



Leo Catana, 'Meanings of "contractio" in Giordano Bruno's Sigillus sigillorum'

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Meanings of 'contractio' in Giordano Bruno's *Sigillus sigillorum**

Leo Catana

In the *Sigillus sigillorum* (*The Seal of Seals*), Bruno develops two parallel lines of thought, one on ontology and one on epistemology. Within the first line of thought he delineates the metaphysical structure of the universe and its process of individuation, called descension; the epistemological line of thought explains how it is possible for man to ascend within that structure. Bruno insists that these two topics, descension and ascension, must exist in conformity, and, accordingly, that they must be conceived of in a uniform manner. As he maintains in the *Sigillus*, ascension is a reversed descension.¹ In this chapter I shall focus on one particular notion in the *Sigillus* which is essential to both of these two parallel lines of thought, namely the notion 'contractio', a Latin term whose basic meaning is a process of drawing together. The aim of this article is rather preliminary and negative, to question the assumption that Bruno's idea of 'contractio' in the *Sigillus* is substantially influenced by Marsilio Ficino. Bruno was undoubtedly inspired by Ficino in many respects, also in the *Sigillus*, as has been demonstrated convincingly.² But, as I intend to argue, in regard to the use of the notion 'contractio', Bruno's interpretation marks out a differentiation from Ficino, ontologically and epistemologically. I hope to be able to publish a positive and more elaborate analysis of the concept of 'contractio' in Bruno's thought in the future.

Alfonso Ingegno has asserted that it was Ficino's idea of ascension which inspired the *Sigillus* and in particular the notion of 'contractio' in

* I should like to thank Dilwyn Knox for reading a draft of this chapter and for his observations and suggestions.

¹ *Sig. sigill.*, in BOL, II.2, 202.19–203.14, 213.14–214.19.

² Sturlese, R. (1994), 'Le fonti del *Sigillus sigillorum* di Bruno, ossia: il confronto con Ficino a Oxford sull'anima umana', in *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres*, II, pp. 89–167.

the *Sigillus*.³ On the basis of Bruno's own statement about the unified nature of descension and ascension, and some observations regarding the history of the term '*contractio*', I shall question this interpretation. Ingegno's claim was that the psychological notion of '*contractio*' in the *Sigillus* was inspired by Ficino's *Theologia platonica* (*Platonic Theology*), published in 1482, and he refers to the following passage in this work of Ficino. When discussing ascension, Ficino examines various ways in which the mind can free itself from the body in order to ascend. Ficino asserts about one of them that it 'derives from the contraction of melancholic humours, which removes the soul from external affairs, so that the soul is just as absent in a man who is awake, as it normally is in a man when he is asleep'.⁴ Now if Bruno's psychological notion of '*contractio*' were positively affected by this Ficinian doctrine of melancholic humours, then, given Bruno's claim of a unified nature of descension and ascension, one should also expect Bruno to rely on those elements of Ficino's ontology on which Ficino's theory of ascension is based. But does Bruno do so in the *Sigillus*?

First, what was the context of Ficino's theory of melancholic humours? In his *Theologia platonica* Ficino returns to the conjunction of contraction and melancholy on several occasions. In one important instance he claims that such an act of contraction may be caused by the celestial influence from Saturn, initiating a process of ascension.⁵ He

³ Ingegno, A. (1987), *Regia pazzia. Bruno lettore di Calvino*, Urbino: Quattro Venti, pp. 133–6, especially p. 133, n. 71: 'Il testo capitale per il concetto di *contractio* in Bruno, in *Opera latine conscripta*, II.II (that is, BOL II.2), pp. 213–14. I diversi tipi di *contractio* trattati nel *Sigillus sigillorum* e ripresi nelle *Theses de magia*, sono ispirati a *Theologia platonica*, XIII, 2. Cf. *M. Ficini Opera omnia*, Basilea, 1576, in part. la sezione *Septem vacationis genera*, pp. 292–5'. This was also the position in Ingegno's earlier work, *La sommersa nave della religione*, Naples: Bibliopolis, 1985, pp. 90–93, especially p. 91, n. 6. This interpretation is affirmed in Mancini, S. (2000), *La sfera infinita*, Milan: Mimesis, p. 67, n. 152.

⁴ Ficino, M. (1576), *Theologia platonica*, in *idem, Opera omnia*, Basle: Henricpetrina. (Anastatic reprint: 2 vols, ed. S. Toussaint. Paris: Phénix, 2000), p. 294.26–28 (XIII.ii): 'Tertius vacationis modus fit ex melancholici humoris contractione, animam ab externis negotiis se vocantis, ut anima, tam vacet homine vigilante, quam solet dormiente quandoque vacare.'

