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**MUSICALITY AND GEOMETRIC PERFECTION OF RHYTHM IN THE
ROMANIAN POETRY OF ION BARBU**

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***Abstract:** The current paper aims at illustrating a Romanian literary phenomenon, unique in its manifestation – the semiotic revolution of poetry through rhythm. The poet Ion Barbu succeeds in transferring the weight of semiotic relations from words, perceived as the poem’s nucleus until that moment, on the compositional units of the poem, the verses. By doing this, the poet places his poems at a supralinguistic level, allowing the superseding of the denotative and connotative signifying rapports, which are specific mainly to the literary criticism. Starting from a reality of this kind, from such a meaning, later on associated with the “art of word” (the filling of a pre-verbalized matrix with signified, “secret and revealed” content), we can understand the semiotic reform in Ion Barbu’s poetry, which manifests largely through freeing the rhythms. Semantics loses the word, whereas the poem is situated in the word’s temporal anteriority; the poem puts on the coat of semantics, not of linguistics (a particular case of semantics, so as Saussure was to consider it) and opens the gates to the supralinguistic expression, using extra-linguistics means: rhythm, onomatopoeia, figurative elements, all of which are powerfully charged with symbols.*

***Keywords:** semiotic reform, pure rhythm, rhythm geometry, symbolical geometry*

1. INTRODUCTION

The restructuring of the artistic sign functions, starting with the semiotic openness proposed by the visual poetry, produced major mutations at the level of the Romanian literature, thus fostering a peculiar semiotic interpretation of the new signs, but also multiple possibilities of identification of texture and inter-textual interpretation of some signifier assemblies that surpassed the linearity of the writing process, of psychological interpretation of the *tracogrammes*, of the interpretation of a work-of-art’s polyphony from the perspective of poetics and style. The linguistic innovation and linguistic reform were natural demands of a literary avant-garde that did not only oppose literary production in a language which had exhausted its resources, but also the language itself, which generated empty forms to be filled with linguistic contents, throughout the writing performance, in a mannerist process. Eco highlighted this crisis of language, which generated the avant-garde:

Installed in a language that has already done so much speaking: this is the problem. The artist realizes that language, having already done too much speaking, has become alienated to the

situation it was meant to express. He realizes that, if he accepts this language, he will also alienate himself to the situation. So he tries to dislocate this language from within, in order to be able to escape from the situation and judge it from without. Since language can be dislocated only according to a dialectic that is already part of its inner evolution, the language that will result from such a dislocation will still, somehow, reflect the historical situation that was itself produced by the crisis of the one that had preceded it. (Eco, 2002:272-273),

whereas the expression for overcoming the crisis under the circumstances of slowing down the metabolic functions of language became the code abandonment, through the engagement of dialogue between codes. Resulting out of the insufficiency of literature and of culture, in general, literary avant-gardes discovered the gaps between languages, the ones between artistic signs and, to compensate this reality, avant-gardes proposed either substitutions, or even forms of mixed signs coming from various languages, respectively, hybrid signs, expressed by syntagmatic and paradigmatic structures that would, any way, never produce other discourses than the opposition ones, articulated through manifestos.

2. PROJECT OF SEMIOTIC REFORM

Romanian experimentalist poet belonging to the literary avant-garde movement of the magazine *Contimporanul*, and also a collaborator of it, Ion Barbu was perceived as a follower of the Mallarméan philological hermeticism. He was even included in the *History of the Romanian Literature from its origins to the present* (Călinescu, 1941) under the interwar avant-garde tendencies: Dadaists, surrealists and hermetics. His placement under this general umbrella was not entirely mistaken; nevertheless, Barbu, displaying an avant-garde impulse, even though, from the perspective of the act of literary creation it was hidden by his intention of solitary, constructive exploration, specific to experimentalism, defied modernity in itself and also criticism/exegesis. “Barbu had not gotten rid of a certain exegesis, but of the exegesis itself”, argued Șerban Foarță (*apud* Codreanu, 2011:9). The dream of the Mallarméan canonical book did not miss from Barbu’s vision; yet, the association with Mallarmé’s literary and philological hermeticism did not please the Romanian poet, whose literary works were to be connected with the canonical hermeticism.

