

REVIEW

Of the *member* of the dissertation council for the dissertation of Kirichenko Vladislav Vladimirovich on the topic: "Fact and Fiction in Georges Perec's Works", submitted for the degree of candidate of philological sciences in a scientific speciality 5.9.2. Literatures of peoples of the world

Vladislav Kirichenko's PhD dissertation, entitled "Fact and Fiction in Georges Perec's Works", is immediately impressive because of the importance of the subject and the ambition of its demonstration. Its reasoning is rigorous and efficient. Coherent and rich, the work is very clear and well written. The first part is a synthesis of the theory of possible worlds, which sets the general framework for the reflection, and the two following parts address, in a retro-chronological order, the question of the relationship between fact and fiction, first in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) and then in *La Disparition* (1969). Although the reflection on the relationship between fact and fiction in Perec's work is not in itself new, it has most often been conducted in relation to autobiography and its oblique use by Perec. The decisive contribution of the dissertation is to renew these debates thanks to the question of possible worlds which, to my mind, has never been the subject of an in-depth analysis in Perec's works.

This dissertation is characterized first of all by its excellent knowledge of Perec's work and of the criticism on the author, as well as by a quite remarkable mastery of the theory of fiction and the theory of possible worlds, which is cleverly handled in the reasoning.

In the first part, Vladislav Kirichenko offers a good reflection on the lexical confusions between "possible world" and "fictional world" (228), in particular with regard to autofiction and even more so in the case of Perec. He then points out, and rightly so, the lexical difference that also exists in French, between "fictif" and "fictionnel".

Regarding *W*, the dissertation hesitates on the terminology to qualify the text, which is alternatively called novel, autobiography or autofiction, and this, sometimes, within the same sentence. On the whole, however, it seems difficult to call *W* a novel as the dissertation most often does. The more accurate name would be autobiography, since the fiction exists only as a reflection of the autobiography and has no autonomy as such. For example, the first part of the fiction begins as an autobiography and echoes the autobiographical part, creating uncertainty about the boundaries between fact and fiction. All the more so as some of the memories are false memories or screen memories, to use Lejeune's term. Thus the central scene, narrated three times, of the separation with the mother at the Gare de Lyon, in which Perec remembers having with him an

album of Charlot parachutist, which, under the Occupation, is totally impossible because Charlot albums were banned.

The dissertation then subtly shows how *W* is organised into several possible worlds whose links and accessibility are problematic. Very clear summary tables help to visualise the complex organisation of these worlds for which different classifications are proposed. Vladislav Kirichenko thus identifies 4 possible worlds in *W*, two fundamental ones (with a main narrator) and two that are linked to superstructures (with a so-called " supplementary " narrator). While this analysis is stimulating, one reserve can be made: from a narratological point of view, it seems difficult to distinguish two narrators within a single narrative instance. Vladislav Kirichenko, for example, identifies two narrators in the autobiographical parts (238-239), but it is in fact a single narrator who, as in all autobiographies, assumes two "I", the one called the "I" narrating, who narrates from the present, and the one called the "I" narrated, who corresponds to the subject at the time of the events narrated.

This analysis would be more effective if the dissertation showed more clearly and earlier that Gaspard Winckler's trip to *W* is only allusively mentioned in the first part and then disappears completely in the second part, so that it is not clear whether Winckler is really the narrator of the second part. This uncertainty is fundamental to the question of testimony. In any case, Vladislav Kirichenko offers a fine study of the connections between these worlds, even if this analysis is at first a little too limited to abstract or formal questions: it would be more effective if it were better linked to the events of the plot, in particular by returning more concretely to the problem of the identity of the narrator and of Gaspard Winckler.

Nevertheless, the discussion of the characteristics that allow us to identify these worlds is highly stimulating, especially when it comes to seeing whether these worlds are mental or physical, whether they are the site of actions, whether they respond to the laws of nature, or according to the alethic, deontic, axiological or epistemological modalities that dominate them. It would have been interesting to immediately link these elements to the issues of meaning that are deduced from them. The reader is left a little unsatisfied, although the approach is original, rich and promising. For example, the question of worlds characterised by mental states rather than physical actions makes sense in relation to the Holocaust, the non-experienced and the witness. Perec makes Winckler say at the beginning: « *dans le témoignage que je m'apprête à faire, je fus témoin, et non acteur. Je ne suis pas le héros de mon histoire.* » ("In the testimony I am about to give, I was a witness, not an actor. I am not the hero of my story"). This statement echoes Perec's situation, who, even more than Winckler, is not a witness to the events, which explains the impossibility of giving an account of them in a testimony and the need to have recourse to a fiction to talk about them.

Regarding the modalities, Vladislav Kirichenko could be advised to reflect on the use of the present tense conditional which opens the fictional part on the island W and ends the first autobiographical chapter of this part to evoke a happy and normal childhood with his mother that Perec did not have. It is as if the conditional tense installs a system of fiction that spreads throughout the autobiography, that derealizes what should be real, while fiction tends to become more real than it is, as if the camps had taken the place of the reality of Perec's childhood.

