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## Aleksandar Bečanović – Montenegro

### *Arcueil* (2015)

Arcueil

Publishing House **Levo krilo**

#### Biography

Aleksandar Bečanović, born in 1971, is a Montenegrin writer, film critic and screenwriter. He is the author of five poetry books, *Ulysses' Distance* (1994), *Being* (1996), *The Pantry* (1998), *Places in the Letter* (2001) and *Preludes and Fugues* (2007); two short story collections, *I am Waiting, What Will Happen Next* (2005) and *Obsession* (2009); and a novel, *Arcueil* (2015). He has also published two books of film criticism, *Genre in the Contemporary Cinema* (2005) and the 900-page long *Lexicon of Film Directors* (2015). He received the Risto Ratković Award for the best book of poetry in Montenegro in 2002. He writes film reviews and essays for Montenegrin daily *Vijesti*, and is one of the contributors to the books *501 Movie Directors* (2007), *501 Movie Stars* (2007), *101 Horror Movies You Must See Before You Die* (2009) and *101 Sci-Fi Movies You Must See Before You Die* (2009).

#### Synopsis

On Easter Sunday, April 3, 1768, Marquis de Sade promised an écu to a beggar by the name of Rose Keller if she would follow him to Arcueil. Only a few hours later, after Keller managed to escape from the Marquis' country house, this little 'adventure' in the Paris suburbs would become the notorious 'Arcueil affair', a scandal that caught the public imagination in France and beyond.

Different testimonies and rumours were spreading, conflicting interpretations were heard, but what really happened in the Marquis' room? Where lies the truth about the scandal? Was Arcueil the scene of horrible sadistic sexual violence and some kind of perverse theatrical production, or was the victim not so innocent after all? *Arcueil* is a complex, multi-perspective retelling of the 'Arcueil affair', which emphasizes the doubts and ambivalences of any historical or – for that matter – media event.

Marquis je izašao u osam sati.

Stojao je maloprije uokviren u velikom ogledalu, prikladno odjeven, sa izrazom lica koje je nestrpljivo iščekivalo što će se dalje desiti. Njegove oči su dobile dubinu neophodnu da bi strasti prešle u imperativ. Kosa je bila namještena, štap u ruci, nož za opasačem. Za religiozne svetkovine treba se dotjerati sa ukusom i otići sa neobaveznim šarmom, bez obzira da li zaista vjerujete u njih.

Ogledao se još nekoliko trenutaka, taman dovoljno da lik utone u njegove misli. Pripreme zahtijevaju, misli on, anđeosku pažnju, punu usredsređenost, predostrožnosti koje će predvidjeti svaku situaciju što bi mogla iskrsnuti. Stvari moraju imati čvrstu osnovu da bi se kasnije razbuktale. To je bio njegov nauk: užitak valja do u tančina izgraditi, on uvijek počiva na jasnom planu, na anticipiranju epizoda koje će uslijediti. Ovdje ne smije biti improvizacije: spontanost je za amatere. Sloboda zadovoljstva zapravo izrasta iz strogog rituala koji se ponavlja onoliko koliko je potrebno da se dođe do vrhunca. Užitak dolazi iz početnog razmišljanja i posljedičnog djelovanja da se zamišljeni nacrt dovede do kraja.

Pa opet, čak i kada se sve sprovede gvozdenom rukom, kada se detalji uvedu u traženi poredak objekata, ljudi i događaja, postoji mogućnost da će slučaj umiješati svoje prste. Ali, to bi trebalo razumjeti kao dodatno uzbuđenje, dodatni napor za postignuti cilj. Scena je već dotjerana, kulise su stavljene u funkciju, protagonisti upućeni u svoje uloge, a onda možda

dolazi neočekivana varijacija, malo pomjeranje u dizajnu. Jedva čekam da vidim kakav će biti rezultat, misli on, ponovo se vraćajući u fokus.

