

**A FRENCH VOICE FOR A HIDDEN RUSSIA:  
IDENTITY AND MOURNING IN THE WORKS OF ANDREI MAKINE**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Foreign Languages and Literatures

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*CPD – Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*

*TFA – Au temps du fleuve Amour*

*TF – Le testament français*

*QF – La question française*

*CFOA – Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer*

*VHI – La vie d'un homme inconnu*

*FA – Une femme aimée*

## ABSTRACT

Andreï Makine is a contemporary Russian-born author who writes in French. He borrows from both the French and Russian literary traditions to reshape his personal memories of Russia as well as his vision of Russian history. His novels are always constructed around a sense of loss and consistently trace a fictional character's process of mourning for something he can't quite express in the form of words, to which Makine often refers as the *indicible*, or the 'unsayable.' Critics have interpreted Makine's quest for the 'indicible' as a search for a language that transcends the cultural divide between France and Russia, but few have investigated how such attempts to express the 'indicible' concern Makine's approach to revisiting his Russian past. In this thesis, I will discuss five of Makine's novels and two of his essays chronologically and thematically, exploring how Makine uses French to revisit Russia from a foreign and 'spectral' point of view. This distanced perspective permits Makine to transform and preserve personal memories of the Soviet era as he descends into the 'gaps' or silences in the collective memory of his generation in Russia. In considering Makine's fictional narratives as a means of mourning for his native country, I will also demonstrate that over the course of his literary career, Makine's writing has in fact grown closer to the Russian literary tradition, even though Makine continues to live and write in France.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Reading Andreï Makine's work naturally raises the question of why a writer from Russia would choose to write fiction in French about the experiences of the Russian people. When *Le Figaro littéraire* asked Makine in 2009 if writing in French was a "necessity" or a "choice," Makine replied that he had never considered writing in French in these terms, simply stating that he has been writing in French since his arrival in France in the late eighties ("Ma langue-grandmaternelle" 4). He added, however, that he had heard French spoken since childhood in Siberia, and that the language was inseparable from the memory of his grandmother, who was of French origin.<sup>1</sup> In the same interview, Makine identified his "langue grand-maternelle" as the language of a literature that opened his imagination to another world: "Le français m'a toujours baigné et encouragé, stimulé mon amour pour la littérature française" (sic). In this interview, therefore, Makine indicates that he began writing French novels about Russia during his transition into life in Western Europe just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. His comments likewise suggest that he associates the French language with an alternate imagined life and an alternate cultural identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Whether Makine actually had a French grandmother is uncertain. Makine's story of how he learned to speak French varies from one interview to another (Wanner, *Out of Russia* 21). In *La terre et le ciel de Jacques Dorme* (2003), a French editor loses interest in a Russian émigré writer's manuscript when he finds out the French grandmother never existed. Wanner observes that the fictional context of this 'confession' makes it impossible to ascertain its authenticity, concluding Makine may be warning modern readers against "craving 'true stories'" (22).

Makine's situation as a writer between two cultures, while intriguing, is certainly not the only example of its kind; he is one of a considerable number of writers who have chosen to write in French rather than in their own native language. Catherine Douzou refers to these writers as "la légion étrangère" of contemporary French literature, pointing out that, unlike Francophone writers, who were culturally conditioned to think and write in French under colonial governments and institutions, writers from non-French speaking countries adopted French on account of either "choice or individual circumstances"(105). Consequently, their relationships to French itself are as "singular" and "individual" as their motives for using the language as a means of literary expression (Douzou 105). Douzou also observes that while the writings of French authors from non-francophone countries may reflect political issues, the "political dimension" of their writings is generally of a more "individual" nature, since the relationship between France and their native countries is usually less direct than the ties between France and its former colonies (105). Douzou nevertheless acknowledges that a tradition of cultural exchange has existed between France and Russia for centuries, and that it is not uncommon for Russian-born writers to favor French (110). While the political dimension of Makine's writings may be "singular," therefore, his inclination as a Russian intellectual towards the French literary tradition is certainly not unusual.

When Makine's writing is considered among recent trends in contemporary literature, however, even the politically historical dimension of his novels appears less of a "singular" phenomenon. The themes of heritage, history, collective memory and identity pervade Makine's writing. In an overview of French letters over the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Anne Roche draws attention to the increased importance of the



themes of “memory” and “heritage” in contemporary French literature, citing Sylvie Servoise’s evaluation of the “literary symptom of the crisis of the modern regimen of historical authenticity” (17, translation mine).<sup>2</sup> Roche argues that what distinguishes the historical novels of the last decade is that more and more writers are choosing to write historical fiction set no further back in time than one or two generations. This distance in time allows contemporary writers to narrate experiences they have not lived through themselves, while maintaining an authentic contact of a “personal order” with history through the “protective screen of an intermediating generation or two” (17, translation mine). What follows from this recurring pattern is that many contemporary French ‘historical novels’ are shifting away from the genre in its established, traditional sense towards a predominantly autofictive treatment of events of the twentieth century: “Although a half-century has passed since the end of the war [in Algeria], [recent novels written on the subject] cannot be read as ‘historical fiction,’ but rather as novels about the present, that is to say, the present state of the collective memory with regard to this moment in the past” (Roche 20, translation mine). According to Roche, the recurring topics of contemporary French literature emerge from the “silences” (20) surrounding the Second World War, the war in Algeria, and “more generally, the question of totalitarianism” (18, translation mine). It is perhaps no coincidence that Roche’s observations align with Douzou’s with respect to the general idea that both French and

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<sup>2</sup> Servoise argues that this “crisis of the modern regimen of historical authenticity” emerged after 1945, when literature became part of “a socio-historical and cultural process more and more strongly marked by a consciousness of a caesura occurring in the representations of history” (77, translation mine). This consciousness of a ‘caesura’ in world history would cause the idea of a ‘littérature engagée’ to cede to a subsequent literary preoccupation with the themes of survival, memory and heritage in the latter half of the twentieth century (Servoise 77-78).

transnational writers tend to privilege the themes of collective memory and history, and that their preferred genre is autofiction.<sup>3</sup> In addition to concentrating on war and the spread of totalitarianism, however, Douzou adds that transnational writers as a group tend to incorporate “reflections on human nature across social and national boundaries” (114, translation mine) into their stories. The presence of such developments in contemporary literature seems hardly a surprise in the wake of a century of global warfare. The fact of postwar immigration alone offers a plausible explanation for a new generation of writers grappling with the questions of history, heritage, and transnational identity.

What may distinguish the case of Makine, however, is the ambiguity of his attitude toward the culture he left behind and the culture he has adopted. In an article on her interview with Makine in 1999, the journalist Natasha Fairweather notes that Makine explained the circumstances of his choice to stay and write in France “a touch defensively” with the statement, “I didn’t leave Russia, Russia left me” (2). Makine draws an analogy with the end of an affair to elaborate on his situation:

For me, Russia is like an old lover. I have an image of her, of the way she used to be and what she used to mean to me, in my head and I am frightened of destroying my internal Russia, which I still need to draw on in my writing, by revisiting the country and replacing my precious old memories with new ones.  
(Fairweather 2)

The comment above offers a crucial insight into the nature of Makine’s motivation to write fiction in order to keep an “internal Russia” alive in his imagination. The analogy

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Autofiction’ is a somewhat controversial literary term referring to a blend of autobiography and fiction, coined by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky in the latter half of the twentieth century. Agata Sylwestrzak-Wszelaki observes that although few critical theorists agree on this term’s definition, all seem to concur that behind every autofictive work, there is a desire to remake an otherwise fragmented life: “We write autofiction for the sake of being; when we are uncertain of our existence, we pass our time in remaking it” (103, translation mine).

indicates that the writer's relationship with this internal Russia is ambiguous and provocative of more than just nostalgic memories. Makine's choice of such an analogy suggests that writing not only provides him with a means to construct a Franco-Russian identity, but also reflects a process of grieving for what has happened over the last century in Russia. In her reflections on literature in *Le don des morts*, the French writer Danièle Sallenave draws on Freudian distinctions in *Mourning and Melancholia* to present the process of writing as a means of transforming the 'paralysis' of melancholy into a 'debt' to the dead, involving an obligation to save their memory from being erased. Makine's writing often appears to reflect such a desire to redeem the memory of not only one lost person, but the millions of people who disappeared during the Second World War and the Stalinist era.

In the chapters to follow, I will begin by discussing Makine's position as a writer between France and Russia. After examining the international critical debate concerning Makine's position as a writer at the 'borders' of the French and Russian literary traditions, I will proceed to consider six of Makine's works in sections grouped according to genre. I will discuss these works chronologically as well as thematically.

After considering Makine's cultural situation as a writer, I will discuss a group of novels to which I will refer as Makine's *Bildungsromane*. The *Bildungsromane* were published consecutively between 1992 and 1995, before Makine achieved national critical acclaim in France with the third of these novels, *Le testament français*. Each of the *Bildungsromane* offers an account of childhood in Soviet Russia. In all three works, the young protagonists forge their identities on dreams: in *Confession*, the hero dreams of a Russian utopia; in *Au temps du fleuve Amour* and *Le testament français*, the characters

grow up longing to live in the Occident. The most striking feature of the Bildungsromane is that all three treat of the process of becoming a writer. In my discussion of the Bildungsromane, I will study how Makine traces the maturation process of a writer. I will look at the way Makine's heroes navigate the space between languages, between past and present, and between East and West to construct an interior universe, which they find themselves driven to find a language "between languages" to express. I will also examine how Makine's constant juxtaposition of the interior and exterior lives of his characters offers an insight into the role of literature and the imagination in the experience of mourning. Of the three novels, *Le testament français* is the most focused on the role of literature in the process of mourning, the role of fiction in the face of reality, and the value of myth in modern societies seeking historical authenticity. Through an examination of examples of ekphrasis in Makine's novels, I will attempt to advance Sallenave's theory that among the arts, literature is particularly reflective of the 'transformative' process of mourning. For example, a Barthesian reading of the role of photography in *Le testament français* will show that having incontestable authentication of the existence of people who have passed away can become an obstacle to coming to terms with having lost them.

I will subsequently focus on Makine's non-fictional essays, *La question française* (1996) and *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer* (2006). In both essays, Makine lays down his opinions on what he perceives as a contemporary cultural identity crisis in France. His essays reflect a more critical stance toward France, in contrast with his idealized representations of France in the Bildungsromane *Au temps du fleuve Amour* and *Le testament français*. Nevertheless, Makine emphasizes the historical influence of French

as the language of precision and “form.” There is one particularly noteworthy distinction between *La question française* and *Cette France qu’on oublie d’aimer*: in his summary of the theories of the Russian historian Klutchevsky, Makine stops at Klutchevsky’s treatment of France. In *La question française*, however, Makine continues with Klutchevsky’s account of the meeting of Occidental and Oriental civilizations within the “unique heritage” of Russia (15). His vision of history suggests that the significance of French to Makine, even as he expands on it ten years later, is inseparable from his Russian identity and his Russian perspective.

The final chapter will concern Makine’s recent historical fiction, which focuses on Russia. Unlike the Bildungsromane, these novels are narrated in third person limited. Although certain passages in the Bildungsromane, which deal exclusively with the experiences of the narrators’ parents and grandparents, are arguably also passages of historical fiction about Russia, the plots of Makine’s most recent novels revolve around the radical political transformations of Russia in the twentieth century. *La vie d’un homme inconnu* and *Une femme aimée* focus on the role of the ‘art of fiction’<sup>4</sup> in both the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. Unlike in the Bildungsromane, Makine’s heroes are no longer seeking a language between languages, but rather a time between past and present. The frame story of *La vie d’un homme inconnu* reflects a process of mourning

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<sup>4</sup> For contemporary Franco-Czech author Milan Kundera, the novel is an art which is by nature opposed to ideological dogmatism: “One of the failings of Europe is to have never understood the most European of arts—the novel; neither its spirit, nor its immense knowledge and discoveries, nor the autonomy of its history. The art inspired by the laughter of God is, by its very essence, not dependent upon but rather contradictory to ideological certainty” (741, translation mine). Here, Kundera emphasizes the connection between the novel as a genre and his conception of European culture, which glorifies originality, individuality, freedom, wit, and criticism. This view of the novel leads to the conception of its role as a cultural defense against totalitarianism.

for the loss of Russia through an ‘intermediating’ generation. However, in *Une femme aimée*, Makine departs from the contemporary tendency in French letters to write about the world of one or two preceding generations and interweaves an account of an filmmaker’s life in modern Russia with historic vignettes from the life and reign of Catherine the Great, crafting a novel that navigates the space between the reality of what was and the possibilities of what might have been.

Makine’s choice of French may not simply be for the sake of French audiences after all. Throughout Makine’s writings, whether Bildungsromane, essays, or fiction concerning the beginning of Russia’s recovery from totalitarianism, two fictional, parallel universes representing East and West are interwoven.<sup>5</sup> France emerges in Makine’s work through associations with high culture and the ideals of freedom and democracy, but these are not the only the reasons Makine favors French as a literary language. Writing in French paradoxically permits Makine to preserve an earlier Russian generation’s identity, as well as restore a subjective, internal image of Russia from an outsider’s perspective.

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<sup>5</sup> The superposition of French and Russian history also reveals two parallels. First, France’s transition in the eighteenth century from a monarchical government to a revolutionary regime can be argued to have been a model for the Bolsheviks’ overthrow of the imperial government in 1917. Secondly, these two facets of France loosely correspond with Russia’s second transformation in 1991, insofar as the dissolution of the USSR marked the beginning of a new attempt at establishing a truly free and democratic state.

## Chapter 2

### A ‘LITERARY BASILISK’: IMPLICATIONS OF A DOUBLE CULTURAL ALIENATION

Andreï Makine draws heavily on both the French and Russian literary canons in his fiction; critics tend to resolve the question of whether Makine is essentially a French or Russian author by situating him ‘between’ the two literatures. Agata Sylwestrzak-Wzselaki considers him “un écrivain de frontières” (226); Catherine Douzou writes that Makine presents himself as a French writer who has ‘inherited’ the Russian literary tradition (113-114). As widespread as the concept of writing ‘between’ cultures has become in contemporary letters, what writing along national boundaries means in the particular case of Makine’s work merits an investigation.

Makine first caught the attention of literary critics around the world when he received the triple distinction of the Prix Goncourt, the Prix Médicis, and the Prix Goncourt Lycéens for *Le testament français* in 1995. *Le testament français* remains Makine’s most well-known work, and this novel has to a great extent defined its author’s public image ever since. The plot of *Le testament français* deals with a bilingual writer’s coming of age, his desire to write ‘in between’ languages, and his struggle to ‘translate’ one culture into another.

In her article, “Andreï Makine’s Literary Bilingualism and the Critics,” Gabriella Safran chronicles the ways in which critics from different countries have contributed to “Makine’s legend” (249) since the publication of *Le testament français*. She writes that

the majority of French critics have willingly read the novel as the story of a Russian who “escapes” (248) his native Russia to find freedom in France and discover his literary voice in French. Safran adds, “Makine himself has encouraged critics to equate his liberation with the French language itself” (249). While Safran agrees that *Le testament français* is a story about a writer’s arrival at a certain personal liberation, the novel does not indicate, as many French critics imply, that Makine himself experienced acculturation according to the mode of assimilation, in which an immigrant immerses himself in his new culture and forgets the culture he left behind (248-249). Safran argues that the “secret behind Makine’s art” is in fact “literary bilingualism” itself, concluding with the observation that in Makine’s work “the point is not the choice of any specific language or genre, but being in a position to choose” (264). With this conclusion, Safran reaffirms the implications of her reading of *Le testament français*: rather than ‘assimilating’ himself into French culture, Makine is a bilingual artist who has successfully incorporated both French and Russian elements into his writing, assuming a “dual identity and a dual language” (259). Both Safran and Douzou cite Hector Biancotti’s<sup>6</sup> description of Makine as a “transplanted” rather than an ‘uprooted’ writer (Safran 259; Douzou 114).

Nevertheless, the freedom of being in a position to choose between languages does not come without its price. In choosing to write from the space or gap between two cultures, the progression of Makine’s literary career over the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows that even a highly successful “écrivain de frontières” remains subject to the effects of a double cultural alienation. The characterization of Makine as a “transplanted” writer,

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<sup>6</sup> Hector Biancotti (1930-2012), a transnational ‘French’ writer himself, was born to Italian parents in Argentina. He began publishing novels in French after moving to Paris in the 1960s and became a member of the Académie française in 1996.



though accurate at the level of Makine's artistry and consistent with the conclusion of *Le testament français*, glosses over what Sylwestrzak-Wzselaki refers to as the "identity tensions" (10) that necessarily follow from Makine's "doubling" (10) of his cultural identity. In Makine's novels, there is a sense of interior tension and universal exile driving his Russian characters to repeatedly confront the cultural and historical divide between East and West.

Makine's initial critical reception in Russia was less than favorable, and Makine's reputation there as a writer there is close to nonexistent. As Adrian Wanner remarks, Makine is arguably the world's most successful contemporary 'Russian' writer "in terms of sales and international reputation," and yet Russian is "virtually the only major language into which his work is *not* being translated," (20) with the notable exception of *Le testament français*.<sup>7</sup> Wanner underscores the irony of Makine's classification as a foreign writer in Russia while the "exotic allure of his Russianness" (20) set his career as a foreign French-language writer in motion in France. Raymond Taras likewise recounts that "only the existence of a Russian-language draft could establish the authenticity of [Makine's] voice" (181) to French publishers early in his career. According to Wanner and Safran, Russian critic and expatriate author Tatiana Tolstaya wrote two consecutive yet perfectly irreconcilable reviews of *Le testament français*: the first review, published in 1997 for the *New York Times Book Review*, was complimentary, while the other, published in 1998 for *Znamia*, was scathing. Wanner highlights Tolstaya's venomous charge in her Russian review that the real reason that Makine left Russia was that "he

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<sup>7</sup> *Le testament français* was never published as a book by itself in Russia (Wanner, *Out of Russia* 20). It appeared in the Russian journal *Inostrannaia literatura* ("Foreign Literature"), published in Moscow in 1996.

would have been ‘beaten’ for his stilted and clichéd style” (27); Safran remarks that, in her Russian review, Tolstaya insinuates that France “must have lower standards” (252). Wanner, Safran, and Taras all quote Tolstaya’s colorful conclusion of her Russian diatribe either partly or in full, where she writes that Makine is a “philological mongrel, a cultural hybrid, a linguistic chimera, a literary basilisk, who, if you believe the old books, was a combination of a rooster and a snake, something that flies and crawls at the same time” (Wanner 27; Safran 252; Taras 181). Wanner comes to Makine’s defense by citing Andrew Wachtel, who points out that, in her own review writing, Tolstaya is in fact guilty of exactly what she accuses Makine: feeding two audiences who are unlikely to overlap or communicate with each other the “clichés that they are accustomed to hearing about their counterpart” (27). Safran nonetheless points out that Tolstaya’s second review of Makine as a traitor to his country and a “deculturated” (253) author, as well as the overall negative dismissal of Makine’s work in Russia, may have been provoked by Makine’s readiness to deliver whatever platitudes he anticipated French reviewers would want to hear about the Russian language and culture. Safran surmises, however, that Makine himself would not object to Tolstaya’s metaphor of the “basilisk,” since constructing a dual identity and a dual language were part of his artistic project from beginning to end in *Le testament français* (263). In any case, these accounts of Makine’s critical reception in Russia and the varied explanations for why Makine’s work has met with either rejection or indifference in his native country puts Biancotti’s image of Makine as a successfully “transplanted” writer in question. Makine was not a novelist before he left Russia; this situation reinforces the idea that recreating himself culturally and linguistically in French came at a price. Makine may indeed have left Russia because

he knew he felt he would not succeed there as a writer. A comparison of Makine's interviews further demonstrates that he does adjust his position on the respective strengths and shortcomings of the French and Russian languages according to his audience. If Makine's later comparison of Russia's image with the memory of a former lover was sincere (Fairweather 2), stereotyping his inner Russia in his own imagination may have even been a conscious move to establish not merely a linguistic distance, but also an emotional distance between himself and Russia.

Taras responds to the debate by expressing the opinion that Makine is a "French and Russian romantic at the same time" (181). Taras' terse assessment of Makine's position between French and Russian literatures, while less detailed than the discussions of other critics, sheds some light on the nature of Makine's situation as a writer whose work without question remains, to a certain degree, a universally 'foreign' literature. In a time in which literary critics and editors judge novels according to standards of 'authenticity,' Makine's novels stake out their foundations on the conviction that legends remain as essential as ever to our contemporary understanding of history and human experience. However, that which is universal to all human history and experience is 'indicable' or 'unsayable,'<sup>8</sup> and will always be in a state of tension with monolingualism and a monocultural identity. Consequently, one way to give form to the 'unsayable' elements of human experience is to claim the freedom to shift between languages (the very freedom Safran argues Makine wished to celebrate in writing *Le testament français*). Another way to give form to the 'unsayable' is to weave two contrasting cultures into

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<sup>8</sup> "The unsayable" is Geoffrey Strachan's rendering of "l'indicable" in his translation of *Le testament français* (*Dreams of My Russian Summers*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

idealized visions of places which never existed, but which reveal roots in recognizable historical and cultural intersections that contributed to the emergence of the present-day world.

Furthermore, if Makine's statements in his London interview with Natasha Fairweather can be taken at face value, the tension between the 'unsayable' and monolingualism may have political as well as ontological implications for Makine:

Monolingualism produces a totalitarian vision of the world. This object is called a book, and that's it, whereas the bilingual child, faced with one object with two names, will have to grapple with abstract and philosophical ideas early on in life.  
(Fairweather 2)

Consequently, reaching for the 'unsayable' can also be read as Makine's way of confronting the preponderant contemporary literary theme of totalitarianism.

Sylwestrzak-Wzselaki situates Makine within a group of Slavic and Central European French-language writers she considers relatively coherent by virtue of their common tendency to associate French with freedom in their imaginations, as well as their common experience of having lived under a communist government (13-14). This group includes the writers Milan Kundera, Romain Gary, and Agota Kristof. Sylwestrzak-Wzselaki explains these writers' attraction to French through the presence of the French language in Slavic and Central European countries over many centuries, which "grafted" (14) the traditional, though admittedly stereotyped "vision of French as the language of the rights of man" (14) into the cultural imagination of these peoples. With particular reference to "situating Makine's narrator's fantasies" (249) in the context of Russian history, Safran cites Tolstaya's explanation (from her positive review of *Le testament français* published in America) that "dreams of France" were not only "an old Russian tradition," but also a "Soviet commonplace" (249). On this one point at least, therefore, critics seem to

universally agree that Makine has consciously chosen to continue writing in the old Russian tradition. The real question that remains is whether he is in fact using it to reveal something about the failure of the Soviet dream.

