

# The Dialogic Mise En Abyme in *Le Mage Du Kremlin* by Giuliano Da Empoli: An Analysis by Pavlina Ribarova

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**Abstract:** *This study presents an analysis of the novel *Le Mage du Kremlin* by Giuliano da Empoli, focusing on the aspects of mise en abyme and dialogue. The narrative techniques and their significance in portraying the contemporary world crisis are examined. The article explores how the novels polyphonic and fluid narrative offers a critical perspective on today's world.*

**Keywords:** Poutine, contemporary history, fiction, mise en abyme, topicality, dialogue

## 1. Introduction

Former adviser to statesman Matteo Renzi, Giuliano da Empoli is an Italian - Swiss political scientist and essayist who published, in 2022, the novel that critics unanimously call the great novel of contemporary Russia. Anne Fulda recalls that *Le Mage du Kremlin* was with difficulty dismissed in favor of *Vivre vite* by Brigitte Giraud for the Prix Goncourt 2022.<sup>1</sup> Apart from this distinction, the novel is crowned, on October 27, 2022, with the Grand Prix of the French Academy. The undeniable quality of the award - winning book is highlighted by many critics, including Soisic Belin from *Marianne*, Etienne de Montety from *Figaro* and Jérôme Garcin from the *Nouvel Observateur*. The visionary novel, completed an year before Russia invaded Ukraine, is rightly compared to a psychoanalysis of the former USSR. The depth of the author's vision, his sublime meditation on power, the perfect mastery of his subject and the virtuoso style of his pen are unanimously highlighted. This study is devoted to two aspects of the writing of the book, namely the mise en abyme and the dialogical framework, both of which can be located in depth and which measure the primordial value of subjectivity.

### The mise en abyme on two levels

First, the mise en abyme is played out, for *Le Mage du Kremlin*, in the overall perspective: the author Giuliano da Empoli is above all a political adviser himself, having chosen fictional expression for its power and its magnitude. He is a committed author who has written several articles and essays on various themes of world news.<sup>2</sup> *Le Mage du Kremlin* was also conceived as an essay. It was a way of reacting to the contemporary crisis, to the danger posed by Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia. However, if today's world is in danger, it does not reside at the political level, but at the human level: to communicate to the world the true nature of Russia, as well as some of the flaws of the western world, G. da Empoli chooses realistic fiction. Apart from the private life of the main character, all the facts are real, based on research and conversations that the author carried out on the spot and during which, in particular, he realized that what is

paradoxical, contradictory and irrational in Russia, can only be grasped through literature.<sup>3</sup> Thus, his book is populated by real characters - Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Poutine, Boris Yeltsin, Edouard Limonov, Igor Sechine, Bill Clinton, Angela Merkel, Alexandre Zaldostanov, Evgueni Prigojine etc - whom he puts in fictional dialogues the ones with the others. G. da Empoli placed, as an epigraph to his novel, a quotation from the philosopher Alexandre Kojève:

La vie est une comédie. Il faut la jouer sérieusement.<sup>4</sup>

As the author explains in an interview for *Corriere della sera*, this choice is due to the fact that the quote sums up well the spirit of Vadim Baranov's character (as well as of his prototype Surkov): indeed, Baranov/Surkov is a man of letters and the arts who sees his role as a political adviser as an artistic performance.<sup>5</sup> Nathalie Collard recalls that more than a political adviser, Vladislav Sourkov was a businessman with an atypical professional career, having even written songs for the gothic rock group Agata Kristi under the pseudonym Natan Dubovitsky.<sup>6</sup> However, the first pages of the novel confirm this perspective: the author evokes a BBC documentary which attributed to Baranov the responsibility for importing the artifices of avant - garde theater into politics.<sup>7</sup>

Then, the mise en abyme is reproduced at the level of the narrative framework. The anonymous narrator who enters the scene speaking of Vadim Baranov says he is obsessed with Yevgeny Zamyatin, a Russian author from the beginning of the twentieth century who, after understanding the sinister turn his country had taken with the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, wrote a novel of political anticipation that only appeared in Russia in 1988, which depicts a totalitarianism in the making transposed into fiction.<sup>8</sup> It is about this author, compared to a time machine and who believed he was writing a fierce critique of the Soviet system

<sup>3</sup>Idem.