Plan za ovaj dan, čiju svetost valja iskušati, razrađen je sa sitničavošću starih egzegeta. Sada, kada se stvari pokrenu, ostaje da se vidi kakvi će biti efekti priče koja je formirana u časovima dokolice, snatrenja i hladno budne racionalnosti. Da li će u njoj biti materijala za dalje prepričavanje, za nova pripovjedanja, za drugačija ponavljanja.

Marquise je ostala u krevetu, gore na spratu, u inerciji koja ju je držala i u snu i na javi. Otkako je nedavno postala majka, neprestano je umorna, štoviše, rekao bi Marquis, i razdražljiva, ali ipak to ne pokazuje ispod svojih skorojevičkih manira. Kada se probudi i vidi da je njen suprug već uveliko izašao i da ne može računati s njegovim prisustvom na ovako važan dan gdje svaka porodica, naročito one najuglednije – a sada je pripadala takvoj –, traže jedinstvo i razoružavajuću bliskost, sa istim osjećajem dužnosti će uraditi, ma koliko bilo oskudno njeno razumijevanje, sve preporučene vjerske rituale. I iskreno će se žalostiti što familija neće ni ovaj put biti na okupu, jer Marquis uvijek ima nekih prećih stvari, neki neodložni posao koji zahtijeva njegovo potpuno angažovanje. Barem joj tako kasnije tumači svoje odlaske, dok ona sve više sumnja da tu nisu čista posla, i da njen suprug posjeduje pretjerano avanturistički duh eda bi svoj dom smatrao privilegovanim mjestom.

Makar ju je njena *maman* znalački tješila: Jednom kada postaneš majka, u njemu će se razviti načelo odgovornosti, njegova bjekstva će se okončati, ludorije sa teatroom prestati da ga opčinjavaju. Najgore su, dalje joj je pričala zabrinuta mater pored razigrane vatre u kaminu – dok je te razgovore

Marquis volio sebi pojačano da dočarava u njihovoj nategnutoj konvencionalnosti –, teatarske opsesije, besramno skupe a tako nepotrebne, čisto bacanje para, i od najmanjeg računa me zaboli glava, u toj naknadnoj Marquisovoj interpretaciji tvrdi *maman*, koja se odmah hvata za glavu, svima se žali na nepodnošljivu migrenu i odlazi u svoju sobu sa stavom istinske mučenice. Svi mi imamo naše male golgote, kaže *maman* svojoj kćerki, učeći je najdubljim mudrostima i najsvetijim tajnama bračnog života. Ali, sigurna sam, kaže ona a Marquis u sebi sve potvrđuje, da će ga mali Louis-Marie promijeniti iz korjena, neki nagovještaji su prisutni, postoje razlozi da se nadamo.

Marquise spava gore, u glomaznom bračnom krevetu, tvrdo poput pravednice. Kao i svi prostodušni ljudi, misli on, najsretnija je kad ne mora da razbija glavu oko svakodnevnih problema. Nju nikad nisu brinule okolnosti njihovog ugovorenog braka, nikad se nije zanimala kako je taj potpuni stranac – o kojem nije ni znala da ga prati određena reputacija iz falsifikovanih policijskih dosijea i zluradih glasina – završio u njenoj postelji odmah tražeći sve pripadajuće bračne prinadležnosti, a možda i neke van obaveznog popisa. Da se interesovala, zasigurno je prvo odgovore trebala da potraži kod njene gospođe majke, baš pored istog onog kamina gdje sada dobija naknadne i neučinkovite bračne poduke i savjete. Samo prostodušni ljudi, misli on, mogu da budu duboko u sebi nezadovoljni sudbinom, a da se ne bune protiv nje.