In her overview of the “Foreign Legion” of contemporary writers who have chosen to write in French, Douzou particularizes Makine’s relation to the historical timeline of the twentieth century. She distinguishes three “waves” (106, translation mine) of foreign French-language writers and classifies Makine as a member of the second wave, which coincides with the first post-World War II generation, born in the 1950s and the 1960s, for whom “the pressure of History and historic events can come into play but in a less brutal and systematic way” (106, translation mine). In other words, unlike the writers of the first wave of “la légion étrangère” (which includes Milan Kundera and Agota Kristof), the experience of the war that determined the Makine’s personal circumstances came down to him and his generation as a sort of inherited, or possibly even culturally inherent, memory. Douzou later makes a general claim about the autofiction characteristic of “la légion étrangère”: “Their autofiction enters into a clearly collective dimension and because of this, their work escapes the self-absorption of which French literature has often been accused” (114, translation mine). In the case of the “second wave,” an autofiction adhering to the collective dimension of human experience appears to be a logical choice of genre for descending into the memories of the generation before.

However, some critics, such as Juliette Pétiou and Andrew Wachtel, have classed Makine’s most famous novel *Le testament français* as ‘pseudo-autobiographical’ rather than ‘auto-fictive.’ While these terms may appear synonymous, the pseudo-

autobiographical tradition is in fact much older than the French term ‘autofiction.’ Furthermore, Wachtel explains that for the last 150 years, pseudo-autobiography “has been the preferred form for accounts of childhood in Russian literature” (*Remaining Relevant after Communism* 131). While critics cannot seem to agree on how to define the ‘new’ phenomenon of autofiction, the genre overall does appear to allow the author to identify himself or herself with the fictional narrator (Sylwestrzak-Wszelaki 103), making it a suitable genre for a personal ‘confession.’ In the case of the pseudo-autobiographical tradition, however, Wachtel makes it clear that the “author and narrator are not the same person” (*Remaining Relevant after Communism* 131), and goes on to show how this genre permits the writer to draw on his life experience to “create an illusion of truth in readers, yet he is not bound by truth and is able to create the kind of fictional world characteristic for the novel... Simultaneously, however, he need never lose the protection of a fictional mask” (*Remaining Relevant after Communism* 131). All debates on the distinction between autofiction and pseudo-autobiography aside, Wachtel’s characterization of *Le testament français* reveals the likelihood that Makine is writing in French according to Russian models such as Tolstoy and Bunin (*Remaining Relevant after Communism* 131), rather than consciously following the influence of contemporary developments in French letters. Nevertheless, while the personal dimension of Makine’s writing fits Wachtel’s definition of pseudo-autobiography, this certainly does not discredit Douzou’s observation that the ‘collective dimension’ of Makine’s writing is ‘autofictive,’ that is to say, meant to authentically address the experiences of previous Russian generations.

Makine's narrators attempt again and again to navigate their way back through time through the memories of a previous generation. Sylwestrzak-Wzelaki identifies this as the "narrative schema" (87) common to all Makine's novels. Makine's recurring use of this narrative schema recalls Anne Roche's observation of the emerging contemporary trend of French authors who "anchor" their stories "on a familial memory more or less hidden or erased" (19, translation mine). They shape their narrative by "playing on a simultaneity of present and past" (19, translation mine) in order to treat of the hidden atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a "relatively" realistic and authentic way. In her treatment of contemporary French writers' relationship to history, Roche ventures the suggestion that they frequently use "formal procedures which play with empathy and distance" (21, translation mine) to address suffering in history, and that "this relative divergence from reality, or rather this problematic relationship to reality, is perhaps one of the distinctive traits of [literary] narration today" (21, translation mine). In transitioning to a discussion of the emergence of autofiction in French literature, Roche speculates whether this is a manifestation of what Lionel Ruffel has termed the "paradigm of spectrality" (21), which, according to Ruffel, appears to have opened a new way of approaching the past free from all "penitence or conspiracy" (21, translation mine). There are various 'spectral' elements throughout Makine's work, some of which are dramatically realized in Makine's ekphrastic treatment of photography. Moreover, in both *La vie d'un homme inconnu* and *Une femme aimée*, Makine's heroes themselves assume a somewhat 'spectral' role in rejecting the Russia of the present and identifying with a Russia of the past. The effect of Makine's heroes' 'spectral' relationship to their native Russia likewise ties in with the Sallenave's notion of the close relationship between literature and mourning. Makine's

stories often reflect a tribute to individuals whose memory has been all but erased by the collective progress of History. Further, Makine's Russian characters identify to one extent or another with these 'specters' of the dead in their search for a lost time when something other than what came to pass in the 'future' (now present) was still possible. The chapters to follow will investigate how Makine constructs his fictional universe and his character's identities around carefully chosen cultural references, often 'clichés,' deliberately blurring the lines between authentic realism and chimeric reverie.



## Chapter 3

### THE BILDUNGSROMANE

#### 3.1 Becoming a Writer

One feature common to all three of the Bildungsromane is that the conclusion of each novel recalls an image referring the reader back to the beginning of the narrative. In *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu* the image is the sky over a radiant horizon, in *Au temps du fleuve Amour*, it is a woman who never existed (except in the narrator's imagination), and in *Le testament français*, it is the smile of a woman in a photograph. All three images are endowed with the pull of nostalgia, and the narrator always begins his story by inviting his reader to share his fascination with the image in question. Each image functions as a threshold into the universe of Makine's imagination. If, as Eric Chevillard writes, "Every novel implements from its first words the conditions of its ending" (citation from Roche 24, translation mine), reducing every novel to "a process of autodestruction" (ibid. 24, translation mine), these images, situated at the beginning and at the end of each Bildungsroman, convey a sense of eternity and indestructibility. They are outside the 'time' of the novels, and even though both narrator's and reader's perceptions of a given image have undergone a transformation by each novel's conclusion, each image itself remains unchanged.

In 1985, while still living in Moscow, Makine wrote a doctoral thesis on childhood in French literature. Wanner argues this thesis "reads at times like a self-description of his own yet-to-be-written novels" (40). He clarifies this claim with

citations from Makine's abstract: "Makine refers to the longing for the 'lost paradise' of childhood as the 'symbolic-metaphorical vertical line of nostalgic vision that transcends everything transitory and personal with a feeling for the eternal and universal'" (40-41). Likewise, in *Le testament français*, to which Wanner refers as the most "self-conscious" (29) of Makine's novels, the narrator Alyosha longs for a "universal" language (TF 279) that will enable him to transcend the divisions he has begun to sense both in himself and in the world around him. The process of becoming a writer is central to the plots of all three Bildungsromane, and Makine presents this process as inseparable from the universal human experience of the passage from childhood into adulthood. In growing up, children are naturally and unconsciously assimilating the culture around them; learning to speak our first language plays a highly dominant role in the process of integrating our own culture. In this respect, language plays a central role in the coming-of-age of every individual insofar as it shapes every person's recollection of their past experiences and affects their vision of the world. For Makine, what characterizes the coming-of-age of writers is their sensitivity to the affective power of words and imagery. Douzou writes that *Le testament français* showcases "the affective [or emotional] importance of the French his grandmother speaks to him as a child" (107, translation mine). For the narrator of *Le testament français*, French opens up a world of images and ideas foreign to his own experiences. In addition to being attuned to the emotional and cultural associations of their own language, however, biculturalism and bilingualism often help Makine's characters realize how the powers of language can also be used to affect and even manipulate how people perceive the meaning of their own history.

If a writer's work involves breaking away from this division in this experience of the world and the past, the writer's 'adopted' language does not necessarily have to be a foreign language. Douzou, in characterizing foreign French-language writers as creators of a "tierce langue" that expands and enriches the French language itself, comments, "Doesn't a writer always write in a foreign language?" (113). The language of literature itself is foreign to the culture of its origin insofar as a writer creates a literary language not only to model reality differently (cf. Sylwestrzak-Wzelaki 35), but to reinvigorate and re-examine reality from a more universal perspective. Sallenave writes that fiction possesses the unique power to fuse the fragments of the "mutilated existence" of "the past, languages, the vast world, men" (56, translation mine) back together into the comprehensible order of a narrative, which reveals itself "far from the real world and proud to exist as such" (56, translation mine). For Sallenave, this distance between fiction and reality is precisely what makes literature capable of "a universality without limits, a quarrelsome brotherhood, where the dreams of men from another time and the dreams of men from our time, who live elsewhere and do not speak our language, could meet" (56-57, translation mine). If literature is considered in this light, then in the passage describing Alyosha's discovery that his grandmother had a gift for telling stories through "une sorte de langue intermédiaire" (*TF* 279), the universal language 'between languages' Makine is explaining in this passage refers neither to French nor to Russian. Alyosha tells the reader that the day Charlotte recounted a Russian experience in French, he asked himself for the first time, "Et si l'on pouvait exprimer ce langage par écrit?" (*TF* 279). Makine's narrator is beginning to believe in the "limitless universality" of literary language.

For Makine's characters in the Bildungsromane, however, there is always a mournful aspect to cultivating a 'universal' language that is true to the essence of human experience, insofar as it involves revisiting and deconstructing the illusions of childhood. Moreover, if childhood represents a "feeling for the universal and eternal" for Makine, his narrators must repeatedly confront the paradox that literature is an art that reaches for the universal and eternal through the intrinsically imperfect, the "transitory and personal" nature of language.

*Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu* stands out from the other two Bildungsromane as a novel in which the presence of France does not feature prominently, although the entirety of the novel is narrated from Paris. Ian McCall writes that in both this novel and Makine's first published French novel (*La fille d'un héros de l'Union Soviétique*) "France and *francité* play no significant role...these are stories essentially about the USSR" (306). This fact does not mean that the nature of language itself does not play a significant role in *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*. In this novel, the language the narrator Alyosha and his best friend Arkadi grow up hearing and assimilating is the idealistic language of the songs and slogans they grew up singing as members of the Pioneers; this novel offers perhaps the most dramatic portrayal of any of the Bildungsromane of what can be called the 'Soviet dream' and the changes in the narrator's perception of this dream.

While song functions as a vehicle of an idealism that will ultimately disappoint Alyosha and Arkadi, music itself momentarily assumes the role of a language of liberation in *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*. In his article "Du drame de devenir écrivain," Arnaud Vareille offers a metaphorical reading of "des indices sonores" (37) in

*Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*, which he uses to trace Alyosha's development as a writer. Vareille highlights the parallels between this novel and *Le testament français*, making the claim that the "opposition between two ways of considering the same language, as well as the interior drama that plays out in every individual within whom multiple languages must coexist, is already a subject in Makine's second novel" (37, translation mine). One of the main distinctions Vareille makes in the first section of his article, entitled "Un univers communautaire" is based on the contrast between the "masse sonore" (39) of the voices of the neighbors in the courtyard and the individual sound of Alyosha's mother's voice, calling to Arkadi's father Iacha every evening so that Iacha would come up and carry her husband Piotr (who lost both legs in the Second World War) down to the courtyard. Iacha and Piotr are part of the community, but they are the first characters to be named in the text and be granted "un statut d'individualité" (Vareille 39). The friendship between the fathers of Alyosha and Arkadi thus distinguishes itself from the beginning of the novel from the "communal universe" of the courtyard. In addition to the courtyard community, Vareille identifies the Pioneers as a second community in the novel: "the children represent the lively forces of the Soviet Union and equate themselves with the sounds they draw from their instruments" (40, translation mine). Vareille argues that the everyday "masse sonore" of the courtyard and the music of the Pioneers, when considered as metaphors, clarify how Alyosha's changing perception of these sounds reflects both his passage into adulthood: "The novel is constructed on this progression of the conscience of the narrator and his friend who, bit by bit, pass from a fusional attitude with the music of the world, to a distanced and critical perspective" (43, translation mine). Nevertheless, the paradox of the children's

situation manifests itself in the moment when the camp leaders take the bugle and the drum away from the boys. Alyosha and Arkadi literally do not want let go of their instruments (*CPD* 104), nor forget the legend of the red cavalryman, in which the ideal of the emancipation of the laborer and the vision of the open horizon merge:

Grâce à mon père, nous avons découvert peu à peu la face cachée de la Grande Victoire. L'ombre du généralissime triomphant ne hantait pas nos rêves héroïques.

Non, nous n'étions pas tout à fait dupes.

Pourtant, chaque été nous reformions nos rangs et mettions le cap sur l'horizon radieux. Mais il n'y avait aucune feinte, aucune hypocrisie dans nos chansons sonores qui célébraient le jeune cavalier rouge et les travailleurs du monde entier...

(*CPD* 106)

Alyosha and Arkadi find themselves faced with the task of disentangling the true from the false in the history they have inherited.

As Vareille points out, the musical rebellion that Alyosha and Arkadi improvise at the Pioneers' camp is their "first form of free speech" (45, translation mine), yet again, what is striking about this early 'free speech' is that while the boys reject all the "isms" (*CPD* 105) of mass ideology, they don't reject the idealism of their childhood. In fact, as Alyosha confesses at the novel's opening, neither he nor Arkadi could entirely reject the songs of the Pioneers if they tried:

Je me suis arrêté au carrefour chaud et bruyant de l'Odéon. Le va-et-vient de cet endroit vous rend invisible. On peut rester sans bouger. On peut garder dans le lointain brumeux du regard ce passé plus étrange que la mort. Personne n'y fera attention. On peut même murmurer tout bas comme je le fais, moi :

—Tu sais, nous resterons toujours ces pionniers aux foulards rouges. Le soleil aura toujours ce petit goût du cuivre, et le ciel la sonorité des battements du tambour. On n'en guérit pas. On ne se remet pas de l'horizon lumineux...

(*CPD* 15)

Alyosha's sense of being an outsider in Paris is visceral and brings about the illusion of being 'invisible,' erased from the present moment and face to face with a past "stranger

than death” (*CPD* 15). Vareille notes that the details of the taste of copper “in the sun” (*CPD* 15) and the vibrations of a drum “in the sky” (*CPD* 15) are indicative that this reemergence of the past is more profound than an ordinary onset of nostalgia: “[This part of the past] is perennial, for it is anchored in the character’s body” (46, translation mine). Furthermore, Vareille argues this is where the necessity of writing becomes apparent, not for the sake of historical or cultural criticism, but for the sake of confronting or reconstructing the past with words, which cannot capture its “fluent and melodic character” (47, translation mine). The songs of the Pioneers will be lost on readers who have never heard them. In writing a full “confession” (*CPD* 150) to his friend, Alyosha is plunging into their common past and reducing their music, their sensations, and their memories to words, which, Alyosha is well aware, is a form of betrayal (*CPD* 149-150). However, to ‘reduce’ life to a story is part of the process of weaving it “into great history, into the greater fabric of society” (Sallenave 42, translation mine). The inability of words to represent their childhood as they actually experienced it thus becomes an advantage insofar as it allows Alyosha to present his experience as a part of history, to approach the burden of his own past as he would approach his and Arkadi’s parents’ experiences of the war. Vareille observes: “The work of the writer allows for facts to pass from the status of personal memories to that of historical testimony” (47, translation mine). This is perhaps the very reason why the novel opens and closes with a description of the music of the Pioneers, a description always accompanied by the clichéd image of a radiant horizon. The blending of the memory of music with the image of the horizon, while compromising the particularities of the music itself, renders the uniquely cultural, nostalgic effect of this music on Alyosha and Arkadi universally translatable.

In both *Au temps du fleuve Amour* and *Le testament français* a fascination with the culture of the Occident becomes fused with this focus on Russian history. *Au temps du fleuve Amour* unfolds around Russia's unique situation at the geographic intersection between the East and West. The novel begins with an aestheticized sexual encounter between a mysterious woman, whose otherness evokes the Occident, and the narrator, who describes himself in relation to her as "son ours, son barbare venu des pays des neiges éternelles" (*TFA* 14). This aesthetic 'Occidental' scene between the Russian narrator and the unknown woman immediately precedes a scene in which the lovers are a Cossack and a Yakut woman.<sup>9</sup> Their union is presented as a myth, which accounts for the birth of the 'first' Siberian. The first scene is full of light, while the second is marked by an "obscurité enfumée" (*TFA* 19). The woman in the first scene is playing music at a piano; in the second scene, the woman is silent. The atmosphere of the first scene is one of freedom, refinement, and luxury, whereas in the second, there is a sense of ritual, mysticism, and peril in the Siberian setting. With the juxtaposition of these two scenes, Makine evokes a clichéd dichotomy of the Occident and the Orient. At the end of the novel, however, the first scene will become the source of another confession, which reveals this division was intended to trick the reader into an assumption about the first woman's identity.

The plot of *Au temps du fleuve Amour* concerns the coming-of-age of three friends in a Siberian village, whose identities in relation to each other are defined according to roles reminiscent of stock literary characters, or rather, as Makine's narrator

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<sup>9</sup> The Yakuts are a Turkic people who live in the Sakha Republic in northeastern Asia. The Tsar's armies conquered this region in the early seventeenth century.



puts it, “nos doubles de rêve” (*TFA* 178). Dmitri, the narrator, is the Lover (referred to by the others as “Don Juan”); the second is the Warrior, who only answers to the name “Samouraï;” and Outkine, the third, is the Poet (who is physically crippled and lives vicariously through the experiences of the other two). The novel begins with Dmitri and Outkine’s reunion as grown men in New York, with Dmitri asking Outkine to bring the unknown woman of the Occident back to life through the formal power of words:

Tu m’entends bien, Outkine ? Celle que j’évoque dans notre conversation nocturne par-delà l’Atlantique va s’épanouir sous ta plume fiévreuse. Son corps, ce verre à l’éclat chaud du rubis, deviendra mat...

Parle d’elle, Outkine !

(*TFA* 13)

Whatever language Outkine speaks appears at first less of a concern than that Outkine give the undefined “masse de verre brulante” (*TFA* 16) of Dmitri’s memories of an unknown woman back their form. However, according to Dmitri, the language that he and Outkine grew up speaking in Siberia did not lend itself to their passion for beauty, form, and femininity: “La beauté était la moindre des préoccupations dans le pays où nous sommes nés...” (*TFA* 17). Consequently, apart from the freedom the Occident represents for them as adolescents, another aspect of Occidental culture that the boys find particularly seductive is its preoccupation with beauty and form. Like *Confession d’un porte-drapeau déchu*, the novel’s dénouement treats of the friends’ disillusionment with the world they discover after leaving Russia. Rather than being able to cure themselves of the ‘Soviet dream,’ however, the protagonists of *Au temps du fleuve Amour* are unable to abandon their passion for beauty and their search for a perfect “acte esthétique” (*TFA* 52). The ideal of the “acte esthétique” has its roots in *la francité*. Samouraï learned about it from his guardian, Olga, an exiled noblewoman, who lived as a child in St. Petersburg

before the October revolution. Olga tells Samouraï “que la beauté commence là où la façon devient tout” (*TFA* 52): the essence of beauty is in the form of an act. This specifically ‘Occidental’ notion of beauty becomes further confused with ideals of femininity and romance in the narrator’s imagination when Samouraï tells him: “Olga dit que le corps d’une femme arrête le temps. Par sa beauté. Tout le monde court, s’agite... Et toi, tu vis dans cette beauté” (*TFA* 53). A “feeling for the eternal and universal”<sup>10</sup> consequently becomes bound up in Dmitri’s fascination with the ‘otherness’ of women and the Occident. Furthermore, as Sylwestrzak-Wszelaki writes, “For Makine, French appears above all as the language of femininity and passionate love” (36, translation mine). Olga, who reads French novels to the boys, becomes an authority in their eyes on love and ideal beauty, which the three friends come to consider as liberating and civilizing forces.

However, the friends live in “un étrange univers sans femmes” (*TFA* 32). In the absence of women, the narrator is also inclined to feminize nature itself: “La neige molle, les cris d’oiseaux, l’écorce rouge mouillée, tout était femme” (*TFA* 65). Women, although physically absent, are metaphorically omnipresent in the rural Siberian setting in Dmitri’s imagination. As Yves Leroux observes, there is even a possible link between the “masse de verre brulante” (*TFA* 16) of the dream woman representing the Occident and the forms of snow and ice, “éclats de cristal de la Nature” (161). This suggests a convergence contradicting the earlier identification of beauty with the Occident: here, the cold of a Siberian winter seems also capable of imposing aesthetic forms.

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<sup>10</sup> From Wanner’s citation of Makine’s doctoral thesis on childhood in French literature (*Out of Russia* 40-41)

Although Dmitri finds himself caught between East and West, in the end it is the desire for “words” that prompts his decision to leave for the Occident: “J’aspirais à une histoire d’amour. Dite avec toute la complexité des romans occidentaux....Je rêvais des « mots d’amour. » Je rêvais des mots...” (*TFA* 235). Dmitri’s dreams of words are related to his ongoing fascination with the ‘form’ of beauty. Earlier in the same passage, he admits he had fallen into the ‘Occidental’ temptation of believing that what cannot be said cannot exist (*TFA* 235). Dmitri consequently dreams of a love that can be ‘spoken,’ a romance that can be ‘thought.’ By contrast, the redheaded woman’s “chant pur et fragile” (*TFA* 233), the vastness of the taiga, the nature of the Kharg root,<sup>11</sup> and the silence of the Nivkh girl<sup>12</sup> with whom Dmitri spends his last Siberian summer, remain ‘impenetrable’ (*TFA* 235).

Determined to realize his dream of an ‘Occidental’ romance, Dmitri leaves Siberia for St. Petersburg. In his reunion with Outkine in New York twenty years later, however, the reader learns that Dmitri’s memory of the unknown woman in a villa was an illusion, and that the words at the novel’s beginning were carefully chosen to lead the reader to believe that the scene at the beginning took place in the French Riviera. Dmitri confesses:

De toute façon, comme tu as sans doute deviné, ma princesse est une pure invention. J’ai menti, Outkine. Toute cette histoire, ce n’était pas la Côte d’Azur, mais la Crimée, il y a cent ans ou mille ans, je ne sais plus. Et elle, elle n’avait pas

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<sup>11</sup> The Kharg root is first mentioned in the scene between the Cossack and the Yakut. The Kharg plant is described as a rare rhizome that ‘bleeds’ and is used to make a drink with euphorogenic effects. So far, no one seems to have succeeded in identifying the scientific name of this plant or to have confirmed if such a plant exists in Siberia.

<sup>12</sup> The Nivkh people are an ethnic group who live in the region of Amur River estuary.

de robe de soie comme sur tes images, mais juste un sarafane en satin déteint au soleil...

(*TFA* 257)

In a sense, the whole of the novel has been a search for the ‘transparent’ unknown woman. The conclusion reveals not only that the whole scene was an illusion, but that the supposed “matière brute” (*TFA* 15) of the narrator’s experiences was likewise ‘translated’ into an Occidental setting. The inspiration for her image was not a memory of the West, but rather a faded sarafan<sup>13</sup> in a museum. Outkine has used the material of Dmitri’s fantasies to become a successful writer in New York; however, he publishes adult graphic novels instead of poetry. Something essential and ‘unsayable,’ therefore, was lost in the translation from East to West. At the conclusion of the novel, Dmitri indicates he still believes he and Outkine will someday learn “le nom indicible de celle qui était née un jour dans cet instant de beauté et de silence au temps du fleuve Amour” (*TFA* 267). The fact that the unknown woman’s name is ‘unsayable’ and virtually synonymous with ‘beauty’ and ‘silence’ suggests that she is a figure for the expatriated Dmitri’s ‘internal Russia.’

