

*THE URGE FOR POWER AND CHARACTERS' CONSTRUCTION IN
ALEXANDRU ECOVOIU'S NOVELS*

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Abstract: In Alexandru Ecovoiu's novels (Ordinea, Stațiunea and Saludos) one may depict a strange relation of the characters with the sense of power. This is what we try to identify and exemplify in order to better light up the significance of the epic. Moreover, the study brings forward those elements that create the ironical touch of the text in order to argument the postmodern features of Alexandru Ecovoiu's novels.

Keywords: postmodern, power, consciousness, irony, fragmentary.

Starting with his first novel, *Călătoria* (The Journey), Alexandru Ecovoiu was acknowledged as a talented young prose writer and the critics have always had contradictory statements on his work. Most of them see in his writings the unknown master of contemporary prose¹. Following the postmodernist trend, Ecovoiu's novels step out from the literary cannon and create a special fictional universe. They strike most of the time by the use of epic unpredictability.

The main theme of the novels is that of *power* and the characters are constructed according to it – they belong to a typology more than being complex individuals: the Actor, the Writer, the Magistrate etc. They are images of what the author wanted to represent: the political, intellectual or mystical power. The game in which the characters engage in is the fight for power and is a dangerous endeavour which always ends with failure of plans, a sign that power cannot be held by one man. In his novels, Alexandru Ecovoiu emphasizes that power is something that can only be gained by force (in all its forms). In the novel *Saludos*, the

¹ "I could only say that Alexandru Ecovoiu, an insufficient read master of contemporary prose, is a Salieri to himself. The important thing is that, eventually, Mozart outlives him." (*Aș mai spune doar că Alexandru Ecovoiu, un maestru încă insuficient citit al prozei contemporane, își este sieși un Salieri. Important e că, până la urmă, Mozart-ul îi supraviețuiește*), Irina Petraș, *Alexandru Ecovoiu sau eseismul bine ficționat*, in "Steaua", nr. 3-4 / 2013, la <http://www.revistea.ro/core/numere/2013/Steaua%203-4%202013.pdf> (nov., 10, 2015).

Custodian tries to violently take over the power and Filip's plans (in the novel *Ordinea* –Order) are quickly stifled by those from the government because his popularity that grew from day to day become a threat (during some violent demonstrations Filip is beaten and thrown in jail). A novel that best highlights the struggle for power is *Stațiunea* – The Resort. The protagonists, simple typologies, simple sketched characters upon their functions lead a struggle to achieve leadership. Finally, power is seized by violence by the residents of the resort, who finally establish order. A concrete example of power is the narrator that intervenes frequently in the text to change the destiny of the characters. He acts as a puppeteer playing with his puppets. The narrator is above the characters, who are trying at all costs to gain power and control of the resort; he holds supreme power and is the only one who has full control over the resort.

Alexandru Ecovoiu novels, *The Resort*, *Saludos*, *Order* can be defined by three key words, namely: power, order and play². Power is the main idea of the three novels and the struggle for power is well accounted for. The second keyword is *order*, defining element for the required power. The order is the visible manifestation of power as every character dreams to impose either globally (the Custodian) or nationally (Filip) a certain order to be obeyed for a system to function properly. The third key element is *the game* and refers to that hidden game of power hunters (i.e.: Freemasons, Illuminati). They are the ones behind the scenes, acting in the shadows. Alexandru Ecovoiu concentrate power in the hands of many forces, a sign that power can never belong to one man. The author developed a fascination for secret societies that rule the world. Such organizations are present in all three novels and according to the writer they wish to establish themselves as the unique global power. *Mo* language, to which the writer refers to in his novels, is a first step towards globalization and it becomes the only language used and accepted by these secret societies.

Alexandru Ecovoiu explores the narrative fragmentation in the construction of his work. This makes him deviate from the literary genre canons that are defined by a complex action carried out on several levels. The writer is not interested in the outside world, in the presentation of concrete events but in the inner universe of his characters and in examining the states of consciousness.