<sup>4</sup>Empoli 2022:11.

<sup>5</sup>Montefiori 2022.

<sup>6</sup>Collard 2022.

<sup>7</sup>Empoli 2022:18.

<sup>8</sup>Sagnes and Viala 2004.

<sup>1</sup>Fulda 2022.

<sup>2</sup>Lepine 2022.

but who, in truth, had spanned a century to address our era<sup>9</sup>, which the narrator declares to have instituted a search:

À mes côtés, presque partout, marchait un magnifique fantôme dans lequel j'avais reconnu un allié potentiel pour quelques raisonnements auxquels je me livrais.<sup>10</sup>

This ghost of the writer and his dystopia turn out to be the point of intersection, the place where the two narrators of *Le Mage du Kremlin* meet and begin to form a so-called pair of narrators, a split narrative I. Because it is by exchanging quotes from Zamyatin on a social network that the anonymous narrator and the retired adviser Baranov find themselves. Baranov's account continues for some two hundred pages, throughout which (almost) neither the anonymous narrator nor the setting of the dacha where the two readers of Zamyatin have gathered to converse appear. After being led through a series of close-ups on portraits of real characters, on social phenomena and on revealing psychological traits, the reader finds himself faced with a new dystopia, conceived no longer by Zamyatin, but by G. da Empoli who entrusts it to the speech of its protagonist Vadim Baranov:

L'histoire humaine se termine avec nous. Avec vous, avec moi et peut-être avec nos enfants. Après, il y aura encore quelque chose, mais ce ne sera plus l'humanité.<sup>11</sup>

It is only after having closed this prophetic discourse that the I of the narration returns to its initial anonymous bearer, while the reader has the feeling of emerging from a state of hypnosis. The character of Baranov, rediscovering the third person, once again becomes the object of the narration. At the end of the novel, the dystopia itself is thrown into abyss (or at least in question) by the appearance on the scene of Baranov's five-year-old daughter, who symbolizes both a possible outcome and the confirmation of the dark perspective in which the narrator/s talking have just glimpsed the future.

## 2. Dialog

The dialogue appears charged with the primordial value of the work of Giuliano da Empoli. Very obvious on the one hand, it also acts strongly as a hidden dialogue.

Apparently, dialogue first acquires multiple manifestations. The staging itself is dialogical. Most of the revelations about contemporary Russian reality, as well as world reality, take place either within fictional dialogues between the characters - both main and secondary - or within the interior monologue of the narrator, dialogical at the start. We can cite as an example the conversation between Vadim Baranov and Boris Berezovski<sup>12</sup> on the latter's idea of plotting Putin's accession to power; that between Vladimir Putin and Vadim Baranov, preparing the latter for the post of adviser to the

tsar<sup>13</sup>; those of Vadim Baranov, already an adviser, with Edouard Limonov<sup>14</sup>, with the biker Alexandre Zaldostanov<sup>15</sup>, with Garry Kasparov<sup>16</sup>, with Evgueni Prigojine<sup>17</sup>, as well as the last with Berezovski<sup>18</sup>, without forgetting the detached replies exchanged between the characters, such as those of V. Putin and E. Prigojine.<sup>19</sup>

Then, the duplication of the I of narration (Vadim Baranov and the anonymous narrator) is placed halfway between the visible and the hidden concerning the dialogic level. Indeed, from page 13 to page 34 the first person is that of an anonymous narrator to whom the I of narration only returns - except for a few brief reappearances - on page 276 for the very last paragraphs of the book. His speech, both contemplative and insightful, frames that of the character of Vadim Baranov who develops his point of view on the history of Russians during the last eight decades. The first narrative I is that of a character who remains anonymous throughout the novel and who seems to have been constructed as an echo of that of Vadim Baranov, the second narrative I. And this to the point of confusing them: after the end of Baranov's account, at the moment when the word returns to the first narrative I, the reader has almost forgotten that such a person existed. However, the character of the narrator could be perceived as the disembodiment of that of the main character: it would be an innocent Vadim Baranov, literary, hovering in the world of letters and writings, a person induced by wisdom that G. da Empoli chose wisely for the role of confessor to the Kremlin adviser.