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 405.46–406.3 (XVIII.v): 'Qua parte coeli descendunt? Cancro praecipue, ut aiunt Platonici, vicissimque per Capricornum, Cancro oppositum, ascendere putant [that is, the 'Platonists']. Atque hinc illam hominum, hanc deorum portam appellant. Nemo vero adeo falli debet, ut descensum ascensum ve hic accipiat secundum situm: sed quia Luna Cancri domina, generationi proxima est. Saturnus vero dominus Capricorni remotissimus, ideo per Cancrum, id est, lunarem, vegetalemque instinctum descendere animas dicunt: per Capricornum vero, id est, per Saturnum intellectualemque instinctum ascendere. Saturnum enim prisci mentem vocant, qua sola superiora petuntur. Accedit ad haec, quod Capricorni Saturnique sicca virtus, dum spiritus ad intima contrahit, atque

Philothei
 IORDANI
 BRVNI NOLANI
 EXPLICATIO TRIGINTA SIGILLORUM

AD OMNIVM SCIENTIARVM ET ARTIVM INVENTIONEM DISPOSITIONEM ET MEMORIAM

Quibus adiectus est sigillus sigillorum, ad omnes animi operationes comparandas, et earundem rationes habendas maxime conducens. Et non temere ars artium nūcupatur, hīc enim facile inuenies quidquid per logicam, metaphysicam, cabalam, naturalem magiam, artes magnas atque breues theoretice inquiritur.

14.1 Title page of Bruno's *Explicatio triginta sigillorum*, in his *Ars reminiscendi*, 1583

gave an evocative and original treatment of melancholy in another work, *De vita libri tres* (*Three Books on Life*), finished for publication in 1489, seven years after *Theologia platonica* was published. *De vita* was one of the most popular of Ficino's works: in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it was printed five times in Italy, four times in Germany and twice in France. The theme of melancholy is treated in the first book (most importantly in chapters 2–6); its celestial procurator, Saturn, is described in the third book.

In the first book of *De vita*, Ficino sets out by defining 'spirit' as the instrument of learned people's intellectual labour. Spirit is defined physiologically as 'a vapour of blood – pure, subtle, hot and clear'.⁶ Through the blood, the spirit is distributed to the entire body, also the brain, and it is used by the soul in the exercise of interior as well as exterior senses.⁷ Spirit is the link between soul and body. In the *Theologia platonica*, Ficino similarly uses the term 'contraction' when describing the gathering of spirit of the soul.⁸ Corporeal humours, Ficino continues in *De vita*, can become such spirits, for example, melancholic spirits.⁹ Bruno refers to such an idea in the twelfth contraction of the *Sigillus*, to which I shall return at the end of this chapter.

Ficino connects this spirit of the individual with the spirit of the cosmos; the latter affects the former through celestial influence, or more precisely through rays of the stars;¹⁰ the rays of Saturn thus call forth a contemplative intellect.¹¹ Moreover, the spirit of a human being can also become exposed to the influence of certain stars by pursuing deeds which are governed by those stars – for example, come under the influence of Saturn through contemplation.¹² Now this powerful theory of melancholy was entwined with Ficino's solution to the Neoplatonic question of the relation between the 'one' and the 'many', especially his notion of ascension towards unity, where the Saturnine influence became of vital significance.

colligit, ad contemplandum assidue provocat, lunaris autem humor spargit, atque dilatat, et animum circa sensibilia distrahit.'

⁶ Ficino, M. (1989), *De vita libri tres*, in *idem*, *Three Books on Life*, ed. and trans. C.V. Kaske and J.R. Clark, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies*, vol. 57: *The Renaissance Society of America*, vol. 2, Binghampton and New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, pp. 110.12–13 (I.ii): 'vapor quidam sanguinis purus, subtilis, calidus et lucidus ...'

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110.13–15 (I.ii).

⁸ Ficino, *Theologia platonica*, in Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, op. cit. pp. 177.35–44 (VII.vi), 405.39–406.3 (XVIII.v).

⁹ Ficino, *De vita libri tres*, in *Opera Omnia*, op. cit., p. 220.1–5 (II.xviii).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 254.89–91 (III.ii), 368.107–115 (III.xxii).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 364.18–44 (III.xxii).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 252.67–72 (III.ii).

So much for Ficino's notion of melancholic humours. Bruno's *Sigillus sigillorum* is the third and last part of *Ars reminiscendi* (*Art of Memory*), published in London in 1583. Here the *Sigillus* is preceded by *Triginta sigilli* (*Thirty Seals*) and *Triginta sigillorum explicatio* (*Explanation of the Thirty Seals*). The titles indicate the relation between these three parts. In the *Triginta sigilli* Bruno presents thirty symbols to be imprinted in memory for the purpose of 'ordering and retaining' material in memory.¹³ The 30 seals set forth in the *Triginta sigilli* are 'unfolded' (*explicati*) in the *Triginta sigillorum explicatio*, that is, their symbolic content is explained philosophically.¹⁴ The third seal, the chain, thus refers explicitly to the idea of a metaphysical continuum.¹⁵ The *Sigillus* follows the two preceding sections thematically: on the front page to the *Explicatio* (also covering the *Triginta sigilli*), it is stated that '*Sigillus sigillorum* is added, being highly conducive to preparing all the operations of the soul and to having knowledge of their causes'.¹⁶ And this is what is promised in the subtitle of the *Sigillus* too, 'which is aimed at guiding the dispositions of the soul and the perfection of its habits'.¹⁷ The object of this work is thus 'the ordering of every operation of the soul'.