Saludos can be successfully analysed as picaresque literature because Sey Mondy's trip is one of knowledge and self-awareness. *Saludos* seems a simple adventure story, but it is a

² “In terms of theme there are three elements defining Alexandru Ecovoiu's prose: power, order and game.” (*Trei elemente definesc, din punct de vedere tematic, proza lui Alexandru Ecovoiu: Puterea, Ordinea și Jocul*), Andrei Terian, *Puterea, Ordinea și Jocul*, in “Cultura”, nr. 80, 2007.

spiritual trip of the character. The novel begins with the confession made by a mysterious witness in a bistro in Paris. The witness, a photographer who had come in a brief visit to Paris in order to make an album with statues of the city, is nothing but an avatar of the writer. The title of the novel aims symbolically at a knowledge strategy which the character calls it “the state of *saludos*”. This is very well explained by Ion Simuț as “a strategy discovered in complete harmony with the environment, in complicity with all things, with rain, vegetation, birds, translated by Sey Mondy as the state of *saludos*, something between greeting and reverence, a form of freedom, a form of resistance but also of purification, a way of resonating with the world and identify with its latent meanings in order to reveal them.”³

The protagonist of the adventures abandons studies at the age of 23 (the study of Philosophy at Sorbonne) and enrolls in a competition which involved travelling round the Earth for the stake of 1 million dollars (the contest is called Tardif Globe Trotter and is organized by a philanthropic organization sponsored by an old lady). The contest is basically about delaying, as the prize would be awarded to the one who reaches last the finish. Thus, competitors have the opportunity to go around the Earth several times, without being concerned by *the lack* for time. Sey Mondy circles the Earth for 40 years in a roll having thus the opportunity of making contact with different cultures. What stands out throughout the journey is that the character proves an incredible will not to give up. He manages to break out from every place and head to another. The character is not driven by material interests as the prize is just a bonus for the bigger reward that is knowledge. He earns a living either singing or doing card tricks or making seasonal work. What matters to him is the opportunity to enrich spiritually and to discover the outer and inner world. Sey Mondy has the power to refuse to settle down, even if he often feels the need for stability. During the trip he falls in love several times but each time he says no to settling anywhere. The character is experiencing an absolute freedom that comes bundled with a sense of rootlessness feeling that he does not belong to any place. Sey Mondy considers himself a world citizen because he was born on a boat and thus he travelled all his life, not having a place to lock out nor people to return to. Therefore, the price for absolute freedom is in fact a terrible sense of alienation.

³ *Există o strategie a cunoașterii, descoperită în armonia deplină cu mediul, în complicitatea cu lucrurile, cu ploaia, cu vegetația, cu păsările, tradusă de Sey Mondy în starea de saludos, ceva între salut și reverență, o formă de libertate, o formă de rezistență, dar și de purificare, un mod de a rezona cu lumea și de a se identifica cu sensurile ei latente, pentru a le dezvălui.* (Ion Simuț, *Viața ca o călătorie imaginară*, in “România literară”, nr. 46, 2004).

In terms of language Alexandru Ecovoiu's novel is very accessible in that it uses a familiar language, easy to read and understand. Being a novel that focuses on analysing states of consciousness *Saludos* does not focus too much on the external events, only in terms of reflection in the character's mind. Thus, external events seem to flicker, character moving quickly from one story to another. Another argument is that the plot is timeless, a sufficient sign that events themselves are not important, but what they stir in the conscience of the individual.

Alexandru Ecovoiu manages to keep the readers' interest both by an enormous fantasy burst (that takes them in the most exotic places on the planet and shares the unforgettable experiences) and by a secret, which is expected to be unveiled along with a new story. The secret lies in an underground fight for global power. Sey Mondy is chosen, along with 12 others, to be part of this secret organization, hidden in a gorge. In his unmistakable style, Alexandru Ecovoiu develops a passion for conspiracies and occult forces that are trying at all costs to obtain absolute power (overall control and unify all states into one: *The Unitary State*). From an ally, Sey Mondy becomes an enemy when he wishes to take part in the Custodian's plans and decides to escape from the Defile. The great secret, the narrator is still waiting for since the earlier stories, becomes clear only at the end of the novel, when Sey Mondy disappears forever. His identity is not specified precisely and each character issues a subjective perspective about him. Not even the truthiness of the travel around the world can be confirmed. What is left is the message the narrator tries to convey: that the World is threatened by an absolute control driven force which may make use of any kind of resources in order to gain the Power.