Finally, the dialogue exists implicitly: it is heard at the level of the tone of the text. Note that the narrative in the first person narrative represented by the material of the novel is not demiurgic, but personified, which presupposes the initiation of the reader. Throughout his speech, Baranov addresses a multiple interlocutor, using a you connoting sometimes politeness, sometimes people from the West, sometimes only one of his representatives. In any case, it is an invitation to reflection and constant dialogue.

Since the importance of the dialogue in the novel appears in many aspects, one would be tempted to suggest that the voice of the author Giuliano da Empoli is embodied by the fictional, while that of the reality that he tries to make comprehensible - by this same reality as it is. In the perspective of this marriage between the fictional and the real, the primordial role of subjectivity emerges.

## 3. Subjectivity

Fiction, as a form of expression, makes possible the approach reconciling analysis and confession, the narrative of socio-political events and that of the things of life. Thanks to this approach, the text acquires the power to sensitize to reality - to its acuteness, as well as to its depth. It

<sup>13</sup>idem: 98-103.

<sup>14</sup>idem: 147.

<sup>15</sup>idem: 182-186.

<sup>16</sup>idem: 190-192.

<sup>17</sup>idem: 216-222.

<sup>18</sup>idem: 223-228.

<sup>19</sup>idem: 213.

<sup>9</sup>Empoli 2022:19.

<sup>10</sup>Empoli 2022:19.

<sup>11</sup>Empoli 2022:273.

<sup>12</sup>idem: 85.

was as a curious and empathetic man that G. da Empoli sought to penetrate the violent universe of the dictatorship in Russia. However, as Elise Lepine has noted, the novel ends before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In her article of 27.10.2022 published in *Le Point*, she also recounts, quoting the author, his view of his book in the light of the events that have occurred since March 2022:

J'aurais plus de mal à m'identifier à ce type de personnage aujourd'hui. J'ai pu entrer dans la tête d'un Russe à une époque où les conclusions atroces du régime de Poutine n'étaient pas encore pleinement visibles et déployées. Je ne sais pas si j'aurais été capable, ou si j'aurais eu envie, d'écrire ce livre après la guerre en Ukraine. . .<sup>20</sup>

The subjective approach, the almost intimate tone by dint of being personal, is very noticeable throughout the narration. Giuliano da Empoli invests his own sincerity and insight into the panoply of his characters. The personal, the subjective and the psychological are his preferred biases. It is within personal perception that the events described acquire their value and magnitude. Examples abound: in retrospect, the abyssal tragedy of the Russian people since the Bolsheviks came to power is presented in a way that is as frank as it is discreet, through stories of lived experiences; however revealing of portraits and psychological types it may be, the story of the relationship between Ksenia and Vadim which traces, like an Ariadne's thread, the entire narrative framework, remains a love story, personal above all; the rise of Putin is explained from the point of view of social psychology. If we take a step back towards the narrative as a whole, we see that the personal - temporal axis going from the grandfather to the daughter of Vadim Baranov governs the narrative matter all the more strongly because it is not very visible. It rhymes with the motif of a quest for the human: let us recall that at the beginning the anonymous narrator declared himself to be interested in the life of the dead much more than that of the living<sup>21</sup> - in other words, in the past tense, to spirits inhabiting his human consciousness and no longer the world as it is today - , while the last pages of Baranov's story unfold a chilling reflection on the absolute power of machines and the imminent disappearance of man for the benefit of technology. Through subjectivity, the human haunts Giuliano da Empoli's novel like a ghost.

#### 4. Conclusion

From a literary perspective, *Le Mage du Kremlin* is a work where narrative techniques intertwine to build a coherent and eloquent message. The novel, through its personal and subjective approach, manages to demystify the image of Russia, stripping it of its moral immunity. This analysis contributes to our understanding of the novel and its relevance to contemporary political issues.

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<sup>20</sup>Lepine: 2022.

<sup>21</sup>Empoli 2022:18.