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## **Bartavels, Ortolans and Borshch: France and Russia in the Fictional Worlds of Andreï Makine**

At the beginning of Andreï Makine's *Le Testament français* the young narrator Alesha and his sister listen enthralled as their French grandmother Charlotte recounts to them the glories of France as remembered from her own childhood, the magnificence of its culture as represented by Marcel Proust, the sensuousness of its language, the resplendence of Paris. Then she shows them the menu for the banquet given in honour of the visit of Tsar Nicholas II and his wife Alexandra on their visit to France in 1896: fifteen courses, dominated by 'roast bartavels and ortolans, garnished with truffles'.<sup>1</sup> The narrator Alesha is transported to another world, one incomparably more graceful and majestic than the dreary life of provincial Saranza (presumably a conflation of the actual cities of Saratov and Penza). The children are thus made aware of a land and a culture far away, which jar with the humdrum provincialism of their own environment. This provincialism, emblematic of the communal paucity of Soviet life, is nowhere better exemplified than the borshch mothers make for their families in the beginning of *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu* (*Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer*). Certainly, for Makine the juxtaposition and contrast of France and Russia in his fictional worlds produce a kind of literary border consciousness, an awareness that two lands and cultures may be separate and discrete, but are nevertheless bound by myriad links and associations. It is the purpose of this article to explore the many contrasts between East and West, Russia and France, in Makine's work, and thus to consider the role and status of Russia and Russian literature in French culture today.

Andreï Makine is the author of a dozen or so novels and a play, although some novels are short enough to be designated novellas. Though born in Krasnoyarsk in 1957 and raised in Soviet Russia, he has since 1987 been a resident of France, and French is the language in which he works. While he is extremely well-known and

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<sup>1</sup> Andreï Makine, *Le Testament français* (London: Sceptre, 1997), 27. All page references to Makine's works incorporated in the text subsequently are to the English-language editions included in the Bibliography at the end of this article.

celebrated in France and elsewhere, winning prizes and with his novels translated into dozens of languages, he remains virtually unknown in Russia, with only one work, the 1995 novel *Le Testament français*, translated into Russian (published, some would say ironically, in the journal *Inostrannaia literatura* in December 1996). He is coy about his Soviet past in interviews, and so relatively little is known of his early life in the Soviet Union. It is known, however, that he was a research student of French literature at Moscow University in the mid-1980s, and, on a teachers' trip to France in 1987, decided to stay in that country.<sup>2</sup> According to his own account, several years of penury and virtual homelessness followed before he achieved literary success. The abiding motif of Makine's writing is that of escape – just as his heroes 'escape' from the horrors of the Soviet Union, so the author, by writing exclusively in French, 'escapes' from the restriction of his native language. Thus, in Formalist terminology Makine establishes a personal idiom that serves to distance what is signified from the means of its signification.

Makine's works owe much to the classic Russian literary tradition of interrogating the tension between the false and the real, the abhorrent and the beautiful, barbarity and culture, that can be perceived in the works of Nikolai Gogol', Fedor Dostoevskii, Lev Tolstoi and Anton Chekhov, to name a few. Whereas in the nineteenth century literary characters can be hopelessly embedded in a sordid social reality, in Makine's fiction they both dream of escape, and do escape. The added dimension to their consciousness is the expectation of something better, richer and more beautiful, as represented by France and French culture. The multiple dichotomies between Russia and France symbolize past and present, travesty and beauty, tyranny and freedom. Of all the writers of Russian origin living and working abroad in the post-Soviet world, Makine's works are most obviously structured around the tensions emerging from the 'trans-border text'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> When asked about his biography by a correspondent from the Russian émigré newspaper *Russkaia mys'* in 1998, Makine was typically evasive: 'Well, let him exist, this Makine! Why should anyone know? You see, when he dies, biographers will sit down and quietly compose his life story. I think that it is dangerous when a man who is still alive adopts the pose of a classic and begins to say: I was born in such and such a year, I did this and that. Let's wait calmly. In about 50 years, when a man is no longer alive (and I generally give myself a long life!), then someone can calmly do this.' ('U kazhdogo svoe dykhanie... Interv'iu s Andreem Makinym', *Russkaia mys'* 9–15 April 1998, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Taras commented in 2000 that 'the identity of many of Makine's principal characters, above all Charlotte [in *Le Testament français*: DG], is transposed to a border space between the cultures of Russia and France. [...] In this respect Makine can be regarded as the author of the "border text", simultaneously highlighting the importance of and deterritorializing the border between East and West.' Ray Taras, "'A la recherche du pays perdu": Andrei Makine's Russia', *East European*

Makine has been fêted in his adopted country as its most successful ‘bilingual’ or ‘translingual’ writer, and his linguistic and creative talents have been recognised in the unprecedented award in 1995 of both the Prix Goncourt and the Prix Médicis, an event that transformed his literary fortunes.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the works of other linguistic migrants such as Joseph Conrad, Elsa Triolet, Milan Kundera and, of course, Vladimir Nabokov, his writing does not engage with his adopted country, but rather remains focused on Russian life and history, especially the Second World War, the ravages of Stalinism and their tragic consequences for the Russian psyche in the modern world. Of his own place in the Russian literary canon, Makine wryly notes that he is happy to be among the great names, having once seen his work in the alphabetically arranged East European Literature section in a French bookshop: ‘My first books were there, sandwiched, and at the risk of inspiring giddy megalomania in me, between those of Lermontov and Nabokov’.<sup>5</sup> Such an elevation may inspire a momentary sense of creative uplift, but Makine remains wary of the trappings of literary stardom, even going so far in *L’Amour humaine* (*Human Love*) as to lampoon those writers who crave fame and literary awards.