They say I am Mallarmé’s equal, without noticing that Mallarmé’s hermeticism is *philological*, and mine is *canonical* (reduction of expression to a canonical form, with as few parasitic terms as possible, in the sense of reducing the equation of an ellipse to the canonical form). (Barbu, 2000:997)

By rejecting all the –isms that characterized him, through the inclusion/classification of his literary work, Ion Barbu kept away from the reading standards of his contemporary fellows, resorting to a gesture – made out of vainglory - of separation and liberation from literature. Constantly manifesting hostility toward modernism, although he used to be a collaborator of *Contimporanul* magazine, Barbu disagreed with his placement within the literary avant-garde.

Ion Barbu proposed a profound semiotic reform. He transferred the weight of semiotic relations from words, perceived as a poem’s nucleus at that time, on the compositional units of a poem, the verses: “The simplest components of a poem are not the words, but the verses” (Barbu, 2000:20). Thus, his poetry was placed at a supralinguistic level, allowing the superseding of the denotative and connotative signifying rapports which the literary criticism tried to get close to. The meanings came to life in a pre-verbalized stage and the only one to have intuited some allusions with regard to the Barbian revolution of words being the Romanian poet Nichita Stănescu,

at the time when he created the concept of *nonwords*¹. Unfortunately, Nichita Stănescu did not understand why poetry equals verse, and ended up by substituting the *word* of the modernist poetry for the *nonword*, “risking getting lost in a mass of ‘nonwords’, missing the Barbian *sea of verses*, by excellence the geometricized sea of the *second game*”, according to the Romanian literary critic Codreanu (2011:184). Nonetheless, the continuity Barbu-Stănescu was instituted in the light of the Barbian revolution continuation, following the translogical and translinguistic features, Stănescu considering the original writing translinguistic and keeping poetry away from the meaning of “art of word”:

The art of word is the least important in the profession of a poet. Kant asserted once that the form is the sublime case of thinking and that the perfect form is forever appealing. I do not dare contradict this marvelous philosopher, but I guess that a wonderful, secret and revealed content attracts a wonderful and revealed form. (Stănescu, 1982)

Starting from such an assertion, from such a meaning, later on associated with the “art of word” (filling of a pre-verbalized matrix with signified, “secret and revealed” content), we can understand the semiotic reform in Ion Barbu’s poetry, which manifests largely through freeing the rhythms, respectively, in Nichita Stănescu’s poetry, characterized by its keeping in the preverbalization status and even by its openness toward the visual. In both cases, starting with Barbu, semantics loses the word, whereas poetry places itself in the word’s temporal anteriority, puts on the clothes of semantics, but not of linguistics (a particular case of semantics, as Saussure was to consider it) and makes room for the supralinguistic expression, using extra-linguistics means: rhythm, onomatopoeia, figurative elements, all of which are powerfully charged at the symbolical level.

3. FROM THE GEOMETRY OF RHYTHM TO THE GEOMETRY OF SYMBOLS

The semiotic revolution of poetry through rhythm coincides with the Barbian belief that, in order to return to mysteries – once the canonical hermeticism is deeply grounded on Pythagorean theorems, the human voice, a magical instrument, by excellence, must not allow deviation from the rhythm. Any magical formula is based on the pure rhythm, in accordance with the cosmic harmonies,

¹“As far as poetry is concerned, the word is only the raw material of poetry”, declared Nichita Stănescu (1983), during an unconventional interview.

the Barbian poetry aiming at the incantatory magic. Commenting on Barbu's appetite for the pure rhythm, in the poem *Ritmuri pentru nunțile necesare* (translated: *Rhythms for the Necessary Weddings*), Theodor Codreanu (2011:265) has built an explanatory itinerary that finds its finality in the Barbian increate, in accordance with Gregory of Nyssa's projection with regard to reaching the state of peace and union with God, by the intellect's immersion into the soul's mirror, and thus, being placed "above the intellect, now lacking any thoughts or knowledge, by a simple impulse":

