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Ut Algebra Poesis (As Algebra, So Poetry)

Ion Barbu, Sarah Glaz, and JoAnne Growney

Ut Algebra Poesis
[Ninei Cassian]

La anii-mi încă tineri, în târgul Göttingen,
Cum Gauss, altădată, sub curba lui alee
– Boltirea geometriei astrale să incheie –
Încovoiam poemul spre ultimul catren.

Uitasem docta muză pentru-un facil Eden
Când, deslegată serii, căinței glas să dea,
Adusă, coroiată, o desfoiată fee
Își șchiopăta spre mine mult-încurcatul gen.

N-am priceput că Geniul, el trece. Grea mi-e vina . . .
Dar la Venirea Două stau mult mai treaz și viu.
Întorc vrăjitei chiveri cucuiul străveziu

Și algebrista Emmy, sordida și divină,
Al cărei steag și preot abia ncerc să fiu,
Se mută-n nefireasca – nespus de albă! – Nina.

Ion Barbu, 1946

ION BARBU is the literary pseudonym of Dan Barbilian (1895–1961), a Romanian mathematician and professor at the University of Bucharest who made important contributions to the fields of geometry, algebra, and number theory and developed an axiomatization of the geometry of projective rings. Barbu’s poetry is popular in Romania, but it is known for its difficulty and has not been widely translated into English. The title of the poem presented here, *Ut Algebra Poesis*, is a Latin phrase meaning “As Algebra, So Poetry.” The algebraist Emmy in Barbu’s poem is well known to mathematicians: Amalie “Emmy” Noether (1882–1935) was a contemporary of Barbu when he studied in Germany in the 1920s. In 1933, Noether emigrated to the United States, fleeing the Nazi regime. Nina Cassian (1924–) is a prolific and widely respected Romanian poet who came to the U.S. as a visiting professor in 1985. Because of her outspoken views, it became dangerous for her to return, so she has remained in the U.S. since that time. English translations of Cassian’s poetry are widely available. Mathematicians may enjoy, for example, “The Inclined Plane,” available in *Life Sentences*.

As Algebra, So Poetry
[For Nina Cassian]

In my young days I strolled the lanes of Göttingen—
Where Gauss, beneath arched canopies of leaves,
Sealed once for all the vaults of higher geometries—
And curved a poem toward its last quatrain.

For easy Eden I scorned the learned muse
And nights without restraint unraveled me
As they drew forth a hook-nosed, exposed Eve
With hobbling gait and writing style abstruse.

I failed to see the transience of genius. The guilt is mine. . .
But for the Second Coming I watch and am prepared
To turn the magic helmet against my fevered head.

And algebraist Emmy, both common and divine,
Whose priest and standard-bearer I would dare emerge,
Surpasses Nina—transcendental and indescribably fair!

—translated by Sarah Glaz and JoAnne Growney,
December 2005

SARAH GLAZ, a professor of mathematics at the University of Connecticut whose native language is Romanian, shares with Barbu an active interest in both algebra and poetry. Now a full-time writer, **JOANNE GROWNEY** was formerly a professor of mathematics at Pennsylvania's Bloomsburg University. Her poetry collection *My Dance is Mathematics* was published in 2006 by Paper Kite Press. Glaz and Growney are currently collaborating on the editing of an anthology of love poems that employ mathematical imagery.