The opening of *Le testament français* focuses on the transformative and affective power of language. The novel’s first image is the “sourire très singulier” (*TF* 15) of Russian women in Charlotte’s collection of family photos. The words “petite pomme,” pronounced right before the pictures were taken have an almost magical quality, making every woman’s smile “une éphémère revanche sur les espoirs déçus, sur la grossièreté des

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<sup>13</sup> Both commoners and the ruling classes in Russia wore this traditional costume. The mention of the sarafan in this scene reinforces Sylwestrzak-Wzselaki’s theory that Makine intended the unknown woman of the preamble to be an echo of the title character in Ivan Bunin’s *Rusya* (78). *Rusya*, the daughter of a disinherited princess with Eastern blood, always wears the same traditionally ‘Russian’ dress (Bunin 20).

hommes, sur la rareté des choses belles et vraies dans ce monde” (TF 15). The presence of a spoken, foreign word in the photo introduces an element of poetry into the otherwise perfectly realistic medium of photography. For Alyosha, the narrator, this way of smiling is a manifestation of femininity (TF 15), although at the time, as a child, he still spoke a language that was too concrete to name what he saw (TF 15). At the novel’s beginning, therefore, the narrator doesn’t draw a division between the tongues of different nations, but between ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’ language. Poetry, which is to play a major role in this novel, is present in the mystery of the “petite pomme.” As a language between the concrete and the abstract, this “première légende qui enchanta notre enfance” (TF 17) foreshadows the theme of a language ‘between’ languages.

The image also serves as an introduction to Charlotte, “cette femme, cette Française égarée dans l’immensité neigeuse de la Russie qui avait appris aux autres le mot qui rendait belle” (TF 17). Charlotte is elevated to the status of a legend herself in the passage, the speaker and unique source of a “mythical” language in Alyosha’s life. Sylwestrzak-Wszelaki breaks down language into the categories of “vernaculaire, véhiculaire, référentiaire, et mythique” (27), defining “une langue référentiaire” as a language of culture and “une langue mythique” as a language that exists “in relation to eternity, at the horizon of cultures, which springs from dreams” (27, translation mine). She notes that “in Makine’s work, French is often endowed with a mythical character and is often referential” (30, translation mine). In the case of *Le testament français*, French evokes a mythical world for Alyosha that has been ‘lost,’ or has never existed; nevertheless, it informs his view of his environment.

Sylwestrzak-Wzelaki, in her treatment of the relationship between language and identity in Makine's work, writes that "over the course of his acculturation, the [Makinian hero] begins to understand that his adopted language and his mother tongue model reality differently" (35, translation mine). To illustrate her point, Sylwestrzak-Wzelaki refers to the passage in *Le testament français* in which the narrator first becomes conscious of the difference in his own subjective connotations between the word "tsar" in Russian and the word "tsar" in French (TF 66). The Russian word conveys a Soviet historical perspective of the tsar as a tyrant who oppressed his people, whereas the French word evokes a 'literary' and romanticized vision of a young Nicolas and Alexandra applauding *Le Cid* in a French theater.

The French and Russian languages are polarized in *Le testament français*. Sylwestrzak-Wzelaki argues that, on a referential level, Makine writes in French "because of the silence of Russian on certain subjects" (36, translation mine). In this sense, Makine's stylistically archaic, literary French becomes a paradoxical reminder of the writer's ways of countering or subverting censorship. However, on a broader level, "[Alyosha] seeks in French the possibility to express what cannot be said in Russian" (Sylwestrzak-Wzelaki 36, translation mine). French comes to be associated with escape, freedom, romance, and passion, whereas Russian is presented as the language of contingency, reality, and cruelty. As he grows older, however, Alyosha struggles to resolve the tension between his French and Russian identity. He is prepared to reject his inauthentic French identity for 'Russianness,' when, in the last summer he spends with Charlotte in Saranza, he learns about the universality of poetry, specifically when he realizes, as Wanner points out, that "the artistic effect does not depend on the choice of a

specific language” (*Gained in Translation* 119). This final summer differs from earlier summers in terms of landscape as well. For instance, Makine evokes the empty landscape of the steppes, reminiscent of a tabula rasa, where Charlotte and Alyosha go walking together for the first time, leaving the confines of her house. It is in these surroundings that Charlotte relates her own past experiences to her grandson for the first time, switching between both languages. The movement out of the village onto the steppes creates a sense of distance, solitude, exile, “un dépaysement presque cosmique” (*TF* 262). It is against this backdrop that Alyosha listens to his grandmother speak in a new way, admitting she will always be a foreigner in Russia, and yet sometimes she sees and understands Russia better than Russians themselves (*TF* 263). Wanner goes so far as to suggest Charlotte herself becomes a figure for poetry in the scenes on the steppes:

Charlotte, who can say anything in either tongue, is the absolute translator who is at home everywhere and nowhere. In this sense she also represents the spirit of poetry as Makine understands it. Wherever she is, time stops, like a lyric. Her mode of expression is not bound to either French or Russian but belongs to an intermediary or universal language existing in between two linguistic realms.  
(119)

The profound paradox of “intermediary or universal language” is that it is “indicable,” unspeakable as Alyosha grasps it, precisely because it is not “bound” or best expressed according to any language. The translation lesson that Charlotte gives her grandson on the steppes develops this theme in showing how, as Wanner emphasizes, meaning can be “gained” through the translation of poems from one language into another. A translator can expand the dimensions of a poem’s “universe” without betraying the spirit of the original work.

Transcendental beauty is also a theme in *Le testament français*, but not in the same manner as in *Au temps du fleuve Amour*. Wanner argues, “When Alyosha is

dreaming about writing a book that could remake the world with its beauty, he seems to echo the famous claim stated in Dostoevsky's *Idiot* that beauty will save the world, which is in its turn rooted in the Orthodox ideal of the transfiguration of earthly reality" (*Out of Russia* 39). Moreover, in a sense Makine draws attention to his narrator's name by only mentioning it once in the entire novel: Wanner likens Makine's Alyosha to Dostoevsky's Alyosha Karamazov in pointing out that both are haunted by a vague memory of their mothers (*Out of Russia* 39). He argues that Makine's descriptions of his hero's 'prenatal' memory bear a visual resemblance to Dostoevsky's rendering of his hero's earliest memories. This likeness reaffirms that Makine's Alyosha is longing for a transcendent ideal, which Makine's narrator identifies with the universality of poetic language.

Alyosha's first realization that Charlotte is capable of speaking in a 'universal' language is accompanied by Charlotte's description of a woman and child she found in a neighbor's isba in Saranza:

Une jeune femme, un bébé dans les bras, se tenait près de la fenêtre recouverte de volutes de glace. Sans bouger, la tête légèrement inclinée, elle regardait la danse des flammes dans la porte ouverte d'un grand poêle... Derrière la fenêtre givrée s'éteignait lentement le crépuscule d'hiver, bleu et limpide...

Charlotte se tut une seconde, puis reprit d'une voix un peu hésitante :  
—Tu sais, c'était bien sûr une illusion... Mais son visage était si pâle, si fin... On aurait dit les mêmes fleurs de glace qui recouvraient la vitre. Oui, comme si ses traits s'étaient détachés de ces ornements de givre. Je n'ai jamais vu une beauté aussi fragile. Oui, comme une icône dessinée sur la glace...

(TF 278)

In Alyosha's opinion, Charlotte miraculously succeeds in using French words to evoke the 'unsayable' in a very 'Russian' scene, endowing an otherwise desolate environment with a 'fragile beauty.' Furthermore, Charlotte's comparison of the woman and child in the freezing isba to an icon elevates an otherwise ephemeral, melancholic moment to the status of an eternal and sacred symbol. Later, Alyosha will consider this icon as one of a



series of memories “à la fois éphémères et dotés d’une sorte d’éternité” (TF 281), all of which “rendaient la mort de Charlotte impossible” (TF 281). Charlotte’s admission that this icon was an illusion, however, reinforces the ongoing tension between poetry and pain in the world, a problem that resurfaces throughout *Le testament français*. Her admission also foreshadows the unraveling of Alyosha’s first memory at the end of the novel.

### **3.2 Writing and Mourning**

In each of the Bildungsromane, the narrator has an experience that forces him to face reality and question the validity of the universe around which he has constructed either a part or the entirety of his identity. These moments also usually mark a definitive and dramatic shift from innocence to experience. This shift is prompted by the death of a family member or occurs after the narrator’s first sexual experience. In both scenarios, once the narrator is confronted with the reality of death or experiences sex for the first time, he momentarily no longer feels the need to immerse himself in the stories of another generation or another culture. Each narrator comes away from his first contact with either death or sex with a sudden sense of the weight of his own ‘history’: his childhood has passed, resulting in the first real division in the continuity of his life experiences. He becomes conscious of having a past to ‘save.’ Paradoxically, however, it is precisely this collision with the realities of life that eventually drives the narrator deeper into the universe of his imagination.

Makine’s narrators’ immersion in a parallel imaginary world in fact foreshadows their experiences of coming-of-age. This foreshadowing is particularly pronounced in *Le Testament français*, since biculturalism and bilingualism feature the most prominently in

this novel. With regard to Makine's bilingualism, Sylwestrzak-Wszelaki makes the claim that "undertaking writing in a foreign language is never innocent" (34, translation mine) and that the "bilingual writer never expresses himself in his second language innocently" (34, translation mine). In engaging with another world for the sake of freedom to choose between two cultures, Makine's Bildungsromane all suggest that ultimately the 'price' of such freedom is innocence. Makine himself asserts in *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer* that historically, every nation has reflected on itself in relation to the "intellectual mirror" of a foreign influence (CFOA 25). His Bildungsromane suggest that a similar process occurs at the level of an individual's awareness of his identity. Sylwestrzak-Wszelaki argues that the cultural and linguistic tensions presented in *Le testament français* underscore that otherness is essential for Makine's characters to grasp their own identity. However, although contact with the 'other' can exhilarate and liberate Makine's heroes, it is also painful, even traumatic:

It leads to the disorientation of the hero. This disorientation is simultaneously liberating yet alienating, but it is also irrevocable: it frees the hero-narrator from an original condition he will never know how to recover: the state of innocence.  
(Sylwestrzak-Wszelaki, 118, translation mine)

Makine's Bildungsromane develop around a contrast between the imagination of the narrator as a child and the imagination of the narrator as an adult. For the child, the distinction between 'otherness' and 'identity' is less absolute than for the adult. Furthermore, the distinction between the fictive or possible and the real or actual is less sternly demarcated in childhood. One of the signs that the innocence of childhood is gone for Makine's heroes is that they become more conscious of the division between 'otherness' and 'identity' as well as the divide between the fictive and the real. This new awareness makes immersion in another culture or in the 'otherness' of literature and the

imagination no longer ‘innocent,’ since their experience of otherness has suddenly taken on a disorienting and melancholic dimension.

Sallenave characterizes childhood as a phase of life in which “no one has died” (174). Furthermore, she argues that children do not associate feelings of guilt with their innate sense of ‘immortality’ (174). The memory of the dead and of people they have left behind weighs heavily on Makine’s narrators once they have entered adulthood.

Sallenave suggests that a feeling of melancholy is always “at the threshold” (170) of literature, even though of itself, melancholy is not a creative, but rather a “paralyzing” (170) emotion. Melancholy accompanies mourning and involves mixed feelings of abandonment and guilt towards another person following separation or death. Sallenave proposes that the guilt we feel towards the dead runs deeper than the feeling of having been abandoned:

Such is, in fact, the reversal produced by the feeling of guilt for having remained alive. For it is not the dead who have betrayed us, it’s we who have abandoned them to death and to oblivion, and we know it well in the late hours of the night.  
(171, translation mine)

The desire to save feelings of affection for those who are gone comes into conflict with the process of grieving and the hope of catharsis. An artist, however, has a gift for transforming the otherwise crippling burden of melancholy into “creative action” (172) by using his imagination to elevate the experience of melancholy to a more universal level and thus transform the personal process of grieving (173). A debt, Sallenave points out, can be “paid” (174) with a gift, and it is the transformation of mourning into ‘debt’ that can be acknowledged and paid that enables artists to mobilize the otherwise paralyzing sensation of melancholy and drives their attempts to give the dead back a

voice. Indeed, all three of Makine's Bildungsromane reflect attempts to give back a voice to someone who is absent or has died.

The presence of death is evoked throughout *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*, but the narrator Alyosha and his friend Arkadi do not feel its weight or impact until it touches them personally. When their fathers die unexpectedly within four weeks of each other, this loss sets them apart from the other children in the courtyard community and pushes them outside their former "fusional attitude with music and the world" (Vareille 42). Iacha, the father of Arkadi, from the moment of his first appearance in the novel, is repeatedly identified by a description of his skull: "Son crâne, absolument chauve et d'une pâleur incroyable, semblait transparent" (13). This description of Iacha's skull becomes a visual reminder of Iacha's past as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps of Poland. Alyosha's father has no legs; this handicap is also a reminder of his hardships as a soldier in the Soviet Army yet is a loss with no apparent meaning (Piotr's legs were crushed by a Soviet tank). For the narrator and Arkadi, however, the mark of the past on their fathers inspires no sadness or shock. These are natural features of their fathers. The land around their homes, too, will later reveal its secrets: one summer, the community will discover that the Crevasse, a cratered area behind their courtyard, hides an undetonated bomb.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator tells us the universe of his childhood appeared "simple" and "limpid" (11). Katya von Knorring writes that the happiness of children is a key theme in this novel, as well as in *Au temps du fleuve Amour* and *Le testament français* (29). Knorring points out that Makine uses the details of daily life to signal the memories the parents are hiding from their children (29), and she cites a

passage from the novel in which Alyosha speculates that perhaps his mother and father were silent about what happened in their early lives because they may have felt that “in their country” knowing too much could be “painful and often dangerous” (*CPD* 27, translation mine). Alyosha’s mother tells the children stories from her childhood in Siberia about a milkman named Glebych, who used to bring them milk in the form of frozen disks; Arkadi’s mother spends years writing letters to the government requesting a commemorative plaque for the victims of the Leningrad Blockade.<sup>14</sup> The mothers’ “preoccupations” foreshadow Alyosha’s discovery of their pasts at the end of the novel: Glebych brought Alyosha’s mother the news that her father had been arrested as an enemy of the regime, and Arkadi’s mother was a survivor of the famine during the Blockade (von Knorring 29-30). Alyosha writes their mothers’ stories into the end of what he calls his “confession” to his childhood friend. Vareille calls the memories of Arkadi’s mother Faïa the “confession within the confession” of Alyosha (48). This mingling of the parents’ stories into his own “confession” suggests that the narrator, in writing down the secrets of the dead, wants to make sense of their parents’ fates by writing them into a larger context, to create a continuity between their parents’ stories and his own.

On another level, it can be said that the story of the Crevasse symbolically parallels the story of the changes in Alyosha’s and Arkadi’s lives. Early in the novel, Alyosha describes it as “un lieu presque mythique” (38), a place which the children always knew hid a story:

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<sup>14</sup> The siege of Leningrad by German and Finnish armed forces lasted from 1941 to 1944 and was one of the longest and most devastating sieges in history.

Qu'est-ce qu'il y avait au fond de la Crevasse ? Pourquoi ne l'avait-on comblée ? Ces questions étaient pour nous aussi mystérieuses que les origines du monde...

Il n'y avait, apparemment, que Zakharovna, une vieille aux petits yeux perçants à moitié cachés par un fichu, qui en savait davantage... Elle connaissait sans doute l'histoire de la Crevasse. Mais Zakharovna, personne ne l'ignorait, devenait de plus en plus folle.

(CPD 39)

This notion of madness surfaces on multiple occasions over the course of the novel.

Madness is usually mentioned in relation to death, but manifests itself differently according to context. For instance, the madness of Zakharovna is opposed to what Makine calls the dazzling “madness of childhood” (CPD 12, CPD 24) in the preamble of the novel. The children's first “folie” is a madness resulting from the joy of chasing an ideal. Their joy is inspired by the horizon, the sky, the music, and the death of the Red Knight. The children find this death especially beautiful: “C'est pour la beauté de cette mort qu'on aimait d'un amour presque sacré les « travailleurs » au nom desquels il fallait se sacrifier” (CPD 26). The death of the Knight is beautiful because it is meaningful. On the other hand, Zakharovna, who does in fact know the secret of the Crevasse, is acquainted with death not through legends but through experience.

When the bomb is discovered in the Crevasse and the community evacuated so that soldiers can detonate it, Zakharovna secretly stays behind and cans tomatoes in her apartment (CPD 84). Consequently, she is the only member of the community present to witness the explosion. She survives unharmed; and afterwards, her neighbors find her more coherent than usual. No one but Alyosha's father has an explanation for the return of her ‘reason’:

Elle m'a dit un jour...avoir vu pendant la guerre tomber une bombe...Elle l'avait entendue tomber, s'était jetée par terre. Mais il n'y avait pas eu de détonation. Ça arrive...quelques jours plus tard, elle avait reçu un faire-part du front. Son fils avait sauté sur une mine. Les deux événements avaient dû se

mélanger dans son esprit. C'est depuis ce moment qu'elle a commencé à ne plus tourner rond...Maintenant, ça va, on lui a retiré ce clou de la tête...  
(CPD 84)

Piotr's interpretation of Zakharovna's return to lucidity suggests that seeing the explosion had a cathartic effect on her and perhaps freed her from a sense of 'debt' to her dead son. The detonation of the bomb has an opposite effect on Alyosha and Arkadi: they now feel "grands, dotés d'une histoire, d'un passé" (CPD 94). They have finally lived through something significant. Rather than wondering about the memories of their parents, they have a story to tell from their own experience.

Another significant moment of "folie" occurs when the children explore the contents of the Crevasse after the explosion. The bomb has unearthed the bones and helmets of German soldiers. Once the children realize these are not the bones of their heroes, but of the enemy, they are carried away by "une véritable folie vengeresse" (CPD 86). Arkadi's father Iacha finds them kicking and crushing the skulls in an "orgie destructrice" (CPD 86). Iacha is furious; when the children protest that these are the bones of Nazis, he replies, "Ce sont des morts," (CPD 87) and orders the children to help him bury them. The fact that Iacha, a former prisoner of the Nazis, teaches the children to respect the dead is no coincidence and echoes a passage from the beginning, when Alyosha overhears Iacha telling Piotr about the "terrifying" indifference of Nazi soldiers toward the mountains of corpses in the camps (CPD 22). We learn later Iacha was rescued from a pile of frozen corpses (CPD 106). Iacha's experiences have shown him that there is a connection between the living and the dead: dishonoring the bodies of the dead is a sign of dehumanization.

When Iacha dies unexpectedly within the same year, Alyosha describes his death as “une mort furtive, et pour cette raison, encore plus incompréhensible” (*CPD* 95). The children’s first experience of a real death does not resemble the heroic image of death they learned from the songs about the Red Knight. Alyosha’s father dies shortly after the death of his friend, with the babushkas of the courtyard commenting, “Ils étaient, Iacha et lui, comme un seul homme” (*CPD* 98). The death of the fathers brings their sons closer. The loss of the fathers is immediately followed by an incident at the Pioneers’ camp. In his account of the incident, Alyosha emphasizes that his rebellion against the camp leaders was not planned:

Tous les tambours et les clairons se turent avec la même netteté disciplinée. Mais nous, sans nous concerter, sans échanger le moindre coup d’œil, nous continuâmes à nous acharner sur nos instruments.

(*CPD* 103)

A new voice and a new attitude emerge from this unspoken union between Alyosha and Arkadi. Their “madness” has begun to resemble the madness of Zakaharovna. They are no longer children singing idealistic slogans and propaganda poems set to the music of the Pioneers’ marches. The boys’ idealism has become their ‘debt’ to their fathers. The music they play is in tribute to their parents, an expression of “cette chance folle” (106) of having had parents to guide them, of the wonder of having had parents at all.

The musical expression of their rebellion follows the deaths of their fathers like a delayed explosion, but it is not enough to give their fathers back their voices. The rest of the “confession” is about Alyosha’s search to integrate the stories of their parents with their lives in a meaningful order. Here Alyosha juxtaposes Arkadi’s mother Faïana’s memories of the Blockade with his own experiences as a soldier in Afghanistan. He recounts the memory of Afghanistan first, describing the soldiers’ practice of throwing



grenades in houses before entering. In one house, after such an entry, he finds a child who has been badly burned in the explosion, but who is still alive. Despite the protests of another soldier that he is endangering their unit, he carries the child with him until the child dies. In Faïana's story of the Leningrad blockade, she is saved from starvation by a neighbor named Svetlana. Svetlana prostitutes herself to soldiers in exchange for canned food for Faïana and herself, but eventually becomes ill and is reduced to eating a frozen corpse. There is no evident connection between the two stories, except that both involve the exposure of innocent children to suffering. After the story of the Blockade, however, Alyosha suggests that his conversation with Faïana prompted his decision to carry the dying child with him.

Even as he is writing his confession, Alyosha is still carrying the memory of the dead child with him. The first book he published was based on his experiences as a soldier in Afghanistan; he confesses to Arkadi that he is disgusted with this book and its success. Even though everything in the book is true to fact, the work in its entirety rings false (*CPD* 129-130). If he could write it again, he would write about “la bêtise qu'on fait en sauvant un enfant” (*CPD* 132). This declaration inspires the question of whether the reader is to believe that the text of this novel is in fact the ‘rewrite’ of which Alyosha speaks. Near the conclusion of the novel, however, Alyosha writes he is standing in a French publishing house with the manuscript of this new book, already with a sense of failure. In having revealed everything he knows of their families' lost stories, with their “humble joys and useless sufferings,” he is haunted by a sense of having betrayed their memory (*CPD* 150). He is certain Arkadi, who is now a mathematician and lives in

America, will not be inclined to write and publish their stories as he is doing. However, Alyosha suspects that one evening, Arkadi too will ‘explode’:

Tu répéteras ma confession ! Puis, dans le silence gêné...tu t’en iras, en entendant derrière ton dos la voix de ta femme : « Ne faites pas attention...C’est un coup de nostalgie...Vous savez, ces Russes...Avec la vie qu’ils ont eue là-bas... »

Au volant, en enfonçant ta belle voiture dans le souffle chaud de l’océan, tu exploseras dans un de ces horribles jurons russes dont tu as oublié la résonance. Tout y passera—ta maison aux objets racés, les diètes et les cures de ta femme...

Et ce qui te fera enrager le plus, c’est que cette explosion sera parfaitement vaine. Car le pari est gagné. Le but atteint. Et l’idéal rêvé, c’est le petit monde décontracté et souriant que tu viens de quitter.

Tout le reste n’est que la bravade d’un vieux pionnier au foulard rouge...  
(CPD 152)

This moment in the confession is a description of the manifestation of another “madness”: the paralysis of ‘melancholy’ as Sallenave describes it. While Alyosha admits to not being able to overcome this melancholy through writing, this passage suggests that his intent all along has been to recover the essence of their childhood and their origins.