Marquise krasi kvalitet da očekuje rasplet događaja sa krotkom ravnodušnoću. Da je kakva filozofesa, tu bi osobinu nazvao božanskom apatijom. Nedostižni ideal koji se zamjenjuje pojačanom dramaturgijom što laž ustoličuje ne kao opsjenu, ne kao iluziju, već kao neophodni dodatak ili začin onome što zaista mislimo o životu. Sjetio se sa smiješkom – ogledalo je automatski naglasilo promjenu u licu – jednog proljeća u château

d'Évry kada su svi morali da prihvate nove uloge, da iskoče na kratko iz svog zatvorenog bića i prepuste se njegovoj režiserskoj ruci koja nije samo postavljala ljude u malom proscenijumu, nego je i ispravljala i dopisivala uvažene komade.

Čak se i Marquise bila opustila, prihvativši svoje role u začudno dobro raspoloženju, valjda zato što je pokušavala da uvidi sličnosti između teatra i života, lažno sigurna da se drugi element mora povinovati prvom, da su pisani zakoni jači od haosa stvarnosti. Ušla bi u svoj lik bez oklijevanja, uvjerena da će čuti baš ono što je željela, moralni nauk i izjavu ljubavi, od strane muškarca koga je, onda kada je u njemu prihvatila vlastiti usud, voljela i sa strašću i sa dužnošću. Pjevala je poboljšane i preokrenute stihove koji su obećavali harmoniju i sretni kraj, iako joj slabašni glas nije dozvoljavao da pogodi pravu intonaciju. Bilo je u svemu tome više šarma nego nezgrapnosti, prisjećao se on, naročito u njenim pozama kada je glumila samouvjerenost, iznutra potrešena mogućnošću da nešto neočekivano dobija, iako *maman* nije prestajala da se buni oko troškova izgrađene otvorene pozornice, izvezenih kostima i ponekog profesionalnog glumca, unajmljenog za ove svečanosti.

Ali, glavni udar ironije nalazio se u činjenici da je i *maman* – još bijesna zbog pozamašnog deficita – tog proljeća završila na pozornici, moglo bi se reći, misli on, u maloj Marquisovoj drami. Tačnije, farsi, jer na repertoaru su, u skladu sa najnovijom aristokratskom modom da se u činjenicama vidi tek odblesak nedostižnog ciničnog ideala, bile samo trivijalne komedije, laki komadi koji su trebali da prevare i one unutar i one izvan pozornice, da ponude priprostu zabavu koja je, međutim, čuvala u sebi mračne namjere. Jer, svijet je najlakše prevariti uz pomoć sretnog kraja, konvencije u koju žurimo da povjerujemo, taman kao da nam lična radost zavisi od njega.

Dovedena na pozorišne daske, otrgnuta na trenutak iz svoje praktične svakodnevice, Mme de Montreuil je bila osuđena na očaravajuće zadovoljstvo i plodonosnu taštinu, koje čak ni uvijek prisutno gundavo škrtarenje nije moglo da umanjiti.

*Maman* je polako izlazila na scenu, misli on, dok podiže obrvu iznad desnog oka kao da zaista posmatra taj spektakularni ulaz, prvo iskreno zbunjena, ljuta na sebe što je prihvatila da kao šiparica nepromišljeno upadne u pripremljenu zamku, nervozna jer se dala nagovoriti bez da je pružila dostojanstveni otpor. Treba joj neko vrijeme da se navikne na okruženje, da prihvati snagu fikcije. Onda se prepušta, obrazi su joj rumeni od pristiglog zadovoljstva, uživlja se u svoju ulogu i spremna je da zaboravi na sitničave zamjerke.