Whereas Makine has been praised by French critics for the virtuosity of his use of French as the ‘dominant language of world culture’, his reception in Russia itself has been more equivocal, if not actually negative. Maia Zlobina set the tone in 1996 by castigating the falseness of the Russia evoked in Makine’s *Le testament français*:

Makine’s Russia seemingly bears the stamp ‘made abroad’. True, it doesn’t reach the point of total myth (*razvesistaia kliukva*), the author, after all, lived in Russia until he was 30, but the falsity is evident. Before us is typical kitsch, served, moreover, without a hint of irony, but with a meaningful mien and passionate aspiration. A straightforward combination of customary stereotypes, like Misha the bear, the exotic local colour of grubby public

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*Quarterly*, 34, 1 (2000), 51–79 (75). This is one of the first studies of Makine’s work to appear in English, and as such merits some credit, but it does contain some factual errors and dubious assertions.

<sup>4</sup> According to Nathalie Heinrich, the award of the Prix de Goncourt ‘transformed’ Makine’s life: ‘he emerged from an obscurity that was as deep as his fame was conspicuous, lustre gained from a tale that was already legendary in which featured the solitude of a Russian exile [and] the poverty of living in a garret.’ Nathalie Heinrich, *L’Épreuve de la grandeur. Prix littéraires et reconnaissance* (Paris, La Découverte, 1999), 137.

<sup>5</sup> Makine, *Le Testament français*, 250.

places and pseudo-insights creates an image ‘of resemblance’, which only foreigners can accept as the real McCoy. But then again, they are the ones the author is writing for, and this can be felt from the very beginning by the urgency with which the author picks out things that can impress the European eye: boundless expanses, fields of flourishing crops ‘from the Black Sea to the Pacific Ocean’, the steppe, the steppe, the steppe and snows without end and in which, of course, lurks something enigmatic and alluring.<sup>6</sup>

For Zlobina, then, Makine describes ‘an invented France and a bogus Russia (*vymehtannaia Frantsiia i lipovaia Rossiia*)’.<sup>7</sup>

In the *New York Review of Books* Tat’iana Tolstaia praised Makine’s evocation of France and explained its allure for Russians to an English-speaking readership.<sup>8</sup> In the Russian-language journal *Znamia*, for a Russian readership, however, she was much more critical of Makine’s descriptions of Russia. Tolstaia picks on the character of Charlotte Lemonnier in *Le Testament français* as an example of all that is unbelievable in Makine’s fiction:

Charlotte, just like everything in this novel, is a dream and a myth, a symbol and the instrument for self-hypnosis, like the shiny ball with which doctors try to lull a patient into the state of medical hypnosis. [...] Charlotte lives a symbolic life, experiences symbolic ordeals, lives on a symbolic balcony suspended over the imaginary line dividing habitation from the wilderness, and the men in her life are symbolic: the French lover, the Russian husband, the Asiatic rapist (yes, we are Scythians).<sup>9</sup>

Like Zlobina, Tolstaia berates Makine for writing for a foreign readership, and creating a picture of Russia intended for foreign consumption that panders to stereotypes and clichés. But she also accuses him of a deeper dishonesty, that of ‘pretending to be French’, so that his novel is ‘a literary mongrel, a cultural hybrid, a linguistic chimera, a literary basilisk’.<sup>10</sup> Writing in a different tone for her Russian reader, Tolstaia attacks Makine for his intellectual dishonesty and seemingly confused literary identity; however, the irony would not be lost on her

<sup>6</sup> M. Zlobina, ‘V poiskakh utrachennykh mgnovenii’, *Novyi mir*, Vol. 10 (1996), 242–45 (243).

<sup>7</sup> Zlobina, 245.

<sup>8</sup> Tatyana Tolstaya, ‘Love Story: Dreams of My Russian Summers’, *New York Review of Books*, 20 November 1997, 4–5.

<sup>9</sup> Tat’iana Tolstaia, ‘Russkii chelovek na randevu’, *Znamia* (1998: 6), 200–09 (205).

<sup>10</sup> Tolstaia, 208–09.

Russian readers, given that she herself was living in the United States, and writing in English.

Russian scholars have been quick to note Makine's fondness for the Russian literary canon. Mariia Rubins wrote in 2004 that 'his prose, although it is written in French, is based not only on French, but, undoubtedly, also on the Russian literary tradition'.<sup>11</sup> Among the allusions and influences she notes are Fedor Tiutchev and his poem 'Problème', referring to the falling rock that invades the home of the infant narrator in *Requiem pour l'est (Requiem for the East)*, Vladislav Khodasevich's poem 'Sorrentinskie fotografii' with reference to the 'double vision' the narrator experiences at the end of *Le Testament français*, when the photograph of his real mother reveals not the dream but the prosaic truth of his birth.

