Religious Imaginary in the Poetry of Ion Barbu

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Cette étude présente certains aspects de l'imagination poétique religieuse dans la perception de Ion Barbu et se base sur le fait que le poète va proposer dans ses théories de critique littéraire (et il va atteindre son but, finalement) une poésie intellectuellement composée, une poésie dans laquelle prédominent les essences poétiques, une poésie qui porte une bataille soutenue contre les charges verbales. C'est pourquoi, les mots, d'origine divine, sont utilisés modérément dans la poésie.

Mots-clés : poétique, poète, divine, l'imagination, bataille

Ion Barbu's reputation as a difficult poet, although not groundless, is disproportionate. The reception of his poetry requires a dual initiation: on the one hand, in the language of modern poetry and in particular (a direction which the author himself pointed out repeatedly) in the elliptical structures and the ambiguous syntax relationships of the texts; on the other hand, an initiation, at least as necessary, in a symbolic and archetypal background, from which springs that substance and depth hermeticism which G. Calinescu (and only he) distinguished from the other "hermeticism", of the surface, only "philological"[1]. The fact is that Ion Barbu is one of our greatest poets, substantial and very musical, and the genuine understanding of his poetry rewards the effort that is required of his reader.

Ion Barbu minimized to a certain extent the first stage of his creation, characterized by Tudor Vianu as Parnassian in form[2], but with a Dionysian, Nietzschean energetic quality and vitality. Without being of equal value to the other two stages of Barbu's creation, the earlier stage is clearly distinguishable in the context of time and even in relation to what had been published in Romanian poetry by Macedonski, Duiliu Zamfirescu and several others in the Parnassian line. Most "Parnassian" poems (*Copacul [The Tree], Banchizele [The Floes], Munţii [The Mountains], Arca [The Ark]*) would likely remain simple and poor allegories (e.g. *The Tree*: an allegory of the dual condition of the human being, with "roots"

[1] George Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent [The History of the Romanian Literature from Its Origins Until The Present]*, Bucureşti, Fundaţia regală pentru literatură şi artă, 1941, p. 162-165.

[2] Tudor Vianu, *Istoria literaturii române moderne [The History of Modern Romanian Literature]*, Bucureşti, Editura Academiei, 1944, p. 42.

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in tellurium, but with aspirations of spiritualization, of ascension to "heaven") had allegories at the beginning not been loaded with the effect of muzicalization, which blurs the allegory, and if, at the same time, a certain complexity did not occur due to a sliding effect, from allegory towards symbol (as , for instance, in *The Ark*, where "the multitude" of thoughts, carried on «the ark» of the mind, of the inquiring spirit, face «the transcendent censorship» depicted in the poem by the «the bars» of the rain He had sent, but different from a new flood, because, beyond the anxiety, the confusion, and the wandering of this «ark», a revelation, an enlightenment is expected, the ek-stasis of "the rainbows", which will rise over "the seas in the soul", a moment and a sign of trans-intellectual, revelatory communication with the transcendental, with Him, with Jehovah. Several other poems from the same phase of creation (*Elan [Impetus], Panteism [Pantheism], Pentru marile Eleusinii [For the Great Eleusinii]*) have another form, complementary with the "allegorical" poems, based on marginalizations (the multifaceted chain of Being from *Impetus*, the mineral and cosmic eros in *Pantheism*), their ceremonial and hymnal form. Overall, it is worth noting that, since its beginnings, Ion Barbu's poetry tended towards the impersonal (it is not a self-centred poetry, a display of the self), towards a lyricism of the eternal and unimpersonal essences, through allegory and symbol, as well as that of verbal music, all in a solemn, grave tone, loaded with Dionysian accents, with a wild vitality, while also marked by a strong nostalgia for transcendence, the revelation of the Spirit.

The other two phases of Barbu's creation, the "balladic and oriental" and the Hermetic, can be seen as complementary: the colour, the picturesque, the sensuality of "the description" from the Isarlâk cycle and from the poems related to it (*După melci [The Snail Hunt]*, *In memoriam, Selim*), cannot prevent us from also perceiving the serious meanings of the Balkan and oriental poetic imaginary from this cycle: a representative action, with emblematic value, is the symbolic gesture from *Nastratin Hogea la Isarlâk [Nastratin Hogea at Isarlâk]* "sfânt trup şi hrană sieşi, hagi rupea din el" ("holy body and food to himself, the palmer tore himself off").

