

## Makine's Postmodern Writing about Exile, Memory, and Connection

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Mary Theis,

**"Makine's Postmodern Writing about Exile, Memory, and Connection"**

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Special issue ***New Work about the Journey and Its Portrayals***

**Ed. I-Chun Wang**

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**Abstract:** In her article "Makine's Postmodern Writing about Exile, Memory, and Connection" Mary Theis explores the implications of some of the many literary epiphanous moments that Andreï Makine shares with his readers in his neo-Romantic metaphysical literary quest to transcend lyrically the limitations imposed by our human condition. The analysis of this theme in Makine's literary career features several of his most important novels, his one play, and his subsequent meta-utopian reflections in *Alternaissance*, written under the pen name Gabriel Osmonde.

**Mary THEIS**

### **Makine's Postmodern Writing about Exile, Memory, and Connection**

The unusual literary career in French of Andreï Makine (1957-), a Russian who emigrated to France from the Soviet Union three years before its dissolution, spans now more than two decades. The author of more than a dozen novels in French, Makine was granted French citizenship upon winning three of France's top literary prizes for *Le Testament français* (1995) (*Dreams of My Russian Summers*, 1997). As is the case with these two titles, something often gets lost in translation from French to English: here, what is lost in the more marketable US-American title is the transmitted French heritage of the woman whom Makine's protagonist called his grandmother, a French woman who was trapped behind the Iron Curtain in Siberia. This and Makine's other novels embody some of the reasons for his exile and record not only his memory of the horrific events of the Soviet Union but also the heroic sacrifices by individuals despite repression and war. In his not yet translated play *Le Monde selon Gabriel: Mystère de Noël* (2007) (*The World According to Gabriel: A Christmas Mystery Play*), Makine makes the artistic credo implied in his novels explicit and criticizes French profit-motivated publishing houses for giving preference to entertaining train-station novels rather than to those which illuminate the human condition. Like many Russian émigré(e) writers, Makine was attracted by the artistic freedom and the literary culture for which the French have been famous. Having mastered the literary language of La Belle Époque, this idealist abandoned his native language to create and share with the world a poetic space in a new literary homeland. In that poetic space, he affirms that exquisite aesthetic moments of epiphany encountered in our everyday lives parallel that of the beauty poets perceive in human nature as well as in the natural world. Capturing and sharing such purple passages in his second language seem to arrest with profound spiritual joy the flow of time for Makine essentially because for him they give meaning to our earthly existence that can be found nowhere else.

In the present article, I explore the evolution and implications of these moments of discovery in his neo-Romantic metaphysical quest to transcend the limitations and ultimate isolation imposed by our human condition, a utopian path not followed by many writers in these postmodern times. Woven synergistically into the poetic web of his prose, the luminous beauty of these epiphanies touches a series of chords that reaffirms his conviction not only in French but in any language that their harmony validates our human existence. Makine's literary journey philosophically began with his decision not to write in Russian. According to an article on his literary bilingualism by Gabriella Safran, this decision was based not only on the fact that he was writing for a French audience but also on his desire to avoid becoming subjectively mired in the routine of monolingual writing in Russian (256) and sounding like Chekhov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, or other great Russian writers before him. At the crossroads of two of the world's great literatures, writing in the "borderland" Makine could provide a fresh perspective and thus also more easily escape the banality and intellectual torpor of those immersed in one culture, a prerequisite for Russian writers who like Makine were influenced by Nikolai Gogol.

Like Gogol, who lampooned Russian banality (*poshlost'*), Makine wrote to have a positive spiritual, as well as aesthetic effect on readers. Preferring a more austere lifestyle, he rejected both the vulgar consumerism of French popular culture (Safran 255) and the materialistic direction of the USSR under Gorbachev. Makine noted that Gogol, "especially his poetic, oneiric side" had an influence on his perception of language" (*Once Upon 7*); but he also made the implicit claim that French was "the unique, universal language of art, superior to any other national language, including English" (Safran 249-50). In a March 2009 interview with Murielle Lucie Clément, however, Makine stated that the choice of a literary language is really less important than his home turf, the creativity required by a universal poetic idiom: "A few things are expressed differently in our two languages [Russian and French] ... But these little nuances quickly become insignificant when one gets to what is essential, that is to say, to vast ontological or poetic dimensions" (all previously unpublished translations are mine) ("Quelques réalités se disent différemment dans nos deux langues ... Mais, ce sont de toutes petites nuances vite évacuées quand on passe à l'essentiel, c'est-à-dire à de vastes dimensions ontologiques ou poétiques" [129]). Nevertheless, the difficulty he experienced getting published in France before resorting to the ruse that his novels had been translated had literally made him a man