Makine's lament for a lost world also has much in common with the work of Ivan Bunin, on whom he wrote a doctoral dissertation in 1991 in the University of Paris IV, significantly entitled 'Poétique de la nostalgie'. Alluding to the numerous references to French culture, as well as to music and art, Rubins concludes: 'In Makine's work, thus, are recreated and interwoven many aesthetic traditions. The result of this symbiosis is an original myth about Russia, which emerges not in a concrete historical or metaphysical aspect, but above all as a literary space'.<sup>12</sup> Makine, however, does not simply create a 'myth', but an new international appreciation of Russian culture. Makine's novels express the Dostoevskian ideal that beauty, in the form of love, moral duty or music, will save the world.

Makine's works are concerned with the Russian historical condition and Russia's place in the world. Half of his works have definite French subtexts, where France, its language and culture serve as symbols of elegance in contrast to the brutality of Russia. Because his works are so abundantly constructed around contrasts, almost every detail has a symbolic signification of good or bad, beautiful or ugly, benevolent or barbaric. Makine's use of French has more to do with the classical literary idiom of the nineteenth century and *fin-de-siècle* than with the modern idiom, as the Russian translator of *Le Testament français* Leonid Tsiv'ian and numerous French critics and Francophone scholars have noted. Makine re-

<sup>11</sup> Mariia Rubins, 'Russko-frantsuzskaia proza Andreia Makina', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 66, 2 (2004), 208–29 (208).

<sup>12</sup> Rubins, 229.

jects modern French with its multi-cultural borrowings and youth slang, both of which are subjected to a withering critique in *La terre et le ciel de Jacques Dorme* (*The Earth and Sky of Jacques Dorme*).<sup>13</sup> This conscious embrace of the language of the past, therefore, is also a clear statement of the author's cultural preferences, and a rejection of the present.

Because Makine writes first and foremost for a French readership (and thereafter for translation into other languages), he thus significantly departs from the Russian literary tradition of direct engagement with his native country, especially pronounced during the twentieth century with the banishment of entire generations of writers abroad, and perhaps best embodied by the case of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Although his works were banned in the Soviet Union, Solzhenitsyn always believed that they would be read by his compatriots, and never doubted that his word as a writer of truth would eventually have a profound effect on Russia itself.<sup>14</sup> Solzhenitsyn is a significant figure for Makine, as will be shown later.

Makine's first novel, *La fille d'un héros de l'Union* (*A Hero's Daughter*), was first rejected by the publisher, who refused to believe that it could have been written in French by a foreigner; it was only when Makine persuaded him that he had written it in Russian and it had been translated into French that it was accepted and published in 1990. The timeliness of this publication, and its importance for Makine's future career, has been noted by Ian McCall:

At the end of the 1980s, when Makine was looking for a publisher, the former Soviet Union was the subject of great media attention in France.

From 1987 onwards, news magazines like *L'Express* ran many articles de-

<sup>13</sup> Tsiv'ian comments on Makine's French: 'Makine writes in the good, pure literary language of the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And it is here, I think, that he has succeeded in returning us to paradise lost – the paradise lost of language.' Leonid Tsiv'ian, 'V poiskakh utrachennogo raia', *Zvezda*, No. 4 (1996), 228–29 (229). On the language of *Le Testament français*, Larisa Zalesova-Doktorova notes: 'Andrei Makine's French is refined and polished, rejecting everything colloquial, with a note of melancholy characteristic of great literature. One wants to linger over his phrases. This is not a novel where you can't turn the pages quickly enough. In this novel language is king.' Larisa Zalesova-Doktorova, 'Mezhdru Frantsiei i Rossiei', *Zvezda*, No. 4 (1996), 210–212 (211).

<sup>14</sup> In describing the continuing existence of the Gulag in post-Stalinist Russia, Solzhenitsyn believed his words of truth would have consequences: 'For *them*, for *today's* zeks my book is no book, my truth is no truth unless there is a continuation, unless I go on to speak of them, too. Truth must be told – and things must change! If words are not about real things and do not cause things to happen, what is the good of them? Are they anything more than the barking of village-dogs at night?' *The Gulag Archipelago 3, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation V–VII*, trans. H. T. Willets (Collins/Fontana: London, 1978), 478.

voted to various aspects of Russian politics, history and culture. These included features on Gorbachev's reforms and Russia's relationships with other countries, articles on the gulags and dissidents, and reviews of literary and (socio)historical texts. Words like *perestroika* and *glasnost* were common currency, and at the end of 1987 and beginning of 1988 Gorbachev's book entitled *Perestroika* was listed in *L'Express* in the top ten non-fiction bestsellers. The publication of Makine's novel as a translation catered for an interest in things Russian. Furthermore, the emphasis on translations from Russian would explain what made the public fall for this one.<sup>15</sup>

It is in this novel that we first see Makine's literary treatment of a ferocious war, as early on the 'Hero' of the title enters a village in the immediate aftermath of a battle: 'He saw the muddy grass piled high with grey greatcoats, Russians and Germans, lying there at random, sometimes bundled together, sometimes isolated, face down against the earth. Then something no longer recognizable as a human body, a kind of brownish porridge, wrapped in shreds of damp cloth' (p. 4). Such gruesome descriptions of the aftermath of combat will become a feature of his accounts of the War in such novels as *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*, *Le Testament français*, *La musique d'une vie* (*A Life's Music*), and other works.

