.

Philosophical art is nothing new, nor is nihilistic art; Bruno here walks on well-trodden ground. The real genius of his vision might be, finally, the hint of playfulness that is never entirely extinguished in even his bleakest visions. The false smile of the therapeutic period is still present by its absence, a metaphorical twitching of the lips in sardonic recognition of self-delusion. And we might say that there is more than one form of therapy; sometimes the rough lick of the philosophical lash is more effective, and more welcome, than the soft contours of the happy line. There is always a sense that, if one could only penetrate the surface or solve the mystery, one would break through into a new plane of revelation where meaning is available to thought. This is always deferred, however; and it is never clear just what the mystery might be – unless, perhaps, it is the very same mystery of pointless suffering that brought Bruno to this current place of “vapid creativity,” as he likes to call it. Thus, perhaps in common with all great art, his works are singular examples of the inverted *ars poetica*, unstable manifestos of nothingness in concrete form. There is no escape possible, they seem to say, neither in the traditional complacencies of morality nor in the self-borne absurdity of the existential ethic.

The universe is indifferent, Bruno’s art tells us. But so what else is new? The really interesting question now is: what are you going to do about it? Bruno’s philosophical nihilism is the answer that swells to encompass its own question, rendering that, too, meaningless. This is a gift that is also a life sentence, an “obscene” gift as Thomas Hirschhorn has called it. But where Hirschhorn sees precarities and political anger, Bruno sees only another sardonic moment, a further extension of humanity’s self-delusion. This is a gift that, whether you like it or not, keeps on giving. A paraphrase of the words used to describe the implacable, relentless, cyborg-assassin of the *Terminator* film franchise seems apposite: You still don’t get it, do you? Bruno will find you. That’s what he does. That’s *all* he does! You can’t stop him! He’ll wade through you, reach down your throat, and pull your fucking heart out!

And he’ll always, always *be back*.