without a country. His taking up residence for several years in a mausoleum of Père Lachaise, a Parisian cemetery to keep body and spirit together — ironically — was also a metaphor of the homelessness Leonid Livak noted has been called "the center of the modern human condition" (3). Reflecting in French mirrors the serene beauty of his luminous poetic world, however, Makine vaulted over such obstacles and became a highly respected international figure who would never deviate from the seriousness of his mission as a writer. Despite or perhaps because of the unusual character of his own literary migration, he deplores the emphasis on a writer's ethnicity and all the artificial excitement of exotic literature ("toute cette effervescence factice de la littérature des exotismes") (Clément 129) because they detract from the universals that inhabit the cultural space that he calls home. According to Makine, given the special psyche that is essential to writing, writers are usually little suited to a practical life and do not integrate well, not just into such and such a country, but into humanity as a whole; hence, the real heart-rending experience is ontological, existential and not ethnic, ethnographic or geographical (Clément 130). The literary journey of this idealist, therefore, is quintessentially a metaphysical and philosophical one, in which despite our common human limitations, the writer must seek justice and champion the truth, even when he concedes that the whole truth escapes him.

Coping with his first transition, emigration, and wearing the cloak of the socially and metaphysically engaged Russian writers before him, he wrote about the contradictions inherent in the totalitarian regime that motivated his seeking political asylum. In *A Hero's Daughter* (2003) (*La Fille d'un héros de l'Union Soviétique*) (1990) for instance, the communist party and its intelligence-gathering organs exploit the honor due a war hero along with that of his daughter and others who deserve a better standard of living because that is reserved for those favored by party and the privileged who have access to the hard-currency stores, onerously named *beriozkas* after the birch trees beloved by the Russians. In the epistolary *Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer* (2000) (*Confession d'un porte-drapeau déchu*) (1992), written abroad by the narrator to a childhood friend, neighborhood children were shielded from the whole truth about the Soviet past so that they could march confidently toward the radiant future and not question much why it seemed nearly half the country had to spend its time behind barbed wire (11). In *Once upon the River Love* (1996) (*Au temps du fleuve Amour*) (1994), inspired by the demeanor and lifestyle of the French film star Jean-Paul Belmondo, three Soviet pals, like Makine, all needed to leave the Soviet Union to find fulfillment abroad.

The ideological didacticism usually inherent elsewhere in such criticism is mitigated in these and other of Makine's works by his narrator's evident desire to understand and some reticence to explain the implications of the events described, by his general refusal to categorically define individuals, and by his preference for lyrical personal reactions that suggest essential universal values rather than ideological correctness. In contrast to Soviet propaganda and Soviet realism, much is simply left unsaid: this prophet of poetic epiphanies even admits at times when he cannot discern what to conclude or *what is to be done*, an admission that mutes the nineteenth- and twentieth-century echoes of this Russian question posed by those pursuing ideologically driven socio-political agendas. It was customary for them to throw hand grenades into the windows of the houses in which they heard even the slightest noise. New on the scene, Makine's narrator cursed the soldiers, saying that people could still be in there. Then one soldier, who had not thrown his grenade, came out of a house holding his intestines: his abdomen having been cut open by an old saber. This, the narrator adds, took place in the second last year of the invasion when everyone wanted to survive the war at all costs. Among the furniture shredded by an explosion and covered with blood in one house, he then came upon a pile of rags moving gently. When he touched it with his boot, it turned over, revealing that it was a child, whose face had been burnt and whose arms were covered with strips of skin. Ignoring his sergeant's instructions, he took the child along rather than leave it in the hope that the Afghans would find it in time, although any inopportune noise from the child posed a danger to his unit. Later, when journalists interviewed him about his experiences in the war, he soon learned what kind of answers they expected for their "story." Delving into the best and the worst in human nature, Makine repeats rhythmically his epiphanous moment to share with the reader the character's dilemma about what is the most essential (*samoë vazhnoë*), here and throughout his oeuvre, but it is the reader who decides

the course of action a person should take when caught up in a war whose rules make the instinctive act of saving a child a stupid mistake. Filling in the blanks, the reader can choose to generalize the question: What political or religious doctrine makes any sense in the face of suffering on the part of innocent children caused by seemingly endless wars on their behalf?