Sallenave writes that every literary text is a “destination” (175) or “a token [un gage] left behind by a thinking being” (175, translation mine). Alyosha has created the destination that he imagines Arkadi is seeking. This destination is the novel’s conclusion, where Alyosha describes a memory of their fathers in a field the summer before they died: Iacha is carrying Piotr, who is cutting the grass with a sickle. Before sharing this memory, Alyosha describes his own manuscript as “un gage:”

Et puis...tu sais dans ce manuscrit qui me pèse sur les bras, je n’ai pas raconté l’essentiel. Et je ne le raconterai jamais. À personne. Cela restera entre nous comme un gage de retrouvailles dans le futur incertain de nos vies cahotées. Comme un écho de cette décharge électrique qui souda un jour nos deux têtes pleines du rêve de l’horizon radieux...

(CPD 153)

The idea of waiting for an ‘electric shock’ to their heads recalls Piotr’s metaphor of a nail being dislodged from Zakharovna’s head by the explosion in the Crevasse. Alyosha

specifies that this image of their fathers is a memory of the time before the bomb unearthed the skeletons in the Crevasse. This is the world Alyosha would like Arkadi to revisit with him if it were possible. This image of their fathers, bearing each other's joys and burdens, is a figure for the "essential" and "unsayable" part of their memory, which Alyosha says he will never reveal. This metaphor of an explosion returns in Makine's later novel, *La Vie d'un Homme Inconnu*, when Choutov's French girlfriend tells him he is "une déflagration qui n'arrive pas à se faire entendre!" (*VHI* 12).

In *Au temps du fleuve Amour*, which develops around the tension between the East and the West, the East exists in the protagonists' imaginations as a world of interdictions, secrets, repressed sorrows and even madness while the West is a world of luxury, pleasures, transparency and expressivity. Dmitri's childhood ends with his decision to visit a redheaded prostitute. This decision is prompted by his wish to finally realize an aesthetic act, which his friend Samouraï promised would "freeze time" (*TFA* 53). Dmitri's expectations are thus intertwined with his imaginary associations with the Occident and Time:

Je ne pouvais plus attendre. Il me fallait tout de suite comprendre qui j'étais... Me donner une forme. Me transformer, me refondre... Et surtout découvrir l'amour. Devancer la belle passagère, cette fulgurante Occidentale du Transsibérien.  
(*TFA* 65)

The Occidental woman Dmitri mentions is an imaginary woman, who has been on the Trans-Siberian for a week and has experienced cities Dmitri can also only imagine (*TFA* 60). Dmitri fantasizes about boarding the train and meeting her. This fantasy is a foil image for the situation of the prostitute, who waits for clients on a bench at the station while pretending to check for departures and arrivals:

Je ressentis soudain un minuscule reflet de cette infinie tristesse que la prostituée rousse devait éprouver chaque soir devant ce tableau...Oui, ces étranges trains qu'elle semblait manquer durant des semaines et des semaines. Et pourtant, elle se levait souvent, et consultait les horaires avec tant d'attention...Mais le train repartait sans elle...

(*TFA* 68)

Where Dmitri expects to escape his environment, he finds himself more immersed in its disorienting and tragic aspects in this encounter with the redheaded woman. Helena Duffy reads the passage describing Dmitri's "sexual initiation" (74) as having incestuous undertones, indicating all the ways in which the prostitute's maternal qualities are emphasized and arguing that Dmitri's desire for her reflects a confusion between wanting her as a lover and needing her as a mother (74). She cites Makine's description of the prostitute's isba as "une maison qui m'attendait depuis longtemps, et qui était ma vraie maison, et que cette femme m'était l'être le plus proche" (*TFA* 73; Duffy 74). Duffy points out the moment when "having realized Mitia's young age, the prostitute rushes to disinfect his genitals" (75) and interprets her showing him photographs of herself with a lost husband and infant as an unintentional invitation to Dmitri "to become both her child and her lover" (75-76). Dmitri's confused response to her display of affection for him and her subsequent repulsion suggest that Duffy's interpretation is a valid reading. After there are no more photographs to look at, Dmitri refers to her as "cet être retrouvé" (*TFA* 80), a sort of shelter where he would like to stay forever. In a sense, time does seem to 'stop,' but not in the way Dmitri expected. When the prostitute throws him out, Dmitri feels estranged from himself, caught between who he was before and who he is at present. He becomes a 'specter' to himself. The inexperienced adolescent, captivated by love stories is "une ombre méconnaissable" (*TFA* 80), whereas "cet autre qui, quelques instants auparavant, se débattait entre les cuisses d'une femme inconnue" (*TFA* 80) is also a

‘stranger.’ Lastly, the photos awakened “un être que je n’ai jamais rencontré en moi” (*TFA* 80). Dmitri stops referring to himself as “je” and begins narrating in third person omniscient, referring to himself as “l’ombre.” Only when a passing truck driver picks him up on a bridge does Dmitri return to narrating in first person: “Je me réchauffais, je redevenais moi. Il me fallait endosser ma nouvelle identité. Les étrangers méconnaissables se rassemblaient de nouveau en moi...” (*TFA* 84).

Unable to orient himself, however, Dmitri is distressed to find he suddenly identifies with the Siberian truck driver: soon he will have the same tattoos, the same face, the same odor of vodka, but above all, the same kind of experiences with women (*TFA* 85). He jumps out of the truck and returns to the train station to discover this entire surreal journey has taken place in less than an hour and a half. The prostitute has come back to look for him, however, and takes him back to her isba to spend the night, where he dreams about the mythical Kharg root.

In the dream about the Kharg root, Dmitri is in the compartment of a moving train, alone with a woman who is looking out the window, “non pour voir ce que cachait le givre épais, mais pour ne pas voir ce qui se passait autour d’elle” (*TFA* 90). Dmitri is opening the bulb on the shelf beside her, conscious that he is destroying something in the process of his discovery:

Et plus j’avançais dans mon effort méticuleux, plus l’angoisse de cette découverte grandissait. J’allais voir quelque chose de vivant dont ma curiosité compromettait la naissance... Je tuais ça en ouvrant le bulbe, mais ça n’aurait pas existé si je n’avais pas osé éventrer le cocon. En rêve, la portée tragique de mon geste n’apparaissait pas aussi clairement.

(*TFA* 90)

Within this passage itself, it is unclear whether “ça” refers to one or two things. In either case, however, Dmitri’s explanation for his anguish in his dream suggests he is mourning

for something he can't name. If "ça" refers to a single thing, a likely possibility is that it refers to his dream of experiencing love as an 'aesthetic act.' After his encounter with the prostitute, Dmitri sees Samouraï's explanations of Olga's theories of love as a "consonance" (*TFA* 97) as standing in contradiction with his experience of sex as "l'horrible solitude des deux corps nus" (*TFA* 97). When Dmitri meets Samouraï and Outkine on their way to the cinema the next day, he regrets he is no longer their "equal" in "innocence" (*TFA* 96). Seeing the French actor Jean Paul Belmondo in Phillippe de Broca's *Le Magnifique* saves Dmitri from his despair at being unable to experience 'love' as an 'aesthetic act.' In striking contrast with the Siberian truck driver of the night before, Belmondo provides Dmitri with a masculine ideal with which he wants to identify. However, Dmitri does not forget the redheaded woman. In explaining how Belmondo 'saved' him, Dmitri describes his memories of his first and only night with her, in her isba at 'the bottom of an abyss,' in the middle of nowhere:

Une femme qui, en pleurant, étale sur une couverture des photos aux bords ouvragés. On ne sait pas pourquoi. Un adolescent qui ne pense qu'à cet oiseau mort en lui—son rêve d'amour. Au fond du gouffre, cette nuit de tempête, le Transsibérien rebroussant chemin. Et le visage effacé de la femme au-dessus de la flamme d'une bougie, et ses doigts caressants mes cheveux...

Belmondo tendit la main à cet adolescent avec son oiseau mort blotti près du cœur. Il le tira vers le soleil méridional. Et le magma effrayant et indicible de l'amour commença à se dire avec une clarté occidentale...

(*TFA* 132-133)

In the quote above, Makine creates an antithesis or an opposition between the dark obscurity of the East and the brightness, or 'clarity,' of the West. In the dark abyss, the woman is mourning, and the boy is conscious of something dead in himself, yet Belmondo brings the boy light and the promise of order, beauty, and definition. Love, once formless and even threatening, 'speaks' and takes shape through passion in the

Occident. Belmondo's world is 'comprehensible,' even if it is "divinement bête" (*TFA* 104). The boys see the film seventeen times, using it as a study of the otherness of the Occident, hoping to discover themselves through that world rather than through their own. However, as Dmitri is to learn, all three of them are secretly in love with the same redheaded woman. While Belmondo saves them from melancholy by distraction and provides them with a model to imitate, becoming like Belmondo does not bring them any closer to her.

Alyosha's experience of coming of age in *Le testament français* parallels both the experiences of Alyosha in *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu* and Dmitri in *Au temps du fleuve Amour*. Alyosha is shaken out of his idyllic dreams of France when his mother dies. This death shocks him and makes him feel ashamed of not having been more attentive to the realities of life around him: "Et moi, je restais « l'enfant à qui l'on ne dira rien pour le moment »" (*TF* 199). His father dies shortly after. Thus, mourning for his parents takes the form of a rejection of Charlotte's stories about France, which he identifies with wasteful dreams. In the guilt Alyosha feels toward his dead parents, he becomes fixated on Russia and his own Russianness, which he associates with reality in its cruelest manifestations. The more he learns of the atrocities committed over the course of Russian history, the more he feels drawn to Russia:

Ma raison luttant contre la morsure de la vodka se revoltait : « Ce pays est monstrueux ! Le mal, la torture, la souffrance, l'automutilation sont le passe-temps favoris de ses habitants. Et pourtant je l'aime ? Je l'aime pour son absurde...J'y vois un sens supérieur qu'aucun raisonnement logique ne peut percer... »

(*TF* 207)

Rather than immersing himself in French literature as he used to do, Alyosha now identifies with both the victims and the perpetrators of violence in Russian history.

Alyosha believes that his desire for the 'limitless' is, in essence, 'Russian': "Et si la Russie me subjugue c'est parce qu'elle ne connaît pas de limites, ni dans le bien ni dans le mal" (TF 211). Confident that he has separated his Russian identity from Charlotte's world, Alyosha is shocked to learn the story of Charlotte's rape in central Asia, casually related by his aunt and uncle. What shocks Alyosha most about this story is its inconsistency with the order of the world as he was beginning to see it:

Non, ce qui m'avait vraiment bouleversé, c'était l'invraisemblance de la vie. Une semaine avant, j'apprenais le mystère de Béria, son harem de femmes violées, tuées. À présent, le viol de cette jeune Française dans laquelle je ne pourrais jamais, me semblait-il, reconnaître Charlotte.

C'était trop à la fois. Cet excès me confondait... Mais la vie ne se souciait pas de la cohérence du sujet... Par sa maladresse, elle gâchait la pureté de notre compassion et compromettait notre juste colère.

(TF 214-215)

In the passage above, Makine is describing a mysterious, interdependent relationship between literature and life experience. Literature is distinct from life, but real life without the 'coherence' of its reflection through literature appears incomprehensible, even 'unrealistic.' For Alyosha, in the absence of literature, the only consistent and consequently 'realistic' fact of life is death: "...peut-être la mort seule était prévisible" (TF 212). Alyosha rebounds from this melancholic vision by plunging back into daily life and Soviet culture. He discovers meaning in "un mouvement collectif dirigé par les autres" (TF 220). This movement into the collective realm is in fact the reverse of the progression of the plot in *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*. Alyosha is thrilled to have suppressed his dreams of France, yet they come back to trouble him during his first sexual experience.



Like Dmitri in *Au temps du fleuve Amour*, Alyosha is surprised at the distance he feels between himself and the redheaded girl he brings down to an abandoned ferry on the Volga after a dance, both during and after physical intimacy:

L'instant d'après, je la vis marcher sur la rive...C'était une femme dont j'étais si proche il y a un quart d'heure, qui s'éloignait. Je ressentis cette douleur toute neuve pour moi : une femme s'éloignait en rompant ces liens invisibles qui nous unissaient encore. Et elle devenait, là, sur cette rive déserte, un être extraordinaire—une femme que j'aime et qui redevient indépendante de moi, étrangère à moi...

(TF 245)

Their parting suggests an identification of the redheaded girl with Russia. Alyosha feels himself wanting to tell her he loves her, but a sentimental voice, synonymous with 'la francité' resurfaces in him. Telling her in everyday words would be "un mensonge imprononçable" (TF 245). He begins talking to her about her fragility, her solitude, the water lilies...Alyosha also wants to share his childhood memories and Charlotte's stories with her, but the girl, disconcerted by his sentimentality, cuts him short. The next day Alyosha overhears some other Russian boys gossiping about him using his old nickname, "Frantsouz." Determined to finally uproot "la greffe française" (TF 249) and the 'double vision' he blames on it, Alyosha retreats to Saranza to confront Charlotte. This is the last summer he and Charlotte will spend together: it is also over the course of this summer that Alyosha makes the startling discovery that French is in fact a 'foreign' language to him. As already discussed earlier in 'Becoming a Writer,' Alyosha embraces French as a 'literary' language, a creative tool for transforming the 'unsayable' essence of life into poetry and literature. Wanner comments, however, that Alyosha's changed relationship to the French language indicates "a concomitant and irremediable loss of innocence" (34). Alyosha's loss of innocence, though painful, enables him to relate to his grandmother at a

new and higher level. Even before Charlotte confesses to feeling like a foreigner in Russia despite having spent more than half her life there, Alyosha is struck by his grandmother's "solitude" (*TF* 274). He realizes that the French they are speaking with each other is an isolated language "s'attaquant à une réalité étrangère à sa nature" (*TF* 274), whereas in childhood he was unaware such a division existed. Nevertheless, through this division between her 'internal France' and her Siberian surroundings, Charlotte's command of her native language has acquired a curious vitality. At first, he will simply attribute this vitality to 'universality;' with time, however, since he is no longer a child living in an insular universe where 'no one has died' or left him, he begins to see that the 'universality' of Charlotte's French also has its source in her desire to redeem the memory of something irrevocably lost.

Given the numerous Proustian allusions and situations in *Le testament français*, in addition to its themes of the tension between life and literature, remembrance, and the mysterious intersection of the past with the present, critics have often drawn comparisons between Makine and Proust. There are similarities, but overall, Makine's vision remains distinct from Proust's. Ian McCall discusses parallels between the scenes where both Makine's Alyosha and Proust's Marcel are nearly hit by passing street vehicles. He notes that the events in both scenes are identical but occur in 'reverse' order (*Proust's 'A la recherche' as Intertext* 973): Marcel, who is in the way of the vehicle, is startled by the driver's cry, which causes him to jump out of the way and stumble on the pavement, whereas Alyosha stumbles on the pavement and falls in the way of the vehicle, thereby causing the driver to swear. McCall's account of these two scenes suggests that a writer's vocation is linked to an encounter with his own mortality: both Proust's and Makine's

narrators begin to undertake the work of writing in earnest after a physical encounter with the ultimate reality of death. However, McCall also emphasizes the dramatic difference between the two characters' reactions: Marcel "feels a joy that makes him indifferent to death" (*Proust's 'A la recherche' as Intertext* 973), whereas Alyosha wishes he had been killed. After his brush with death, Alyosha retreats to a cemetery where he scribbles a "crédo grandiloquent" (*TF* 309): "Ma situation outre-tombe est idéale, non pas pour découvrir cette vie essentielle, mais aussi pour la récréer...Je n'aurai d'autre vie que ces instants renaissant sur une feuille..." (*TF* 309). In his pursuit of 'eternal moments,' therefore, rather than affirming that the past is somehow never 'dead,' Alyosha determines to live as though he were a 'specter' already 'dead' to the present. This brings him one step closer to the dead who belong to an era other than his own. As McCall points out, rather than using 'involuntary memory' to regain access to shadows of his past self (*Proust's 'A la recherche' as Intertext* 983), Makine develops a 'formula' for using his imagination to "[transport] himself into the lives of others" (*Proust's 'A la recherche' as Intertext* 983). At the same time as Alyosha formulates this credo, he sets a goal of bringing Charlotte back to France in person. Although he knows this will likely never happen, this dream becomes the source of his commitment to survive his present destitution.

Alyosha's narrative ends on a paradoxical yet profoundly simple note, when he finds himself wordless in the wake of the death of Charlotte, in the deserted streets of Paris at predawn. The shock of having lost her forever, however, makes her 'eternal' presence in Paris more 'evident' than ever before in Alyosha's eyes (*TF* 343). Hélène Mélat observes: "In Makine's work, shock is always intimately linked to a moment of

poetry, and the magnitude of the catastrophe is reduced to a detail. Thus art becomes a firework, a means of deflecting the explosion of suffering into the beautiful, the luminous” (45). Early in the novel, when Alyosha was still a child, literature served as a distraction from reality. In adulthood, literature becomes a means to ‘transfigure’ reality and ‘transform’ his loss of Charlotte. Alyosha’s resolve to continue seeing her in his life and his surroundings echoes Sallenave’s idea that the writer uses his art to raise his personal sufferings to a ‘universal’ plane, transforming mourning into a ‘debt’ that can be paid to the person who has been lost.

### **3.3 Ekphrasis**

While much of Makine’s oeuvre is occupied with searching for a language ‘between’ languages, in his novels, Makine also includes extensive descriptions of art forms other than literature, such as music, photography, and film. The recurring presence of other communicative media in Makine’s Bildungsromane invites a comparison between the respective roles of literature and these media in each hero’s experience of the transition from childhood to adulthood.

*Confession d’un porte-drapeau déchu* opens and closes with the narrator’s memories of the music of a bugle and drum vibrating under a clear sky, with a wide view of the horizon. Music plays an ambiguous role in the novel. On the one hand, the Pioneers’ music is a powerful agent for political indoctrination. On the other hand, music later becomes a manifestation of rebellion. The children’s ‘rebellion’ is also an expression of mourning for their fathers and the dreams of childhood. Makine underscores this aspect of the boys’ rebellion in his account of their second outburst,

when the two friends stumble on a member of the Party seducing a female camp leader at night on a bench:

Je soufflais comme je n'avais jamais soufflé de ma vie. Le clairon ne sonnait plus, il hurlait, fondait en sanglots. Dans son cri se laissaient entendre les râles de nos jeunes rêves étouffés. Les lamentations de l'amoureux trahi. Le houra du desperado du paradis radieux. Le braillement tragique du kamikaze de l'horizon impossible.

(CPD 115)

Something about the art of music contributes and yet falls short of the narrator's purpose in his 'confession.' Alyosha uses the memory of the Pioneer's music as a means to remind Arkadi of the 'harmony' of their emotions at a 'simpler' stage in their lives. The music that they improvise in the camp, however, becomes a more complex symbol of their solidarity in a moment of alienation. They are rebelling against the 'spirit' of the camp ceremony and the Pioneer community. In contrast with the "happy madness" (CPD 12) of childhood, the imagery of the passage above evokes a manifestation of 'tragic' madness. The distinction between these two forms of madness can be described as such: 'happy' madness is the madness of not knowing, and the other is the madness of knowing. The voice of the mature Alyosha emphasizes this difference at the beginning of the novel: "Maintenant on sait tout...[Autrefois] On nous faisait tourner en rond pour que nous ayons l'impression d'avancer" (CPD 12). Here, Makine portrays music as a medium with the power of prolonging both innocence and ignorance.

The novel emphasizes the unifying powers of music. Indeed, one could debate whether any other art can compete with the ability of music to create a sense of community and comradeship. To support his argument for the use of song in *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu* as "a tool for the cohesion of a group" (40, translation mine), Vareille cites the observations of critic Georges Banu: "...songs contribute to the

affirmation of a community and the reinforcement of its unity. Song unites” (40-41, translation mine). Moreover, music is, in its way, a ‘universal’ language. Makine’s juxtaposition of music with the sky reinforces this idea from the first lines of the novel.

Alyosha’s ‘confession’ reflects a desire to reject Soviet propaganda without altogether letting go of the transcendent sense of unity the Soviet songs inspired. As Vareille observes, the desire to revisit the spirit of their childhood “necessitates the task of distancing oneself, which takes the form of the complex composition of a novel, in which several temporal layers are reunited, due to the choice of genre: the confession” (47, translation mine). Literature, and the novel in particular, are uniquely suited to this task of revisiting the past as a stranger to the ‘spirit’ of the times. Von Knorring makes the case that *Confession d’un porte-drapeau déchu* illustrates that the novel is an art form rooted in humanism, but not a naïve and ‘poetic’ humanism so much as a “tenacious and firm gaze on humankind” (33, translation mine). Alyosha’s difficulty, however, lies precisely in the fact that he cannot reject the poetic and the universal, embodied in the symbol of music:

Tu sais, un jour nous rejouerons cette silencieuse mélodie... Pour l’apprendre il nous a fallu les châteaux nuageux du Passage, notre cour et même l’horizon radieux. Mais une fois apprise, elle peut couler partout où nous sommes. Pourvu qu’il y ait un bout de ciel au-dessus de nos têtes.

(CPD 159)

The “Passage” refers to a summit just outside the communal courtyard, which stands in antithetical relation to the Crevasse. In his description of the “topographie de nos jeunes années” (CPD 38), Alyosha reminds Arkadi of this elevated place, which drew their view away from the courtyard to the Northwest, towards a vast open space dominated by a “vertical sky” (CPD 42). Sabine Badré considers the name “Passage” to be a symbolic

name referring to the text of the novel itself, insofar as it is a high and ‘magical’ place from which everything appears related (71). The Passage also used to inspire naïve dreams of unity with the countries of the Occident in the two friends’ imaginations: “Nous savions que leur existence cruelle et injuste touchait à sa fin, que leurs habitants allaient bientôt nous rejoindre dans notre marche vers l’horizon radieux” (*CPD* 42). The conclusion of the novel suggests that Alyosha’s ‘humanism’ is still caught somewhere between the Crevasse and the Passage, the earth and the sky, his ‘confession’ and the silent echoes of the music of his childhood.

Vareille observes that the versified propaganda of the Pioneers’ songs is reinforced by Makine’s representation of cinema, a second *leitmotif* that “[cuts] short all interrogation and all debate” (41-42, translation mine) in the novel. The summer before the detonation of the bomb buried in the Crevasse, a ‘mobile cinema’ stops in the courtyard and screens a short film entitled *La menace de la guerre atomique*. The film shows the community images of the bombings in Nagasaki and Hiroshima and concludes with an educational segment on how to build shelters resistant to nuclear radiation in case of an American attack. A quote from Stalin at the end reveals that the film was produced before the ‘Khrushchev thaw.’<sup>15</sup> In describing the viewing, Makine includes the verbal reactions of the audience to the image, presenting an ironic dialogue between the courtyard community and the film’s voiceover. The recorded voice answers the audience’s questions as if their reaction had been anticipated (*CPD* 72). Vareille argues that Makine presents the cinema in this passage as a powerfully dogmatic medium: “The

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<sup>15</sup> The ‘Khrushchev thaw’ refers to a period in Soviet history that followed Stalin’s death in 1953 and lasted until the end of the 1960s, when Soviet authorities began reversing Stalinist policies and relaxing censorship of the media, the arts, and culture.

cinema does not require interaction, it confines its audiences to the passive role of spectator, and if the screening is occasionally interrupted by laughter or mockery, the projection continues its inevitable course..." (42, translation mine). In its own way, however, the screening of *La menace de la guerre atomique* is still a communal experience, and Makine's account of the evening emphasizes that the film's foremost goal is to communicate its warning to as widespread an audience as possible.

