

RIGOR AND FERVOR

Ion Barbu – Dan Barbilian is the most difficult to decode of them all. It is not only his poetry and mathematical studies that are addressed to “the happy few”, but also his occasional essays or confessions. This is partly due to his deliberate wish to encode his sentences or at least to make them lapidary, but perhaps even more so to the defiant pride and the reserved, autocratic way of being of one who was not open to dialogue and understanding.

His essays on Rimbaud and Moréas familiarize us with the method of this great mathematician and poet, of shaping out paradoxical creatures, by combining the seemingly heterogeneous elements of the two worlds in which he alternatively lived. In Rimbaud, he discerns an intense, creative and nonconformist vital element next to the methodical rigor of exasperation, while in the solemn Moréas, he sees a return to Greek classicism, combined with a purification of reality and poetry, that would however place him beyond space and time. In each case, the first quality is known, while the second is newly discovered. He associates Rimbaud’s creative ability with a prolific mathematician (Cauchy), although Galois would have been more appropriate (Barbu knew this too well, because he had written about it, but he did not want to repeat himself), and his purifying ability with Hilbert. Thus, by combining the images, he can put together the bodies of two imaginary types of creators (unconditioned by the field): prolific naives on the concrete level, and domineering minds on the abstract one.

The method was the one Barbu considered common to poetry and mathematics: a decoding and abstraction of the hidden structures in the outer or inner reality (“infra-reality”), and then the creation of imaginary but possible (that is, non-contradictory) objects and even worlds in accordance with those structures. This is how he explains it in an interview with I. Valerian, but later he speaks of “fathoming the unseen structure of existence” or “the abysmal existences of emotional structures”. This is the only possible meaning of the famous line in *Secondary Game* (“Abstracted from the hour, the depth of this calm peak”). He

opposed the existence of abysmal structures that is common to all people (which G. Bachelard had studied simultaneously in sciences and arts) to the superficial similarity by imitation, on which E. Lovinescu had relied in explaining literary synchronism.

"The poetic issue" Ion Barbu was raising to L. Blaga was the embodiment of structure in an imaginary concrete (such as the combined double described by Camil Petrescu in *Addenda...*), which is not reduced to verbal color or musical rhythm (although it makes use of these too). When requesting Arghezi's poetry to show invariance to verbal transformations, he could only refer to the poetic universe or the symbolic vision, as the one able to resist this radical operation. Arghezi had it in large amounts, though not permanently, while Ion Barbu achieved it quite seldom, but perfectly. I find this beauty not so much in his hermetic cycle (where the abstractive effort is too evident), but in his "naive" poems, with a ballad-like epic structure, culminating in **King Crypto and the Laplander Enigel**, in which the embodiment of the spirit is complete, and the combinations become osmosis. Here, contrary to classicism, but in accordance with Nietzsche and Wagner, the northern woman (Gerda) is apollonian, the southern mushroom-king (Ion Barbu) is telluric-dionysian, and the expected salvation is placed under the sign of incompatibility.

In mathematics, Barbilian seems to have been – like Gauss, against Kantian apriorism – shaken by the appearance of the non-Euclidian types of geometry. He said that the different types of geometry result from "the plunging of the researching spirit... into the simple data of intuition" (1935), and that "geometry starts from experience, like physics and mechanics", and its goal is to find "the laws of the bodies' changes of position, irrespective of time" (1954). Perhaps his intense life had made him unable to ignore reality and its painful constraints. Mathematical creation gives birth to "rational beings", mathematical objects or "creatures", and aims to completely characterize them by organizing the objects that share the same fundamental group of transformations in axiomatic mathematical doctrines. Finally, "mathematical morphology", i.e. the formalism founded by Hilbert, deals with the study of these doctrines (through that "iteration of thematization" Moisil was speaking of), refining the axioms of the system "to the point of turning it into a perfect mosaic" with which he can build various universes. This final study is superbly described in *The Place of Axiomatics*, the opening lecture of 1942 (also published in vol. 3 of [30]). Barbilian also added the necessity of a complete characterization of the respective mathematical "universe", by specifying the fundamental group of transformations (also mentioned by Onicescu in his essay *Language Issues in Mathematics*).