Makine's writing reached its maturity with the highly lyrical *Dreams of My Russian Summers* (1997). The rhythmical repetitions, lyrically woven into his earlier novels for dramatic effect, here function to span two continents, Europe and Asia, and patch together fragments of several epochs in French and Russian history before, during and after the Cold War that comprise the narrator's notes on his Russian roots and French heritage. Makine's literary mission first to understand and then convey that understanding in poetic prose thus exhibits the sincerity that previous generations of émigré(e) Russian writers claimed distinguished their writing from the form-focused writing of the French. The French, young and old, however, were enchanted by its irresistible poetic mirage of France: its rich history, its love of literature, art, and above all its language gathered together in the notes to fill out the narrator's sense of self. Portrayed against the backdrop of the carnage marking so much of Soviet history, this vision of the world beyond the Iron Curtain preserved by a beloved grandmother of French descent, appeared idyllic. The love of this Siberian orphan for the touchstones of French identity, which reverberates on every page and confirms his bond with this caring grandmother, must have reassured those questioning what would become of French identity in the new Europe. The novel begins and ends its seduction of the reader with the by now famous effect on the photogenic quality of smiling women produced by the two French words for little apple: *petite pomme*. It begins in the first paragraph: "Had I known how to say it at the time, I would have called this way of smiling 'femininity.' ... As if by magic, the mouth, instead of being extended in counterfeit bliss, or contracting into an anxious grin, would form a gracious round. The whole face was thus transfigured" (*Dreams* 3) ("Si j'avais su le dire, à l'époque, j'aurais appelé cette façon de sourire 'féminité' ... Comme par enchantement, la bouche, au lieu de s'étirer dans une béatitude enjouée ou de crispier dans un rictus anxieux, formait ce gracieux arrondi. Le visage tout entier en demeurait transfiguré" [*Le Testament français* 15]).

Makine completes the seduction of his reader when the narrator learns the truth about his identity in the last brief paragraphs of the novel: "As I walked, I looked from time to time at the photo of the woman in the padded jacket. And now I understood what gave her face a distant resemblance to the people in the albums of my adoptive family. It was that slight smile that appeared thanks to Charlotte's magical formula, "*petite pomme*" (*Dreams* 240) ("En marchant, je regardais de temps en temps la photo de la femme en veste ouatée. Je comprenais désormais ce qui donnait à ses traits une lointain ressemblance avec les personnages des albums de ma famille adoptive. C'était ce léger sourire apparu grâce à la formule magique de Charlotte — "*petite pomme*"! [*Le Testament français* 342]). By giving us the words to tell the story, Makine wraps both the narrator and the reader in the warm glow emitted by face of the narrator's mother after she too repeated Charlotte's magic words. Having shared her own beauty secret, but not the awful truth of his birth in a Soviet gulag until after her death, Charlotte helped the narrator find wholeness and deal with the truth about his heritage. The same can be said for the aesthetic vision of Makine that has helped to heal by lancing other discomforting festering wounds left by undisclosed facts about his former homeland; but not all of his works enjoyed the same virtually universal praise from French critics and the public as this one did.

When *The Crime of Olga Arbyelina* (1999) (*Le Crime d'Olga Arbélina*)(1998) hit the bookstores, despite praise by Thierry Laurent for the novel's psychologically realistic portrayal of extreme states of the human soul (in a manner reminiscent of Dostoyevsky) (24), both the book and Makine were the subject of "full-page tirades in the press," again attempting to marginalize him as the mixed-breed of literature ("le métèque de la littérature") according to Sophie Masson's interview in *Quadrant* (1998). In this work, he broke a literary taboo by treating poetically the incestuous relationship of a noble Russian émigrée in France with her hemophiliac son. This transgression also aligned Makine with French literary tradition because it was a demonstration of his very French attitude, which, in an interview with Philip Delves Broughton, he summed up by asserting that form should take priority over content in a work of literature. No doubt this exposure of the criminal act of a princess who, according to the aforementioned interview with Masson, came from one of Russia's oldest families, was

provocative. It set Makine apart from previous émigré(e) writers, who in opposition to the Soviet Union would not have cast stones at the cultural icons of the tsarist past.