In *L'Art du roman*, Milan Kundera writes that the novel is necessary to the modern world precisely because it is an art form that goes against the "reductive spirit" (649, translation mine) of the contemporary world, which Kundera believes is a consequence of the "unification of the history of the planet, that humanistic dream which God cruelly allowed to be realized" (649, translation mine). In *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchû*, Makine's attitude towards this 'reductive spirit' appears to coincide with Kundera's to some extent. Alyosha feels the success of his first novel was unmerited precisely because the facts he published provided a distorted representation of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Alyosha writes that in the interviews with the press that followed the book's publication, the journalists wrote their questions for him with responses already in mind (CPD 132). Tired of making his answers meet his interviewers' expectations, Alyosha attempts, ineffectively, to tell what it was like to carry a dying child:

J'ai dit que face à son visage brûlé, ni l'Islam, ni Gorbatchev n'avaient plus aucune importance. Je portais cet enfant et je ne savais pas à cause des brûlures si c'était une petite fille ou un garçon...un enfant brûlé parmi les hommes écrasés par la fatigue et la haine. Un enfant dans les bras de celui qui ne sait pas pourquoi il s'est chargé de ce petit corps encombrant. Et le plus étonnant, c'est que cette petite boule dans mes bras semblait sentir mon hésitation...

Après cet essai, les interviews se sont faites moins fréquentes. Puis la guerre a pris fin. Et comme n'importe quel produit l'information sur l'Afghanistan a été soldée. Et, avec elle, ma présence médiatique.

(CPD 133)



There is a note of scorn in Alyosha's mention of his 'media presence': an implicit, almost pessimistic acknowledgment that what he considers most essential in his work is out of place in a society that markets information as a product for consumption. Likewise, Kundera stresses the difficult position of the novel in a media saturated society:

The common mindedness underlying mass media, discretely masked by political difference, is the spirit of our age. This spirit seems to me to go against the spirit of the novel.

The spirit of the novel is the spirit of complexity. Each novel says to its reader, "Things are more complicated than you think." This is the eternal truth of the novel, which is less and less audible in the ongoing noise of simple and rapid responses that anticipate questions and thus exclude them... Given the spirit of our age, it's either Anna or it's Karenin who's in the right, and the old wisdom of Cervantes, who speaks to us of the difficulty of knowing and of intangible truth, appears cumbersome and useless.

The spirit of the novel is the spirit of continuity... But the spirit of our age is fixated on actualities, which are so expansive, so ample that they push the past beyond our horizons and reduce time to a single second, isolated in the present.

(650, translation mine)

Read in conjunction with Kundera's observations, Makine's description of Alyosha's memory of the child bears a passing resemblance to Kundera's comment on the 'old wisdom' of Cervantes. The memory of the suffering child is 'cumbersome' insofar as it evokes something profoundly unsettling, and as Alyosha cannot offer his interlocutors a ready explanation or conclusion, his attempt to communicate the memory seems out of place and useless.

While it would be unfair to 'reduce' cinema and mass media themselves to their 'dogmatic' roles in *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*, Makine's portrayal of these media in this novel underscores their use in a totalitarian society. This portrayal further allows Makine to oppose their use to the purpose of literature, which, by its very ambivalence, is a threat to the existence of a totalitarian state. This opposition will feature

more pointedly in Makine's later novels, *La vie d'un homme inconnu* and *Une femme aimée*. Music, however, remains the most prominent example of ekphrasis<sup>16</sup> in *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*, and to a certain degree, its function in the confession shares in the ambivalence, 'complexity,' and even 'continuity' of literature. Vareille, in his phenomenological reading<sup>17</sup> of Makine's use of the memories of sounds in the novel, argues that "more than any other sense, hearing marks in a profound and durable manner one's body...so well that the mere evocation of sound has the power to resurrect the past" (53, translation mine). In this respect, Makine's fusion of a 'silent melody' (a visceral evocation of the past) with the image of a 'radiant horizon' (a representation of an ideal future) suggests a quixotic dream of reconciling past and future. The oxymoron "silencieuse mélodie" (CPD 159) further evokes an abstract intersection between song and the written confession, in spite of the different characteristics the two arts possess. This intersection suggests that the novel promises a unity perhaps more profound than the harmonies of music. While music has the power to unite the masses and reinforce a community spirit when people are present together, in his confession, the writer invites his reader to share in his solitude, in hopes of an uncertain future reunion, in an unknown place and time.

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<sup>16</sup> In her review of Murielle Lucille Clément's book, *Andrei Makine: L'ekphrasis dans son œuvre*, Helena Duffy defines ekphrasis as a "special type of intertextuality," traditionally "defined as a literary re-creation of visual art works" (127). Clément treats of images as well as music in her studies of Makine's ekphrastic writings, which Duffy considers problematic, given that music is a "generally non-representational" medium. In the particular case of *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*, however, music plays a highly rhetorical role in the text, and the narrator consistently gives detailed descriptions of the images and ideals each memory of music evokes.

<sup>17</sup> Vareille is referencing the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty.

The presence of cinema in *Au temps du fleuve Amour* dramatically contrasts with its appearance in *Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*. In *Au temps du fleuve Amour*, the illusions and special effects of Belmondo's films 'free' the imaginations of the three adolescent protagonists. The cinema introduces them to a fictional, alternate universe in which anything and everything seems possible. Furthermore, as none of the three boys has a father, Belmondo becomes a cinematic father figure each boy tries to imitate. However, as Ian McCall observes, the narrator largely ignores the actual content of the Belmondo movies to which he pays homage as aesthetic experiences. The questionable moral and ideological 'value' of Philippe de Broca's film is never directly addressed. McCall notes that "what [Makine] refrains from doing is actually acknowledging that, even if [Dmitri] does not recognize it, the very French intertexts he glorifies do in fact contain an ideological stance which many viewers or readers might find equally objectionable" (*French Literature and Film in the USSR* 161). McCall cites Ginette Vincendeau's assessment of *Le Magnifique*: "Belmondo's image on and off screen was certainly macho, and women in his films are marginalized and trivialized" (*French Literature and Film in the USSR* 161). However, the boys' attention is fixed on Belmondo alone. They carefully study Belmondo's actions in his different roles: Dmitri wants to play the role of the lover, Samouraï the role of the fighter, and Outkine the role of the writer.

McCall calls their reaction to *Le Magnifique* a naïve response—typical of adolescents, who according to J.A. Appleyard, usually discuss art "almost entirely in terms of identification with the characters" (McCall *French Literature and Film in the USSR* 165). The scenario of *Le Magnifique* itself mirrors the boys' quest of the perfect

‘aesthetic’ act: Belmondo’s character is a failed writer, lost in his fantasies of a perfect romance and a life of action. All three teenage protagonists are drawn to what Dmitri calls Belmondo’s “heroïsme gratuit” (*TFA* 129) precisely because, like beauty, it exists ‘for itself.’

Nous vîmes la force qui s’admirait sans songer au résultat, l’éclat des muscles qui ne se préoccupait pas des records de productivité à battre. Nous découvrîmes que la présence charnelle de l’homme pouvait être belle en soi ! Sans aucune arrière pensée messianique, idéologique, ou futuriste. Désormais, nous savions que ce fabuleux en-soi s’appelait « Occident. »

(*TFA* 129)

For the adolescent Dmitri, this “Occident” offers relief from reality in its display of the ‘beauty’ rather than the ‘utility’ of strength. In his descriptions of various scenes in the films, Dmitri never questions their ‘reductive’ nature, even though, in his long tribute to the effect of Belmondo’s image on his life and sense of identity, he occasionally alludes to the fact that Belmondo’s world is “absolument invraisemblable” (*TFA* 104). Dmitri and his friends are particularly thrilled with the formal technique of ‘mise-en-abyme,’ when an illusion within an illusion is revealed. For them, this is still further proof that Western cinema is unapologetic for its follies. Dmitri explains the mise-en-abyme as a token of Belmondo’s ‘confidence’ in his spectators: “...il nous avait admis dans la sacro-sainte cuisine du cinéma, nous autorisant à jeter un coup d’oeil sur l’envers de la magie” (*TFA* 161). Moreover, the Belmondo’s films create the impression that no subject is off limits in Western cinema:

Nous redécouvrons l’Occident...Le monde qu’on pouvait prendre au sérieux parce qu’il n’avait pas peur de se montrer comique.

Mais surtout son langage ! C’était un monde où tout pouvait être dit. Où la réalité la plus embrouillée, la plus ténébreuse trouvait son mot : amant, rival, maîtresse, désir, liaison...

(*TFA* 161-162)

Though the 'language' of Western cinema is reductive, it dispenses with its own credibility in such a transparent and playful manner, that for the teenage protagonists, its language seems more 'truthful' than that of any film that purports to portray life realistically.

At another level, Dmitri's escape into the fantastical world of Belmondo's Occident contrasts dramatically with his earlier viewing of the redheaded prostitute's family photo album. In *La chambre claire*, Roland Barthes touches on a paradoxical distinction between cinematic and photographic images. Although both arts involve capturing a subject's 'pose' on film, Barthes argues that from a phenomenological standpoint, cinema distinguishes itself from photography because its 'poses' admit of duration and consequently also fictional transformation:

...in a photo, something *posed itself* in front of the aperture and stayed there forever...in cinema, something *passed* in front of that same aperture: the pose is carried out and denied in a continuous sequence of images...  
(123, translation mine)

However, according to Barthes, the essential realism of photography makes it better suited than any other medium to authenticate the existence of someone or something just as 'it was.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In the following excerpt from *La chambre claire*, Barthes elaborates on the 'perverse' aspect of Photography's power to authenticate a subject's existence as 'it was.' He argues that the immobility of a photographic image encourages a confusion of the 'real' and the 'living' in the spectator's mind:

In Photography, the presence of a thing (at certain moment in the past) is never metaphorical...if photography then becomes horrible, it's because it attests, if we may say so, that a corpse is living *as a corpse*: it is the living image of something dead. The immobility of a photo is comparable to the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Living: in attesting that the object was real, it surreptitiously leads us to believe that the object is

In looking at the photos of the family the redheaded woman lost, Dmitri demonstrates an inclination to 'translate' the moment captured in the photos into the present, resulting in a confusion of the 'real' and the 'living' as Barthes describes:

Je ne voyais pas les photos, je vivais leurs images ternies. C'était presque toujours une femme jeune et souriante qui se protégeait les yeux du soleil...et je respirais l'air de ces journées inconnues que je reconnaissais dans la lumière vacillante de la bougie...

Les commentaires que la femme rousse me donnait à travers ses larmes silencieuses évoquaient toujours cet été paradisiaque. Et puis la fatale dispersion de la chaleur concentrée sur ces clichés jaunis. Quelqu'un était parti, disparu, mort. Et le soleil qui obligeait la jeune femme à plisser les yeux s'était transformé en ce halo trompeur des trains de nuit à la gare enneigée de Kajdaï.

(TFA 80)

This passage describes a mournful, double movement both toward and away from the past. Dmitri, who is slightly drunk, doesn't 'see' these images as illusions, but as a 'living' presence. Light itself reinforces the persistent 'presence' of the phantoms of the woman's past. The 'concentrated warmth' of the candlelight illuminating the faded clichés simultaneously evokes yet remains distinct from the sunlight in the photos. Dmitri 'breathes' the warm summer air of the images as though it were the same as the warmth of the candle, all while acknowledging that the sun shining on the redheaded woman in the image is now gone. Nevertheless, the specters in the photographs appear so real that there is a suggestion of a confusion of memories. Dmitri, in his drunkenness, is ready to replace the memory of what happened between them with her family memories:

"L'ivresse détacha cet instant de ce qui l'avait précédé. L'isba de la femme rousse devenait ma maison retrouvée. Et cette femme à côté de moi était un être proche dont je mesurais désormais l'absence..." (TFA 80). Although Dmitri indicates his confusion

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living...however in deporting reality in the direction of the past (« ça a été »), it suggests that it has already passed away.

(Barthes 123-124, translation mine)

results primarily from inebriation, this passage nevertheless illustrates the potential of a photographic image to overshadow the ephemeral reality of the present moment.

In the early chapters of *Le testament français*, Alyosha, relating his impressions as a child, innocently blends fantasy, memory, and myth with photographs. Photography later plays an important role in altering the narrator's perception of the resulting 'memories.' After the novel opens with the 'legend' of the 'petite pomme,' Alyosha gives details of his earliest plunges into 'prehistory' (the time before his birth as well as the time before his earliest memories):

Ces clichés étaient les plus anciens de nos albums. Leurs images franchissaient le cap immémorial de la révolution de 1917, ressuscitaient le temps des Tsars, et qui plus est, perçaient le rideau de fer très solide à cette époque, m'emportant tantôt sur le parvis d'une cathédrale gothique, tantôt dans les allées d'un jardin dont la végétation me laissait perplexe par sa géométrie infaillible. Je plongeais donc dans la préhistoire de notre famille...

(TF 17)

There is nothing tragic about this prehistoric world from Alyosha's point of view at this stage of the narrative. Rather, in its otherness, this world stirs his imagination. In this passage, he is narrating what he saw as someone who is still in the early stage of life where 'no one dies.' Even as a child, however, Alyosha is conscious of the 'order' of the album; yet suddenly, a photo in an envelope disturbs the album's chronology:

Elle portait une grosse veste ouatée d'un gris sale, une chapka d'homme aux oreillettes rabattues. Elle se posait en serrant contre sa poitrine un bébé emmitouflé dans une couverture de laine.  
...Et puis autour d'elle, ces colonnades, ces vues méditerranéennes. Sa présence était anachronique, déplacée, inexplicable. Dans ce passé familial, elle avait l'air d'une intruse...

(TF 18)

The identity of this woman and her baby is to remain a mystery until the conclusion of the novel. When Alyosha asks his grandmother who she is, he is puzzled to see panic in

her eyes. She pretends not to see the photo, and diverts the child's attention to a Death's-head Hawkmoth, which is actually not one, but two moths in the middle of mating. This distraction makes her dismay appear 'logical' to him. Alyosha gets close enough to the moth to see the Death's-head on its back, and he notices that strangely enough, the moths are oblivious to any threat: "À ma surprise, ce double sphinx ne me prêtait aucune attention et n'essayait pas de se sauver" (*TF* 19). This 'distraction' from the photo of the woman in the chapka is significant because it triggers two vague memories in Alyosha, the second of which, as yet unknown to the reader, holds the answer to his question about the identity of the woman and the baby. Alyosha is the baby in the photo, and his second memory involves the sensations he felt when the photo was taken:

Il n'y avait même pas de « moi » bien précis...Juste la sensation intense de lumière, la senteur épicée des herbes et ces lignes argentées traversant la densité bleue de l'air—bien des années plus tard j'identifierais en elles les fils de la Vierge. Insaisissable et confus, ce reflet me serait pourtant cher, car je réussirais à me convaincre qu'il s'agissait là d'une réminiscence prénatale. Oui, d'un écho que mon ascendance française m'envoyait.

(*TF* 20-21)

Unable to date or place his memory, Alyosha cherishes the 'reflection' of the moment he believes he possesses in himself. He keeps his "prescience enfantine" (*TF* 21) of Southern France a secret from his grandmother since he is afraid to try to express it. Ironically, there is an infinite divide between this idyllic memory and the reality of where he was. At the end of the novel, the same photograph resurfaces and negates Alyosha's mythic memory. After Charlotte's death, Alyosha discovers he isn't French at all. The final 'testament' Charlotte sends from Russia to Paris is a long letter in Russian, accompanied by the photo of the woman in the chapka. In this letter, Charlotte explains the woman was the daughter of a Russian peasant, who conceived a child when she was



raped in a gulag; she died months before an amnesty was granted after the Khrushchev thaw. However, in the last lines of her letter, Charlotte switches to French and reveals this woman was Alyosha's mother, adding that it was his mother's wish that he not know about her existence for as long as possible. The photo has no immediate emotional effect on Alyosha, since the woman in the photo is still a stranger to him. That night, however, he identifies his memory with the image, separating his infant perceptions from reality:

Je comprenais maintenant que ce bois était, en fait une taïga infinie, et que le charmant été de la Saint-Martin allait disparaître dans un hiver sibérien qui durerait neuf mois. Les fils de la Vierge, argentés et légers dans mon illusion française, n'étaient que quelques rangées de barbelés neufs qui n'avaient pas eu le temps de rouiller. Avec ma mère, je me promenais sur le territoire du « camp des femmes »...C'était mon tout premier souvenir d'enfance.

(TF 340)

Although Alyosha is well past childhood, one could argue that this identification amounts to losing his childhood a second time. Barthes describes the ironic potential of photography to negate memories: "Not only is a photograph never, in its essence, a memory...but what's more it blocks and quickly becomes a counter-memory" (143, translation mine). In Alyosha's case, losing his childhood also amounts to losing Charlotte a second time.

Since Alyosha was never able to bring Charlotte back to Paris and was not present at her death, the photo itself becomes an obstacle to closure from the loss it represents. In fact, Alyosha's situation reinforces the idea that photography by nature precludes the transformation of grief into mourning. According to Barthes, "Photography is non-dialectic; it is a denatured Theater where death cannot be "contemplated," reflected on, and interiorized; or yet: the dead theater of Death, the prohibition of Tragedy; it excludes...all catharsis" (141, translation mine). However, Barthes' comparison of

literature to photography sheds some light on Makine's conclusion of *Le testament français*. Barthes emphasizes that there is nothing Proustian about photography, in that it restores nothing and simply authenticates that the deceased existed (129). In contrast, language is, by nature, fictional. At the end of Makine's novel, Alyosha's recognition of the 'magic' words "petite pomme" on his mother's lips 'restore' her and render her recognizable to him. He realizes that the word itself gives her smile a physical resemblance to the smiles of the other women in his adopted family. Once an 'intruder,' her image now takes its place in the 'history' he used to imagine in relation to himself, that is to say, in his 'family romance'<sup>19</sup>:

« Il faudra m'habituer à l'idée que cette femme, plus jeune que moi, est ma mère, » me disais-je alors.

Je rangeais la photo, je repartais. Et quand je pensais à Charlotte, sa présence dans ces rues assoupies avait l'évidence, discrète et spontanée, de la vie même.

Seuls me manquaient encore les mots qui pouvaient le dire.

(TF 343)

Given that the temporal 'immobility' of the photo still has a disorienting effect, Alyosha puts the photo away. However, the recognition of a 'word' in the image is enough to convince him that he can still find a language that will 'transform' his loss of Charlotte, and allow him to pay his 'debt' to her with the 'gift' of a new voice in France.

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<sup>19</sup> In *Romans des origines, origines du roman*, Marthe Robert argues that the evolution of the novel as a genre can be explained in light of two Freudian models concerning a child's reconstruction of his identity as either a "Foundling" or a "Bastard child." The child imagines himself as either a foundling or a bastard to account for the loss of an ideal family or father; similarly, the novel reflects man's innate desire to re-order the universe in which he lives, according to an ideal order he has imagined.

## Chapter 4

### NON-FICTIONAL ESSAYS ON CULTURAL IDENTITY

Critics note a shift in Makine's portrayal of France after the success of *Le testament français*. Both *Au temps du fleuve Amour* and *Le testament français* unfold around his young protagonists' fascination with a mythical France. McCall observes that in the late 1990s, Makine's novels gradually become more critical of contemporary French culture. Rather than opposing dreams of France to the realities of Russia, these later novels "force the reader to contrast the beauty of the earlier protagonists' dreams of France with the 'laideur' of the present [France]" (McCall 315). Sywestrzak-Wszelaki characterizes the 2006 essay *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer* as Makine's explicit avowal of disillusionment with the West, as well as with the difference between contemporary France and the France of his childhood dreams (158). Safran offers a unique perspective on this apparent shift in Makine's attitude toward his adopted homeland. She suggests that in the essay *La question française*, published ten years before *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer*, Makine is perhaps responding to critics who praised *Le testament français* as an affirmation of French as the "dominant language of world culture" (250). Safran writes, "...Makine seemingly responds to such reviews in an attempt to regain control over his own literary legend and present himself as not only (and not entirely) an unreconstructed Francophile" (255). Indeed, the theme of disillusionment was already present in Makine's Bildungsromane. If the theme of disillusionment features more prominently in Makine's work after the success of *Le*

*testament français*, Safran's observation offers a plausible explanation for this change. In fact, even though this novel's acclaim gained him the status of French citizenship (which he had earlier been denied) there is evidence in Makine's essays that his vision remains rooted in what can be considered a distinctly 'Russian' perspective on France and on Europe at large.

In spite of the heightened sense of disillusionment with France in these later writings, there are many aspects of French culture for which Makine's admiration remains constant, even though admittedly, most of what Makine admires about France comes from legends and history. *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer* is an avowal of disillusionment with contemporary France, but it is also an expression of concern for the future of France, its language and its identity. In this essay, as the title indicates, Makine is criticizing the French for "forgetting to love" and to identify with a France of the past.

There are many similarities between the essays *La question française* and *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer*. Both essays address the apparent decline of 'Frenchness,' (*la francité*) which Makine identifies as a passion for form and aesthetics. In *La question française*, Makine treats of this subject in close conjunction with the "illusion optique que comporte le regard russe porté sur la France" (17). In this essay, Makine examines the historically dualistic attitude of Russians toward French culture. According to Makine, Russians have romanticized French high culture for centuries, "but when they travel to France, they are disgusted by the banal reality of French life" (Safran 255). Two of Makine's earlier Bildungsromane feature characters who experience the Occident and France according to this same pattern. Dmitri and his friends search for the perfect 'aesthetic act' in *Au temps du fleuve Amour*, while Alyosha delights in the beauty of

French as a romantic and literary language in *Le testament français*. At the end of *Au temps du fleuve Amour*, Dmitri and Outkine confront the banal and even crude reality of the lives they have made for themselves in the Occident; similarly, once Alyosha moves to Paris, he declares: “C’est en France que je faillis oublier définitivement la France de Charlotte...” (TF 297). The subject of Russian disillusionment with the Occident and with France, therefore, has precedents in Makine’s earlier writing, and, according to *La question française*, throughout the last three hundred years of Russian history. Ten years after *La question française*, Makine revisits the question of the decline of ‘Frenchness’ in a slightly different manner in *Cette France qu’on oublie d’aimer*, adding details of his own personal experiences of contemporary French life to his theories relating to the history of the ‘Russian gaze’ on France.

