

REMEMBRANCES OF RUTH BARCAN MARCUS

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As Epicurus said, sweet is the memory of gone friends

I first heard about Ruth Barcan Marcus when I was starting up my dissertation on Frege and Kripke on reference, towards 1977. I knew about the Barcan formula, but was more attracted by her views on identity. She had written an article in 1967 on extensionality, which I mentioned some years later in the very first piece that I published, as an example of a constructive as opposed to a deconstructive – Derrida was then tutorial fellow ("caïman") at the Ecole normale- attitude in philosophy.

The first time I met Ruth was at the spring of 1978, at a party at which my wife Claudine and I had been invited at Gregory Vlastos' house in Berkeley. Both of us were graduate students, and very impressed to have the privilege to meet the members of the Berkeley department and some famous philosophers (I seem to remember that a young blonde, named Martha Nussbaum, was there too), thanks to the wonderful hospitality and generosity of Gregory Vlastos. Ruth was then staying at the Center for Advanced study in the Behavioural Sciences at Stanford. I was aware that THE Barcan Formula was in front of me and it paralysed me. What should I say about the scope of descriptions in modal contexts? Would she ask me whether Converse BF holds it such or such a semantics for modalities? I was relieved that the conversation did not go on these issues. She was then writing her famous paper on moral dilemmas. I remember that we talked about Geach on *The Virtues*, which I had read, although I had no idea about the literature on moral dilemmas, except perhaps Davidson's weakness of the will article. We were impressed by her directness, the way she addressed to us as if we were peers and the enthusiasm with which she talked about philosophy, which contrasted so much with the aloofness and *blasé* atmosphere that we found in most of our encounters with our teachers in France.

The second occasion when I could meet Ruth was a few years later, in 1984, when Jules Vuillemin organised a conference "Mérites et limites des méthodes logiques en philosophie" at the Fondation Singer Polignac. It was a very classy conference, with a lot of stars, among whom Dummett, Williams, Kaplan, Lambert, Follesdal, Suppes, Patzig and most of Vuillemin's friends. I was then a lecturer at Grenoble, very impressed and very pleased to meet Ruth again in such prestigious company. She gave an excellent talk in reply to Maurice Boudot on Russell's views on individuation, later republished in *Modalities*, a topic to which rather few writers were at that time interested in. Once again she showed her extraordinary energy and lucidity. She displayed the same qualities when in 1986 Vuillemin invited her to give lectures at the College de France. I remember that she discussed issues about identity, and that at one point Anne Fagot, who attended the talk, suggested that these issues were irrelevant for dealing with the actual moral problems about the embryo, abortion, etc. She answered that they *were* relevant, and that ontology matters as much as ethics. I had by then finished my dissertation on Kripke, and could talk a bit with her on reference, rigid designators, and the necessity of identity. But I do not remember that at that time she had any kind of animosity against Kripke or that she felt that she was deprived of the merit of having invented the "new theory of reference", although the fuss about Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* was more or less at its peak. Although she was a bit ironical about the theory being "new", she seemed to consider Kripke's work as more or less the natural furthering of her views. It was apparently only later that she expressed some complains about lack of

recognition of her work on these issues. I remember that we talked mostly about Quine's rejection of modal logic, which she did complain about, and that her views influenced me when I wrote on these issues later on in my book *The Norm of Truth*.

I came to know Ruth a little more when she (and Pierre Aubenque) invited me, in 1991, in her quality of President of the Institut International de philosophie, at the annual meeting of the Instituto de investigaciones filosoficas at the UNAM in Mexico in 1991. It was a memorable and very agreeable meeting, the main topic of which was, once again, identity. Ruth ruled the institute with her usual authority and imposed analytic philosophers in it, which it did not please very much some of the members. But she had no problem since she was, as in most of the academic responsibilities that she took up in those years, highly respected.

Shortly after, in 1992 the so-called Derrida Affair burst out in Cambridge. Hugh Mellor had opposed, quite rightly in my view, the awarding of a *doctorate honoris causa* to Derrida, and an international petition was circulating, together with a letter to the *Times*, signed by Quine and many leading figures in analytic philosophy, saying that Derrida was no philosopher. Ruth was among them, and in good place. She had explained to me earlier her misgivings at Yale with Derrida and de Man, and her later refusal to support the *Collège international de philosophie*, when the Minister Jack Lang had written to her, in her quality of member of the Yale humanities faculty to which Derrida belonged, to support the College. She returned a letter asking why she would sign for an institution which she had all good reasons to consider as an academic imposture. We discussed a lot the matter, and I indeed agreed fully with her (and later expressed my opposition to the said institution), but contrary to a conspiracy legend spread by Derrida and his friends, not only I was not behind the letter to *The Times*, but also I refused to sign it when asked to do so by the promoter of this initiative, Barry Smith. My reason was only that Derrida had been my teacher (officially at least, since he never taught me anything) and that one does not petition against one's teachers (I also had had a conflict with Derrida when I was a member of the entrance jury of the ENS, and did not want to appear as attempting a *règlement de comptes*). In these circumstances and in others I have admired a lot Ruth's courage. She simply said what she believed, and did not try to ponder academic politics, wherever it was. I may have shown then some cowardice, although I was probably not alone since no French academic signed the letter.