What stands out in most poems from the Isarlâk cycle or at least aesthetically related to those set in this imaginary and symbolic space is the synthesis of picturesque and narrative, the outpouring of colour, the infusion of the grotesque, "the tangible" which is the object of a narrative that bears, more often than not, symbolic meanings. These dominant features reveal an inner reaction of the poet Ion Barbu to the aesthetic danger he had glimpsed in the dominant fashion that had characterized the previous phase of his creation: the risk of conceptual, ideational dryness which "the veiling" of allegorical representations could not remove. Suddenly, all these Balkan, balladic and oriental poems show a great abundance of sensorial notations, pictorial phrases, drawing, colour, abundance of motion and gesture, all aspects designed to overcome the tendency to conceptualize.

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In the poems actually belonging to the Isarlâk cycle, the picturesque, the plasticity of description can still deceive, if the reception of these poems remains only on the surface, focused on the abundance of colour, the opulence and the variety of the descriptions full of enumerations, with their accumulation of a bazaar "show" of the material. The poet's subtlety consists in including in his descriptions, when they are not related only with the nostalgic sentimental memory of "the world" of an bygone age (childhood) as, for example, in *Selim,* a deep need that materiality itself suggests, of the necessary, with the complementary exaltation in spirit. This is the system of suggested meanings into which is "woven" the image of the city, of the crowd on the shore and of those who lure the ascetic Nastratin with the, temporarily, tempting attractions of the pleasures: their silhouettes, their inviting gestures, the colours of the show made up by the particoloured crowds over the backdrop of a heated Levant is set in contrast, as well as complementary, to Hogea's intransigence and his gesture of symbolic self-consumption, in a battle that of the ascetic spirit against the flesh, ruined by lust. Moreover, in this key text, *Nastratin Hogea at Isarlâk*, is the essence of the symbolic meaning given by the poet to such an imaginary space (Isarlâk), a place of confrontation between the passivity and the vulnerability of the body, driven by desires, pleasures and lust and thus, unwittingly, pushed towards death, towards nothingness, and, on the other hand, the concentration in the spirit, the pursuit of salvation, of a release from the prison of materiality and of the body.

Some of the ballad poems stand out, above all, because of the poet's extraordinary ability to invest them with complex meanings and grand narrative and symbolic developments endowed with an almost childlike tenderness and innocence. This is particularly the case of the poem *The Snail Hunt* which Vladimir Streinu rightly saw as an innocent "cosmic lamentation"[3]. The child, innocent and reckless, in his incantation ("melc, melc codobelc" ["snail, snail, show me your trail]) makes the snail come out of its shell, exposing itself to "the Lent winds" thus explains, in its way, a great symbolic paradigm: that of vulnerable innocence in the context of a world full of pitfalls and dangers. Remarkable is the art of the poet, his special aptitude for styling both on the playful patterns of the childish incantation (the "spell" phrase), as well as in shifting the image of the forest as the symbol inner fear with which it is read in "the Lent winds" as the process of a disfiguring metamorphosis which shifts the accents and flips and mixes the appearances, pushing them towards the grotesque. The same effect is achieved with great artistic in *Domnișoara Hus (Miss Hus)*, a poem in which the sequences depicting the crazy old woman, overwhelmed by her own physical and mental misery, who had become the object of collective derision, while others bring back her image as an young courtesan, at the height of her bright charm (the image of the dancer in front of whom the pride of "princes" breaks), and, finally, with the deliriousness poetical quality of her spell ("Buhuhu la luna șuie..." ["Tu-whit-whoo to the mad moon"]),

[3] Vladimir Streinu, *Pagini de critică literară [Pages of Literary Criticism]*, vol. I-IV, București, Editura Pentru Literatură, 1968, p. 63.

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a phrase designed to magically facilitate the communication with the lover lost in death, crossing over the "barrier" between the two realms, of life and death. A unique beauty, strange and disturbing, somewhere akin at its roots with Baudelaire's the famous idea of "the aesthetics of ugliness"[4], appears in such Barbian stylizations in which the grotesque of senility, the echoes of youth full of grace and charm, now obsolete, and a suggestion of existential failure (which explains both the high estimation given by poet to Matei's work (Mateiu Caragiale) blend in the thrill of a contradictory and vulnerable beauty.