The *Sigillus* starts out with an allegorical exhortation to 'spread out the wings'¹⁸ and fly up and participate in the 'celestial life'.¹⁹ This, of course, is an allusion to Plato's *Phaedrus*.²⁰ Bruno addresses the reader with these words on the first page, appealing to a Neoplatonic return to the origin, God: 'You who are hesitant but are wholly inflamed by the theme, should first make sure that you worship what you are first and foremost stirred by outwardly, and inspired by within as God, that you praise it as the lord, invoke it as the godhead and look upon it as the light.'²¹ These initial remarks suggest that the 'ordering of the operations

¹³ Bruno, *Triginta sigilli*, in BOL, II.2, 79.4-6: 'Habes, illustrissime et excellentissime Domine, Sigillorum 30. congeriem, quibus ad trutinam redactis inquisitio, inventio et retentio affabre succedere valeant.' These 30 seals are described in *ibid.*, pp. 79-107. Some of these seals are illustrated in *ibid.*, pp. 109-115.

¹⁴ Bruno, *Explicatio*, in BOL, II.2, 121.3-7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 123.17-124.25. See Clucas, S. (1999) 'Amorem, artem, magiam, mathesim. Brunian images and the domestication of the soul', in *Zeitsprünge. Forschungen zur Frühen Neuzeit*, Band 3, Heft I/2, pp. 5-24, especially pp. 10-13.

¹⁶ Bruno, *Explicatio*, in BOL, II.2, 73.7-10: 'Quibus adiectus est *Sigillus Sigillorum*, ad omnes animi operationes comparandas et earundem rationes habendas maxime conducens.'

¹⁷ Bruno, *Sig. sigill.*, in BOL, II.2, 161.2-4: 'Sigillus sigillorum ad omnes animi dispositiones comparandas habitusque perficiendos adcommodatus.'

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 163.5-11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.20-26.

²⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246b-d.

²¹ Bruno, *Triginta sigilli*, in BOL, II.2, 161.5-11: 'Haesitanti tibi et ad rem ipsam

of the soul', which Bruno mentions on the front page of *Ars reminiscendi*, do not include all operations of the soul, but only those related to the Neoplatonic process of ascension. The *Sigillus* offers a theoretical clarification of the use of the mnemonic images in *Ars reminiscendi* within this Neoplatonic agenda. So much for the framework of the various meanings of 'contractio' in the *Sigillus*.

There are actually three meanings of 'contractio' in the *Sigillus*. First, there is a physiological one. Organic material and parts of bodies can draw themselves together, 'contract', when exposed to heat from fire.²² This sense of 'contractio' is unimportant in the *Sigillus*. Second, Bruno presents a psychological meaning of the term, which is related to the process of ascension: the human mind withdraws from the empirical and social world, turns inwardly, and seeks to ascend to higher realms – it 'contracts' into itself. This psychological meaning is vital to understand the epistemological aspect of the treatise. The 15 contractions in the *Sigillus*, containing praise as well as criticism of techniques of ascension, are to be understood as forms of psychological contraction.²³

Apart from the physiological and psychological sense of 'contractio' in the *Sigillus*, there is an ontological sense too, by which Bruno explains emanation. The Neoplatonic One, or 'absolute form' (*forma absoluta*) as he calls it, 'contracts' itself, he says, into the universe, generating and sustaining the existence of particulars. 'Contractio' in this sense thus explains the origin of the universe, and the individuation of and subsistence of things. It is this ontological doctrine with which ascension must be in conformity, according to Bruno.²⁴ I shall return to this and the psychological meaning of 'contractio', but first I will focus on the history of the term 'contractio'.

With regard to classical Latin the picture is fairly clear. Here, the term was primarily defined as a medical one, comprising a physiological and a psychological meaning. A physical cramp, or contraction, of a body was often described as a *contractio*.²⁵ This meaning corresponds to the physiological sense, which we have seen in the *Sigillus*. The psychological meaning of 'contractio', still in classical Latin, designates a mental depression. Cicero and Seneca thus used expressions such as

penitus inflammanti, illud principio intentandum, ut ipsum a quo excitaris exterius et incitaris interius primum proximumque Deum colas, principem magnifices, numen invoces et lumen adspicias.'

²² Bruno, *Sig. sigill.*, in BOL, II.2, 194.2–8.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 180.19–193.26. See also pp. 197.25–199.17, 212.15–215.20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 202.19–203.14, 212.14–215.20.