However, the picture of war as pitiless and bloody is not a new one for Soviet literature, and equally gruesome and harrowing accounts can be found in the works of such writers of 'war prose' in the 1960s and 1970s as Vasil' Bykov, Bulat Okudzhava, Grigorii Baklanov, Viktor Astaf'ev and many others. All these writers wrote with first-hand knowledge of combat, and so their descriptions bear a grim authenticity. Educated in a Soviet school in these years, Makine cannot but have known many of these works, and his description of the War is therefore no doubt largely influenced by writers who had experienced it at first hand. The cruelty of collectivization and the relentless vigilance and brutality of the secret police, as described in several novels, are also hardly new to practitioners and consumers of twentieth-century Russian literature (especially the works of Solzhenitsyn). But whereas Soviet writers would emphasise the collective heroism of the War effort, and the sacrifices made for a better future, Makine makes it clear that men suffer, are maimed and die in vain, their terrible wounds subsequently ignored by the authorities.

<sup>15</sup> Ian McCall, 'Translating the Pseudotranslated: Andreï Makine's *La Fille d'un Héros de L'Union Soviétique*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 42, 3 (2006), 286–97 (290).

The most harrowing of Makine's war images is that of the 'samovars', em-bittered legless war veterans who engage in drunken knife fights, charging at each other on their custom-made trolleys before being unceremoniously thrown into the back of police vans. In *Le Testament français* this signifies not only the terrible price paid by the War's survivors, but also, and more tellingly, their subsequent abandonment by the regime they helped to save.<sup>16</sup> Any foreign visitor to the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s can testify to the fact that amputees and invalids had very few amenities, and wheelchairs were unheard of. The 'samovars' and their knife fights may be more the product of imagination than fact, but the shameful treatment of the war wounded and amputees generally by the Soviet regime is not a revelation for a Russian reading public. Such official negligence was attacked by the very Soviet writer Iurii Nagibin in his 1983 novella *Terpenie* ('Patience'). Makine may bitter the pill further, but his fiction is based on very clear fact.

Russian literary references continue in *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*. The two boys central to the narrative live in communal dwellings, next to which is an area known as 'The Pit'. With this name it is immediately recognizable as the site where communism is to be built in Andrei Platonov's great satirical novel of that name (*Kotlovan*, 1929–30). In Makine's work it is the place where personal disputes are resolved through fisticuffs, the Platonovian dream reduced to a squalid scrap. For both writers any construction of a 'radiant future' is a sham, and Makine quite consciously uses his literary precursor to debunk official triumphalism.

Makine's Russia is generally a barbaric and sordid moral wasteland, his heroes determined to leave once they discover the corrupt reality under the surface. The depressing truth of Soviet life when its exterior packaging is peeled away has been a theme beloved of Russian writers of the 'third wave' of emigration as diverse as Vasilii Aksenov and Sergei Dovlatov, and was also touched on, albeit

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<sup>16</sup> Helena Duffy sees the abuse and dismemberment of the human body in Makine's prose in terms of his broader lament for the denigration of the body politic: 'Whilst mutilations are undoubtedly inseparable from the socio-historical landscape of Makine's novels, the writer's quasi-obsessive interest in amputations, wounds and scars may be also interpreted as metaphorizing his narrators' sense of loss issuing from the disintegration and eclipse of an empire, be it Tsarist or Soviet.' Helena Duuffy, 'The Veteran's Wounded Body before the Mirror: The Dialectic of Wholeness and Disintegration in Andrei Makine's Prose', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 1, 2 (2008), 175–88 (176). I would refine this point by referring to Makine's comprehensive rejection of Soviet imperialism, though in *Le crime d'Olga Arbyelina* there is a nostalgic affection for a vanished way of life, if not for an empire.



only partially, in the ‘official’ prose works of writers such as Iurii Trifonov, where truth and falsehood are never absolute. There will be more to say about the work of Iurii Trifonov.