The impulse is the leap from the intellect, knowledgeable of light, into *trance*. It is a matter of *pure rhythm*, of a simultaneous vibration of image and its model. This pure rhythm is perceived by Barbu in the prolongation of the first two rhythms, of the unchained passions and of the intellect, both impure, yet *necessary*. It is the deep meaning of the title *Ritmuri pentru nunțile necesare* (translated: *Rhythms for the Necessary Weddings*), the epithet

Din ceas, dedus, adâncul acestei calme creste,
Intrată prin oglindă în mântuit azur,
Tăind pe înecarea cirezilor agreste,
În grupurile apei, un joc secund, mai pur.

Nadir latent! Poetul ridică însumarea
De harfe resfirate ce-n zbor invers le pierzi
Și cântec istovește: ascuns cum numai marea,
Meduzele când plimbă sub clopotele verzi.

Theodor Codreanu has built a projection of seeking and refining the Barbian pure rhythm:

The Barbian rhythmic pentad is at ease, confirming an unusual rhythmic mobility of the verse. *Din ceas, dedus...* begins with a verse of an impeccable symmetry, made up of two amphibrachs ("looking" at each other in the mirror!), guarded, still specularly, by two iambs, which, to the end of the verse, turn into trochees, following the combined PC symmetry (of *parity* and *contrasts*). The creative subconscious (in Barbu's case, the more appropriate term would be *infraconscious*) thus anticipates the *mirroring* formulated in the second verse, through the very presence of the word *mirror*, which, not by chance, marks the caesura. (...) What is amazing is that the iambic ternary of the second hemistich is subjected to a combined PC symmetry, as well: two iambs combined by parity, where the second is separated by the second caesura, marked by comma: *un joc / se-cund, // mai pur*. This last iamb is the strong ictus of the entire stanza, synthesizing *more purely*, through its phonic triads, the Barbian poetry of essences, which proves to be of a musical

necessary being occulted by the exegetes. The "original innocence and beauty" are hidden in the increate, as pure rhythm, so as Moreschini reminds us when commenting the eschatology of Maximus the Confessor and of Gregory of Nyssa, *innocence* and *beauty* resulting after the atonement of sins.

Musicality and geometrical perfection of rhythm – these are the elements that join the rhythmical cells, even if, by analyzing the symmetry of the Barbian verses, we will rather find fractal deviations than a topological closeness, a variety of internal rhythms. Through the preservation of either measure or rhythmic symmetry, the geometry of verses multiplies internally, endlessly, starting from the rupture points, which thus provide the assembly unit of vibration. Starting from the rhythmic pattern of Ion Barbu's poetry, *Joc secund* [*Din ceas, dedus...*] (translated: *Second Game* [*From clocks, deduced...*]):

v- / v- v-v v-v -v -v
v-v vv-v / vvv- v-
v- vvv-v v-vv v-v
v-vvv -v / v- v- / v-

v- v- / v-v v-v vv-v
v-v vv-v v- -v v-
v-v vv-v / v- / v-v -v
v-vv v-v v-vvvv

(Barbu, 2003:4)

order, *pure rhythm*, in the second stanza (Codreanu, 2011:320).

The Barbian poetic construct, on whose rhythm we need to focus more in order to discover the refining efforts within a structure that surpasses the mere joining of individual significances of words in a general signifier structure, is the one that indicates a separation of Ion Barbu from the semiotics of units carrying sense and a positioning outside of them. The language is independent of the phono-acoustic mechanisms of the word, but it also enters the psychic depth of the human being that interacts with the verses, as an author or lector, through this phono-acoustic (musical) dimension. The language is perceived by Benveniste (1974:48) as "un système de signes où il n'y a d'essentiel que l'union du sens et de l'image acoustique, et où les deux parties du signe sont également psychique".