²⁵ Cicero, *Pro Sestio*, 19; *idem*, *De natura deorum*, 2.150; *idem*, *De officiis*, 1.146; Vitruvius, *De architectura*, 4.3.2.; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 11.3.83; Seneca, *Epistulae*, 66.43; Plinius secundus, *Naturalis historia*, 7.76, 20.191, 22.105.

contractio animi, depression of the soul.²⁶ The notion was used in this sense, though in various adaptations, by different medieval authors. One example is Augustine (354–430), who advised the preacher to rid himself of gloomy moods in order to appear joyful to the audience.²⁷ Later on, in Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) and his discussion of fear, the psychological and physiological aspects of corporeal contraction are analysed on the basis of a medical theory of humours; these humours, that is, bodily fluids, are subjected to movements, 'contractions', in the body, when emotions such as rage occur, Aquinas observes calmly.²⁸ Ficino also used the notion, as we have seen, within his theory of melancholic humours and their role in ascension, and he built on this classical and medieval medical tradition.²⁹

Contrary to '*contractio*' in the physiological and the psychological meanings, '*contractio*' in the ontological sense seems not to have a classical base, but is apparently of medieval origin, and it seems to be a German invention. It has a fascinating and as yet unexplored history concerned with philosophical and religious ideas about the origin and nature of the universe, in particular the relation between God and the creation. Of course, this theme was widely debated, and so was the interpretation of ontological '*contractio*'.

The earliest reference I have found, derives from the thirteenth century. The German theologian Albert the Great (1193–1280) used the term in his metaphysical treatise finished around 1265, *De causis et processu universitatis a prima causa* (*On the Causes and Procession of the Universe from the First Cause*). In it, the notion takes up a prominent position in his formulation of emanation. In this book, Albert the Great synthesizes – more or less consistently – Christian, Platonic, Neoplatonic and Aristotelian viewpoints. He adheres to the Aristotelian notion of God as a first, unmoved mover.³⁰ But he also maintains – following the Platonists and Neoplatonists rather than Aristotle – that God emanates through the universal intellect, passing through a

²⁶ Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*, 1.90 and 4.14; Seneca, *Dialogi*, 6.7.1.

²⁷ In *De catechizandis rudibus*, Augustine advises the preacher to rid himself from gloomy moods: Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus*, 10.14, in *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series latina prima*, ed. J.P. Migne, 221 vols (Paris, 1844–64), vol. 40, col. 324.

²⁸ Aquinas, T. (1963–75), *Summa theologiae*, ed. M. Browne and A. Fernandez, 59 vols, London and New York: Blackfriars, 1a2æ, qu. 44, ar. 1 and ar. 3, contra.

²⁹ On Ficino's use of the medical theory of melancholy, see Klibansky, R., Panofsky, E. and Saxl, F. (1964), *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, London: Nelson, pp. 3–16, 254–74.

³⁰ Albert the Great, (1987–), *De causis et processu universitatis a prima causa*, I.3, in *idem, Opera omnia*, vol. 1–, ed. W. Fauser, Aschendorff: Monastery of Westfalen, vol. 17.2, pp. 35–42.

hierarchy of intelligences, ultimately leading to the creation of the earth, created within its own sphere, and governed by its respective intelligence.³¹ In this process of emanation, the universal forms of higher intelligences are 'contracted' into the particular forms of lower intelligences. The universal forms thus exist in a 'contracted manner' in the particular forms.³² Elsewhere in this work he declares explicitly that the universal intellect is 'contracted' in all beings.³³ So, in Albert the Great, the notion is adapted to explain the origin and existence of the universe.³⁴

Aquinas, a pupil of Albert the Great, used the term and its grammatical derivations exuberantly and with a variety of meanings. I shall only look at some of the relevant philosophical ones. Aquinas does not use the term '*contractio*' to denote a process of emanation, or part of it. This is hardly surprising, since Aquinas thwarted the Neoplatonic idea of emanation, which tended to lead to an identification of God and the universe – a pantheistic thought which was at loggerheads with St Paul's important distinction between the creator and creation.³⁵ Instead, Aquinas interpreted 'emanation' within a Christian account of creation.³⁶ When Aquinas uses *contractio* in a more strict philosophical and ontological sense, he adapts it to an Aristotelian scheme of individuation. In the *Summa theologiae* he thus states: 'It should be noticed that matter is contracted (*contrahitur*) into a determinate kind of thing through form, just as a substance of a species is shaped (*contrahitur*) to a certain way of being through the accident proper to it, as a human being is defined (*contrahitur*) by being white.'³⁷

At least two other German theologians from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries followed the adaptation of '*contractio*' of Albert the Great, namely Dietrich of Freiberg (1250–1318/20) and Nicholas of

³¹ Ibid., I.4.1, pp. 42.31–44.3. On the Platonic component, see De Libera, A. (1992), 'Albert le Grand et le Platonisme. De la doctrine des idées à la théorie des trois états de l'universel', in *On Proclus and his Influence in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. E.P. Bos and P.A. Meijer, Leiden: Brill, pp. 90–94, 115–19.

³² A. the Great, in *De causis*, op. cit., II.2.22, p. 116.4–34.

³³ Ibid., I.3.6, p. 41.38–42: 'Similiter si dicatur ens, non illo intellectu dicitur ens quo ens vocatur, quod est universale ens. Hoc enim contrahitur in omni eo quod est, et determinatur et nullum esse habet extra ipsum secundum actum.'

³⁴ See Nardi, B. (1960), 'La dottrina di Alberto Magno su *incohatio formae*', in *idem, Studi di filosofia medievale*, Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, pp. 69–101.

³⁵ Romans 1:25. See Aquinas, T. (1967), *Summa contra gentiles*, 2 vols, ed. L.R. Carcedo and A.R. Sierra, Madrid: La editorial catolica, I.12.