*Maman* na sceni, to je prizor koji valja pohraniti u sjećanju, da bi kasnije mogao biti iskorišten za blagodeti ironije. U povećem kostimu koji njeno tijelo čini okruglim, ona zamišlja da je gospodarica priče koja je, međutim, već davno određena a dijalozi su unaprijed spriječili autonomnost radnje. Volio je da tokom predstave, čekajući da dođe red na njega, posmatra majku i kćerku, kako iz suprotstavljenih razloga prihvataju da se ponašaju u skladu sa zakonima otrcane farse: jedna je mislila da pozorište oplemenjuje, da će biti katarza u bračnom životu u čiju je svrhu već počela da sumnja, iako su zlosutne informacije bile pažljivo sklanjane od nje, druga je bila ubjeđena da, uz malo laskanja, može sve da kontroliše s obje strane zavjese i da joj ništa neće promaći. To je najniži i prezrenja dostojan efekt pozorišta: da natjerate ljude da povjeruju u iluziju, da obezbjedite prostor u koji će moći da nadoknade ono što im manjka i da izbace ono što ih tišti. Prostodušni ljudi su najbolja, ali i najneznavenija publika, posebno kad u svojim umovima igraju drugima dodijeljene uloge ili oponašaju tuđe akcije.

Teatar je nešto drugo, misli on, potpuno drugačija instanca: on ne proizvodi ni laž ni istinu, ne vraća ništa i ne obezbjeđuje ništa. Nema ničega na što bi se moglo ugledati, ničega na čemu bi se valjalo zadržati. Nema pročišćenja i pokajanja, smijeh nikada nije srdačan, suze nikad nisu potresne. Teatar je ispad iz logike morala, i zato sredstvo da se njime bičuje hipokrizija i konvencija, ali ne da bi se svijet poboljšao, ne da bi bila poslata poruka, ovo je loše, ovo je nemoralno, nemojte da radite poročna djela. Ne, pozorište je mjesto gdje upravljate ljudima i riječima, pravite najoprije kalkulacije, raspoređujete ispod proscenijuma stvari i junake, kombinujete tijela u pozama, položajima, shemama, činite vještačkom svaku vezu, svaki govor, cijelu prirodu.

Najviše je volio pripreme, iščekivanje pred spektakl, zadržku prije nego će priča biti postavljena. Onda bi izašao na pozornicu da je dobro osmotri, prošetao bi nekoliko puta uzduž i poprijeko da osjeti koliko prostora može da dobije ako iskoristi dubinu pozadine. Zatim bi razmišljao o tome kako postaviti svjetlo i usmjeriti pogled gledaoca, jer pozornica nema svrhu ako u njoj nema mjesta za sjenke koje svemu daju nijansu, i lažnoj bezbrižnosti farse i nategnutoj moralnosti tragedije. Fikcija je velika ne zato što sve može, već zato što ništa ne mora.

*Arcueil*

**Aleksandar Bečanović**

*Translated from Montenegrin by Will Firth*

The Marquis left the house at eight in the morning.

Just before that he had stood framed in a large mirror, suitably dressed, with an expression on his face that showed he eagerly awaited what was to come. His eyes took on the depth needed for passions to cross over to the imperative. His hair was neatly combed, his walking stick in hand, and his knife under his belt. You have to dress with taste and go out with easygoing charm on church holidays, whether you believe in them or not.

He looked at himself closely for a few moments more, just enough for his countenance to sink into his thoughts. The preparations, he thought, demanded angelic attention, full concentration and foresight to allow him to predict every situation that could arise. Things had to have a firm base so that they might blaze up later. That was his maxim: enjoyment has to be worked out down to the finest detail; it always rests on a clear plan and anticipation of the episodes to follow. There must not be any improvisation here: spontaneity is for amateurs. Rather, the freedom of pleasure grows out of a strict ritual repeated as often as necessary for the apex to be reached. Enjoyment comes from initial reflection and subsequent activity to see a conceived project through to its end.

And yet even when everything is implemented with an iron hand, when the desired sequence of objects, characters and events is fleshed out in detail, there is still a possibility of



chance taking a hand. But that should be seen as an added thrill, an extra effort required to attain the goal. The stage is decorated, the scenery set up, the protagonists are conversant with their roles, and then an unexpected variation can come, a small shift in design. *I can hardly wait to see what the result will be*, he thought, and returned to his focus again.