*Cette France qu’on oublie d’aimer* opens with Makine’s visit to an unnamed village church near Luçon in the Loire region. Makine describes the beauty of its interior in great detail, but adds that there is not a local in sight “pour me renseigner” (CFOA 15). The stones are left to speak for themselves to a visitor who grew up “dans un pays qui exaltait le rejet des croyances et le mépris tout particulier pour le catholicisme” (CFOA 16). While Makine clarifies that his heart is not moved by any religious sentiment, at the sight of the paths worn out in the stone floor by the feet of pilgrims and parishioners over the centuries, he experiences a sense of “une intense communion, à travers les âges, avec les êtres dont la vie m’est proche grâce à cet unique instant: un jour lointain, ils poussèrent la porte, marquèrent leurs pas sur le dallage...deuils, joies, naissances, guerres, famines, exils et retours, peine et espérance...” (CFOA 16). Immediately after describing the church in Luçon, Makine describes a different visit to a second church in

the Loire region, where he discovers yet another “secret” (*CFOA* 16), a plaque with a list of names, over which there is an inscription, “La paroisse de Saint-Radegonde de Jard à ses enfants morts pour la France, 1914-1918.” Although plaques inscribed with the names of “Morts pour la France” are common in churches and on monuments in France, Makine finds this one particularly moving because the list includes several examples of men who came from the same families. In Makine’s eyes, this plaque becomes a tribute and a testament to the intimate closeness of a family, affirming an idealistic unity of France as a nation: “Ce n’est plus la silhouette désincarnée d’un conscrit, ni l’ombre d’un appelé, c’est l’intimité d’une famille française, l’essence des heures tragiques qu’elle a vécues” (*CFOA* 17). This image of the plaque inside the church of Saint-Radegonde de Jard will reappear at the conclusion of the essay. Here again, as in his *Bildungsroman*, Makine opens and closes his work with an image alluding to an indestructible and eternal ideal. Moreover, his special attention to the plaque that represents the lost ‘children’ of the ‘family’ that is the French nation is reminiscent of Makine’s fidelity to the memory of the people who disappeared during the Second World War and the Stalinist era in Russia. Unlike the dead brothers, fathers, and sons commemorated and classed according to their family names in Saint-Radegonde de Jard, however, the mass graves of Russia are full of unknown, unnamed persons. Moreover, as in the case of the ‘Crevasse’ in *Confession d’un porte-drapeau déchu*, the existence of many of these gravesites has been denied, hidden, or simply forgotten.

Makine’s fascination with the ‘dead’ of France may also have its source in his own grapplings with Russian and Soviet history. With the image of the interior of the two village churches, Makine evokes the ideals of communion and fraternity. This appeal to

idealism, while a tribute to a France of the past, can also be understood as a spiritual dimension of Makine's own conception of Russian culture. Wanner's commentary on vaguely 'religious' moments in Makine's writing illuminates the role that the image of an empty church might serve in Makine's essay. To support the claim that Makine's idealism adopted "religious overtones" (41) at the turn of the twenty-first century, Wanner cites a statement that Makine made to Catherine Argand in 2001: "We Orthodox people belong to a poetic, intuitive, sensitive culture, which is not based on communication but on ontological communion. What counts in Russia is not the communication of ideas, but of ideals" (41). Wanner explains that Makine's identification with Russian Orthodox culture is not manifested in his fiction in the form of any openly religious sentiment. Rather, Wanner observes, "At best, religion is suggested as a lack, an absence visualized by the ruined church buildings dotting the Soviet landscape" (41). At the beginning of *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer*, Makine also uses the church of Sainte-Radegonde to illustrate the absence of a sense of 'supernatural vocation.' In a passage entitled, "La vérité des légendes," Makine vividly describes the difference between "la fraîcheur de Sainte-Radegonde" (CFOA 19), and the heat, the traffic, the 'soulless' rose-beige vacation homes, and the 'deadening beat' of techno music in the street outside the church. In Makine's eyes, the sights on the street outside serve as evidence of a civilization ordered to satisfying the stomach and 'petty' material needs:

Je reprends la route en pensant à ces paroles que Bernanos écrivait en 1939, loin de Paris : « L'histoire de mon pays a été faite par des gens qui croyait à la vocation spirituelle de la France... » Le paradoxe n'est qu'apparent : pour bâtir une « nature » nationale, pensait-il, on doit la sublimer, sinon tout retombe dans la petitesse matérialiste d'une civilisation « d'estomacs heureux. » Pour avoir un

vécu digne de l'Histoire, un pays doit le transcender dans un défi métahistorique de l'esprit.

(CFOA 20)

According to Makine, the paradox of Bernanos implies that human history and the human spirit are always at odds with one another. The reality of a country's past is always different from the 'history' of its legends, but the identity of a nation rests on the ideals these legends represent. The memory of the individuals who sacrificed their lives for their country is tied to this unifying power of legends in Makine's mind. Makine suspects that an increasingly globalized, materialistic society is threatening to overshadow the legends that once unified France. This attitude seems reflective, to some degree, of the transcendental idealism from which Makine's hero Alyosha from *Confession d'un porteur de drapeau déchu* is unable to 'heal.' While the pseudo-autobiographical nature of *Confession* indicates that Makine considers himself distinct from this character, the fact that Makine, like Alyosha, continues to write and dwell on life in Russia from his new home in France suggests that he, too, feels unable to 'heal' from the memory of Russia. The 'spiritual vocation' of France for which Makine mourns in *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer* may therefore be an ideal of substitution for a 'Russian' ideal.

Makine defends his approach to portraying 'Frenchness' according to legends and historical anecdotes, asserting, "...notre perception d'un pays est tissée de mises en scènes [souvent apocryphes]. Leur contenu est peu fiable mais leur forme exprime l'essence « surnaturelle » d'un peuple mieux que ne feraient milles traités scientifiques" (CFOA 25). In considering the mystery of what makes 'French' life 'French,' Makine touches on the curious transition from the 'austere' age of chivalry to the more luxurious age of "la mollesse des cours" (CFOA 22) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.



Eighteenth century France is also of particular interest to Makine, given that Russia modeled itself in France's image politically and culturally over the course of this century.

Makine identifies an image from the eighteenth century anecdote that shaped his vision of France when he was a teenager in Russia. This anecdote comes from the life of Voltaire, in which the famous Enlightenment philosopher is 'wriggling' inside a 'ridiculous apparatus' designed by a priest (*CFOA* 21).<sup>20</sup> Makine claims that this vision of Voltaire flailing in a priest's machine was what first made him conscious of the 'infinite complexity' of French culture (*CFOA* 21). In Makine's eyes, what makes French culture unique and interesting is the way French thinkers have walked the line between the scientific and the supernatural, the physical and the spiritual, the 'sayable' and the 'unsayable' for centuries. Makine suggests that the French language evolved accordingly, adapting to a cultural inclination to order and impose forms on nature. This inclination has resulted in certain "mystères français" (*CFOA* 37), which sometimes amount to amusing contradictions (Makine gives the example of a radio host who reports that the French appreciate the 'absence of trees' in a forest) and at other times result in a highly poetic hedonism (Makine quotes a literary 'masterpiece' from *Le Figaro*, in which an epicurean journalist describes how to properly open a bottle of champagne). Makine argues that the formal character of the French language is a natural consequence of the French cultural mindset:

La forme française n'est pas un habillage folklorique bon à épater les touristes mais un style d'existence profondément irrigué par le vécu national, une

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<sup>20</sup> The 'apparatus' to which Makine refers is the 'trémousseur' invented by the abbé de Saint-Pierre, which is defined in Émile Littré's *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1872-77) as a kind of chair on a spring, designed to move and shake the body in ways that were believed necessary for good health.

riche consonance où s'entrelacent des thèmes très divers. Non pas un échantillon de curiosités mais tout un monde en mouvement novateur. Sa force est de savoir réunir dans un ensemble vivace des éléments apparemment incompatibles.

(CFOA 45-46)

Makine's mention of 'innovative movement' recalls the earlier image of Voltaire and the priest's mechanical invention designed to move and shake the body to restore health and equilibrium. Further, the French national character, according to Makine, involves a freedom and boldness of expression, a willingness to confront contradictions, and a determination to unite life's 'apparently incompatible elements' elegantly.

Makine stresses that French identity is rooted in intellectual as well as in aesthetic traditions. In both *La question française* and *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer*, Makine bases his hypothesis regarding the ties between the French identity and ancient Greco-Roman traditions on the writings of the Russian historian Klutchevsky. According to Klutchevsky, the Gaulic tribes' assimilation of the vestiges of Roman civilization and the cultural heritage of Antiquity was marked from its very beginning by an obsession with form: "Le caractère symbolique de cette assimilation sautait aux yeux: on s'attachait plus aux emblèmes qu'au sens de la civilisation défunte" (CFOA 43). Makine explains this fixation on the forms of Greco-Roman culture as the source of the 'dynamism' and creativity of the new culture that emerged and transformed itself over the centuries through a cyclical return to its Greco-Roman roots throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Neo-Classical period. The 'cycle' that Makine describes in fact recalls Sallenave's theory of 'melancholy' and 'mourning': one could argue that French culture emerged from a civilization mourning for lost Classical ideals. However, the French obsession with forms would later prompt nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals and writers, including Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, to target French formalism as the reason

why hedonism, hypocrisy, and frivolity seemed so prevalent in French high society. Nevertheless, Makine defends 'la forme française' against Dostoevsky's accusations: "Car, n'en déplaise à Dostoïevski, il ne s'agissait pas d'une « pure forme », d'un emballage, d'une enveloppe vide. Non ! Cette forme française est suffisamment pulpeuse. « La forme est la chair même de la pensée », disait Flaubert" (*CFOA* 44). In the French tradition, and according to Occidental custom as well, contemplating something necessitates finding an adequate 'form' to express it.

In *La question française*, however, Makine does not stop at Klutchevsky's account of France, but also offers a summary of Klutchevsky's theories about the first European tribes who migrated onto the Russian steppes, whose situation between East and West prefigured the 'unique' heritage of Russians in the future:

Deux genèses différentes, à deux extrémités de l'Europe : l'une, à l'Occident, disposant, pour terreau, du magma culturel de plusieurs civilisations, l'autre, à l'Orient, se contentant, pour décor, du cadre cosmique. L'affrontement, l'échange, l'enrichissement réciproque seront inévitables, prenant pour les Russes d'abord le nom de Byzance, puis de l'Europe. Et comme le condensé de celle-ci : la France.  
(*QF* 15-16)

This passage suggests that Makine's conflation of 'forms' with French culture springs from his belief in this opposition between the pluricultural environment which nurtured the European "aptitude à rendre le monde dicible et pensable" (*QF* 16) and the displaced situation of the first 'future Russians' in an empty space of 'cosmic' proportions.

Makine's summary suggests that in his opinion, this displacement lies at the origin of a particular 'Russian' sensibility to the 'indicible.' For Makine, the ongoing 'clash' and tension between 'dicable' and 'indicible' forms the basis of Russia's 'unique' heritage. It might be argued, however, that what Makine calls a 'unique heritage' was in fact suppressed under the "myth of Russia's unique history" (Wachtel, *An Obsession with*

*History 3*) which “[reached] its zenith in the worldview of Stalinist culture” (Wachtel, *An Obsession with History 3*). Soviet society considered itself ‘postapocalyptic,’ a society in a world in which all differences in human culture and history with all its social tensions had ‘passed’ (Wachtel, *An Obsession with History 3*). Makine, on the other hand, sees value in tensions and in the ability to express them; his fascination with the image of Voltaire in the abbé’s trémoussoir has shown his admiration for the ‘clash’ of the ‘sayable’ and ‘unsayable.’ In this sense, therefore, Makine is projecting his vision of the ‘unique heritage’ of Russia onto the French cultural heritage, in which he sees and admires a tradition of spirited contradiction. Consequently, in *Cette France qu’on oublie d’aimer*, Makine appears to be approaching French culture as though it contained a microcosmic reflection of Russian history.

Despite their criticism of French culture, both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were admirers of French literature (*CFOA* 31-32). Makine essentially credits literature itself as the reason why French became the ‘language of Europe.’ Makine argues that there are many languages that rival French in musicality, have a more flexible syntax or boast a richer lexicon. In the hands of great writers, however, French gradually evolved into a ‘universal’ language of humanism, culture, and the arts:

Cette langue s’imposait car elle avait été ciselée par d’immenses écrivains qui avaient sculpté leurs œuvres dans sa substance vivante tout en profilant, affinant, ennoblissant cette substance par leur génie. Pouchkine aimait cette langue de l’Europe non pas pour ses gracieusetés verbales mais pour l’énergie, l’audace et l’élégance avec lesquelles le français abordait l’univers des hommes.

(*CFOA* 51)

According to Makine, the creative innovations of writers and the rigor of philosophers sharpened the expressive power and precision of French. Here again, however, Makine is essentially crediting ‘audacity’ and openness to innovation as the reasons why French

happened to flourish as a literary, 'universal' language. With his mention of Pushkin, Makine also suggests that French poetry and literature itself were the reasons why the French formal 'ideal' let down such deep roots in Russia.

Makine's ideas on the evolution of French as a language of the world overlap with a commonly held Russian and Eastern European view of France and the French language. Sylwestrzak-Wzselaki writes that the reputation of French as the language of culture, reason, romance, liberty, and humanism constitutes "une image stéréotypée du français" (36) common in Russia as well as in central and Eastern Europe. From the eighteenth century onwards, in Eastern Europe and Russia, French was historically considered a language of both great intellectual and revolutionary potential; in the twentieth century, French became the unofficial 'language of resistance' to the languages of Russian and German, which became associated with oppression, propaganda, and totalitarianism (Sylwestrzak-Wzselaki 14). Makine does not address the political factors of the twentieth century in his essays until he begins to treat of the decline of French in the contemporary world. In the third section of *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer*, entitled "Déformation," Makine expresses his concern that the French language has been weakening in the age of globalization. What alarms Makine is the lack of a reaction on the part of the French themselves. Instead, the French hide behind politically correct ideologies, or, like Michel Serres, refuse to discuss certain "sujets interdits" (CFOA 60) altogether. European cultural identity is now based on a rejection of the injustices of nationalism, imperialism, and colonization, rather than on a positive identification with the history and traditions of Occidental culture. Makine is concerned that too many Western Europeans are ready to reject their identity entirely, the good with the bad.

Ioanna Chatzidimitrou is disturbed by Makine's assessment of contemporary French culture, asserting that Makine is unconsciously expressing ideas that would resonate with the views of radical racists ("Si vous n'êtes pas français, soyez dignes de l'être") through his "obvious disregard for historical and political context, past and present" (218). Although Chatzidimitrou does not disagree with Makine's proposed solution of an "honest discussion of taboo issues" (217) in order to resolve the threat of globalization to European identity, the crux of her critique is that "the France Makine wants to see restored to its glory may have never really existed...it is, to a large extent, the product of French cultural imperialism" (217). Her latter criticism is just. The France of the past that Makine claims the French no longer love is indeed a legendary France. Makine himself would likely acknowledge this. At the beginning of the essay, Makine explains that every culture's identity is rooted in a myth, based on an ideal image of what that nation would like to be. Makine's chronicles of the history of the French culture and language have also ignored historical and political context in favor of explaining the evolution of France in relation to an eternal search for ideal 'forms.' In doing so, Makine 'universalizes' the evolution of the French language. Rather than defending a racist sense of cultural superiority, Makine's approach to French identity emphasizes his belief that the transcendent notions of beauty and intellectual freedom reflected in French culture and literature belong to everyone who wishes to lay claim to this historical legacy. The key to understanding Makine's views is not to question whether his ideal ever existed, but to consider its absence.

In his critique of *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer*, Raymond Taras writes: "The romanticized notion of intercultural understanding and advancement, which permeated

[*Le testament français*] has been replaced with a soured depiction of France's troubled multi-ethnic society" (186). One could still argue Makine's current stance on contemporary French culture remains 'romanticized': Makine begins and ends his essay with a reminder of the memory of France's dead, who gave their lives for a France which is being forgotten. This fixation on the memory of a nation's dead was already present in Makine's Bildungsromane and will be a prominent theme in his 'historical novels' after *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer*. In Makine's fiction, there is a sense of melancholy, of guilt in letting the dead be forgotten. In writing about the dead, he transitions from melancholy to mourning, and as discussed earlier, attempts to acquit a perceived 'debt' to the dead by giving them the 'gift' of a new voice. This 'romanticized' mourning process applies again to Makine's message in *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer*: Makine wants to give the dead of France back their 'voice' in order to enter into a dialogue with history. He hopes that such a dialogue will enlarge the perspective of the people of France on the troubles and tensions of the present.

In response to Makine's statement that he still believes in "la vitalité de la France, à son avenir, et à la capacité des Français de dire, « Assez ! »" (CFOA 87), Taras poses the rhetorical question, "But, we can ask, enough of what?" (184). In the remainder of his critique, Taras implies that Makine is referring to the "shackles of political correctness" (185) but also to xenophilia in France, "which has forced the [French] state to negotiate with leaders of street gangs engaged in violent disturbances, to tolerate drug traffickers, to recognize the wealth accumulated by car thieves, to excuse the behavior of *les jeunes des banlieues*" (185). Makine does indeed take issue with the tolerance of violence and crimes in the Parisian *banlieues*, but not necessarily with 'xenophilia.' (This would seem

hypocritical on the part of Makine as an immigrant himself.) Instead, in addition to the form of ‘censorship’ which political correctness represents, Makine subtly criticizes the media in a scene that bears a resemblance to the fictional scene Makine wrote fourteen years before in *Confession d’un porte-drapeau déchu*:

Les yeux du journaliste s’éveillent, c’est le moment où la réalité craque le schéma. Je le prie d’imaginer juste le regard de cet enfant de cinq ans penché sur sa mère poignardée. Penser à ce que sera désormais la vie de cet enfant. Se demander aussi...

L’émission est terminée. Pénible sentiment d’échec...Cet enfant en pleurs qui tente de ranimer sa mère : ils sont tous deux fixés sur cette bande magnétique qui va se couvrir de poussière dans les archives de France Culture.

(CFOA 81)

Like Alyosha in *Confession*, who describes the death of a child in Afghanistan in an interview, in real life Makine brings up the story of a child witnessing his mother’s murder in a park in Nice. Unlike his own fictional character, however, Makine brings up the story to make a clear point, that such an occurrence, however often such things may be happening, should never be regarded a commonplace event, but a tragedy. The culture of mass media and communications has backfired insofar as it has engendered a widespread numbness to social tensions. Political correctness by itself will not resolve these social tensions, nor will it be able to hide these tensions indefinitely. Crimes such as the murder in Nice represent conditions that have begun to seem so commonplace that Makine insists it is time for society to wake up.

Makine signals the approaching conclusion of his essay with a plea for “des mots clairs pour dire qu’il ne peut y avoir qu’une seule communauté en France : la communauté nationale. Celle qui nous unit tous, sans distinction d’origine et de race” (CFOA 88). Makine is calling for an open dialogue in a divided community. This ‘community’ includes the dead, both the victims of violence and the French soldiers who



died for France. The idealism of this conclusion is again reminiscent of the Russian ideal of ‘ontological communion.’ Makine is treating of the present social situation in France in a poetic rather than a political way. This is significant, however, because for Makine, poetry is the natural opponent of propaganda:

Et pourtant « la France éternelle » n’est pas une hyperbole nationaliste. Ce sentiment de pérennité se perçoit dans les échos qui, durant notre existence fugace, relie notre présent au passé lointain d’un pays, de cette France dont nous sondons alors, avec émotion, l’histoire et la densité humaine.  
(CFOA 91)

Here again, Makine’s perspective on France remains firmly entrenched in the ‘Russian gaze.’ Throughout *Cette France qu’on oublie d’aimer*, therefore, while focused on France, Makine is always arguing from his experiences as a former citizen of the Soviet Union. The conclusion of the essay implies a distaste and distrust for all political agendas. His ideas for what kind of ‘action’ is needed next remain undefined. In fact, Makine is not addressing ‘action’ but hidden attitudes. Disillusionment with political ideology is the very reason why the spirit of speaking out freely and critically appears to be so important to Makine.

## Chapter 5

### **‘HISTORICAL FICTION’ ABOUT THE RADICAL TRANSFORMATION OF RUSSIA**

Traditionally, works of historical fiction are set in the past, but this is not the case in *La vie d'un homme inconnu* and *Une femme aimée*. The heroes of these novels are artists who are obsessed with the past and searching for links between a vanished world and contemporary society. In both novels, the present moment is considered as a potential portal to an experience of a prior era. Unlike the earlier Bildungsromane, which focused on the individual's search for identity 'between' a mythical France and Soviet Russia, these later novels are focused on Russia's past, the fragments of which are pieced together in relation to the heroes' reflections on European history.

*La vie d'un homme inconnu* fits Roche's description of the 'new historical novel' (17) set no further back in history than one or two preceding generations. It is in fact a novel within a novel, with a frame story alternating between Paris and St. Petersburg in 2003, the year of St. Petersburg's tri-centennial. The return of an expatriate writer named Choutov to St. Petersburg results in a chance meeting with an elderly man named Volski, whose survival of the siege of Leningrad and the Stalinist era becomes the basis of the novel's second plot. As a character, Volski serves as a bridge for Choutov to an earlier phase in Russia's history. On occasion, the past-present opposition within the novel suggests a parallel between the opposition between dreams and reality. Volski's sufferings become so extreme at times that he perceives the world around him in a

dream-like state. These moments nevertheless illuminate certain aspects of the human condition. By contrast, in the frame story set in the present time, the progress of the new Russia's recovery appears almost exclusively concerned with the regaining of wealth and world status. Volski speaks of post-Soviet Russia as though he were a foreigner in his own country. Choutov too, finds himself in a 'spectral' role in relation to Russia, since the Russia he knew in his youth no longer exists. Of course, Volski and Choutov's respective relationships to the Soviet era are far from nostalgic. For Choutov, the complexity of his Soviet identity is even a source of a sense of isolation in Paris as well as in post-Soviet St. Petersburg. The double plot structure of *La vie d'un homme inconnu* juxtaposes the heroic and poetic spirit of Volski with the pragmatism of the newly wealthy business class of post-Soviet Russia. The novel even suggests that Volski survived the devastation of the siege and Stalinism because of a certain sense of poetry and idealism. In the progressive recovery of the present era, however, the 'relevance' of this spirit of the past comes into question.