Traumatized by historical events, Olga is a grotesque deformation of the iconic image of the *mater dolorosa*, and her not-so-noble life is a twisted travesty of a saint's life. Having lost her father in the Russo-Japanese war and her mother to excessive religious zeal after his death, Olga along with other Russian nobles is depicted as having lost her cultural bearings well before fleeing south from the Red Army. Raped by a White Russian just before getting on the last boat out of Russia, she marries her rescuer, a White Russian officer, but divorces him after the birth of their hemophiliac son when the superficiality of their storybook romance becomes intolerable. Doomed to an early death and afraid of nothing, the child, who remains nameless, drugs his mother's tea at bedtime. She becomes pregnant. One abortion later, her perception of this puzzling turn of events changes. Psychically distancing herself by mentally substituting a more appropriate partner for her adolescent son, however, she becomes resigned and eventually receptive to his visits, that is, until circumstances that would have revealed their affair led to her being committed to an institution. Makine pieces together moments in a gradual discovery of the awful truth with subsequent alienation from reality in such a way that the grotesque perversion of maternal love and rationalization of it seem an ironically logical and this is curious: if it is the son who drugs the mother and gets her pregnant — the word "child" above is a problem — is it really true that the mother feels as having committed a crime?

She put the cast back in the box and closed it; then unable to curb her desire, seized the plaster mold again, pressed it to her cheek, her lips. And it was then that the secret rang out: "Incest!" The word shattered into a number of memories, each one earlier than the last. They reverberated in the night of the first snow and even before that night. During the night when the sleeping draft had not worked. And even earlier, when for the first time she had surprised that young stranger beside the kitchen range. And even further back than that in her memories. The old overcoat of her husband's on the youth's naked body. The previous winter she had darned it and, seeing it on her son's shoulders, had to make a rapid, strenuous effort not to think about her husband's body. (*The Crime of Olga Arbyelina* 138-39)

This time there are several questions Makine leaves for the reader: Could Olga's poetic connection with nature lead to her eventual recovery? Could it alone restore the spiritual and mental balance that is lost when one permits even a literal return to the womb? In short, are there limits to the healing power of formal beauty? Her delusion, it seems, repeats that of the illusion of the moral equivalency between the good and the beautiful. Needing an absolute love, Olga fails to distinguish between them. This failure not only makes her vulnerable to the egocentric machinations of both her local doctor and her son, but it also ultimately deprives her of the initial justification for her crime: maternally protecting and satisfying the special needs of her child. Makine, nevertheless, only suggests his probable fate while leaving hers open-ended. But he is explicit about the ultimate value of the artwork of her disfigured childhood friend, Alexandra, and by extension that of all artists who create merely to entertain and to make money. Such art has no higher purpose. Upon her return to the Soviet Union, the paintings with holes cut out for faces, which she used to photograph her customers, are confiscated by the Soviets when she repatriates and ends up being used as firewood to combat the cold winters by people in the countryside.

Having incorporated photography, painting, film, and craftwork into *Once Upon the River Love* (*Au Temps du fleuve amour*), music into *The Music of a Life* (2004) (*La Musique d'une vie*, 2001) and *The Life of an Unknown Man* (2010) (*La Vie d'un homme inconnu*) (2009) in order to share his vision of what is most essential. Makine ventured next into theater with his meta-utopian play about global intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual atrophy: *The World According to Gabriel: A Christmas Mystery Play* (*Le Monde selon Gabriel. Mystère de Noël*, 2009) not yet translated. Channeling French and Russian writers and dramatists who were committed to their art for its own sake, he includes in this pastiche of French theater a bow to Georges Feydeau (1862-1921), whose lively farces from La Belle Époque were known for their great wit and complex plots. Exploiting ironically the weight of the proponents of visual media against them, Makine takes his theater audience "behind the scenes" to hear the commentary that will not accompany the broadcast poses of the actors to television audiences around the world.