The plan for this day, whose sanctity was to be tested, had been elaborated with the meticulousness of old exegetes. Now, when things were getting under way, it remained to be seen what the effects would be of this story formed in hours of leisure, in daydreaming and cool-headed rationalism. Would it provide material for further paraphrasing, new narrations and different iterations?

The Marquise remained in bed upstairs, in the inertia that held her both when asleep and awake. Since giving birth recently, she had been constantly tired, and moreover tetchy, the Marquis would say, but still she didn't show it beneath her parvenue manners. When she woke up and saw that her husband was well and truly gone and that she could not count on his presence on this important day, where every family, especially the most respectable ones – she now belonged to those circles – demanded unity and an ingratiating closeness, she would perform all the recommended religious rituals with the same sense of duty, however limited her understanding was. And she would be sincerely sad that the family wasn't together again because the Marquis always had some pressing things to attend to, urgent business that demanded his complete commitment. That, at any rate, is how he later explained his absences to her, while she increasingly suspected that something fishy was going on and that her husband possessed too adventurous a spirit to consider his home a privileged place.

At least her *maman* consoled her with all her expertise: “When you become the mother of his child, the Marquis will acquire a degree of responsibility, and the escapades with the theatre will cease to fascinate him. Theatrical obsessions are the worst –,” her anxious mother continued beside the dancing flames in the fireplace (the Marquis loved to evoke those conversations for himself and play them through in their stiff conventionality) “because they are shamelessly expensive and so unnecessary, a pure waste of money, and the smallest invoice gives me a headache,” *maman* claimed in the Marquis’ retrospective interpretation. She immediately grasped her head in her hands, complained of an unbearable migraine and went off to her room with the pose of a true martyr. “We all have our little ‘Calvaries,’” *maman* confided to her daughter, teaching her the deepest wisdoms and holiest secrets of married life. “But I’m sure, and the Marquis confirms it himself, that Louis-Marie will change him radically – there are already some signs – so there is cause for hope,” she said.

The Marquise slept upstairs in a bulky, king-size bed, soundly, like the sleep of the just. As with all simple-minded people, he thought, she was happiest when she didn’t have to worry about everyday problems. She never cared about the circumstances of their arranged marriage and was never interested in how that complete stranger – she didn’t even know he was followed by a certain reputation from forged police dossiers and malicious rumours – ended up in her bed and immediately demanded the fulfilment of all her conjugal duties, and perhaps also some that were not on the list. If she had asked herself these questions, she certainly should first have sought answers from her esteemed mother, beside the very same fireplace where she was now being given belated, futile marital instruction and advice. Only simple-minded people,

he thought, could be so dissatisfied deep inside with their fate, and yet not rebel against it.

The Marquise was graced by the quality of awaiting the outcome of events with meek equanimity. Had she been a philosopher of any kind, he would have termed this characteristic divine apathy. An unreachable ideal that is substituted by intensified dramaturgy that enthrones the lie not as a sleight of hand, not as an illusion, but as an essential dash of spice to what we really think about life. He recalled with a smile – the mirror automatically accentuated the change on his face – one spring at Château d'Évry when everyone had to accept new roles, briefly step out of their closed selves and trust his director's hand, which not only placed people in the small proscenium but also reworked and rounded off the celebrated pieces.

Even the Marquise relaxed and accepted her roles in a remarkably good mood, probably because she was trying to see similarities between theatre and life, falsely confident that the latter must submit to the former, and that written laws were stronger than the chaos of reality. She would take on her character without hesitation, convinced that she was going to hear just what she wanted: moral edification and a declaration of love from the man whom, once she accepted he was her destiny, she loved both passionately and dutifully. She sang improved verses with changed meanings that promised harmony and a happy end, although her feeble voice prevented her from getting the intonation right. There was more charm than clumsiness in all that, he recollected, particularly in her poses when she played self-confidence, all shook-up inside by the possibility of gaining something unexpectedly, although *maman* never stopped complaining about the cost of the fully constructed open stage, the embroidered costumes and the handful of professional actors hired for the festivities.

