STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXIX, 2, 2024, p. 125 - 136
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2024.2.07

ANDREÏ MAKINE – FROM ANONYMITY TO LITERARY FAME

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Article history: Received 11 May 2024; Revised 04 June 2024; Accepted 12 June 2024; Available online 25 June 2024; Available print 30 June 2024

ABSTRACT. ***Andreï Makine – From Anonymity to Literary Fame***. The aim of this article is to analyse the strategies that enabled Andreï Makine to go from being a penniless Russian immigrant living in a Parisian cemetery to becoming a celebrity in the French literary world. The first aspect to be considered is the use of pseudo-translation. Unlike another Russian writer in exile, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who always believed that his works would be read by his compatriots and have an impact on the Russian cultural space, Makine, who settled in France in 1987, decided to write in French, mainly for a French readership. However, his first two novels were rejected by the Parisian publishers who did not believe that a Russian could write so well in French, so Makine had to create fictitious translators in order to get his texts published. Another significant factor is the way in which he exploited his biographical aspects to create a personal mythology. The third, and perhaps most important, factor that has contributed to Makine's consecration in the French cultural space is the way he describes his country of origin (he has been accused of creating an image of Russia that would be pleasing to Western eyes) and his host country, praising both the French language and, as the title of one of his books puts it, "this France that we forget to love".

Keywords: *pseudo-translation, hybrid identity, personal mythology, slavophilia, francité*

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REZUMAT. ***Andrei Makine – de la anonimitate la faimă literară.*** Acest articol își propune să analizeze factorii și strategiile care au facilitat transformarea lui Andreï Makine, un imigrant rus fără bani și fără acte care trăia într-un cimitir parizian, într-o celebritate a spațiului literar francez. Primul aspect care va fi abordat este utilizarea pseudotraducerii. Spre deosebire de un alt scriitor rus exilat, Alexander Soljeniţîn, care a crezut întotdeauna că lucrările sale vor fi citite de compatrioții săi și vor avea un impact asupra spațiului cultural rusesc, Makine, stabilit în Franța din 1987, a decis să scrie în franceză în principal pentru un public francez. Cu toate acestea, primele două romane ale sale au fost respinse de editorii parizieni care nu credeau că un rus poate scrie atât de bine în franceză. În consecință, Makine a fost nevoit să creeze traducători fictivi pentru a-și publica romanele. Al doilea aspect semnificativ este modul în care scriitorul și-a instrumentat elementele biografice pentru a crea o mitologie personală. În cele din urmă, al treilea și poate cel mai important factor care a contribuit la consacrarea lui Makine în spațiul cultural francez este modul în care el descrie țara sa de origine (a fost acuzat că a reprezentat Rusia clișeic, pentru a fi placul occidentalilor) și țara gazdă, elogiind atât limba franceză, cât și, cum spune titlul uneia dintre cărțile sale, „această Franță pe care uităm să o iubim".

Cuvinte-cheie: *pseudotraducere, identitate hibridă, mitologie personală, slavofilie, francitate*

With 24 books published over a period of 34 years (four of them under the pen name of Gabriel Osmonde), Andreï Makine is one of the most prolific and best-known contemporary French writers. His novels, translated into dozens of languages, have been the subject of several doctoral theses (Nazarova 2003; Clément 2008; Chilea-Matei 2010; Harmath 2011; Bărbuceanu 2014), monographic studies (Parry, Scheidhauer and Welch 2004, 2005; Laurent 2006; Sylwestrzak-Wszelaki 2010; Clément 2011; Toma and Samarineanu, 2017; Duffy 2018 etc.) and numerous scientific articles and book chapters. With each new novel, Makine is invited to give interviews, speak at conferences and appear on radio and television, and his public presence has become increasingly sought after. Furthermore, in March 2016 he became a member of the French Academy, a distinguished achievement that can be seen as the culmination of his integration into the French literary world. The reputation he enjoys today, however, contrasts sharply with his precarious situation in the first years after his arrival in France in 1987 as an obscure Russian immigrant.

His journey from anonymity to national and international literary fame, and the strategies and contexts that facilitated it, is the focus of this research. The three main aspects that will be discussed are: the use of pseudo-translation as a

response to the refusal of Parisian editors to believe that an unknown Russian immigrant could write well in French; the instrumentalisation of biographical data to create a personal mythology; and the portrayal of the country of origin and the country of adoption in a way that appeals to the French. Methodologically, biographical research and the contextual approach will be used for the first two aspects, while the third aspect will be explored through textual analysis.