Another memorable meeting with Ruth was in 1994, when Claudine Tiercelin organised, with Jean-Pierre Cometti, at Cerisy la Salle a conference on American philosophy, where representatives of "post-analytic" philosophy like Rorty and Cavell cohabitated for a few days with more "mainstream" analytic philosophers like Davidson, Putnam, Haack and Marcus. Marcus was a hard liner, and I was happy to receive her support when I attacked frontally Rorty on truth (Davidson was kinder to Rorty). One could see then where the lines had to be drawn. Marcus was unimpressed by the mixture of Wittgenstein, Cavell, Rorty and pragmatism which at that time preferred not to call itself "analytic" (things have changed, that mixture passes today for being "analytic"). Ruth had from her graduate years at NYU with Sydney Hook no great esteem for pragmatism, and she had also written a strong piece against the "language oriented" conceptions of belief that, according to her, Davidson held. At that time my views were too close to Davidson's to accept her provocative conceptions on belief, but once again I have had to realise later that she was right.

We saw each other at the time quite often, in particular in Oxford when she visited Wolfson College, then at our place in Paris, once with Jacques Bouveresse. Marcus actually seemed not to have read much of Wittgenstein.

In 1995 another affair burst out, the Kripke affair. This time it was not a foreign affair, as in the case of Derrida, but a family affair, inside the analytic house. A lot has been said about it, about the meetings of the APA where the supposed plagiarism by Kripke of Marcus' ideas

was supposed to have been revealed. I did not discuss with her all the details. She seemed to have been affected by it, not because she actually believed that her ideas had been stolen – she did not – but because she felt that once again, her contribution to these debates was ignored or minimised by those who pretended to defend Kripke. She thought it sufficiently evident that her contribution to the ideas about modal logic, quantification and naming was both original and anticipated most of the later developments, that she did not want to remind that herself publicly. I hope that now justice has passed and that everyone recognises that although Kripke's work articulated in the best possible and creative way these ideas, he was not alone and that she brought all the stones with which the building was elevated, and secured most of the foundations.

We corresponded and discussed again over my review of *Modalities* which appeared in *Dialogue* in 1997, and on my piece in the second *Festschrift* in her honour which in 1999 was published by Henry Lauener in *dialectica*, where I discussed her views on belief again, and tried to complement them by an analysis of acceptance. Ruth belonged to the group of philosophers whom Lauener gathered regularly in Biel, among whom were often Davidson, Quine, Follesdal, Vuillemin, Granger, Lambert, Hintikka and many others. They certainly disagreed on many philosophical issues, and were sometimes tough, but they respected each other and agreed on a certain way of doing philosophy, on the centrality of logic and on the need to keep contact with science. Quine was a naturalist, and Marcus was also tempted by some naturalistic views. But none of them believed, as some philosophers do today, that philosophy would have to merge into cognitive science, in maths or in logic and get rid of all normative issues. This style gave to the practice of philosophy an atmosphere which was perhaps a bit elitist, but which in retrospect appears much less aggressive than the one in which we live today. This generation of people has shaped my idea of the university and in many ways I fear that that ideal has today gone with them. In her wonderful autobiographical Dewey lecture, she tells us that she never really cared to publish much, because quite often philosophical and logical articles are shot through with errors that one discovers only years later. Who could today afford to say such things and act accordingly?

In later years, I did not see Ruth because she did not travel to Europe and was ill, but we corresponded a bit. When I travelled often to New York city in 2006 and 2007 I planned to see her at New Haven, but her health prevented that. It was a great pleasure to learn that she had been awarded the Lauener Prize, to see her again at this occasion in 2008 and to be able to honour her work. I can still remember vividly her voice, her lapidary oral style and her extraordinary humour and warmth. She liked to ask her questions in the falsely naïve tone that Alice takes when she talks to the Queen.

I have always thought that it must not have been easy for someone like Ruth to come at the top of the academic establishment in philosophy, in a context like that of the departments of philosophy in the USA, where the only alternative to male chauvinism often seems to be female chauvinism. Very often women philosophers are put off by the kind of show off with logical skills and with "arguments" displayed by male analytic philosophers, and often, and rightly, they fear that they have no chance to succeed in this profession if they do not enter a sort of secular convent. Ruth had no problem with the logicians: she was one of them, and among the very best. She certainly had great problems in her early career to conciliate her family life, children, and her academic work. She had the support of her teachers and mentors, like Mc Kinsey, Fitch, Church and Carnap, but it certainly needed an exceptionally strong temper to survive in that milieu.

I have been extremely lucky to meet a person like her, and although I have never been her student, to receive her advice and generous help in so many occasions. She did not care for anything else than truth and friendship, and practiced both admirably.