Saludos is the novel which assured Ecovoiu's recognition in the literary world. Beyond the travel, the reader experiences a text of self-awareness and of self-knowledge in an indefinite act of rebellion. With this novel, the writer establishes his unmistakable mark: "dystopia, unaccredited narrators behind whom there are authors disguised in a Matryoshka style, conspiracy theory, world occult forces, textualism, speculations of text-reality relation: the text that becomes reality, reality that becomes text, the text that blends with reality up to indistinction."⁴

⁴ *Cartea care l-a impus pe Alexandru Ecovoiu în lumea literara a fost Saludos [...], unde sunt identificabile elemente tematice și de construcție care alcătuiesc din acest moment marca autorului: distopii, naratori necreditabili prin care sunt disimulați autori încapsulați în stil Matrioșka, teoria conspirației, oculte planetare, textualism, speculări ale relației text-realitate: textul care se transformă în realitate, realitatea care se transformă în text, textul care se amestecă până la indistinct cu realitatea.* (Mihai Iovănel, *Alexandru Ecovoiu*, in "Cultura", nr. 299, 2010).

Another novel in which the theme of power and power gaining is at its best is *Stațiunea* (The Resort). This time there are suggested two kinds of power: political power exercised by the leaders on the inhabitants of the resort and the power the narrator exercises at the level of narrative discourse. The narrator acts as a Creator who holds in his hands the fate of the entire resort and of all the characters inhabiting it. Throughout the novel a fascinating game that the narrator practices with his characters stands out, like a puppeteer with his puppets. Each character has the right to reply, but they are always overwhelmed by the narrator's voice. It is remarkable that throughout the text the reader comes across only monologues, as characters fail to communicate with each other. This could be a defining feature of contemporary society, which Alexandru Ecovoiu tries to emphasize – namely that society no longer operates as a system in which each component communicates with the other, but on the contrary each component of society acts separately according to its own principles. This creates a lack of equilibrium that affects proper governance.

The writer does not build complex characters in his novels – and especially in this one –, but typologies meant to serve as symbols of universal patterns of a society (the Magistrate figure embodies the absolute ruler). They aim at shaping a utopian world. The resort itself is a paradise of pleasure, an oasis of gambling positioned within a monarchical state that prohibits such practices. The only reason that the resort is not closed is that it brings significantly profit to the state due to the large number of tourists. Alexandru Ecovoiu creates in his novel a utopia if it were to relate strictly to the basic meaning of imaginary world; yet, if one goes deeper into the meaning of this word, he might find that it embodies the model of a social-political and religious ideal. But Ecovoiu's world is far from being a perfect one. The author builds a rather anti-utopia, or a black utopia, which reveals the negative aspects of society: corruption, betrayal, greed, etc. In order to better shape his black utopia, Ecovoiu outlines all the negative aspects of life and highlights the flawed characters. One such example is the woman of easy virtue, embodied by Caravella, a character with vulgar, even obscene language. Ecovoiu's novel is remarkable in that the characters involved in the fight for power are part of the intellectuals (the Magistrate, the Actor, the Philosopher and the Writer). Although they are the elite of society, they do not display a role-model of behaviour. *The Resort* creates an imaginary space that is not subject to the rules, a space where chaos reigns: where the individual conceives the idea of a space escaping any Commandments. The order is established only when the power is taken up by the residents of the resort.

The end of the novel is remarkable by the moralizing touch of the narrator who decides to restore order by choosing another leader and punishing all the characters responsible for the chaos in the Resort: The Writer, the Doctor and the Magistrate are hanged, Caravella falls into the hands of the other women in the resort, and the Actor and the Hero die in the fire. The fire has a purifying role, destroying everything that was flawed. Alexandru Ecovoiu creates in his novel a utopia intended to serve as a symbol of a society dominated by the struggle for power. Universal patterns compose these society leaders who, by their features, sketch the bleak picture of a world in which money, dissoluteness and corruption are the main components that define modern society.