³⁶ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, op. cit., 1a. qu. 45, ar. 1–8.

³⁷ Ibid., 1a. qu. 44, ar. 2, contra: 'Sed considerandum est quod materia per formam contrahitur ad determinatam speciem, sicut substantia alicujus speciei per accidens ei adveniens contrahitur ad determinatum modum essendi; ut homo contrahitur per album.'

Cusa (1401–64).³⁸ The ontological meaning of 'contractio' in the *Sigillus* could have been inspired by one or more of these medieval theologians, or indeed by other intermediary Renaissance philosophers. However, already in his *De umbris idearum* (*On the Shadows of Ideas*) dating from 1582, and in his metaphysical dialogues of 1584 and 1585, Bruno referred extensively to Cusanus, especially to his major work, *De docta ignorantia* (*On Learned Ignorance*).³⁹ This circumstance calls for a comparison between Cusanus's use of the notion 'contractio' in *De docta ignorantia* and Bruno's use of the notion in his *Sigillus*. I shall not attempt such a comparison here, since that would involve an analysis of conceptual complexities – in Cusanus's as well as in Bruno's philosophy – which exceed the limits of this chapter. Instead, I shall confine myself to presenting two adaptations of ontological 'contractio' in Cusanus's and Bruno's respective writings.

Cusanus's *De docta ignorantia* was finished around 1440 and reprinted in all three versions of his collected works, which came out in 1490, 1514 and 1565 respectively. The work is divided into three books. The first book treats of God in his absolute and incomprehensible nature. The second book explains how the creation and existence of the universe takes place through a 'contraction' from God, effectuating a causal series of contractions and terminating in particulars. The third book presents Christ as the mediator between God and man. The second book is of particular interest to our examination, especially the following passage, in which Cusanus explains the role of ontological 'contractio':

³⁸ Dietrich of Freiberg, *De visione beatifica*, 4.3.1, § 4, ed. B. Mojsisch, in D. of Freiberg, *Opera omnia*, 4 vols (1977–85), ed. L. Sturlese et al., Hamburg: Felix Meiner, vol. 1, p. 112: 'Ad quod ulterius considerandum, quod in dispositione et ordine causali essentiali formarum ad invicem duo attenduntur: unum videlicet, quod illud, quod est formalius et simplicius et nobilius in superiore forma, contracte et magis determinate et minus perfecte invenitur in inferiore, sicut in exemplo *Libri de causis* [proposition 1] accipere possumus de ente, vivo, rationali, sicut etiam se habent intellectivum, cogitativum, imaginativum, sensitivum.' See also *idem*, *De animatione caeli*, 4, § 3, ed. L. Sturlese, in D. of Freiberg, *Opera omnia*, 4 vols, op. cit., vol. 3, pp. 15–16: 'Est et alius ordo essentialis dependentiae, qui attenditur in unoquoque genere causae secundum se, in quantum videlicet causalitas alicuius primi in quocumque genere causae determinatur in secundum, et causalitas secundi contrahitur et determinatur in tertium et sic deinceps secundum gradum et ordinem causalis processus a primo usque ad extremum, ubi est status.'

³⁹ It has been argued that Bruno's *De umbris idearum* was influenced by Cusanus in Sturlese, R. (1992), 'Niccolò Cusano e gli inizi della speculazione del Bruno', in *Historia Philosophiae Medii Aevi. Studien zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters. Festschrift für K. Flasch*, ed. B. Mojsisch and O. Pluta, Amsterdam: Spur, pp. 953–66. Bruno refers explicitly to Cusanus's *De docta ignorantia* in Bruno, G., *Cena*, in BOeuC II, 133; *Infinito*, in BOeuC IV, 195, 197; *De immenso*, in BOL, I.1, 381.

And in this way we discover that there are three universal unities gradually descending to the particular in which they are contracted, so that they may be the particular in act. The first absolute unity enfolds all in an absolute manner, the first contracted unity enfolds everything in a contracted manner. Their order entails, however, that the absolute unity may be regarded as enfolding, as it were, the first contracted unity, and, by means of the latter, everything else; that the first contracted unity may be regarded as enfolding the second contracted unity and, by means of the latter, the third contracted unity; that the second contracted unity may be regarded as enfolding the third contracted unity, which is the last universal unity, and the fourth unity contracted from the first, so that, by means of the third contraction, the first unity becomes the particular. And so we see how the totality of things is contracted into individual particulars.⁴⁰

Generally speaking, Cusanus uses the term '*contractio*' to give a Christian account of the relation between the One and the many. He is in particular intent to show a distinction between the creator and the creation. Hence, in the above quotation, Cusanus uses the notion of '*contractio*' to describe a separation between God, called absolute unity, and creation, or the particulars.⁴¹ Moreover, in this quotation, and in the rest of *De docta ignorantia*, these contractions are described without the Neoplatonic idea of reversion towards the One, opening up the possibility for human beings to ascend towards the One in a personal and direct manner.⁴² To Cusanus, as to medieval Platonism in general, emanation in the Neoplatonic sense (that is, being, procession and