The rhythm is the one that, through its musicality, steps beyond the system of the language and it will be organized around another compositional unit, the verse. The verse (content of

the prefigured structure and equally rhythm) implies the association of systems founded on signifier units (the language, whose words are themselves carriers of rhythm and musicality) and of systems founded on unsignifier units (music). The sound cannot be considered a sign, it is dependent on the scale structure where it belongs, and on which it depends, and it is not an intrinsic significance bearer (Benveniste, 1974:58), but it generates significance when interpreted. Under such circumstances, the rhythm presupposes a superseding of language, by focusing on the unsignifier dimension of words in their phrasal chaining within a stanza scheme, and it needs the

*Cir-li-lai, Cir-li-lai,
Precum stropi de apă rece
În copaie când te lai;
Vi-o-con-go-eo-lig,
Oase închise afară-n frig
Lir-liu-gean, lir-liu-gean,
Ca trei pietre date dura
Pe dulci lespezi de mărgean.*

In this poem, the unusual rhythmic exercise imposes the reading of onomatopoeias as joint cretic structures, suggesting the water music, first through rhythm, and after that through the iconic reproduction of the nature sounds, at the phonic level. There were multiple interpretations of these verses, many of which were exaggerated, indirectly and incorrectly connected with the concretist functions, for example², yet, the onomatopoeias' role is to become a verbalized form and to put together the rhythmic unit, by means of some units holding semantic potential.

Coming from the field of mathematics, in which semiotics preponderantly uses other codes than the linguistic one, Ion Barbu also appeals to mathematical instruments, to the space, geometrized expansion, as a solution for openness toward the supreme ontological ascension, "the

² Matei Albastru, in an article published in the volume *Lebăda oarbă* (translated: Blind Swan), entitled *Poezia concretă (în texte teoretice și ilustrative)* (translated: Concretist Poetry (in theoretical and illustrative texts)), includes the Barbian poetry among the concretist manifestations, giving a puerile justification, taken out of context: "There is evidence for modernist-concretist elements in Ion Barbu's poetry, as well. In his poem "In Memoriam", we meet a "symbol of onomatopoeic and magical sonorities equaled by no other analogy in literature. The sweet and melodious syllables pass from the nature into the poet's voice, who starts talking, indeed, the language of birds and water" (Tudor Vianu)" (Albastru, 2004:142).

words' support (or the support of those units holding semiotic potential), in order to reach the *pure rhythm*. Words will answer the sound challenge, the need for joining the poetic units, first as rhythmic units and then, as semic units, within the verse. Let us go back to the Barbian rhythmic scheme for the poem *In memoriam* [Stihuri pentru pomenirea unui câine cu numele nemțesc, e drept (dăruit autorului de un prieten franc). Crescut, însă, la Isarlâk.] (translated: *In memoriam* [Lyrics in the memory of a German-named dog, (it's true, presented to the author by a French friend). However, raised in Isarlâk.], as the author has mentioned it:

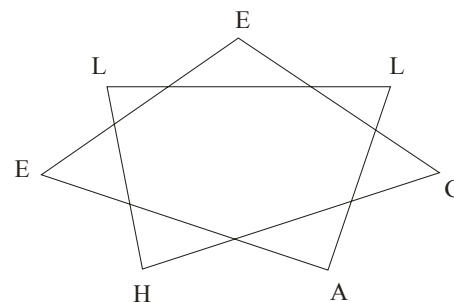
v- vv-v
vv-v vv-

-v v-v v-v -
--- / ---
- v-vv v-v
vv-v vv-

(Barbu, 2003:74)

pure sound" EL GAHEL (E-L-G-A-H-E-L). The poem *Înceiere* (translated: *Closure*) is the one to fix the geometrical solution on the retina (and equally on the printed page), in a "tertiary-without-a-name", so as Theodor Codreanu has identified it in the rhythmic propensity, where, probably, the name of Ion Barbu's greatest love is hidden under an anagram: Helga.