With this burlesque dystopian extrapolation of current cultural trends — which seem bent on extinguishing the importance of poetic images — Makine underscores their importance. In *The World According to Gabriel, Ricardo*, the serious writer's would-be nemesis, bears the stage name of Top Hat because he is the one responsible for the distracting circus-like posturing of his troop. A former editor who has been seduced by the potential size of a television audience, Top Hat selects mini scenes for their shock value and then sends them off stripped of their dialogue for broadcast. Supposedly subject to voiceovers by an invisible producer, the highly sensationalized over-acted dramatic mini episodes show how television audiences are being anesthetized to ignore their own emotions in favor of an artificial, televised present that dulls and misinforms them so much that they notice neither the passage of time nor when they have dispensed all together with the need to think or to act on their own behalf. While utopian writers since Plato have sought to show an ideal society, one whose very structure would be permeated by the principle of justice to show that the just life is also a better life, Makine chose theatre for his version of poetic justice. The subtitle of this play is *Mystère de Noël*, and like all mystery plays in flesh and bones (*en chair et en os*) (*Monde 8*), it also is a demonstration, one that invites its audience to realize that the quality of life does not depend on more creature comforts, protected by mind-numbing hours in front of a television nor on adherence to what is socially, politically, ideologically, or aesthetically accepted, but on the intensity and integrity of one's cognitive and emotional experiences that are born out of the recognition of their transience. Doing without the wings, Gabriel, the imprisoned writer in this play, has announced that despite one's limited stay on this stage of life, "all actors" are pregnant with the ability to perceive directly the beauty of the moment. In order to let that beauty disrupt their life, they must also endure the pain that this birth entails: recognition of their eventual death and the march of time. Flashed, ready-made televised visual impressions, designed for quick and thoughtless consumption, narrow the field of vision, waste one's life, and relinquish control to others.

In his avant-propos to this meta-utopian tour de force, Makine recalls the numerous times that Stalin saw performances of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Days of the Turbins* (*Dni Turbiny* 1926) and honors the memory of Bulgakov because he so inspired his actors to convey a life beyond their own (*une vie au-delà*) that this tyrant of all tyrants was mesmerized by the frank expression of the writer's artistic vision (*Monde 7-8*). Perhaps, Makine comments, Bulgakov made him recall a bygone time when his own power-corrupted soul yearned for a similar sublime experience. After this close-up of a Soviet meme, Makine quickly shifts focus to give his play once again universal significance by saying that each author must have the courage to confront spectators who expect that the performance will justify their way of life in the here and now, but instead project them onto a radically different planet ("Chaque auteur doit avoir le courage d'affronter ce spectateur incrédule et même hostile, à qui il serait si facile de plaire en le divertissant un spectateur qui attend la justification du monde où il vit et qui est projeté sur une planète radicalement différente" [8]).

Reiterating the sacred mission of the pen and its prophets, he proclaims the transformative power of the word made flesh in the theater. The moment the curtain rises is an opportunity for rebirth and a possible redemption, an invitation that also has special significance for French audiences in this work. No longer winning their favor by poetically polishing the patina on cherished features of French culture, Makine holds forth about human foibles and tragic flaws, reserving his strongest criticism for the superficiality of the Parisian intelligentsia and the prostitution of literature by commercially oriented Parisian publishing houses, because they cast aside the poetic beauty of well-polished prose and drama, which this author considers essential for life this side of eternity.

Theatrically conveyed by a wall inexorably advancing stage front, death overtakes Top Hat and the other cowardly incorrigible players as they realize the metaphor of their staged tableaux, no longer animated (*vivants*), by literally drying up in the space of a framed picture left stage front by the advancing wall, when they have run out of time. Only the youthful Héléne — given the stage name of Gavroche — dares to surmount yet another revolutionary barricade, this time posed by the loss of faith on the part of the other miserable players in the power of the word and the beauty of luminescent moments in life. With Makine handing down poetic justice, only those truly motivated by the beauty of a poetic vision will survive, that is, remain forever alive in the company of future generations. Remembering the sacrifices and suffering of those who have earned for us a more comfortable life not

only inspires and frees Gabriel from his chains, it also prevents our species from losing its human capacity to imagine and create a better world.