*Une femme aimée* is set almost entirely within the borders of Soviet Union (and later those of post-Soviet Russia). The novel traces the life of a young filmmaker named Erdmann who doesn't have the opportunity to consider his own country from beyond these borders until the conclusion of the novel. Makine expands the socio-historical scope of this work by interweaving the various stages of Erdmann's life and artistic career with anecdotal vignettes from the life of Catherine the Great, gleaned from the hero's own ongoing research on the famous Russian empress. The plot unfolds around his search to understand her not simply as a historical figure but also as a woman. The novel is 'historical' in the sense in that it is constructed around moments in which Makine's

writing suggests that history and the present intersect. In moving away from the usual structure of the new contemporary ‘historical’ novel, set back one or two generations at most, Makine creates a novel that addresses the question of whether the shadows of the past are perceptible in the present. The tense of the novel’s narration accentuates the focus on the present: both Erdmann’s life and the episodes from Catherine’s life are rendered in the present tense, resulting in a cinematic effect: a story conveyed largely through outward and immediate images, actions and dialogues. However, using the interplay between larger-than-life legends of history and seemingly inconsequential moments in the present, Makine begins to sketch the existence of invisible connections between the ‘personal’ and the ‘historical,’ the individual and the collective. Erdmann’s research into Catherine’s life begins with his interest in her ‘feminine’ identity. In an interview, however, Makine indicates that his own interest in understanding the ‘femininity’ of Catherine is linked to an attempt to understand the introduction of a European model of democracy into Russia:

Elle a déposé les bases de ce qu’on pourrait appeler, pas seulement pour les Russes, mais pour le monde entier, la recherche démocratique, la construction démocratique. Les bases étaient posées par Catherine, bien plus que par Pierre le Grand, qui était certes un personnage absolument gigantesque, mais qui a beaucoup cassé, qui a cassé la nature historique de la Russie. Catherine avec sa souplesse, peut-être sa souplesse féminine, cette tendresse presque, cette douceur, a réussi à inoculer dans les têtes russes cette idée si neuve pour eux : la démocratie.<sup>21</sup>

Here, Makine proposes a somewhat farfetched, but still intriguing parallel between ‘feminine tenderness’ and the dream of democracy in imperial Russia. Makine’s

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Librairie Mollat (Bordeaux), from the video archives of Mollat.com (accessed 22 March 2014): <http://www.mollat.com/livres/makine-andrei-une-femme-aimee-9782021095517.html>

reflection on Russia's ongoing search for a political system guaranteeing freedom and equality for everyone implies that the quest for an 'ideal' society remains an impossible dream as long as society continues to unquestioningly accept and live according to reductive representations of the human condition.

While Makine's earlier novels have been read according to the model of a Proustian search for a lost world, the focus of the protagonists on history in these two 'historical' novels is in a sense deceptive, as in fact both works reflect the paradoxical search for a 'lost present.' Kundera touches on this idea in his discussion of the development of the 'psychological novel' in the wake of Proust and Joyce. According to Kundera, Joyce developed a means of capturing each moment of the present through writing, which paradoxically proved a more difficult task than Proust's search for a moment lost in the past:

There is apparently nothing more evident, nothing more tangible and palpable than the present moment. Nevertheless, it escapes us completely. All the sadness of our life is there....Every moment represents a tiny universe, irrevocably forgotten in the next instant. The great microscope of Joyce knows how to stop, to seize this fleeting instant and make us see it. But the search for oneself ends, again, in a paradox: the more powerful the optics of the microscope, the more the 'self' ("le moi") and its unity escape us.

(653, translation mine)

Realizing the intangible nature of present necessitates an acknowledgement of a painful yet also commonplace reality of the human condition: our consciousness of our own life and identity becomes fragmented with the passage of time. Sallenave writes of yet another 'tragic' view of human existence in touching on the problematic nature of the pursuit of happiness, which experience reveals to require more than social liberty and material wealth: "[Nietzsche's *Lebensnot*] is a metaphysical thesis: to live is not sad, to live is tragic" (102). Here Sallenave is referring to the 'ennui' that results when the

hardships of struggling for survival are lifted and the ‘weight’ of the present is still unbearable (103). These two different perspectives on man’s relationship to his own existence come into play in Makine’s two ‘historical’ novels, and can be considered together in relation to Makine’s treatment of the utopian dream of an ideal society and the problematic nature of individual identity. Both Choutov and Erdmann are confronted with the transformation of Russia from a failed communist society to a capitalistic society. This problematic transition bears the characteristics of both progress and of failure: Makine’s heroes have the sense of having simply transitioned from one kind of struggle to another. In this sense, every ‘fragment’ of Russia’s history offers an example of a reductive view of human nature and a reminder of the fragmented nature of human existence. As artists, both heroes hope to redeem the present of post-Soviet Russia and save their Russian identity through a union with the past. In *La vie d’un homme inconnu* and *Une femme aimée*, Makine simultaneously confronts the present yet resists examining the present too closely through the ‘microscope’ of literature. Makine does not narrate either novel in the naturally introspective first person, but instead writes about Choutov’s and Erdmann’s lives in third person limited in present tense. Further, Makine blurs the ‘optic’ of the ‘psychological microscope’ of his fiction. Both of Makine’s heroes recover their sense of interior ‘unity’ in turning their vision outside themselves towards something unknown and perhaps deliberately undefined. Choutov’s artistic project at the conclusion of *La vie d’un homme inconnu* opens onto the unknown identities of men and women in unmarked graves in Russia, suggesting a transition from the paralysis of melancholy to a process of mourning. Erdmann’s image of Catherine the Great comes to be linked with the image of mist over the Baltic, representing a hidden

moment in Catherine's life when she was something other than what History could capture.

*La vie d'un homme inconnu* draws significantly on Russian and central European literary intertexts. Indeed, such intertexts dominate the frame story, which begins in Paris. Choutov's name means 'sad clown' in Russian and is directly associated with a Chekovian intertext that opens the novel. The first image is a couple sledding down a hill, a motif taken from Chekhov's short story, "A Joke" ("Choutochka" in Russian). Like the girl on the sled in Chekhov's story, Choutov is haunted by the words, "Je vous aime, Nadenka." This same sentence also happens to be the 'joke' in Chekhov's story: each time the couple sleds down the hill, the narrator whispers his little 'joke' in the girl's ear so she can never be sure if she heard these words from him or the wind. Choutov's fascination with these words and frustration with the idyllic beauty and innocence of Chekhov's world appear at first related to his grieving over the end of his own 'clichéd' Parisian romance with a young French girl named Léa. However, the phrase, "Je vous aime, Nadenka," soon becomes as a leitmotif reflecting Choutov's struggle to understand the role of literature, as well as his own role as a writer, in the present time: "Sacré Tchekov ! De son temps, on pouvait encore écrire ça" (*VHI* 9). Choutov decides the story only works because of his current solitude, which is itself a "joli cliché" (*VHI* 10). While drinking alone in his apartment, Choutov reduces the memories of his life to various pastiches and 'clichés.' His adolescent admiration for Chekhov's story is included in this list of experiences, as is a memory of having cried over the corpse of an Afghan woman when he was a soldier in Afghanistan. Choutov's memory of Afghanistan recalls the memory of Alyosha from *Confession d'un porte drapeau déchu* and signals a pseudo-

autobiographical dimension to *La vie d'un homme inconnu*. Alyosha also considers his life in France a cliché: “[Je suis] un stéréotype, l’auteur-émigrant-russe” (*CPD* 17). In having identified with characters of Chekov’s stories since youth, Choutov has a sense of having become as unreal and as laughable as they are in the context of the contemporary world.

In addition to lamenting having lived a life of clichés, in revisiting the memories of his failed French romance, Choutov regrets having loved Léa as an ‘ideal’: “Oui, son erreur était bien là, dans son désir d’aimer Léa comme on aime un poème. C’est à elle qu’il lut, un soir, ce récit de Tchekov : deux amoureux indécis, les retrouvailles vingt ans après. Je vous aime, Nadenka...” (*VHI* 25). Makine will later specify at the novel’s conclusion that Choutov in fact remembers these “retrouvailles” differently from how Chekhov’s story really ended. Choutov’s fixation on the “retrouvailles” indicates he may be hoping for a ‘union’ with someone to compensate for a ‘reunion’ he will never have. Léa was perhaps to play the role of ‘Nadenka’ for Choutov. Further, there is a suggestion that Choutov read this story to Léa because characters such as these represent the only ‘family’ he has: “Longtemps il a vécu en compagnie de ces revenants fidèles que sont les créatures enfantées par les écrivains. Des ombres, oui, mais dans son exil parisien il s’entendait bien avec elles” (*VHI* 27). Choutov identifies these ghosts with his homeland, but this homeland is not Russia, but Russian literature: “Un exilé n’a, pour patrie, que la littérature de sa patrie” (*VHI* 27). Consequently, while regretting having loved an ‘ideal’ in Léa rather than Léa herself, he also is frustrated for having only been able to present himself to her as a living caricature of Romantic Russian literature.



Reflecting on their fights, Choutov realizes that most of their arguments began not just with their difference in age and culture but also with their views on literature itself. Léa is an aspiring writer, but her concept of the role of the book and the place of the writer in contemporary society are different from Choutov's: "On n'est plus au dix-neuvième siècle ! argumentait-elle d'habitude. Le livre est un produit comme un autre... Mais parce que ça se vend ! Eh bien, vas-y, fait comme Boulgakov, écris pour être publié dans trente ans et *post mortem*" (VHI 34). The most significant point in this statement is the importance Léa places on publication, or rather publicity, as a sign of a living writer's success in his art. Léa believes in the 'living writer' who adapts his work to reflect directly on the changes of the present, rather than writing vaguely about a metaphysical ideal in hopes of being remembered after he is dead. Léa has great admiration for Slavic expatriate writers such as Nabokov and Kundera. Choutov resists identification with these internationally acclaimed post-modernists. Details from Nabokov's life are cited and used to denounce his writing: "Cet esthète Nabokov tenait plus à une jolie métaphore qu'à la terre paternelle !" (VHI 28). In Choutov's eyes, Nabokov sacrifices his heritage as a Russian for nothing more than an aesthetic of his own invention. Further, Choutov's attitude toward Nabokov's approach to describing nature forms a parallel with the protagonists in *Au temps du fleuve Amour*. In this Bildungsroman, the aesthetically obsessed Dmitri observed a problem with the 'feminine form' of the Kharg root: exploring it involves destroying it (TFA 31-32). Choutov essentially accuses Nabokov of writing about life and human nature in the same way: "Il écrit en collectionneur de papillons" (VHI 29). This metaphor of the butterfly collection is nevertheless ironic, given that Choutov has also created his own collection of 'dead

butterflies' in the form of clichés lifted from the 'Golden Age' of Russian literature.<sup>22</sup>

Kundera's name is never mentioned; instead, a passage from his novel *L'identité* is quoted. This passage from Kundera's novel describes a kiss as the transmission of 'an army microbes' from stranger to stranger. It is presented as the antithesis to the chaste romances of Chekov:

Répugnant...en fait, tout un crédo. Formulé par un écrivain que Léa idolâtre et en qui Choutov voit un boudeur prétentieux. Tchekov est bien loin. À présent, un héros doit être névrosé, cynique, pressé d'étaler devant nous ses miasmes. Car son malheur vient de sa mère qui le tient en laisse même quand, grandi, il fait l'amour. Ainsi parlait l'idole de Léa.

(VHI 11)

Here, Choutov takes issue with novels that have become overly 'psychological' and introspective. As noted above, however, while Kundera admires the 'optic' of the 'microscope' of Joyce's vision, he also acknowledges that probing too deeply into the self through the dissection of the present moment can become reductive and limiting. In *La vie d'un homme inconnu*, this allusion to an isolated passage of *L'identité*, which reduces human interaction to the transmission of microbes, is reminiscent of the metaphor of modern literature as a microscope that has become too powerfully focused on 'authenticity,' and results in detached, pretentious, and depressing studies of the material or the psychological aspects of human experience.

Choutov cannot let go of his passion for the 'ideal,' although from the perspective of mid-life, he is well aware that the 'ideal' can be reductive and become a trap for a writer as well as for a society. His admiration for Chekhov is strained, moreover, given

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<sup>22</sup> The 'Golden Age' refers to the nineteenth century, the era that produced Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and near its end, Chekhov. Chekhov's preoccupation with the decline of an era in Russian history will make his position in Russian literary history particularly relevant to Choutov's.

that Choutov didn't grow up in the nineteenth century, but in the USSR. In one of his last conversations with Léa before she leaves him, Choutov deliberately attempts to destroy the exotically 'Russian' image behind which he used to hide: "Je ne suis pas russe, Léa. Je suis soviétique. Donc sale, bête et méchant. Très différent des Michel Strogoff<sup>23</sup> et autres princes Mychkine<sup>24</sup> dont les Français raffolent..." (VHI 47). While aware he is substituting one 'mask' for another, Choutov's declaration reflects a denial that his Soviet identity may still have a connection to his passion for Chekhov and the ideals of the 'Golden Age.' In addition to Chekhov's 'joke,' the image of golden autumn leaves appears as a parallel leitmotif, transporting Choutov back to the time when he was a student in Leningrad:

Et s'il y avait un ailleurs, c'était ce parc d'il y a trente ans, sous le feuillage d'automne, à Leningrad, deux ombres qui marchaient lentement, leur respiration rythmée par un poème.

L'alcool l'aidait à croire que ce pays sous l'or existait toujours...  
(VHI 48)

This nostalgic memory of his first love is associated with another phrase from literature, which Choutov believes to have inspired Dante, and which he read at this same period in his life as a university student: "Amata nobis quantam amabitur nulla!"<sup>25</sup> (VHI 22). This Latin intertext appears only once yet is in fact enmeshed in a web of Russian, Classical, and Medieval associations. While referring to Choutov's first love in Leningrad, whose name is Iana, this same phrase is also quoted by the main character of Ivan Bunin's short story 'Rusya.' The situation of 'Rusya' is very similar to Choutov's: a middle-aged man

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<sup>23</sup> The hero of a novel by Jules Verne, set in Tsarist Russia.

<sup>24</sup> The hero of Dostoevsky's *Idiot*.

<sup>25</sup> "A woman loved by us like none other!" (Translation mine)

is suddenly reminded of his first love. The man quotes this Latin phrase to his wife at the conclusion of the story, when she asks if he is drinking cognac at noon because he is still grieving over the memory of the ‘dacha girl’ whom he refuses to discuss. The original quote is from a poem by Catullus.<sup>26</sup> While the opening of Catullus’ poem can easily be applied to the situation of either Bunin’s or Makine’s protagonists, Makine’s ‘sad clown’ immediately follows his quotation of Catullus with Chekhov’s, “Je vous aime, Nadenka.” In Catullus’ poem, the verse immediately following the one quoted mentions the ‘joys’ Catullus and his lover shared: the word Catullus uses is “iocosa,” which comes from the same root as *iocatio*, Latin for “a joke.” With this Latin intertext, therefore, Chekhov’s ‘joke’ suggests a memory of a joy in which the metaphysical and the mundane are fused. The mention of Dante suggests that Choutov wants to believe, in spite of the compelling idea that human condition ultimately reflects a ‘tragedy,’ that the contrary is true, that a vision of a higher order is still possible. Choutov is dreaming of a Beatrice who will save him: “Pour cet amour-là, une langue sacrée s’imposait. Non pas nécessairement le latin, mais celle qui élèverait l’être aimé au-dessus du quotidien” (*VHI* 22). Though Choutov qualifies that Latin has come to his mind as a ‘sacred’ language by chance, it was historically once the high ‘universal’ language of medieval Europe. Choutov’s search for a universal and ‘sacred’ language worthy of his ‘beloved’ is also reminiscent of Alyosha’s quest for a language worthy of the ‘indicible’ in *Le testament français*.

This last hope of recovering the ideal romance of his youth prompts Choutov’s return to St. Petersburg, at the time of the city’s tri-centennial celebration. He succeeds in

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<sup>26</sup> “Miser Catullus, desinas ineptire/ et quod vides perisse perditum ducas” (“Miserable Catullus, desist from foolish speeches/ and what you have seen to have been lost, regard as lost.”) (Translation mine)

re-establishing contact with Iana, his first love, only to discover that Iana has changed with Russia. She has become a female oligarch: a divorced proprietress of an opulent, newly constructed hotel in the heart of St. Petersburg. She has one grown son, named Vladimir, who works in the industry of literary advertising. This is a double blow for Choutov: Iana has forgotten their romance completely, and her son's profession is proof that his hope that literature was still something 'sacred' in Russian culture is also an illusion. Choutov's conversations with 'Vlad' reinforce Choutov's sense that, like in the West, literature has become just another product for consumption in contemporary Russia. Choutov's return to the new Russia prompts him to wonder: "Pourquoi le goulag serait-il le critère de la bonne littérature ? Et la souffrance, un gage de l'authenticité ?" (VHI 89). When he watches Russian television, Choutov has the impression that Petersburg has become like any other modern Occidental metropolis. History is repeating itself, as Russia continues to model itself on the West. Makine describes the new Russian television programs and advertisements in great detail. For Choutov, everything shown on the television is a sign of cultural regress: commercialism has replaced propaganda, but mainstream media entertainment has likewise displaced literature. According to Marie Lucille Clément, Makine's ekphrastic treatment of television in *La vie d'un homme inconnu* has both symbolic and structural significance:

Like a leitmotif, this ekphrasis of television programming resurfaces throughout the novel through more or less accentuated variations. Makine places the world of the new Russia beside the world of Choutov...Andy Warhol beside the Madonna, icons of entertainment and of mass reproduced art [are placed] against Choutov, the enduring figure of literature personified.

(92, translation mine)

Choutov feels insignificant in the face of the new consumer culture he sees reflected on the hotel TV screen. Volski is facing a similar situation of displacement: the reader learns

that Iana's luxury hotel is in fact a converted Soviet apartment complex, and Volski is one of the former tenants, who is too old to manage a move on his own. At the time of Choutov's arrival, Iana has made all the arrangements for Volski to be taken to a nursing home. Everyone believes Volski can't hear or speak. However, Choutov discovers that Volski is silent by choice, and the irony of the situation is compounded when Volski, the man with 'no voice' reveals that he was once a singer of musical comedies.

Volski in his own way becomes a figure for literature in the novel. If, as Clément writes, television and mass media are a recurring leitmotif in the frame story, theater becomes the new principal leitmotif in Volski's story. In fact, Volski's very survival becomes associated with a line from an operetta based on Dumas' *Les trois mousquetaires*. This line is taken from an aria which d'Artagnan sings to Marie: "À vous, ma bien-aimée, je vais confier mon rêve." Throughout his struggles to stay alive during the Second World War and the Stalinist era, in singing this line, Volski is able to find his beloved Mila again, even after she is dead. Volski's story begins just before the Blocus, when he first meets Mila in a café. Both are studying to become opera singers in Leningrad, and the day they meet is described as the 'last day of their lives': "...Volski vécut, sans le savoir, les dernières heures de son ancienne vie, le dernier jour de paix" (*VHI* 111). When they meet again during the Blockade, Mila will be dragging her mother's corpse on a sled made from a discarded painting to the cemetery. At their second meeting, both Volski and Mila have changed so much in appearance during the famine that Volski doesn't recognize Mila. They have become like specters, like the 'dead' and the 'unknown':

« J'ai changé plus que toi... Tu ne m'as pas reconnue », murmura-t-elle.

Volski crut avoir mal entendu, étonné par ce tutoiement, mais surtout par la rapidité avec laquelle cette voix féminine lui redevenait familière. Il voyait pourtant toujours une inconnue.

(VHI 124)

This reunion after ‘death’ to their lives before the Blockade marks the beginning of Volski’s and Mila’s life together. Their life as a couple is devoid of the hope and passion normally associated with a youthful romance. Volski and Mila spend their days helping one another survive: their first embrace is for warmth (VHI 129).

Their chance discovery of an open musical theater in a city full of frozen corpses is as astonishing as it is surreal. The theater transforms their experience of their environment:

La pièce avait peu de choses en commun avec le roman de Dumas. Sauf les mousquetaires, bien sûr. En rentrant chez eux, ils allumaient le feu, répétaient les airs et parfois se mettaient à rire : les paroles sur « le soleil chaud du Midi » faisaient monter de la bouche de Volski un nuage de buée...

Tout le monde se battait pour que les spectacles se passent comme avant. Et tout était, bien sûr, très différent. On jouait à la lueur des bougies, dans une salle où il faisait moins dix... On n’entendait plus d’applaudissements. Trop affaiblis, les mains gelées dans les moufles, les gens s’inclinaient pour remercier les acteurs. Cette gratitude silencieuse touchait plus que n’importe quelles ovations.

(VHI 132)

This silent theater during the Blocus reflects that these performances constitute a ritual that is enacted for the sake of something more than mere distraction. The absence of applause reinforces the gravity of the ritual. In her treatment of Makine’s only play, *Le monde selon Gabriel*, which was published two years before *La vie d’un homme inconnu*, Mary Theis writes that Makine “proclaims the transformative power of the word made flesh in the theater” (7) and that “the moment the curtain rises is a moment for rebirth and redemption” (7). She adds that in writing his own version of a Christmas mystery play, Makine drew inspiration from Bulgakov who wrote and staged plays during the Stalinist

era and “inspired actors to convey a life beyond their own” (7). This attitude toward acting explains why the survivors of Leningrad fight so earnestly to keep the theater alive, even during a siege and a famine. The actors expend what could be their last breath with each performance, and yet their ‘play’ on stage becomes more than an escape. It becomes a way of defying the siege. The power of the theater to make a collective immersion in another world possible is also perhaps the reason why the lighthearted air, “À vous, ma bien-aimée, je vais confier mon rêve,” becomes the leitmotif that continually reunites Volski and Mila: first, in enabling them to recognize each other, and second, in giving them the courage begin a life after ‘death’ again together. The line from the operetta repeatedly restores unity to an otherwise unbearable and broken existence. When they are sent to separate labor camps, Mila is immediately executed. However, there is a suggestion of a reunion with her when Volski finds himself near death, trapped under a pile of timber. When he is near dying, Volski hears a voice in the night: “quelqu’un chantait et oubliait parfois des paroles qu’il fallait lui rappeler” (*VHI* 226). This illusion of Mila’s voice forgetting the words of their aria saves Volski’s life: “on retrouva Volski grâce à ces quelques mots ‘chantés’” (*VHI* 226).

Overall, the story of Volski suggests an answer to Choutov’s question regarding the gulag and literature. Volski’s story of survival reminds Choutov of a conversation he had briefly with another writer, who explains, “En fait, le livre commence quand tout est fini pour mon héroïne. Il en est ainsi de nos vies, je crois. Quand on n’attend plus rien, la vie s’ouvre à l’essentiel...” (*VHI* 40). The woman has written a novel called *Après sa vie*. Likewise, Volski lives a life ‘after’ his life. In a life ‘after life,’ literature no longer functions as a form of distraction, but a glimpse of the transcendent. Sallenave notes that



it is a belief in the ‘transcendence’ of our apparently ‘linear’ and finite existence in time that “grants man hope in a survival that is not purely biological” (105). Literature affirms this hope in transcendence in establishing a link between the time in which we exist and the ‘time past’ represented in fiction, which is ‘eternally present,’ which in turn establishes a “secret and profound” sense of connection with the dead, who may or may not have existed (Sallenave 185). The conditions of Volski’s life force him, at a very young age, to let go of his hope in everything except the possibility of such a transcendence, or what the writer of *Après sa vie* refers to as ‘essential’ in human life. When Volski, in his delirium, sings in response to the spectral and ‘transcendent’ voice singing the aria of d’Artagnan and Marie, he is heard and saved by other prisoners. Moreover, once Volski is released from the gulag, only to discover he will never find Mila again, he is still never alone: he becomes a music teacher in orphanages. He stages the “Three Musketeers” with the orphans, who remind him of the children he and Mila had adopted after the war. In teaching the children the arias of the three Musketeers he once sang with Mila, Volski instills a similar spirit of survival in the children, many of whom were severely crippled in the war: “Au bout de dizaines de répétitions, il comprit le vrai sens de ce qui semblait d’abord un simple amusement. Sur scène, ses élèves oublièrent leur mal...En quelques minutes de jeu, chacun d’eux échappait à ce monde qui les avait condamnés à ne pas exister” (*VHI* 243).