Fie să-mi clipească vecinice, abstracte,
Din culoarea minții, ca din prea vechi acte,
Eptagon cu vârfuri stelelor la fel,
Șapte semne, puse ciclic:



(Barbu, 2003:74)

Codreanu sees in the Barbian visual representation a placement in the symbolic plan, the heptagonal geometry being an indicator of perfection, under the quadrature of the circle sign, to which the heptagon E-L-G-A-H-E-L is circumscribed, and which later on, in the poetic visual language of Nichita Stănescu's, will take the shape of the symbolic self-closure reminding of the

ancient Uroboros serpent, symbol of primordial unity (with Nichita Stănescu, this closure is achieved by means of the wolves eating one another in a circle, a picture displayed on the cover of the volume *Respirări* (translated: *Breathings*):

...Barbu had the chance of taking an ultimate refuge into mathematics, but the ending to the poem *Second Game* does not leave space for such a solution, because the text of the poem *Closure* stands for a real meeting with geometry, in the area of maximum transparency – El Gahel, the letter being endowed with the heptagonal perfection which it surrounds within the circle of life, symbolized by the serpent Uroboros. (Codreanu, 2011:150)

Geometry, similar with language, serves the construct, yet, it is not the ultimate goal. Through El Gahel, we shall not go back to geometry, but we shall seek for a visual openness through geometry, toward the star structure E-L-G-A-H-E-L. The reading is induced in a sense that reminds of the Cabalist rotation of YHWH (Yahweh, יהוה, in the repetitive structure *yod-he-wau-he*) and contains the repeated structure EL, standing for God, in Hebrew, in a whole that, reduced to the consonant skeleton, would become (E)LG(A)H(E)L. But our interest is not only in the hidden significance of the Barbican heptameter, from the perspective of visual literature³, but rather in understanding it as a

³ Codreanu's explanation is deep and follows the spirit of meanings that he had included in his work *Ion Barbu and the Romanian Modern Spirituality. The Canonical Hermeticism*, for which he was awarded the Romanian Academy's "Titu Maiorescu" prize for criticism: "The exhaustiveness accomplished through the representation of the septenary is structured of five sounds-letters (ELGAHEL), where EL is repeated in an intended symmetry, EL also being the name of God, similarly used in Dante's Paradise. (...) In Rimbaud's poems there are still five primordial sounds, the vowels. Barbu, nevertheless, reconstructs the Universe, in an increate style, out of three vowels and four consonants, $3 + 4 = 7$, and 34 poems, the number of poems the book comprises. What proves that Second game is the Barbican Creative Act, a world offered to us through a demiurgical attempt, kept inaccessible to the superficial critical view, a universe hidden under the seven final signs/seals. Barbican vowels remake, at the sound level, the celestial triangle of the eye, combining it with the telluric quadrature of consonants, since there are three of them, one of which keeps repeating, the one include in the divinity's name. Now it is clear why Barbu called it the virgin triangle of cut out to the world. And let us further observe another stirring symmetry in ELGAHEL: A (alpha, aleph) is the "world's axle" that accomplishes the universal symmetry, the axle guarded by a double ternary ELG and HEL, a hexameter that

manner of expression beyond the possibilities of language, in poetry, which undoubtedly stands for a superseding of the syntagmatic linguistic structures and moving the focus from the stratum of signifying units on the prime stratum, based on Roman Ingarden's linguistic projection. In general, through visual poetry there is achieved a re-evaluation of the phonemes and phonic units stratum, of graphemes, of units with iconic value, of unsignifier sound elements, in rapport with signifying units stratum, with the stratum of imaginative vision, respectively, with that of object-elements.

With the Barbican poetry, we have a fortunate convergence of all those strata, by means of the first stratum, where geometry of rhythms and plane geometry represent ways of transcending toward significances of superior rank. The mere mentioning of the fact that Ion Barbu considered the edition of 1921 of his work *După melci* (translated: *Looking for snails*) a failure due to the book's illustration (partially recovered in 1967, in the edition illustrated by the painter Sabin Bălașa), sends us toward the profound understanding of the fact that a literary work's illustration should not be randomly performed, and that the role of co-image is fundamental for the configuration of the deep meaning, not a goal in itself, in order to bring insightfulness in a plane zone of the superficial, like in map readings. Ion Barbu's visual poetry is profound, self-interrogatory, yet insufficiently explored. It becomes a path (toward the absolute), and not a goal in itself, nor the absolute that the avant-garde writers had aimed at, through their reform of the language.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Ion Barbu, on the one side compelled to adhere to the synchronistic⁴, modernist principles, and on the other side, forced to join the rebelliousness of the *Contimporanul* magazine, will find his way