Daring the world by creating "someone who lived far from the hurly-burly" of it, Makine adopted another nom de plume, Gabriel Osmonde, and thus created a French literary mystery, that was solved only in 2011, according to Maïa de la Baume's article in the 1 April 2011 issue of the *New York Times*. This pen name finds an echo not only in the name of the imprisoned writer in Makine's play but also in the message that the play shares with Makine's four other still not translated novels written under that second pen name before and after it. Preceding it are: *The Voyage of a Woman Who No Longer Feared Getting Old (Le Voyage d'une femme qui n'avait plus peur de vieillir)* (2001), whose life took on new meaning after she postponed her plan to end it; *The Twenty Thousand Women in the Life of a Man (Les 20 000 femmes de la vie d'un homme)* (2004), which recounts the misadventures of a recently divorced man preoccupied with his unsatisfactory sex life and thematically shares with Gabriel's censored book in Makine's play hyperconsciousness about the value of human activities given the brevity of life; and *Labor of Love (L'Oeuvre de l'amour)* (2006), which continues Osmonde's attack on modernity. Sparing literally no graphic details, he wages that war in the "lowest depths" of the porn film industry where the grotesque contrasts with the sublime epiphanies found elsewhere in Makine's work (see Theis, "Dead Souls" 45).

Appearing after the play is Osmonde's meta-utopian novel, *Alternance* (2011) (Other Birth), whose depressed narrator escapes arrest and death due to an attempted suicide through initiation into an alternative society called the Diggers on the edge of a desert in Western Australia. Networked with other such centers around the world, the Diggers dedicate their lives both to rescuing the environment and to helping others overcome the limitations of their first birth, that of their physical bodies, and the snares of their second or social birth, that is, of the power, riches, celebrity, sexual competition and other games that society plays to keep them in line and asleep to their mortality. The Diggers are beyond all that and prohibit the use of all forms of indoctrination, but they are supposedly not beyond using technology to solve the thorny issues that all utopists have had to address. Extraordinary sensory simulators diminish the sexual needs of their adherents by extremely satisfying them; psychic and affective problems are checked by monitored film therapy; less than optimal physical wellbeing is compensated for by means of genetic modifications to less than optimal body shapes and body images. Despite its commendable goal of eliminating conflicts within and among families, so that the Diggers are free to devote themselves entirely to their cause, this utopian vision, however, morphs into a dystopia with the total elimination of the nuclear family, a proscription essential only to the most strictly interpreted version of a Soviet communist utopia (*Mothers* 32, 127).

The total failure of the altruistic movement is fabricated on the basic ineffability of an existence beyond this one. As the narrator learns more about the Diggers in various training films and assignments, he meets Chloe, who appears to share his doubts about the sacrifices deemed necessary for total dedication to the movement. This concern forms a bond between them. Seconds before she has to flee their opponents attacking the Diggers' compound in the final phase of his initiation, she reveals that she is pregnant with his child. Her revelation could still justify but does not result in a more banal familial form of human happiness apart from the movement, because the narrator, while trying to escape the attackers, appears to be so severely wounded that he can no longer speak for himself. At this point in one final narrative twist his story ends. Still unmet, therefore, is the seemingly greater need for others to grasp the "consonance" of characteristics in a brief eternity (*brève éternité*) as well as to find the words to call it forth and communicate it to the world, for a merely logically constructed blueprint for a better world can neither simulate nor program the aesthetic perception that gives birth to the requisite language (478-79). Finding this language, the narrator admits, is a goal that has eluded him. This time the author leaves the last word of his meta-utopian reflections to other Diggers.

Having exploited yet another genre to challenge his readers to question the social conventions that mummify them or that justify violence to others and the planet, the author published a selection of brief intense moments to live by in *The Book of Brief Eternal Loves (Le Livre des brèves amours éternelles)* (2011). This untranslated collection of interconnected short stories philosophically link the transcending power of ideal love to that of the poet's idealistic homeland. In the first of these, Makine

contrasts the tiny number of the devotees to an idealistic realm with the myriad masses preoccupied with ideological concerns, that end up not worth the pain and suffering they were supposed to alleviate: "The only real doctrine is quite simple. It depends on ... loving one another" ("La seule doctrine vraie, elle est toute simple. Elle tient au fait de ... de s'aimer," [94]). Among the elect in this realm, he includes Dmitri Ressa, the philosopher-poet, who à la Don Quixote, confronts the Soviet system, not by criticizing the weaknesses of the Soviet government as would the sniggering faction and marginalized rebels, but by condemning the servility with which its people, like people everywhere, deny their own intelligence in order to rejoin the somnolent fold following the powers that be (22-23). Ressa's third sentence in the camps broke him physically but not his spirit, and his unrequited love for the unworthy woman who once shared his revolt survived all three.