There are, of course, poems where a certain ingenuity comes to the forefront of reporting to the moral commandments and constraints, such as the exemplary *In memoriam*, and others (*Cântec de rușine [Song of Shame]* and *Răsturnica [Tumblelina]*) in which Barbu's lyricism is quite close to Arghezi's lyricism in *Flori de mucigai (Flowers of Mold)*, but if we try to define what gives, beyond such differences, to Barbu's balladic poetry a certain type of depth, which we discover in this particular aesthetic synthesis of ideation (symbols) and "story" (the ballad as narrative). In this light, an illustrative example is the ballad *Riga Crypto și lapona Enigel (Crypto the King and Enigel the Lapp)*, a "story" with allegoric-symbolic meaning, uttered, not by chance, at the end of a "wedding". The comparison usually made, based on the author's own statement, between *Crypto the King and Enigel the Lapp* and Eminescu's *Luceafărul (Morning Star)* must still be protected from the schematic approaches too often adopted, especially since Barbu's ballad has nothing to do with the issue of the genius, the dominant theme in Eminescu's poem.[5] Here, as in *The Morning Star*, there are two ontological orbits, incompatible with each other, two existential conditions that can not harmonize: one is Crypto the King, a hypostasis whose condition is associated with a realm of the hidden, of moisture and darkness, the other, Enigel the Lapp, who is coming from a land of ice and snow, of blinding cold light and is heading south, towards the lands of the sun, of the heat, and of the fatal Crypto the King. The vitality of the Nordic Enigel has (within the system of the dominant symbolic significance in Ion Barbu's poetry) the option that overcomes the cold light of the knowledge of the brain ("the wheel" of Mercury, the head), as well as the stage of the unconscious and sensuality ("the wheel" of Venus) towards an ideal superior synthesis of vitality and spirit, of total fulfilment, symbolized by the supreme "wheel" of the Sun. Thus, "the temptation" of King Crypto, through love, by Enigel the Lapp proves not only the limits King Crypto's ontic condition, who falls victim to his aspiration to another condition or is not limited to suggestions of cruelty and risk involved by love and the attempts at transgressing, under its spell (of love), the limits of one's own condition, but, in this allegoric-symbolic story, it warns the wedding guests from "the frame" of the poem about the complex

[4] Estetica urîtului [The aesthetics of ugliness].

[5] George Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent [The History of the Romanian Literature from Its Origins Until The Present]*, București, Fundația regală pentru literatură și artă, 1941.

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synthesis of instinctual vitality, an aspiration that aims at uplifting the spirit and, at the same time, the awareness of death, a synthesis that involves genuine love, the ceremony of "the wedding" as a fusion of all these components in a ritualistic and transformative act.

The last stage of creation of the poet Ion Barbu, the hermetic state, is dominated by a poetics of compression (Barbu's ideal of the poem as "august text, inscription"), through a special syntax that eliminates copulas, fosters ellipses, the relations within the text become relative, while the author returns to his older interest in musicality and solemnity of the verse, the poetic utterance, but now, unlike in the Parnassian beginnings, the verbal harmonies have something mysterious in them, an initiatic language, secret in its allusiveness. This new ideal of poetry is formulated in several programmatic texts, that opened the cycle *Joc secund (Second Game)*, particularly in the symbolic valences of "the mirror" metaphor in *Din ceas, dedus (From Time, Abstracted)*. The deep, the echo over time to the Platonic idea of art – copy of a copy[6] (therefore, situated at opposite of the perfect essences that were, in Plato, eidoi) the echo according to which, the art process is actually a returning to the essence, through dematerialization, through projection in spirit ("mirror") to the things of the world.

In the same text, the author's ideal of poetry is worded in terms that escape the conflictual and the temporal as the ephemeral present (*From Time, Abstracted)* aiming at a symmetry which is only accessible to the spirit, of "the deep" and "the high" ("the deep of this calm crest"), reflecting the zenith in a "latent Nadir", doubly spiritualized, essence separated from materiality, like those "water groups" with "the second game, more pure", towards the impure "rustic herds". The condition of fulfilling such aspirations, towards a poetry of the eternal and imperishable essences, the poet must overshadow his own will to gain access to that potentially cosmic, universal, impersonal song which he has a mission to disavow, to condense it in the poem: "Poetul ridică însumarea/ De harfe răsfirate ce-n zbor invers le pierzi/ Și cântec istovește, ascuns cum numai marea/ Meduzele când plimbă sub clopotele verzi."[7]

The ideal of such a poem is timeless and trans-subjective[8], overcoming the ego of the poet towards a broader, impersonal, cosmic poetry.