For Makine, France may be the symbol of the beauty that can save the world, and beauty can be either spiritual (music) or concrete (woman). The human soul can create harmony out of the foulness of existence. In *La musique d'une vie* the pianist Alexei Berg manages to survive the war and post-war incarceration through his love of music, and it is his inability to suppress his inner need for self-expression that proves his undoing:

He did not feel as if he were playing. He was advancing through a night, breathing in its delicate transparency, made up of an infinite number of facets of ice, of leaves, of wind. He no longer felt any pain within him. No fear about what would happen. No anguish or remorse. The night through which he was advancing expressed this pain, this fear, and the irremediable shattering of the past, but this had all become music and now only existed through its beauty. (pp. 98–99)<sup>17</sup>

Berg cannot resist the urge to play beautifully, and it leads to his identification as the son of an executed ‘enemy of the people’ and subsequent imprisonment. Berg is one the great survivors of Soviet history, like Ivan Grigor’evich in Vasilii Grossman’s *Vse techet* (*Everything Flows*, 1970), he is one who has experienced the purges and the death of loved ones. In Makine’s latest novel *La vie d'un homme inconnu* (*The Life of an Unknown Man*), the elderly Vol’skii has also been through war, arrest and imprisonment, and thus also serves as a cipher for the worst of the Soviet historical experience. Through these elderly characters, Makine shows a further affinity with Trifonov, whose works such as *Dom na naberezhnoi* (*The House on the Embankment*, 1976) and *Starik* (*The Old Man*, 1978) also explore the power of memory and the truth of individual experience. Crucially, what remains important in Trifonov’s fiction is not what his characters remember, but what they have forgotten, probably willingly, for they bear some moral responsibility. The comparison with Trifonov is certainly a valid one, but in their treatment of memory the two writers diverge. Trifonov’s morally ambiguous characters are at least in part responsible for the tyranny around them, for through their actions – or inaction – they have allowed it to flourish. Thus,

<sup>17</sup> This novel was awarded the Prix RTL-Lire in 2001.

they try to forget. Makine's elderly characters bear more of a resemblance to Ivan Grigor'evich because they remember as innocent victims of history, the scars do not heal. Berg remains strong thanks to his music and the beauty and meaning that it imparts to his life. When the narrator hears him playing in a snowbound railway station in Siberia, it is like a beacon of beauty in the wintry wilderness all around, an expression of the soul.<sup>18</sup>

There are further parallels with Trifonov's work worth exploring. In his later years Trifonov wrote extensively about his trips abroad, not, as Soviet travellers were expected to do, in order to denigrate the West and trumpet Soviet values. Rather, Trifonov always sought links and affinities between his native land and other countries, to demonstrate the totality of human experience and the interconnectedness of history and life. Makine's love of France is above all for a country, a culture and a language that embody the epitome of human beauty and grace, and in stark contrast to the harshness and cruelties associated with Russia. But for Makine the glories of France are lost in the past. *La terre et le ciel de Jacques Dorme* ends with the author/narrator in France searching for the eponymous airman's living relatives, becoming disgusted and outraged by both what he sees of modern France with its terrified old people, litter-strewn streets, graffiti and desecrated graveyards, and what he hears in the language of younger people (his hatred of rap music also indicating a rejection of multiculturalism).<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, Makine's view of France is not without its ambivalent side. In *Le Testament français* the superiority of all things French is not always evident. Not only does Charlotte assert to Alesha that Valerii Briusov's translation of Baudelaire's poetry is actually superior to the French original, but by the end of

<sup>18</sup> In an interview with Arkadii Vaksberg for *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Makine comments: 'My novel is about how a man frees himself of everything that society imposes on him as the mandatory condition of life. Only the soul is under nobody's control.' Andrei Makin, 'Probit'sia k chuzhoi dushe', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 28 March–3 April 2001, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ian McCall noted in 2005: 'In his later work, it is clear that Makine's love is for the French language, French literature and a France of the past. His present surroundings inspire feelings which are much more ambivalent.' Ian McCall, 'Andreï Makine's France: A Translingual Writer's Portrayal of his "terre d'accueil"', *French Cultural Studies*, 16, 3 (2005), 305–20 (318). Makine also shares his narrators' dislike of present-day France. McCall refers to various public statements by Makine in the early 2000s, where he decries modern French literature as 'awash with sperm and faecal matter' (312).

the novel we learn that Alesha has no Frenchness in him at all, his presumption being based on an incorrect interpretation of a photograph.<sup>20</sup>

Makine's Russia is not the Russia of the great cities of Moscow or St Petersburg; rather, his text describes the frozen wastes of Siberia, where life may be tough and death all too easy, but where personal dignity, innate goodness and a communal harmony are possible. Anna's Siberian family in *L'amour humaine* is almost impossibly good, non-materialistic, polite and racially tolerant, as if unaffected by twentieth-century prejudice and vice. Again, there is a clear Russian literary context here, for both the nineteenth-century Slavophiles and the twentieth-century 'village writers' extolled the virtues of the rural spaces of Russia, and especially Siberia (Valentin Rasputin and Viktor Astaf'ev, for instance).

Indeed, it is with the evocation of rural Russia that Makine's affinity with Russian literature is clearest. His novel *La femme qui attendait* (*The Woman Who Waited*, 2004), is set largely in a northern Russian village, and reads very much like a work from the 1960s 'village prose' movement. Vera, 'the woman who waited', is the central female character, and has a clear lineage of proud and morally unblemished female characters.

The symbolically-named Vera ('faith') is approaching middle age and lives alone, for the past thirty years waiting for her beloved to return from the War. Although the reader is initially led to believe that he died, we later learn that he is in fact living a relatively comfortable family life in a neighbouring town. We do not know if Vera knows this, but the fact that she has sacrificed her youth for the man she loves is proof of her inner strength and sense of duty.