Born in 1957 in Krasnoiarsk, Siberia, Andreï Makine lived in the USSR until the age of thirty, when, taking advantage of the more relaxed environment brought about by Gorbachev's reforms, he seized the opportunity to go to France as part of a teacher exchange programme and applied for political asylum, which he was granted. The experiences of his early years in Paris seem to have been imbued with an aura typical of the characters of Romantic literature. As he had neither money nor proper papers, he lived for a while in a nook in the Père Lachaise cemetery, and then in a 12-square-metre room in the Montmartre district. However, the poverty and precariousness of his external conditions mattered much less to Makine than his inner freedom. As he confessed in an interview, he did not feel poor and helpless because he already had a perfect knowledge of French, which he had learnt as a child from his French-born grandmother, Charlotte Lemonnier, and he was in a place that offered him the necessary freedom of expression, France (Makine 2016, 0:45-1:00).

It was under these circumstances, half starving and mostly "sitting on park benches" (Tolstaya 1997), that Makine wrote (in French) his first two novels: *A Hero's Daughter* (1990) and *Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer* (1992). The story of their publication became so famous that it is anecdotally mentioned in most studies devoted to the man known as "the most Russian of French writers"[2] (Makine 2023). The difficulties the author encountered in trying to publish these two books were due to the climate of suspicion among French publishers at the time, who did not believe that a Russian could write well in French and therefore rejected the manuscripts without even reading them. In response, Makine, who was prepared to do anything in his power to get them published, resorted to the literary trick of pseudo-translation, i.e. he invented fictitious people who supposedly translated the novels from Russian into French: Françoise Bour for the first novel and Albert Lemonnier for the second – „he even had to translate the second novel into Russian for a publisher who demanded to see the «original»!" (Safran 2003, 246). In the case of *A Hero's Daughter*, he also wrote an entire paratext from the perspective of the supposed translator to make it more convincing. It included an "acknowledgement in which Makine and the fictitious Françoise Bour express thanks to «Georges Martinowsky»,

[2] "Le plus russe des écrivains français" (my translation).

«agrégé de russe», for having read though the manuscript and translation and commented on them" (McCall 2006, 286), and more than thirty footnotes, mainly explaining Russian cultural or historical references such as "kommunalka'', "lejanka'', "matriochka'', "N.K.V.D.'', "Raikom'' and "Obkom" (Lievois 2013, 447-449; McCall 2006, 286-287). This ingenious subterfuge of pseudo-translation proved successful and his novels were finally published.

The story also appears in the last chapter of his autobiographical novel *Dreams of My Russian Summers* (*Le Testament français*), narrated by the protagonist Aliosha, a Russian writer who has emigrated to France (and Makine's alter ego), who confesses:

> All this was the fruit of a pure and simple literary hoax on my part. For the novels had been written directly in French and rejected by publishers. I was "some funny little Russian who thought he could write in French". In a gesture of despair I had then invented a translator and submitted the manuscript, presenting it as translated from the Russian. It had been accepted, published, and hailed for the quality of the translation. (Makine 1998, 220)

Therefore, in order to be accepted by the Paris literary authorities into The World Republic of Letters, Makine had to give up thinking of himself as a French writer and instead adopt the identity, the label of a Russian author – a foreigner, an outsider who wanted to be published in a prestigious centre of literary consecration (Casanova 2004). All the more so as he could thus "be pegged and marketed in the fashionable category of «writer from Eastern Europe»" (Wanner 2002, 123), for the exoticism of Russian themes was in high demand among the French population at the time – an interest that Makine, who was quick to recognise the advantages of marketing himself as a Russian writer (Taras 2000, 51), knew how to capitalise on. As Ian McCall notes:

> at the end of the 1980s, when Makine was looking for a publisher, the former Soviet Union was the subject of great media attention in France. From 1987 onwards, news magazines like *L'Express* ran many articles devoted to various aspects of Russian politics, history and culture. This included features on Gorbachev's reforms and Russia's relationships with other countries, articles on the goulags and dissidents, and reviews of literary and (socio)historical texts. (McCall 2006, 290)