self-fulfills in a heptameter through A(leph). The hexameter is the Selected Intellect of the world/phenomenal, mathematical, thorough and perfect, which accessible to the "mind's colors". (Codreanu, 2011:358).

⁴ Eugen Lovinescu forces Barbu "to enter, by all means, the Procrustean bed of "cultural complexes" of a certain epoch, despite the author's protests, which proved to be useless, fact that finally determined him to act proudly and keep distance from men of letters and poetry" (Codreanu, 2011:24); following Barbu's decision not to accept the tempting western rhythms, Lovinescu (1970:279-280) was to reproach the former's option and to attribute it to some incapacity of the poet-mathematician.

through the canonical hermeticism, and thus, will keep distance from the avant-gardism, Valéry-ism and Mallarmé-ism, which the critics Cioculescu and Călinescu attributed to him, from the pre-Christian spiritualism, by means of which the critic Pompiliu Constantinescu characterized his literary works and from the philological hermeticism within the boundaries of which the critic Tudor Vianu places him. Barbu himself was to “get rid” of the syntactic hermeticism of Mallarméan origin:

They say I am Mallarmé’s equal, Barbu claimed in his Works II, p.997, without noticing that Mallarmé’s hermeticism is philological, and mine is canonical (reduction of expression to a canonical form, with as few parasitic terms as possible, in the sense of reducing the equation of an ellipse to a canonical form) (*apud* Codreanu, 2011:63).

Codreanu (2011:131) asserts that “(...) Ion Barbu was not a hermetic, but a creator of a new poetic concept, namely, of the *canonical hermeticism*”. If the critic Mincu saw in Ion Barbu’s literary work a space of textual instances germination, in a late textualist interpretation in which:

Self-speculation, self-reflexivity and self-referentiality are the only poetic operations that allow for the textual translation process; however, a process manifesting through the representation of an ambiguous corporality, decodable by a lectorial body equally involved in the act of writing. The poetry object will now be the metapoetry, and the discourse lines display the infinite practice of an inevitable intertextualization. (Mincu, 2006:48),

Theodor Codreanu interprets the Barbian experiment in the light initiated by Mincu in 1971, after defending his Doctoral Thesis (Poetic Work of Ion Barbu, finally published in 1990), and continued by Eugen Simion, Solomon Marcus or Mandics György. The textualist re-interpretation, in a post-modernist key (by considering Barbu a precursor of the post-modernist literature), reaches a point of negation of its own foundations. The association with the *Open Work/ opera aperta*, cannot be the key to the forest of Barbian significances, because in Barbu’s works one cannot speak of the “infinite dispersion of message”, but of a poetry of closeness. Given these facts, the interpretation of the Barbian poetry as metapoetry is inadequate, so long as the coat of

post-modernism does not fit him, the only theory sufficiently fit to him being that of transmodernism (Codreanu, 2011:134).

The Romanian experimental literature, both the modern and the post-modern, supplied the raw material for the study of the verbal-ionic in the Romanian poetry, contributing, from this standpoint, at least as much as the literature of the avant-garde did. The experimentalism/neo-avant-gardism manifested through solitary voices, both throughout the local avant-garde waves expression: for example, Ion Barbu, prefigured the new integrating avant-garde and kept distance from the nihilist, denying impulse of the magazine *Contimporanul*, which would promote him obstinately.

The main problem of our literary approach is that, as long as the historical literary avant-garde was not completely integrated within the public consciousness, the experimentalism/neo-avant-garde are not perceived in this light, either, but rather, in relation with the main-stream, which they kept influencing at the level of an imposed poetry and of its attached linguistic projection.

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