Moreover, we can fully subscribe to the fact that Vladislav Kirichenko shows that the epistemological modality is the most problematic in these possible worlds (258). Because what is at the heart of W is the question of knowledge, about the personal past as well as about the un-lived past, knowledge after and about the camps when one is not a witness of the events. Thus W is certainly closer to the testimony of Antelme and Rousset than to that of Primo Levi. Both texts take their strength from their certainty about the possibility of establishing knowledge about the camps. They are models of understanding for Perec but are invalidated by the fact that he himself is not a witness. Furthermore, the narrative on W Island imitates Rousset's *L'Univers concentrationnaire*. The narrator attempts to reproduce the mode of narration of Rousset's testimony, which had blurred his "I" in order to universalise his experience. Like him, the narrator of the fiction on W Island gives the impression of a certain objectivity. He tries to speak in a neutral and detached tone. He never speaks for himself, as if he were faithfully reproducing things. But this objectivity is only a facade that is gradually cracked by a series of personal opinions that may surprise. For example, the narrator praises the « *traits les plus originaux de la société W* », « *ce qui fait toute l'originalité de W* » or « *la fière devise de W* ». All these marks of judgement undermine his supposed objectivity and proscribe any association with the position of the camp witness trying to know. Perec's narrator is disturbing because he subscribes to the W system. Far from being offended by the abuse, he praises its effectiveness. He is committed to the concentration camp policy. This endorsement, which only reveals its ironic dimension towards the end of the text, contradicts Rousset's testimony and creates a constant feeling of unease for the reader, who is forced to wonder about the identity of the person who is showing him around W.

This distance from the Rousset model of testimony also stems from the generation to which Perec belongs, the "1.5" generation, to borrow a category from Susan Suleiman, which is that of hidden children who did not experience the events directly but lived with their consequences.

Regarding *La Disparition*, Vladislav Kirichenko rightly emphasises the family dimension of the novel (323), indicating how the evolution of the characters towards an understanding of their past outlines what could be a possible path for Perec himself (323). On this point, we recommend reading Yu Maeyama's PhD dissertation (available online at <https://hal-amu.archives->

ouvertes.fr/hal-02488645/document), which shows how the autobiographical work on *L'Arbre* may have influenced the gradual modification of *La Disparition* into a true family novel.

The identification of the different possible worlds in *La Disparition* is made from the stories told and the character who tells them (303-304) but the changing of the narrator, the embedding and the changing of the subject are not enough to make them different worlds. All these stories belong in reality to the same overall story. The identity of the characters is the same, so that it is difficult to speak of possible worlds. Only the foreword seems to describe a different world from the rest of the plot.

Vladislav Kirichenko also subtly shows how the Zahir is the second cause of the characters' death, a mystical or esoteric one (315). One could even go further and say that, as a rewriting of a Borges short story, the Zahir in *La Disparition* could be a literary cause to their deaths, which echoes the postscript in which the writer himself is incriminated in the murders because of the writing constraint he has set for himself.

Vladislav Kirichenko also demonstrates very well how the Bearded Man, with his unpronounceable name, could be associated with the letter 'e' (316), and this could be extended by seeing an echo of the Tetragrammaton which, in Jewish tradition, is the unpronounceable name of God. God who is the father of men as the Bearded Man is the father of the family line. The Tetragrammaton is also at the heart of Borges' "Death and the Compass", in which Inspector Lönnrot is trapped by his tendency to turn the enigma into a textual enigma in the manner of the characters in *La Disparition*, who are all readers of Voyl's texts. It is as if Perec were indicating that the text itself could be a trap.

The analysis of the "heroes-shards" (323-324) is also very relevant, particularly with regard to Savorgnan, Conson and Voyl. We should also praise the beautiful reflection on Perec's white melancholia (332-335), to which Vladislav Kirichenko links the detective novel in an interesting way, even if the detective novel is above all essential for Perec as a genre of the triumph of knowledge, as an epistemological genre par excellence, since it is precisely this question of knowledge, on the past, on death, on disappearance, that is at the heart of the text.

Finally, it should be pointed out that Vladislav Kirichenko was quite right to begin his analysis with *W* and then to turn to *La Disparition*, even if the explanation given, which is very accurate, comes a little late, at the very end of the work (337).

Dissertation of Kirichenko Vladislav Vladimirovich on the topic: "Fact and Fiction in Georges Perec's Works" *meets* the basic requirements established by Order No.11181/1 dd. 19.11.2021 "On the procedure for awarding academic degrees at St. Petersburg State University". The applicant Kirichenko Vladislav Vladimirovich *deserves* to be awarded the academic degree

of *candidate of philological* sciences in a scientific speciality 5.9.2. Literatures of peoples of the world. No violations of paragraphs 9 and 11 of the specified Order have been detected.

Maxime Decout

Professor at Sorbonne University,

27 April 2023

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'M. Decout', written in a cursive style.