⁴⁰ Nicholas of Cusa (1932-), *De docta ignorantia*, in *idem, Opera omnia*, ed. E. Hoffmann and R. Klibansky et al., vol. 1-, Leipzig-Hamburg, vol. I, p. 79.19-28 (II.vi): 'Et ita reperimus tres universales unitates gradualiter descendentes ad particulare, in quo contrahuntur, ut sint actu ipsum. Prima absoluta unitas omnia complicat absolute, prima contracta omnia contracte. Sed ordo habet, ut absoluta unitas videatur quasi primam contractam complicare, ut per eius medium alia omnia; et contracta prima videatur secundam contractam complicare, et eius medio tertiam contractam; et secunda contracta tertiam contractam, quae est ultima universalis unitas et quarta a prima, ut eius medio in particulare deveniat. Et sic videmus, quomodo universum per gradus tres in quolibet particulari contrahitur.'

⁴¹ On the separation between God and creation articulated in Cusanus's interpretation of '*contractio*', see Beierwaltes, W. (1992), 'Primum est dives per se', in *On Proclus and his Influence in Medieval Philosophy*, op. cit., especially pp. 168-9. For a speculative discussion of '*contractio*' in Cusanus's thought, see Hopkins, J. (1983), *Nicholas of Cusa's Metaphysics of Contraction*, Minneapolis, MN: Banning; *idem* (1985), 'Introduction', in *Nicholas of Cusa on Learned Ignorance: A Translation and Appraisal of 'De docta ignorantia'*, trans. and intro. J. Hopkins, Minneapolis, MN: Banning.

⁴² On the doctrine of return to the One in Neoplatonism, see Wallis, R.T. (1995), *Neoplatonism*, [1972] 2nd edn, with foreword and bibliography by L.P. Gerson, London: Duckworth, p. 66.

return) did not have any significant meaning; emanation was primarily conceived of as procession from a first principle, that is, through the hierarchy of being. Only Christ, Cusanus proclaims elsewhere in *De docta ignorantia*, can mediate the chasm between God and creation.⁴³ Bruno rejects this Christology.⁴⁴

Now let us turn to Bruno's use of '*contractio*' in the ontological sense. He states in the *Sigillus* that there is a 'double contraction':

There is then a double contraction. The first is that by which absolute form becomes form of this or that in this or that being, just like light [*lux*], which is, as it were, first in itself and then, at a posterior ontological level [*postea*], by a process of the this or that, brightness [*lumen*] is produced (without, however, giving out anything of its substance and without diminishing its integrity). The second contraction is that by which inferior nature and multiplicity, through some habit of agreement and obedience, is collected together and by which it is rendered participant, either by a natural or a conceptual impulse, and which gathers many participants into one. The first contraction is that by which the infinite and absolute form, through its essence, is made finite in this or that matter; the second is that by which infinite and indeterminate matter, through number, is determined to this or that form.⁴⁵

The complex scheme of individuation suggested at the end of the quotation involves not only matter being determined into forms through one contraction, but also absolute form being determined and embodied into matter through another contraction. In Bruno's *De la causa* this theory of a 'double contraction' is repeated and elaborated considerably.⁴⁶ In this dialogue he assigns to matter active potentiality, in stark contrast with the Aristotelian and Scholastic conception of matter as passive potentiality.⁴⁷ By stressing the interdependence between

⁴³ N. of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia*, op. cit., p. 127.7-21 [III.iii].

⁴⁴ Firpo, L., *Processo*, pp. 16, 143. See also Bruno's blasphemous rendering of Christ in *Sig. sigill.*, in BOL, II.2, 181.5 and 190.5 ('some Adonis' may be an allusion to Christ); *Spaccio*, in BOeuC V, 461-3 (Orion is a representation of Christ).

⁴⁵ G. Bruno, *Sig. sigill.*, in BOL, II.2, 214.6-19: 'Duplici ergo existente contractione: altera, qua absoluta forma fit huius illiusque in hoc et in illo forma, sicut lux, quae est primo velut in se ipsa, postea progressu quodam huius efficitur atque illius, in hoc et in illo lumen, (dum tamen de sua substantia nihil emittat et a propria integritate non deficiat); altera contractio est, qua inferior natura per quamdam assensus et obedientiae habitudinem, tum naturali tum notionali adpulsu et multitudo particeps colligitur, et multa participantia colligit in unum. Prima contractio est, qua per essentiam infinita et absoluta forma finitur ad hanc et ad illam materiam; secunda est, qua per numerum infinita et indeterminata materia ad hanc illamque formam terminatur.'

⁴⁶ Bruno, *Causa*, in BOeuC III, 147.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 237-39, 249-51. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VII.viii 1033b.5-20; VIII.i-ii; *idem*, *Physics*, I.vi; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, op. cit., 1a. qu. 44, ar. 2, 2.

absolute form and matter in the *Sigillus*, Bruno makes individuation from a first principle, absolute form, dependent upon the intrinsic and natural processes of the universe. Even though Bruno was influenced by several of Cusanus's ideas which are related to Cusanus's notion of 'contractio' – such as *complicatio/explicatio* and *coincidentia oppositorum* – Bruno differs from Cusanus in his use of 'contractio', since Cusanus declined to identify the first principle, God, with the universe itself.