But irony's main blow, so to speak, lay in the fact that *maman* herself – still furious about the sizeable deficit – ended up on the stage that spring in one of his small dramas, the Marquis thought. It was a farce, to be exact, because, in line with the latest aristocratic fashion of seeing facts as just a reflection of an unattainable, cynical ideal, the repertoire consisted purely of trivial comedies, light pieces that were supposed to trick those both on and off the stage into thinking that they offered plain amusement, when they actually harboured dark intentions. People are easiest to cheat with the help of a happy ending, a convention we are quick to believe, as if our personal happiness depended on it. Led onto the boards of the theatre, torn away from her everyday concerns for a moment, Mme de Montreuil was condemned to enthralling pleasure and creative vanity, which even her perpetual grouchy avarice was unable to impair.

*Maman* stepped out onto the stage slowly, he thought and raised his right eyebrow as if he was actually scrutinising that spectacular entry. At first she was sincerely bewildered, angry at herself for having been so simple as to unthinkingly walk straight into a trap like a greenhorn, and nervous because she had let herself be persuaded without offering a dignified show of resistance. She needed some time to get used to the surroundings and accept the power of fiction. Then she let go, her cheeks went red from a surge of pleasure, she identified with her role and was prepared to forget her petty-minded quibbles.

*Maman* on stage – that was a sight worth remembering so it could later be used for the benefit of irony. In a rather large costume that made her body seem rotund, she fancied herself the mistress of the story, but things had long been laid down and the dialogues hindered the autonomy of the acting in advance. As he waited for his own parts in the performance,

the Marquis enjoyed watching mother and daughter acquiesce to go along with the laws of the trite farce for opposite reasons. The one thought that theatre ennobled, that it would be a catharsis for her marriage, whose purpose she had already begun to doubt, although ominous information was always painstakingly hidden from her; the other was convinced that, with a little flattery, she would be able to gain full control on both sides of the curtain, and nothing would escape her attention. That is the lowliest and most shameful effect of theatre: you make people believe in an illusion, you provide a space where they can compensate for what they lack and cast off what vexes them. Simple-minded people are the best, but also the most ignorant audience, especially when their minds play the roles assigned to others or imitate the actions of others.

Theatre is something else, he thought – a completely different agency. It produces neither lies nor truth, it neither returns nor promises anything. There is nothing for you to emulate and nothing you should cling to. There is no cleansing and penitence, the laughter is never heartfelt, and the tears are never touching. Theatre is a suspension of the logic of morals and therefore can be used to scourge hypocrisy and convention, but not in order to make the world a better place or to send a message: this is bad, this is immoral, steer clear of sin. No, theatre is a place where you govern people and words, make ruthless calculations, dispose of things and heroes beneath the proscenium arch, combine bodies in poses, positions and schemes, and cast every bond, all speech and the whole of nature in an artificial mould.

Most of all he liked the preparations, the anticipation before a show and the delay before the story was put on. Then he would go out onto the stage to have a good look around; he would walk the length and breadth of it several times to get a

sense of how much space he could gain if he exploited the full depth at the rear. Later he would think about how to place the light and direct the gaze of viewers, because the stage has no purpose if there is no place for the shades that give all things their hue, including the false nonchalance of the farce and the strained morality of the tragedy. Fiction is great not because everything is possible, but because nothing is prescribed.



EUROPEAN UNION  
PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

2017

**Aleksandar Bečanović** – Montenegro

*Arcueil*

Arcueil

121 pp, 2015

**Translations:** The rights for translation have not been sold yet.  
(*Last Update – March 2017*)

Publishing House **Levo krilo**

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Barajevo, Serbia

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ISBN: 978-86-89225-17-4

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