In addition to these programmatic meanings, the other poetic art in the hermetic cycle *Second Game,* entitled *Timbru (Timbre)*, opposes an easy and too easily approachable art (whose synecdoche is "the bagpipe" and "the whistle", associated to spaces that are too open, too accessible to everybody: "the meadow", "the road", "the eternal bagpipes"), to a higher form of art, able to rise above the limitations of

[6] Ioana Em. Petrescu, *Ion Barbu și poetica postmodernismului [Ion Barbu and the Poetics of Postmodernism]*, București, Editura Cartea Românească, 1993, p. 60.

[7] "The poet elevates the summation / Of scattered harps you lose in a reverted flight / And painfully distils a song: hidden, as only the sea / Sways the jellyfish under the green bells."

[8] Mircea Scarlat, Ion Barbu. *Poezie și deziderat [Ion Barbu. Poetry and Aspiration]*, București, Editura Albatros, 1981, p. 67.

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the biography and the accidental, as well as the humble ("pain divided") acceding to what is universal and everlasting[9], essentially: the prayer states ("piatra-n rugăciune" ["the rock in prayer"]), excruciating pain ("a humei despuiare" ["the stripping of the clay"]) and the mystical betrothal ("unda logodită sub cer" ["the wave betrothed in the sky"]), rising to the ideal stage (or at least aspiring to it) of that ultimate song, dreamed as "capacious", that is ample, depersonalized, of a great horizontal, as well as vertical opening of the deep: "ar trebui un cântec încăpător precum / foşnirea mătăsoasă a mărilor cu sare" ["there should be a capacious song, like / the silky rustle of the salty seas"], lyrics in which the metaphor of the ideal perfection is one of the areas that are only accessible to the imagination, with the secret music of their depths, and the second metaphor of the same ultimate song should be temporal, with reference to the mythical, auroral of the birth of beauty ("Eve, still between flesh and fantasy") and the response of beauty to beauty, of the choir of angels to the making of Eve, "Ori lauda grădinii de îngeri, când răsare / Din coasta bărbătească al Evei trunchi de fum" ["or the praise of angel garden, when / From the male rib, Eve's body of smoke rises"].

Ion Barbu achieved his dream of such a poem of the universal and eternal essences, incompatible as expression ("august text, inscription") and surpassing the romantic poetics limited to "exhibiting the self"[10] (a perspective that rejected the formulas of elegy and romance in his polemical texts *Poezia leneşă (Lazy Poetry)* and *Poetica d-lui Arghezi (The Poetics of Mr. Arghezi)* in quite a few of the poems in the hermetic cycle *Second Game*, as, for example, in *Grup (Group)*, an image of the human aspiration, generically universal, to overcome what is carnal and perishable ("temniţa în ars, nedemn pământ" ["prison in burnt, unworthy clay"]) towards a world of spirit, but also put into question ("Dar capetele noastre, dacă sunt, / Ovaluri stau, de var, ca o greşală" ["But our heads, if any, stand out, / Lime ovals, like a mistake"]) with the thrilled accent of the wonder of the human spirit before the proliferation of mysteries ("clăile de fire stângi" ["the haystacks of left straws"]) whose origin is the transcendent, the divine "ochi în virgin triunghi tăiat spre lume" ["eye in virgin triangle cut to the world"] or in poems such as *Poartă (Gate)* or *Statură (Stature)*, designed to capture the state of a musicalization of the finish by eros and love ("Suflete-n pătratul zilei se conjugă / Paşii lor sunt muzici, imnurile - rugă" ["Souls are conjugated in the quarter of the day / Their steps are music, the hymns - prayer"] in the poem *Gate*) or the passing of childish innocence: "shy, her infancy passed" towards the flicker of those "daily, heavy suns" that "burned under the line"[11] in the poem *Stature*.

What the author promised through the quote, chosen as the motto, from a text by Mallarme ("De n-ar fi decât sa vă dau ideea" ["If I were to give you only the idea"]) crystallized an aspiration which the poet of *Second Game*, which he

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 70.
[10] Dinu Pillat, *Ion Barbu*, Bucureşti, 1969, p. 39-41.
[11] "Sfiit pruncia ei trecea. / Sori zilnici, grei, ardeau sub dungă".

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actually fulfilled in his Hermetic creation,[12] dense, substantially, but not at all "charadesque": Ion Barbu is a great poet, not only in the Romanian literary horizon, but also that in the history of European and world poetry.

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[12] Tudor Vianu, *Istoria literaturii române moderne [The History of Modern Romanian Literature]*, (with Șerban Cioculescu and Vladimir Streinu), București, Editura Academiei, 1944, p. 65.

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