The metaphor of the first 'contractio' – light (*lux*) remaining undiminished during its radiance (*lumen*) – is not one Cusanus offers in the central passages on *contractio* in *De docta ignorantia* (II.6). It is, instead, derived from a Neoplatonic idea, namely that the One, from which emanation originates, is not reduced during its 'flowing out', its emanation. This is the Neoplatonic doctrine of undiminished giving.⁴⁸ Bruno mentions this idea elsewhere in the *Sigillus*, stating that this is the light which 'effuses through everything as the image of the sun', a typical Neoplatonic 'illusionistic' explanation of the relationship between lower and higher hypostasis.⁴⁹

In the two quotations both Cusanus and Bruno apply the notion 'contractio' in their explanations of the origin and subsistence of the universe, though differently. The philosophical implications of a possible influence from Cusanus in the *Sigillus*, in regard to 'contractio' and to other concepts used by Cusanus, are vast and complex, and I shall not pursue the idea any further here. Nor, indeed, shall I claim that the quoted passage of Cusanus is the only and direct source of the passage quoted from the *Sigillus*. Rather, my intention is simply to point out that there was a scholastic tradition related to the notion of 'contractio' in the Middle Ages, a tradition which may provide an alternative explanation of the sources for the *Sigillus* to the medical tradition transmitted by Ficino. If we are to believe Bruno's statement about the unified nature of descension and ascension, and if this medieval Platonic tradition of 'contractio' did influence Bruno's ontology in the *Sigillus*, then we should expect Bruno to adhere to a theory of ascension which is in conformity with this medieval tradition. On this background I shall return to the polemical point of this chapter, namely to question Ingegno's assertion that Ficino's psychological notion of 'contractio' is a key to understanding the idea of 'contractio' in the *Sigillus*.

⁴⁸ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.viii[30].8.46–48; III.viii[30].10.1–19. See Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, op. cit., p. 62.

⁴⁹ G. Bruno, *Sig. sigill.*, in BOL, II.2, 200.6–8: 'Est lumen intimius, quo sol per se lucet, a quo genere differens habetur lumen, quod inde velut imago solis per omnia manat'. For this metaphor, see Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.i[10].6.28–30.

As already pointed out, Bruno holds that ascension is a reversed descension. Accordingly, if it were the case, as Ingegno claims, that Bruno's idea of psychological 'contractio' is influenced by Ficino's *Theologia platonica*, then one would also expect Bruno to apply Ficino's idea of descension in his *Sigillus*. It would be of particular interest to know whether Ficino applies the term 'contractio' in an ontological meaning which can explain Bruno's double contraction, presented in the quotation above. In the *Theologia platonica*, Ficino does actually speak of contraction from a first cause, that is, in the Platonic and Neoplatonic manner. But Ficino adapts the notion to his own astrological-metaphysical philosophy. He thus speaks of the power of the World Soul to elicit, to 'contract', the rational principles, the 'instincts', in the elements of the sublunary world.⁵⁰ Bruno's non-hierarchical cosmology led him to reject Ficino's idea of instincts from the superlunary region being implanted on the sublunary region.⁵¹ This astrological adaptation of 'contractio' by Ficino is similarly distinct from the one in Bruno's *Sigillus*.

Now let us turn to Ingegno's claim that Ficino's psychological notion of 'contractio' played an absolutely central role in the 15 contractions in the *Sigillus*. As I see it, Ingegno fails to notice that here Bruno does not address the specific Ficinian doctrine on melancholy, but possibly some adaptations of it in various religious techniques of ascension. Ingegno also ignores that in those instances Bruno is fiercely critical in his criticism of the ecstasy generated by such self-inflicted melancholy. Actually Bruno shows himself very contentious in these 15 contractions, and the label 'cultural criticism' would be very apt in a description of his aim. In veiled terms he seems to mock, among others, the Jesuits and the Franciscans.⁵² He thus scorns the self-inflicted, mental fits which are often aided by melancholy – mental fits, which these religious persons hold to be forms of ascension, brought about by meditation, but which Bruno claims are nothing but vain self-suggestion.

The twelfth kind of contraction in the *Sigillus* provides an excellent

⁵⁰ Ficino, *Theologia platonica*, op. cit., p. 123.3–4 (IV.i): 'Faciet, inquam, talia in materia, sic prius aut sic ab anima ipsa disposita, dum ad eam disponendam sic aut sic contrahit mundanos instinctus.' See also *ibid.*, p. 122.44–47 (IV.i).

⁵¹ Bruno, *Cena*, in BOeuC II, pp. 243–5.