When Choutov returns to Paris, he re-reads Chekov’s “Joke.” He realizes that at the ending the lovers aren’t reunited on a sled as he mistakenly imagined. This absence of a ‘reunion’ makes Choutov recognize a parallel between himself, Volski, and Chekhov:

[Tchekhov] restera dans un passé de plus en plus méprisé et de plus en plus inconnu d'ailleurs. Une époque qu'il sait indéfendable et où pourtant vivaient quelques êtres qu'il faudra coûte que coûte sauver de l'oubli.

(VHI 263)

Choutov believes that Chekhov, facing the decline of his own era, sensed that it was still crucial to save the spirit of this era by representing the character of people who lived in it. Implausible or idealized as the existence of these forgotten individuals may seem to generations to come, saving their identity carries the possibility of reawakening people in the future by uncovering some fragment of their own identity that the 'present moment' of their time may obscure.

In his interview with the Librairie Mollat, Makine outlines a similar premise for *Une femme aimée*, though in this novel, the focus has been narrowed from 'humanity' to 'femininity': "En lisant Catherine, j'ai eu l'impression de voir toutes les possibilités de la féminité...d'un bord comme d'un autre toute la féminité était condensée dans ce personnage" (Librairie Mollat). The development of the novel itself reflects this idea; Erdmann learns the most about Catherine not only from research but from his encounters with women in the present.

Through his research on the empress in preparation for a film based on her life, Erdmann can ultimately only arrive at two portraits of her: "une femme qui maîtrise cet immense empire russe" (Librairie Mollat) and "une femme qui est un sorte de nymphomane achevée, une Messaline russe" (Librairie Mollat). Makine explains that one of the driving forces behind his own writing was that fact that he found both of these facets of history's portrayal of Catherine "bien réductrices" (Librairie Mollat). In the novel, Erdmann's mentor, Bassov recommends, "Chasse-la de son trône !...Trouve une femme qui serait Catherine à n'importe quelle époque. Une vendeuse de glaces ou une

prof de gym...Essaie de tomber amoureux d'une Catherine II moderne...." (*FA* 70-71).

In chasing Catherine from her throne, as filmmaker and storyteller Erdmann is in fact still forced to 'reduce' Catherine to one image or another again. Nevertheless, in writing his screenplays he can attempt to approach moments of her life that were not considered worthy of History. He can approach her apart from her political plots and infamous amorous intrigues. He tries to view her freely and disinterestedly as a he would view a woman he loves, from a gaze that will open "toutes les possibilités de la féminité" (Librairie Mollat). In this respect, the various female characters in the novel play a metaphysical role insofar as understanding them individually brings Erdmann closer to understanding Catherine's identity.

The opening of the novel reflects Erdmann's initial struggle to figure out a way to compress Catherine's world into cinematic images in an elegantly stylized yet not oversimplified way. Erdmann is playing with a small mirror and imagining two spaces, each of which is representative of the two historic facets of Catherine. The first is an alcove hidden by a sliding mirror. Each time the mirror slides back, another one of Catherine's lovers is shown. The second space is a grand salon in which Catherine meets with European heads of state and philosophers. The surface of the mirror is thus poised to frame the scenes of Catherine's public life, like a camera would, while its other side leaves her private life in obscurity. However, as he navigates back and forth between the spaces of the alcove and the salon in his writing, a conversation with his girlfriend Lessia makes Erdmann realize there might be a more fitting way to begin his film. Lessia, a critic, suggests that what would truly distinguish a film about Catherine from all the historical novels already written about her would be to film a moment in Catherine's life

when she was something she wasn't according to History: "Un soir comme à présent, cette brume, la dernière douceur d'avant l'hiver... Il devait y avoir dans sa vie des instants qui la rendait à elle-même" (*FA* 59).' The kind of moment Lessia is describing appears at first an essentially 'romanesque' or fictional moment. Lessia's idea recalls Kundera's observation that all the sadness of human life lies in the fact that a 'tiny universe' is lost every moment. For both Kundera and Makine, history is not capable of addressing this existential problem. Only fiction offers a means of reversing this loss. Makine explains, "...le roman historique, c'est un genre qui réduit tout à l'essence événementielle du règne. Or ce qui se passe, se passe en nous, échappe aux événements. Parfois, il n'y a pas d'événement. Les journées sont grises, très humbles, et l'essentiel de notre 'moi' s'expriment dans ces journées là" (Librairie Mollat). However, Lessia corrects Erdmann when he assumes she is speaking of what could have been, saying she means a moment in which Catherine 'authentically lived.' After this conversation, the image of mist becomes a leitmotif alluding to Erdmann's perception of the 'authentic' self.

This theme of the relationship to the self is developed further in conjunction with the theme of the interconnectedness of humanity. Erdmann begins to believe that "nous sommes bien plus ramifiés que ce petit moi auquel nous nous agrippons" (*FA* 131). If people are naturally prone to reducing their own identities, actors stand out as an exception to this tendency: "Le moi des comédiens, moins adhésif, a la capacité de migrer d'un personnage à l'autre. C'est pour cela que les artistes sont si égoïstes. Ils doutent de leur propre identité" (*FA* 131). The doubt with regard to identity also extends to cultural identity. Erdmann's interest in Catherine is related to his own German

ancestry.<sup>27</sup> In this respect, Erdmann, like his father before him, is torn between the East and the West. For Erdmann's father, Sergueï, the tension between his consciousness of being both German and Russian, coupled with his experiences as a soldier in World War II, are the cause of depression and mental illness.

The reader also learns that all of Erdmann's recollections of childhood are inseparable from the memory of watching his father retreat progressively more and more into his own world. A trained architect, Sergueï begins building a two-meter tall model palace in their apartment, in which "all the styles" (*FA* 83) of Europe after the Renaissance are combined in chaotic fashion. In fact, sometimes it also resembles a cathedral, at other times a labyrinthine "compressed city" (*FA* 82). Occasionally, Erdmann's father will rage that everything is "illusion" and will destroy parts of his creation, then continue to rebuild. Sergueï's never-ending construction and deconstruction of his 'ideal' palace recalls the work of a novelist. The unidentifiable structure is described as an "utopie architecturale" (*FA* 87) that reflects all the dreams and sorrows of Sergueï's life. In the advanced stages of his madness, Sergueï speaks of ruins as being necessary to "liberate beauty from Time": "La vie n'est rien d'autre que l'attente de la chute. On passe sa vie au milieu des ruines de ce qu'on a aimé..." (*FA* 86). Sergeï's words echo Alyosha's credo in *Le testament français*, that works capable of "resisting Time" are only created at the "threshold of Death" (*TF* 309). Moreover, the narration lapses briefly into the subject of Sergueï's past, indicating that the memory of his mother burning family pictures to hide all traces of his family's German relations marked

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<sup>27</sup> Catherine the Great was a German princess before marrying into the House of Romanov. She lived in Pomerania (a historical region between modern day Germany and Poland, bordering the Baltic Sea) until the age of fifteen.

Sergueï's youth more profoundly than the "grands événements à l'époque" (FA 89).

Sergueï's construction of the model palace can consequently be read as an escape into the 'European' universe of prior generations of his family, as well as a 'gift' (in the sense that Sallenave describes literature as a 'gift') in hopes of these deceased relatives' 'pardon' for having been 'erased' from memory. Erdmann, in turn, 'inherits' his father's sadness in the form of an "obscure culpabilité" (FA 85): he feels guilty for having felt ashamed of his father as he grew up. In these respects, *Une femme aimée* offers a portrayal of the transmission of both familial and cultural memory.

After Erdmann's girlfriend Lessia leaves him, his project as assistant director of his first film begins, and he falls in love with an actress named Dina, who plays the 'young Catherine.' While preparing for the role, Dina has a dream that suggests Catherine felt trapped during her life:

« J'étais dans un palais. Je marchais à travers les couloirs, je poussais les portes... De larges baies vitrées, beaucoup de lumière, et aucune issue ! C'était affreux... Depuis le début du tournage, j'ai eu cette idée en tête : Catherine n'a jamais pu partir ! »

(FA 137)

Dina's dream introduces the mystery around which the rest of the novel unfolds:

Catherine's dream to get outside Russia and return to Europe, specifically, to Italy. With this development, Erdmann's search for a unity between the time of his life and Catherine's also reflects a search for a unity of place. Sylwestrzak-Wszelaki, in her readings of Makine's earlier novels, frequently applies Bakhtin's literary theory of chronotopes, which has its source in the idea that time is the dominant formal element in literature, and thus the imaginary time continuum in literature gives form to place (155). With regard to the representation of history in literature, she writes: "A fragment of

human history is also condensed into the space of historic time, just as each fragment of an individual's life is concentrated in a space and time which is private and crucial for that individual" (155). Bakhtin's theory illustrates to some extent how Erdmann's approach to Catherine differs from a historian's. Rather than reconstructing the legendary Tsarine's life from facts and artifacts, Erdmann intuitively private and 'crucial' moments that might or might not have happened in Catherine's life and attempts to piece together these non-historical fragments of her existence. Unlikely as his discoveries seem, material evidence surfaces to authenticate these intuitions. Eva Sander, a German actress from East Berlin who plays the elder Catherine in Erdmann's film, gives Erdmann a gift of old cards from the eighteenth century depicting locations in Prussia, Poland, Switzerland and northern Italy (*FA* 158). Eva received these cards from a descendant of Catherine's lover Lanskoï in Berlin. When Eva says this could be proof that Catherine dreamed of going secretly to Italy with Lanskoï, and Erdmann replies it's improbable, Eva observes that many of life's developments are improbable, including their present situation: a German and a Russian discussing their lives "par l'intermédiaire d'une femme qui s'est crue aimée ?" (*FA* 169). Thirteen years later, in post-Soviet Russia, when Erdmann mails these cards as a gift to the historian Lourié after falling into depression and economic hardship, Lourié comes to visit him and confirm that he too believes Catherine dreamed of leaving Russia with Lanskoï, though his only historic evidence is that Lanskoï had an extensive foreign coin collection. Lourié admits, "Cette version des faits doit vous sembler trop romantique. Mais les preuves existent—ces cartes entre autres...et puis, c'est en pensant à ces deux amoureux fuyant en Italie que j'ai réussi à survivre pendant huit ans de camp" (*FA* 236).

The latter part of the novel set in post-Soviet Russia addresses the difficulties of human freedom. Erdmann finds himself working for an old friend named Jourbine, who is a prototype of the ‘New Russian’: a successful oligarch who controls a chain of restaurants and hotels. Formerly subjected to Soviet censorship, Erdmann now becomes a slave of commercial manipulation. When Jourbine employs him to write a mini-series about Catherine, Erdmann envisions an extended project in which he can incorporate the ideas and dreams of Lessia, Dina, Eva, Lourié, and his father Sergueï in ways he could not in a two-hour film. Instead, Jourbine constantly rejects the drafts of his scripts and pushes Erdmann to write more and more pornographic content into each episode to gain viewers’ attention and raise the series’ ratings. Erdmann is disturbed and also irritated by the nature of Jourbine’s approach. Jourbine takes the fragments of the most sensational historical ‘facts’ he can find and insists on exaggerating their shock value. The result is a historical soap opera. Erdmann, however, finds he can tolerate all of Jourbine’s whims, with the exception of Jourbine’s representations of Catherine’s ‘femininity’ (*FA* 269). As Makine’s comments in his interview suggest, for Makine (as well as for his hero Erdmann) ‘reducing’ femininity leads to a reductive view of human nature itself, hindering progress toward a truly ‘free’ society.

The conclusion of the novel, set in Italy, presents a Tarkovskian intertext. Overall, Makine’s novel echoes multiple situations and dialogues from Tarkovski’s *Nostalghia*,<sup>28</sup> a film about a Russian poet visiting Italy to research the life of a dead Russian composer who lived in Bologna. Like Tarkovski’s Russian poet, Erdmann goes to Europe for

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<sup>28</sup> Andrei Tarkovski (1932-1986) was a Soviet Russian filmmaker. He directed *Nostalghia* in Italy in 1983.



research, to see the sights he imagines Catherine might have seen in Germany. Sergueï's conviction that all human life is an anticipation of a 'Fall' is reminiscent of the madman Domenico's decision to shut himself up with his family to wait for the end of the world. Erdmann's interest in the 'inadhesive' individual self (*FA* 131) recalls this same madman's speech in Rome ("I feel myself countless things at once...I can't be just one person...").

When Erdmann is reunited with the German actress Eva Sander in Berlin, the two embark on a trip to Italy together to fulfill "un rêve vieux de deux siècles" (*FA* 343). They follow the 'map' of an old Europe, which they piece together from the fragments of the old cards that Catherine and Lanskoï collected when they were alive. Chance (or perhaps 'fate') brings them to their final destination, and Makine's description of their car passing through an open, foggy countryside (*FA* 357) is a visual echo of the opening sequence of *Nostalghia*. Their destination is similar to that of Tarkovski's hero and his female translator, but not identical. Both couples arrive at a small Italian church dedicated to the Madonna, but whereas Tarkovski's characters go to see the *Madonna del Parto* in Monterchi, Makine's characters stumble upon *Santa Maria delle Grazie* in Mantua. As in the passage of *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer* discussed earlier, Makine gives a detailed description of the interior of this church:

Une église humble. Ce qui éblouit, c'est la multitude de fragments de corps—symboles de la plus banale faiblesse humaine. Les colonnes basses, à mi-hauteur des murs, sont recouvertes d'ex-voto : moulages de mains, de cœurs, de seins féminins, et on ne le devine pas tout de suite, ces affreux bubons de la peste. Guérison, fertilité, lactation, plaies et maladies... Et entre ces colonnes recouvertes de milliers d'organes sont sculptés des condamnés, sauvés grâce à sainte Marie. L'un s'apprête à être pendu, un autre a déjà posé sa tête sur un billot...  
(*FA* 358)

The imagery of the collective sufferings of mankind brings to mind an architectural metaphor for the process of transforming mourning and suffering into art, evoked earlier in the novel with the story of Erdmann's father. The images of *Santa Maria delle Grazie*, however, are not aesthetic. The sculptures, which pre-date the Renaissance, signify 'the most banal human weakness,' and Makine describes the medieval sculptures as "naïve" and "disarming" (FA 358). These images do not simply convey the horror of the memories they represent. Rather, they have transformed the traumas of life into something else, into an offering made in the hopes of a future redemption. The earlier parallels with Tarkovski's *Nostalghia* also suggest an allusion to the film's final shot, which shows the interior of an abandoned Italian church, which has transformed into the hero's home in Russia. The parallel between the imagery of *Nostalghia* and the novel's denouement suggests an identification of the images in the medieval Italian church with the collective memory of the Russian people.

Although Erdmann is not religious, this unplanned stop points to the beginning of a personal catharsis. He comments to Eva as they get back in her car that they may have found "deliverance" (FA 359). He observes that centuries before, Catherine and Lanskoï could have been seeking a deliverance, which was not possible in Saint Petersburg, where they were surrounded by too many stifling masks and political schemes, as well as too many of their own "souvenirs meurtris": "Non, le seul endroit pour être transfigurés comme ils le rêvaient, c'était ce village de Grazie..." (FA 360). The final, 'spectral' image of the novel is the figure of Eva walking beside the Mediterranean, a sight that jogs Erdmann's memory of a shot he filmed of her in Crimea, intended to portray 'Catherine' walking along the shores of the 'Baltic.' In conformity with Bakhtin's theory

of chronotopes, Makine's writing in this passage creates a sensation of freedom from real time and place by layering the various imaginary time frames of Erdmann's real and fictional memories. At the sight of this spectral figure, Erdmann decides that, from this moment on, it will be enough for him to think of himself as "un homme dans le regard d'une femme aimée" (*FA* 363). In momentarily 'freeing' Catherine from the identities History has imposed on her, Erdmann consequently believes he too has found "une identité simple, libre comme cette enfilade aérienne ouverte sur la mer" (*FA* 363). In this moment, Erdmann resolves 'fragments' of two politically and culturally disconnected periods in Russian history through the image of a 'beloved woman.' Erdmann feels liberated in the belief that he will also be able to resolve the fragments of his personal identity in relation to this image.

## Chapter 6

### CONCLUSION

The chronological and thematic examination of this selection of Makine's works demonstrates that his writing has grown closer to the Russian rather than the French tradition over the years, although Makine continues to write in French. While Makine's works 'fit' with the trends in contemporary French letters discussed earlier in the introduction, his preferred themes of childhood and history as well as the recurring transcendental imagery in his work suggest an increasing identification with Russian literature. Moreover, Makine's work repeatedly reveals new facets of the 'Russian' gaze on France and the West. Nevertheless, on a personal level, continuing to write in French allows Makine to continue projecting himself into a voice and a point of view that is 'foreign' to his native country, as well as to maintain a 'spectral' relationship to post-Soviet Russia in his writing.

The study of Makine's fiction further shows that there is always a complex but close relationship between Makine's 'self' as an artist and the identity of his protagonists. However, the constant interplay between 'authentic' remembrance and illusion reminds readers that Makine's voice is distinct from those of his characters. Even in the Bildungsromane, which are written in first person, Makine's narrative voice will occasionally 'double' itself. For example, in the pseudo-autobiographical narration of *Le testament français*, Makine develops an ambiguous voice characteristic of the genre: in the novel's preamble, the childhood voice of his narrator harmonizes with his own voice

in the future, creating a sense of balance between the ages of innocence and experience (Pétion 143). This harmony between childhood and adulthood intensifies the preamble's nostalgic tone. However, this ambiguity within the narrator's voice is not always a harmonious one. As Sallenave observes, in every novel there is often a tension between the main character and the narrating voice: in projecting his voice into his literary narrative, the author is "playing the role of a specter" in order to enter into an imaginary dialogue with the absent or the deceased (176). In becoming a 'specter' and 'separating' himself from his own voice, the writer also gives those who have died or disappeared the 'gift' of a voice with which to speak (Sallenave 176). Thus, in engaging in a sort of role-play with an imaginary "tribunal" (Sallenave 172) of the absent or the deceased, the writer acts in the hope that the voice he has given this "tribunal" will in turn 'pardon' and free him (Sallenave 171-172). Indeed, Makine's writing offers him a means to approach the specters of his Soviet past as well as the silences of Russian history. For example, the final spectral image of *Une femme aimée* reflects a division between the pre-Soviet and post-Soviet eras. The narrator's voice, which speaks from the main character Erdmann's point of view, contemplates the dual image of the silhouette of Catherine the Great, a figure from pre-Soviet history, and the silhouette of Eva, a figure from post-Soviet or contemporary history. This division draws attention to the absence of a figure from the Soviet era, the time in history constituting the 'gap' between these two silhouettes. The superposition of these silhouettes thus suggests that Erdmann, and by extension Makine himself, are in fact in the process of re-approaching the Soviet era.

The 'theatrical' dimension of the novelist's art also becomes more noticeable in the 'historical novels,' which Makine narrates in the third person. Makine emphasizes the

‘role-playing’ of writers in both *La vie d’un homme inconnu* and *Une femme aimée*.

Makine’s description of Choutov’s mid-life crisis at the beginning of *La vie d’un homme inconnu* creates a caricatured portrait of his hero as a ‘sad clown,’ a portrait in which Makine is parodying himself. In a similar fashion, Erdmann reflects on the ‘inadhesive’ identity of the artist (*FA* 131). Still, an ‘inadhesive’ voice is already present in the Bildungsromane, even apart from the ‘double’ identities of the characters themselves. In *Le testament français*, Makine’s voice will occasionally detach itself from Alyosha’s and migrate into another era in Charlotte’s life before he was born, narrating events in the third person limited from Charlotte’s perspective. In *Au temps du fleuve Amour*, Makine’s voice passes from Dmitri’s depiction of his Occidental fantasies to a mythological account of the birth of the ‘first’ Siberian narrated in third person omniscient. In relation to the process of writing as ‘mourning,’ therefore, the narrative structure of Makine’s novels reveals itself to be fairly complex. For example, in the case of *Le testament français*, Makine is not only writing to give Charlotte back a voice, but is rather writing as someone else who is writing to give Charlotte back a voice. In *La vie d’un homme inconnu*, Makine is narrating in the third person from the perspective of Choutov, who is determined to give Volski back his voice, and through Volski’s voice, to be ‘reconciled’ with the dead of another generation. In short, Makine never approaches the imagined “tribunal” (Sallenave 172) of the dead to offer the ‘gift’ of his voice directly. The multiplication of the degrees of Makine’s removal from this ‘tribunal’ of specters may be what permits Makine to mourn for Russia on a more ‘collective,’ if not more ‘universal’ scale. Thus, to the extent that he personally identifies with his lead characters after assuming the clichéd mask of ‘l’auteur-émigrant-russe,’ Makine may be writing to

‘pardon’ himself for leaving Russia. With regard to the realm of legends, history and collective memory, Makine is also in the process of ‘pardoning’ Russia for ‘leaving’ him.

Makine’s choice to write about life from a ‘spectral’ perspective and his desire to alter the reader’s perception of the relationship between past and present are also in part a reaction to the ‘acceleration’ of History in a globalized, media-saturated age “fixated on actualities” (Kundera 650). As Sallenave points out, fiction, in a sense, offers the reader an “eternal present” (181), in the sense that the time of fiction does not belong to real time. In life, we feel the present slipping away from us into the past, whereas in fiction, the past is not even past, and it impresses itself on us ‘fictively’ in the present (Sallenave 182). Makine’s work addresses this theme in exploring the role of literature in relation to our personal experience of time in the present. In describing his characters’ experiences, Makine evokes the notion of images which are both ephemeral and eternal, capable of opening the self to “a moment that does not pass away” (*TF* 281, translation mine). These eternally present moments effectively serve as a means for Makine’s heroes to push back the borders of the ‘self’ in an attempt to pass into the memories of someone from another time. Makine also uses this approach to the memories of others at a personal level for the sake of reaching beyond the personal, to consider the relationship between literature and History. In both his Bildungsromane and historical fiction, Makine may be borrowing from a tradition of ‘intergeneric dialogue’ in Russia, in which the distinction between the ‘fictional’ and ‘historic’ is purposefully blurred (Wachtel, *An Obsession with History* 224). Wachtel explains that, as an approach to understanding history, this system worked for Russian writers as long as they held out in “a belief that there was truth somewhere to be had” (*An Obsession with History* 225). If this belief in truth was relinquished, then

intergeneric dialogue broke down into nothing more than a “cynical and manipulative game” (Wachtel, *An Obsession with History* 225). Makine earnestly believes this truth is an authentic, reunified, ‘essential self,’ which can only find expression in the mist of ordinary days: a ‘self’ somewhere between the time measured by history’s events and interior time. This ‘essential self,’ though vulnerable, is the only self with any hope of interpreting the ‘silences’ of history. In descending into these silences, Makine’s characters are not only undertaking a ‘recovery’ of the past, but also ‘reconciliation’ with the past.



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