The creator typology we have seen above bears Ion Barbu's mark in more than just style. It reveals indirectly a double image of his personality (like the one under the sign of Galois and Gauss): Rimbaud – his adventurous youth, intended to be prolific at least in terms of poetry, and Moréas – the maturity of the mathematician engrossed in axiomatics (that "doctrine of doctrines" of highest generality). There is also the nostalgia for eternal Greece (obsessively reappearing in an interview taken by F. Aderca), the Greece he felt related to spiritually, and with which he would have liked to be related by blood (just like M. Caragiale wanted to be of noble stock). Likewise, the unquestionable superiority he assigned to Moréas corresponded to his strange scorn – spite or even hatred (one can sense) – for the deeds of his youth. This was not about youth, it was about poetry (because he respected the young mathematician Galois very much).

His letter to Nina Cassian reveals his regret to have wasted his inventiveness in poetry, while, in mathematics, he was left only with the endeavor of perfecting, i.e. the purification of doctrines through axiomatic study. Despite the pride with which he stated his affiliation to the great tradition of the Erlangen program, he saw the lack of creativity of this trend as a shortcoming, which – according to him – had more to do with the analytical spirit of finesse than with the spirit of geometry (assimilated here to the synthetic capacity of constructing mathematical objects, of discovering new truths). Moreover, even within axiomatics (of which he said: "mathematics is the art of thinking through theorems; axiomatics, through

doctrines”), he thinks it fundamental to solve the problem of the system’s completeness (which has to do with the synthesis of totality), while the issue of the independence of each axiom (which gives axiomatics its supreme character) is considered merely “delicate” (as it is analytic).

I am inclined to think that Ion Barbu’s break from his poetic creation and his conversion (or re-conversion) to mathematics (after a disintoxication that cured him of drugs, but also of poetry) was caused (besides the drive of an imperative calling) by the depletion of his creative capacity in poetry too. His existence as a damned poet had come to an end due to the exhaustion of the poet, not of the damned. **King Crypto...** originates in such an experience – that took place in 1924 – with his own self (which Rimbaud described as a “passage to limits of an exact examination”), in which the birth of the poetic being becomes one with the scientific revelation (of the materiality of time, in this case). We discern in this drive to experience the absolute Musil’s desire to rationally supervise ecstasy – a strange symmetry in terms of creation, which was however reversed in their lives: the Austrian writer had left mathematics and physics for literature (but just as radically). Unlike Plato, another convert from poetry to mathematics, Barbilian did not drive the Poet out of the city; he offered him the fourth place. Others had an even more equalitarian sense, as far as values were concerned.

That formula of “intensity and rigor” that Ion Barbu used as diagnosis in the case of Rimbaud, the poet had first devised for himself, as the loftier “rigor and fervor” (implied “mystical”), as the last stage in poetic experience, on the way from Enchantment to Salvation.

He had not reserved fervor for poetry only. Professor I. Banciu (the same who encouraged Moisil ten years later!) had inspired him with “the emotion in the face of a theorem’s beauty and the passion for research”, supremely achieved by Gauss in “the adventure of mathematical discovery”, and by Hilbert as “the intoxication of the state of geometry”. Nor did he abandon his preoccupation with personal style, as far as the rigor of mathematics permitted, after his re-conversion. In the edifice of science, where the objectification of the whole is obtained by integrating the individual into the collective effort, Barbilian tried to preserve and proudly assert his individuality. Following in the footsteps of Gauss, he would cultivate in his demonstrations the hierarchic structuring and the organic articulation of ideas and, in terms of expression, not the Attic, dialogic style, like Moisil, but the laconic, Spartan style, resulting from “the elimination of all accessories” – monologic, I would say –, quoting A. Dumitriu’s identification of it with the old Hellenic thinkers.

Poetry or mathematics, imagination or reality, prolificacy or sterility are as many antagonistic couples which Barbu and Barbilian experienced alternatively, not simultaneously, endlessly and hopelessly. He was a man of leaps, not of transitions, of life, not of death or evolution. He himself described this polarity by resorting to Dionysus and Apollo, under the tutelary sign of Greece, whence the of the new humanism came; a mathematical humanism this time, which he was waiting for and whose inspired prophet he was.

(L. B).