Vera represents Makine's ideal woman in that she is virtuous and honourable, not sexually aware, like the women in the city, but above all a spiritual being who enriches her environment by her very presence. Her resilience is also incarnated in the French ladies lost in the Russian steppes in *Le Testament français* or *La terre et le ciel de Jacques Dorme*, or in the Siberian Anna for whom a professional revolutionary is prepared to sacrifice himself in *L'amour humaine*. As a character whose soul is valued by her (male) creator more than her body, she is clearly in

<sup>20</sup> Charlotte Lemonnier actually shows herself to be an astute and assiduous literary scholar, an impressive feat for someone living most of her life in the wilderness of the Russian steppe, as the relationship of the original poetic text to the Russian translation has been the subject of sustained close examination among Slavist specialists. See, for instance, Dennis Ioffe, '“The Discourses of Love”: Some Observations Regarding Charles Baudelaire in the Context of Brjusov's and Blok's Vision of the “Urban Woman”', *Russian Literature* LXIV-I (July 2008), 19–45.

a long line of Russian literary heroines. Anna, too, represents all that is honest and wholesome, a symbol of the spiritual purity of Siberia much lauded by such writers as Rasputin and Leonid Borodin in, for example, their portrayal of the female characters in the novellas *Zhivi i pomni* ('Live and Remember', 1973) and *Tret'ia pravda* ('The Third Truth', 1984), respectively. A similar character, Mila, features in *La vie d'un home inconnu*, but, significantly, she belongs entirely to the past.

Makine presents his female characters from the outside, from the point of view of the men who desire and possess them. The woman is simply the object. Even Ol'ga in *La fille d'un héros de l'Union* is aware that her body is attractive to men and is proud of herself exclusively as a source of sexual pleasure. A woman's own desires and personality therefore remain a mystery, we never know from Vera's point of view why she has been waiting for thirty years for her beloved to return, she just does. Because Makine is not interested in the inner lives of his female characters certain types recur in his works: the Frenchwoman Alexandra who provides physical and moral comfort to Jacques Dorme in the Russian steppe harks back to Charlotte Lemonnier in *Le Testament français*, and there is a fleeting mention in *Au temps du fleuve Amour* of a woman who has been waiting for years for her man to return from the War.

Makine's Madonna/whore dichotomy may not be the sole preserve of Russian writers, but it does lie clearly within a male-dominated Russian literary discourse going back centuries. Barbara Heldt notes that 'Russian heroines incarnate perfection in youth or in extreme old age; mature women are presented in a qualified or less flattering light'.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, Russian literature boasts an impressive gallery of women 'insulted and injured', but who represent inner strength and redemption. Makine's positive female characters are drawn from this template.

*La femme qui attendait* may play with the conventions of village prose by introducing sexual desire into village life, something the *derevenshchiki* were reluctant to do, but it also follows its generic conventions. Thus, Makine's narrator (the authorial 'I') yearns to get away from the big city with its cynical and decadent intellectuals, and to lose himself in the Russian countryside in a direct parallel to Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Matrenin dvor* ('Matrena's Home', 1963),

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Heldt, *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987, 28.

also incidentally a first-person narrative. Whereas the enigmatic Vera excites the narrator's sexual curiosity, Solzhenitsyn's narrator feels nothing but awe and a Wordsworthian respect for the resilient and humble Matrena.

In one scene Vera and the narrator travel to a remote village deserted by all but one old lady, in order to bring her back to a community that can look after her. The motif of the abandoned or lost village is a recurrent one in the work of other 'village writers' such as Fedor Abramov and Vasilii Belov. For the 'village writers' these forgotten places are the tragic cost of the country's rapid and chaotic urbanization, resulting in the loss of customs and values associated with village life. For Makine the trip to the abandoned village serves merely to reinforce Vera's iconic saintliness, and to strengthen the narrator's desire.

Makine also engages with the natural landscape and in this novel, as elsewhere in his work – most notably in *Le crime d'Olga Arbyelina* (*The Crime of Olga Arbelina*) – he is adept at painting evocative word pictures. Such, for instance, is the narrator's perception of the approach of winter in *Le femme qui attendait*:

The first glance outside, well before sunrise, is a plunge into an unknown world. All is pale and blue with hoar-frost, its suede has petrified the trees, the walls are encrusted with its crystals. The road, bristling with muddy ridges only yesterday, is today a long, smooth, white track. The dry stems of nettles beside the old front steps rear up like silver candelabras. I open the door long enough for an intake of breath, trying to hold on to the icy intoxication of this beauty to the point of giddiness. (p. 175)

Vera's home village of Mirnoe, with its association of a peaceful community, recalls the equally rustic Tal'novo ('willow'), home of Solzhenitsyn's Matrena.<sup>22</sup> Makine would have been familiar with the conventions of 'village prose' through the work of his own mother, a literary scholar specialising in 'village prose'.<sup>23</sup>