⁵² Bruno may allude to the Franciscans in *Sig. sigill.*, in BOL, II.2, 190.14–18: 'Quem quidem phantasiae turbatae impetum eousque in quibusdam invaluisse novimus, ut confessorum numinum, quorum speciem intensius animo contraxerant, ardentioris phantasiae fervore cicatrices in proprio corpore inustas comperirent.' The identification with the Franciscans has been made by Clemens, F.J. (1847), in *Giordano Bruno und Nicolaus von Cusa. Eine Philosophische Abhandlung*, Bonn: Wittmann, pp. 175–6. Flagellation may, however, have been practised by many others too.

example of this. In it, Bruno criticizes a technique of meditation, apparently used by an unnamed group of religious people, possibly the Jesuits. They, he sneers, 'our not very ingenious apostles', who are 'afflicted with a foul kind of melancholy', and who possess a 'thinness and Saturnine complexion', 'hit themselves delicately with whips', in order to intensify the 'melancholic spirit' in themselves. In this manner, Bruno continues, they are 'guiding the cognition of the soul towards the death of some Adonis'.⁵³ The last expression may be an allusion to Christ on the Cross, whilst the expressions 'melancholy', 'melancholic spirit' and 'Saturnine complexion' may derive from Ficino's popular book, *De vita*, and from his *Theologia platonica*. The criticism of this twelfth contraction may be directed towards the practice of the Jesuits, as it was prescribed by Ignatius Loyola in his *Exercitia spiritualia* (*Spiritual Exercises*), published in 1541 – possibly conflated with Ficino's theory of melancholy. In this work Loyola recommends that during meditation on hell one should eat less and torment one's body with pain, for example, by self-flogging.⁵⁴ Moreover, Loyola's meditations were arranged around the life and death of Christ, possibly what Bruno alludes to with the words 'the death of some Adonis'. The meditations of the first week were dedicated to sins; the second to the life of Christ; the third to the passion of Christ; and the fourth to the resurrection and ascension of Christ.

A few years later, Bruno turned to the poets with the same warning against being too melancholic, namely in his *Eroici furori* (*Heroic Frenzies*). The reason being, he states explicitly, that the contemplative

⁵³ G. Bruno, *Sig. sigill.*, in BOL, II.2, 189.16–190.14: 'Iam ad non magis ingeniosos apocalypticos nostros respiciamus, qui cum eiusdem pessime olentis melancholiae specie laborent, fine tamen per libidinis diversitatem differunt; hoc maxime detestamur, quandoquidem interim stulti non propriam modo, sed et aliorum ignorantum et asinorum (quibus prophetae atque revelatores pietatis apparent) turpissimam stultitiam enutrient. Hi magis naturale nutrimentum contemnentes postquam in maciem et vitiose Saturniam complexionem fuerint adacti, quibusdam (ad phantasiam perturbandam) aptissimis praevis (quas pias credunt) meditationibus ipsi faventem noctis umbram potiti, tristitiam quandam subeunt, ubi flagris lenius caedendo sese, ab internis calorem ad partes exteriores evocant, ut hoc interius magis remisso amplius in spiritu melancholicus tepor intendatur, et ut nulla ad extasim contrectandam desit occasio, animi excogitationem ad alicuius Adonidis mortem adpellentes, tristitiaeque suavem quandam addentes tristitiam (haud enim et lacrimis suam deesse libidinem comperimus) alterius generis horripilationem subeunt, interimque virtute perturbati sensus facile proprii spiritus adpulsu alicui de immundis iisdemque irrisoribus spiritibus intelligentiae copulantur, cum demum nescio in quem miserorum tristiumque numinum apertum intuitum et affatum adeo promoti credantur, ut ea audiant atque percipiant, quae numquam in eorum cogitationem cadere potuissent.'

⁵⁴ I. Loyola (1923), *Exercitia spiritualia*, in *idem*, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*, ed. and trans. J. Rickaby, 2nd edn, London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, p. 48.

state of mind reached through melancholy does not depend on the authenticity of the individual's experience, but on physiologically generated self-suggestion.⁵⁵ However, even though he distances himself from the Ficinian conception of ascension through melancholy, Bruno still accepted the fundamental idea of ascension introduced into the Renaissance through Ficino's full-blown Neoplatonism. The question is to what extent, and how, Bruno followed Ficino's interpretation of this fundamental Neoplatonic idea.

In conclusion, Bruno distances himself from Ficino's adaptation of 'contractio' as an ontological and an epistemological term. Instead, he seems to draw on the scholastic meaning of ontological *contractio*, possibly the one favoured by Cusanus, although in a modified form. But even if Cusanus's *De docta ignorantia* did provide an important source for the ontological meaning of 'contractio' in the *Sigillus* – a contention which I have not proved, nor intended to prove in this chapter – we are still confronted with the question which Ingegno proposed a solution for, namely how to understand the epistemological meaning of 'contractio' in Bruno's text. Bruno rejected Cusanus's orthodox Christology, hence also the idea of Christ as a mediator between man and the divine. Consequently, Bruno was forced to come up with some other idea about ascension, or epistemological 'contractio'. And, if I am right, this idea had to be in conformity with his notion of ontological 'contractio'. Hence two questions arise: first, how did Bruno interpret the notion of ontological contraction on a more specific level, and, second, how did Bruno conceive of ascension within that ontology?

⁵⁵ G. Bruno, *Furori*, in BDI, 986–8, 'atra bile' or black bile (p. 988) being synonymous with melancholic humour.