The novel *Ordinea* (Order) can be viewed as a political writing of nowadays society. The writer expresses his disappointment with the effects of poor understanding of freedom. The novel focuses on the crisis of values in modern society, showing that the contemporary world is heading towards chaos. Order is the core element of the novel. Order means dictatorship, imposing strict rules to eliminate severe chaos in society. Filip is the protagonist who creates the illusion that he could remove the chaos society is facing. Throughout the novel, the reader is just a silent witness of the plans Filip makes as future leader, meant to bring order and discipline in society. Virto (as Filip's future state is called) is again a utopia of a perfect world in which order dominates. Opposing to this is America which regards as the source of most sins: "a psychiatric clinic."

Filip puts himself in the shoes of the leader, namely a dictator who has an iron will and who would be able to establish order with recovering lost liberty. He creates a very good plan, with well documented stages, and chooses his friends according to his dictatorship needs: Ieronim is the one who assures his acceptance in the Literacy Club and he hopes the friendship with him may one day bring prestige and influence in the intellectuals' world. Moreover, his girlfriend, Ester, is a ballerina in Swan Lake show, whose popularity brings a positive aura to Filip. Another character that may help him in order restoration is Johan, an uncle from his mother side who opens his perspectives on alchemy. The relationship between Filip and these characters (especially Estera) is one of possession more than communication.

As we have already mentioned Alexandru Ecovoiu focuses on the analysis of different states of consciousness and not on the events themselves. Throughout the novel the writer depicts the tribulations in the character's mind. Filip misleads himself by taking the position of a dictator. This illusion increases every day and ends up taking over his entire life. His only

purpose is to fulfil his dream of order. The author offers an explanation for its abnormal trends of despotism namely that the child had suffered from meningitis and the disease has left traces of mental instability. That might explain the fact that some of his ideas reach the absurd: Filip wants to introduce the game of marbles as a kind of national sport. And his desire to kill a man in order to prove the power may be an explanation for mental instability. Moreover, his tendency to order everything around him adds arguments to Filip's psychiatric literary record. The paradox is that young Filip's life was marked by disorder (lust, alcohol addictions, smoking), which led to his parents' divorce. The character is caught between extreme behaviours, unable to find a moderate path. Either of the two options would have brought the same outcome.

A key feature of Alexandru Ecovoiu's work is the irony and the end of the novel brings forth this by a paradoxical explanation of the warrant officer: "prisoner committed suicide because he could not stand the order." Filip's entire life may be regarded as one of irony, as he always oscillates between order and disorder, without being able to follow a sane attitude. Alexandru Ecovoiu brings a touch of (post)modernity to Romanian prose. Unique in structure and content, the Romanian writer tackles in his novels an old theme with new techniques – power in all its levels and manifestations. This obsession for power rise from the stems of contemporary society. The struggle for power has become a defining characteristic of each individual – the dream of climbing higher on the stairs of success, no matter what the costs are. Alexandru Ecovoiu's work reveals current world situation perfectly: the modern man is dominated by corruption, malice, envy, and is controlled by obsessive desire for wealth. By giving up faith, the nowadays society (at least in the fictional worlds) is smothered in lust, sexuality, lack of morality and lack of the conscience of the sin. Sin, carnality before spirit, debauchery, money, power, hidden desires, dark ambitions are all literary motives that populate the evil universe found in the Alexandru Ecovoiu's novels.

In all his novels, Alexandru Ecovoiu finds the way of portraying typologies that behave accordingly on the background of a universe that is, sometimes (*Ordinea*), a mirror for the Romanian contemporary society. In other novels, the universe is a general, timeless one, a reason for the human experience to take place. His writing brings echoes of Kafka's universe (Ion Simuț) and puts the reader in the witness position as the narrative voice displays sensations, symbols and metaphors. Alexandru Ecovoiu lets the reader's imagination run free

and provide an authentic novel, both by content and structure, which has led off new literary attitudes in the development of postmodern Romanian literature.

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