As both a celebration and a dissection of the 'village prose' trope, *La femme qui attendait* can also be read as a story of an adolescent wish-fulfilment, the tale of a young man lusting after an older woman and eventually getting his way

<sup>22</sup> Vasilii Belov writes: 'The word *mir* in Russian signifies the whole universe. *Mir* means the construction of the world, temporal and spatial infinity. This very same word is also used to designate good-naturedness, the absence of any quarrel, friendship between people, harmony and calm.' Vasilii Belov, *Lad: Ocherki o narodnoi estetike*, Moscow, Molodaia gvardiia, 1982, 103.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, M. A. Makina, 'Tvorchestvo krest'ianskoi "pleiady" v russkoi literature nachala XX veka i "derevenskaia" proza nashikh dnei', *Russkaia literatura* (1980: 2), 73–91.

through sheer persistence. But just as his picture of the War is heavily influenced by the generation of writers who experienced it first-hand, so, too, this apparent homage to ‘village prose’ owes much to the characterizations, thematic contrasts and lyrical evocations of the older generation of *derevenshchiki*, those like Vasilii Belov, Valentin Rasputin and Viktor Astaf’ev, who all enjoyed rural childhoods and described them in their work.

It is instructive to compare Makine’s work with that of another Russian living abroad and writing in the language of her adopted country. The ‘American’ Olga Grushin’s *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* (2006) explores the unravelling world of a typical Soviet bureaucrat during the mid-1980s as a new freedom emerges, showing the compromises and moral blindness the Soviet regime encouraged in its citizens. Here Grushin, like Makine, removes the outer veneer of social respectability, but she, unlike Makine, does not emphasize the brutality and horror lying beneath the surface of Soviet society. Grushin’s *The Concert Ticket* (2010) demonstrates that she shares with Makine a profound respect for the spiritual aspirations of her native culture. In this novel attending a one-off concert by the émigré composer Selinskii (based on the actual concert given by Igor’ Stravinskii in the USSR in 1962) provides an opportunity of escape into a world of unparalleled artistic beauty for the resolute individuals who stand in line for months on end waiting for the 300 tickets to go on sale. Makine’s characters, just like Grushin’s, yearn to escape from the sordidness of the here-and-now into a world of ethereal beauty.

Let us assume that Andreï Makine is a French writer, both simply because he writes in French and also because he enthusiastically endorses the grace and beauty of French culture and life from a bygone age. It is unlikely, given the nature of his work and its admittedly limited reception in Russia, that his native country will ever accept him as one of their own (unless he began writing in Russian). But Makine does Russian literature a great service. By writing in French about Russia, Makine brings characters and motifs from Russian and Soviet literature to a Western audience, juxtaposing them with the beauty and grace of French culture. Makine may use French to ‘escape’ from the confines of his native language, but he has, in effect, colonized and even russified it.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Gabriella Safran surveys the French critical reception of Makine’s works, noting that ‘this metaphor of escape, of Makine’s liberation from Russia to France, from the Russian language into French, reappears in review after review’, and the ‘enthusiastic appreciations of Makine’s magical feat of

Critics have been at pains to explore Makine's juxtaposition of two languages and two cultures. Sharon Lubkemann Allen speaks of Makine's novels foregrounding 'displaced consciousness and deterritorialized language': 'On the level of language, they do so by transposing French culture into Russian contexts and writing Russian consciousness in French, transforming both French and Russian language, prosaic and poetic, by "reterritorializing" them, as it were, through a process of translanguaging "metamorphosis" rather than "metaphor".'<sup>25</sup> This is an apt summary. In his introductory note to each novel, the translator Geoffrey Strachan draws attention to Russian words and realia from Soviet history that he leaves untranslated, such as 'shapka', 'dacha', 'kolkhoz', 'kulak', 'kommunalka', 'izba', 'babushka', the NKVD, the strong 'Belomor' cigarette, the 'Berezka' hard currency shops. In transliteration they assume a supra-linguistic importance for the text: they bear significance that neither French nor English can express or reflect adequately. Their 'Russianness' is a metonymic affirmation of what remains unique about Russia itself.

In Makine's world the horrors of history can be offset by the beauty of life, as embodied in the cultural beauties of France and the French language, or by the life-affirming power of music, human kindness and love. Makine's preoccupation with the passage of time and its influence on the lives of individuals and society has inspired comparisons with Marcel Proust, but his bipolar world of ugliness and beauty is just as much influenced by Dostoevsky.<sup>26</sup>

Every writer must create his or her own literary space, even if it is a deliberately manufactured cliché for foreign consumption, the 'kliukva razvesistaia' with which Russians love to berate foreigners.<sup>27</sup> Each space has its own artistic legiti-

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self-liberation'. See Gabriella Safran, 'Andrei Makine's Literary Bilingualism and the Critics', *Comparative Literature*, 55, 3 (2003), 246–65 (249).

<sup>25</sup> Sharon Lubkemann Allen, 'Makine's Testament: Transposition, Translation, Translingualism and Transformation of the Novel', *Review of Literatures of the European Union*, 4 (2006), 167–86 (168).