Despite Makine's strategies, his early novels did not find a significant echo in the French literary world. It wasn't until his fourth novel, *Dreams of My Russian Summers* (1995), the first book in history to win the two most prestigious literary awards in France, the Prix Goncourt and the Prix Médicis (and also the

Prix Goncourt des Lycéens), that Makine emerged from anonymity to become an overnight celebrity (Safran 2003, 246; Tonu 2023, 125). This astonishing success, which also earned him French citizenship (which he had been denied in the past), immediately put him in the media spotlight, with journalists trying to find out everything they could about the hitherto unknown Andreï Makine. But the way he responded to the excessive curiosity of his interviewers, refusing to give details of his personal life and letting the novels do the talking for him, only added to the mystery surrounding him and thus increased his popularity (Clément 2011, 12).

As Ionela Bărbuceanu points out, Makine's assertion that "I am what my books are, that's all"[3] (Makine 2016, 2:10-2:13), that the author's biography and intentions only serve to imprison the text (Barthes 1997, 147) and limit the free and seminal play of meanings (Derrida 2001, 352), has not pleased all but a few critics (such as Erzsebet Harmath and Murielle-Lucie Clément). Others (such as Nina Nazarova) set out on the tortuous path of reconstructing Makine's life, "gathering all the available data, both from interviews and from the novels recognised by the author as having the strongest autobiographical overtones"[4]: *Dreams of My Russian Summers* and *Once Upon the River Love* (Bărbuceanu 2016, 86). The result of this attempt to fill in the gaps is a biographical narrative based on a series of assumptions and possible interpretations of controversial characters or episodes. It is believed that Makine lost his parents at an early age, was sent to live in an orphanage, and then grew up under the influence of an older French-speaking woman, Charlotte Lemonnier, who instilled in him a love of French language and culture (and who he refers to as his grandmother in some interviews and as a close family friend in others). But we can't be sure that this was the case; it's not even certain that Andreï Makine is his real name. "In fact, apart from the author's date and place of birth, which in themselves have been subject to polemics, little is known about the life of a man who, while happy to talk to journalists, remains highly discreet about his past or deliberately misleads his interviewers by providing them with mutually contradictory information" (Duffy 2018, 6).

The practice of reading Makine's novels in an autobiographical key[5], combined with the lack of clear information about the writer's background, has

[3] „Je suis ce que sont mes livres, c'est tout" (my translation).

[4] „adunând toate datele disponibile, atât din interviuri, cât și din scrierile recunoscute de autor ca fiind cu cea mai accentuată tentă autobiografică" (my translation).

[5] For example, in an article published in 1996, Sascha Talmor, in her autobiographical reading of *Dreams of My Russian Summers*, went so far as to claim that Andrei Makine grew up in the remote village of Saranza, where much of the action of the novel takes place (Talmor 1996, 2095) – although there is no such village in Russia, it is a fictional place, most likely "a conflation of the real cities of Saratov and Penza" as David Gillespie notes (Gillespie 2012, 798).

even led to the hypothesis that Makine had links with the KGB – speculation that has gained momentum with the publication of the novel *Requiem for a Lost Empire* (2000), whose protagonist is a secret KGB agent. Nina Nazarova, for example, says that this hypothesis is likely to be true because, even in the Gorbachev era, Russians "could not travel abroad without the consent of the secret services or a clear mission from them"[6] (Bărbuceanu 2016, 41-42). Moreover, the explanations given for his defection to the West in 1987 (aversion to capitalist Russia and to the official Soviet narrative of the war in Afghanistan) are rather unconvincing, especially since he had already had a stable and successful academic career in the USSR: professor at the Pedagogical Institute in Novgorod (Nazarova 2005, 16; Duffy 2018, 6-7).

Critics have noted that Makine's authorial image was not constructed solely on the basis of external sources. On the contrary, he actively influenced it through his numerous appearances in the press and the (pseudo)biographical details he skilfully inserted into his novels, thus contributing to the creation of a personal mythology (Lievois 2013; Bărbuceanu 2016, 17-18; Olteanu 2009, 143). The mythological aura is maintained even by his eccentric lifestyle. Condemning the consumerism and capitalism that dehumanise us, Makine decided to live like a hermit in the hustle and bustle of the Parisian metropolis. Single, unmarried and committed to the ideal of chastity, on the grounds that living with a woman would not allow him to devote himself entirely to artistic creation, Makine leads a rigorous and austere life, refusing to be tempted by material possessions to the point of making his own household objects out of wood.