A second inhabitant no doubt would be the woman left behind by a sailor who perished in a submarine accident at sea. The narrator happened upon her after he had finally escaped from the metallic cages of the stored dais the orphans encountered during one of their many community service projects: an apt symbol of Soviet repression. Makine contrasts the authenticity of her intense feelings due to this tragedy with the hoopla for Soviet political holidays fabricated twice a year for the dais of "dignitaries" and reinforced by other official symbols the rest of the year: "The young woman sitting on the dais covered in snow became more than a memory. A way of seeing, of understanding, a sensibility, a tone without which my life would not have been what it was going to be. ... this woman in love ... lived perhaps in another world, one that could have been, without the spiteful anger of men, without these dais, without the barred spider web of their cages" ("La jeune femme assise sur les tribunes enneigées devint bien plus qu'un souvenir. Une façon de voir, de comprendre une sensibilité un ton sans lesquels ma vie n'aurait pas été telle qu'elle allait être. ... cette femme amoureuse ... peut-être vivait-elle dans un monde tel qu'il aurait pu être, sans la hargne dominatrice des hommes, sans ces tribunes, sans la toile d'araignée de leur barreaux" [*Livre* 45-46]).

Other vacationers in the novel are the elderly couple the narrator and his woman companion encounter on the Black Sea. In contrast to his own amorous affair — which like those of other vacationers there is routine — the love of the former White Russian officer and his wife survived decades behind the Iron Curtain. The narrator and others vacationing at the resort complain about the constraints placed on them and blame the poor quality of their romantic relationships on the regime because they are not even allowed the simple freedom to get a room in a hotel. Another character is the childhood friend of the narrator who became crippled and horribly disfigured while trying to ensure his friends' safety: years later this friend could still love so selflessly that he gathered a bouquet of crocus for the narrator's girlfriend just before he took his own life.

The extraordinary intensity of their selfless idealism suggests a serenity that can only be matched by Makine's own poetic reframing of his experiences of life in the Soviet Union. In one other vignette in *Le Livre*, Makine's narrator visits the largest apple orchard in the world, one of those gigantic projects the Soviets created to show off. Unfortunately, although marvelously beautiful, it was sterile: the trees had been planted closely together over such a large expanse that bees could not travel that far to fertilize their blossoms. His companion, a childhood friend, formerly nicknamed Red Riding Hood for her insistence on being different from the other orphans, was incensed at this typical example of the wasteful and absurd ambitions of the Soviet regime and had nothing good to say about it. The narrator, however, could concede at least the orchard's incredible beauty. At once disorienting and overwhelming, it no doubt stands in for Makine's ever-present image of Siberian snow whose whiteness and uniformity always light the way to poetic transcendence throughout his novels. His poetic vision, however, has blossomed since his early condemnations of Soviet exploitation and repression of its people: "Regimes change; unchanged remains the human desire to possess, to crush one's fellow man, to grow numb and indifferent as well-nourished animals" (*The Book*) ("Les régimes changent, reste inchangé le désir des hommes de posséder, d'écraser leurs semblables, de s'engourdir dans l'indifférence d'animaux bien nourris" [*Livre* 193]).

In conclusion, Makine arrived at the point in his philosophical and existential literary journey, rose above the conflicts of his past, and celebrates in his writing moments that help individuals cope with their lives and mortality. Makine's desire to understand and somehow bridge the contradictions of a world based on hate, destruction, and death has led him to ground himself in the importance of love

and selfless feelings despite his aversion for aspects of Russia's past and the world today. Suggesting the view of "Well beyond all doctrines" (Book) ("bien au-delà de toutes les doctrines" [*Livre* 195]), he affirms the belief that the artist in each of us must share the beauty of that understanding, in order to "understand creation" "redresser la Création" [194]), that is, to set right what in his opinion an impotent god has left undone. That mission has an "end" in the sense that it gives meaning to his life, a purpose that Makine has found nowhere else.

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