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Ian McCall, 'Proust's *A la recherche* as Intertext of Makine's *Le Testament français*', *Modern Language Review*, 100, 4 (2005), 971–84. In a touch of inter-textual playfulness, Makine includes a scene in *Le Testament français* where Proust plays tennis in the town of Neuilly, birthplace of Charlotte Lemonnier.

<sup>27</sup> The 'kliukva razvesistaia' ('overspreading cranberry bush') is a term used to denote an absurdity, as the cranberry bush is a creeping shrub that may grow to 2 metres long, but rarely is more than 20 centimetres in height. Thus it cannot 'overspread'. It has become synonymous with misconceptions foreign visitors have about Russia, such as the prodigious capacity of Russians to drink vodka, and the ability of bears to play the accordion. The writer Alexandre Dumas *père* is said to have sat beneath just such a cranberry bush on a trip to Russia, a physical impossibility.

macy. But it becomes clear that Makine's 'translingual' space is composed of two parts: the use of French, firstly, distances the author from, and then exorcises the demons of, Soviet history, and, secondly, enables him to explore more objectively the impact of Marxist ideology on the world at large. In the real world of tyranny and violence the Dostoevskian ideal remains relevant, if not attainable. Elias in *L'Amour humaine* gives up his own life as he realises that beauty is the ultimate truth. The pianist Berg survives horrors of war and the Gulag, his survival a bitter commentary to his times, but his love of music representing the truth of his life. So it is that Russia provides the inner strength of the French writer, as explicitly stated in *Le Testament français* when Alesha contemplates his own 'dual identity':

For the first time in my life I was looking at my country from the outside, from a distance, as if I were no longer part of it. Transported to a great European capital, I looked back to contemplate the immensity of the cornfields and the snow-covered plains by moonlight. I was seeing Russia in French! I was somewhere else. Outside my Russian life. To be thus torn asunder was so painful and at the same time so thrilling that I had to close my eyes. I was afraid of not being able to return to myself, of being stranded in that Parisian evening. Screwing up my eyes, I inhaled deeply. The warm wind of the nocturnal steppe suffused by being once more. (p. 37)

Makine's world is above all one that posits literature as the only 'real' reality, for Russian literary tropes, characters, even individual words define and dominate the worlds he has created. His picture of Russia is one put together from literary, not historical sources, but 'made strange' by being evoked in a different language. This is even more true of *La vie d'un homme inconnu*, which self-consciously foregrounds the Chekhov short story 'Shutochka' ('A Little Joke', 1886) as a framing device for the exploration of a relationship between a middle-aged Russian writer living in Paris – clearly self-referential – and his younger girlfriend. The novel juxtaposes past and present in a bitter attack on the commercial priorities of the new capitalist Russia. The novel makes clear that Makine is as disgusted by the new realities of Russia as he is with modern France, suggesting that immersion in literature now remains the safest refuge.

In conclusion, Makine's Russianness is evident in his unconscious references to the Russian literary tradition in his analysis of Soviet and post-Soviet ills, his eagerness to show the rotteness beneath society's surface, and his depiction of women. But it is interesting that he very consciously cites the genres and



concerns of the Soviet literature of the ‘stagnation’ period with which he grew up – war prose, ‘village prose’ and the work of Iurii Trifonov – in his love-hate relationship with the France–Russia dialectic. Makine has succeeded in embedding Russian literature, even a genre as seemingly parochial as ‘village prose’, in modern French culture, thereby enriching that culture immeasurably. It is also through literature that he defines, or at least constructs, his own persona, as a writer who scorns material possessions and lives entirely for the creative impulse.<sup>28</sup> Russian critics may bridle at Makine’s desolate and demeaning picture of Russia past and present, but his fictional worlds are built on the bricks of Russian and Soviet literary genres, metaphors and even characters, and thus his achievement and immense contribution to world literature today is to demonstrate the importance and durability of Russian literature itself.

#### **Andrei Makine: Bibliography 1990–2010**

(All of Makine’s novels have been translated into English by Geoffrey Strachan.)

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<sup>28</sup> Apparently Makine continues to live in a tiny apartment in Paris, with a wooden shack in the countryside his ‘dacha’, his rural retreat. See Safran, 246. In an interview on ‘The Book Show’ on the Australian radio station ABC Radio National in January 2008, Makine emphasised the spiritual calling of the writer: ‘If I may, I would like to give some advice, and I’ll dare to actually do it... if a poet at some stage talks about material comforts or mentions or complains that he or she doesn’t have enough money, that he or she would like to write if only money was not a problem, you can come to the conclusion that this is not a poet. He may be a writer of sorts, but this is not a question that a poet would ask, and I believe that to a poet writing is everything, the rest is irrelevant. If I, for instance, believe that a book is good, this is the only thing I will want to actually achieve and that I will want to push. To me, figures don’t mean much. I know that *Le Testament français* sold three million copies in France, for instance, but I also know that *Requiem for the East* was hated in France, and some authors or poets could actually be extremely saddened by such developments or such a reception of the public and come to the conclusion that they will be saddened forever and never write again. But that is not the way I look at it.’ The whole interview can be found at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2008/210904.htm>.

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