The sudden and astonishing literary success of 1995 did not change him. Makine retained his value system of preferring inwardness and spirituality to outwardness – which is why, existentially and literarily, he is more closely associated with the Russian Orthodox tradition, with his country of origin, than with his adopted country (Bărbuceanu 2016, 45-47). The very appearance of this writer, who speaks perfect French but with a strong Russian accent, has fascinated the French public. Dominique Fernandez's description of Makine in the *Dictionnaire amoureux de la Russie* (2004), taken up by many Internet platforms, is eloquent in this respect: "To look at his tall stature, rigid stance, face carved with a serrated edge, prophet's beard and clear eyes, you'd think he was one of those pilgrims who walked the vastness of the steppe with a stick in his hand (...). But beneath this serene monk-like physique lies a rebellious, tormented and violent spirit."[7] (Barguillet Hauteloire 2016)

[6] „nu puteai călători în afară fără acordul serviciilor secrete, sau fără o misiune clară din partea acestora" (my translation).

[7] A voir la haute stature, le port rigide, le visage taillé à la serpe, la barbe de prophète, les yeux clairs, on dirait un de ces pèlerins qui parcouraient, un bâton à la main (…), l'immensité de la steppe. Mais sous ce physique serein de moine, se cache un esprit rebelle, tourmenté, violent. (my translation)

In addition to the clever instrumentalisation of biographical aspects and the use of the ingenious ruse of pseudo-translation, Makine's decision to write in the language of his adopted country can also be seen as a marketing strategy. The novel that made him famous, *Dreams of My Russian Summers*, was accepted directly in French by the prestigious publisher Simone Gallimard, the author being praised for the virtuosity with which he articulated his thoughts in the language of Voltaire. In one of his public discussions, Makine mentioned that he chose to write in French because it gave him much more freedom of expression than the impoverished and ideologised Russian language of the Soviet era, but also because his target audience was the French (Makine 2019, 1:02:35-1:03:02). As David Gillespie points out, by writing in French, mainly for a French readership (and thereafter, through translations, for an international one), the Franco-Russian writer

> significantly departs from the Russian literary tradition of direct engagement with his native country, especially pronounced during the twentieth century with the banishment of entire generations of writers abroad, and perhaps best embodied by the case of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Although his works were banned in the Soviet Union, Solzhenitsyn always believed that they would be read by his compatriots, and never doubted that his word as a writer of truth would eventually have a profound effect on Russia itself. (Gillespie 2010, 6)

In Makine's case, the reception of his work in his native country proved to be poor and rather negative. From the point of view of his compatriots, the exiled writer is guilty of a triple betrayal: firstly, for leaving the country; secondly, for replacing the Russian language with French; and thirdly, for the way in which he portrayed (contemporary) Russia in his texts. Only one of his books has been translated into Russian, *Dreams of My Russian Summers* – "published, some would say ironically, in the journal *Inostrannaia literatura*" (*Foreign Literature*) in 1996 (Gillespie 2012, 799) –, and despite his international fame, it did not receive good reviews from Russian literary critics. For example, both Maya Zlobina, the first to write about the novel, and Tatyana Tolstaya, an imposing figure on the Russian literary scene, accused Makine of fabricating an exotic image of Russia full of clichés, stereotypes and kitsch in order to please the West.

Zlobina bases her criticism on Makine's loss of contact with Russian reality as a result of his emigration. Because he spent the first thirty years of his life in the USSR, the story doesn't quite reach the realm of the aberrant, the "total myth", but the falsehood is nonetheless obvious and, what's more, served up "without a hint of irony". According to her, the whole novel is

> a straightforward combination of customary stereotypes […] which only foreigners can accept as the real McCoy. But then again, they are the ones

> the author is writing for, and this can be felt from the very beginning by the urgency with which the author picks out things that can impress the European eye: boundless expanses, fields of flourishing crops 'from the Black Sea to the Pacific Ocean', the steppe, the steppe, the steppe and snows without end and in which, of course, lurks something enigmatic and alluring. (Zlobina 1996, translated by Gillespie 2010, 3-4)

Tatyana Tolstaya, while noting some positive aspects – the novel is well conceived, multidimensional, postmodern, saturated with cultural allusions –, continues Zlobina's ideas, insisting that Makine's writing is too slow, too calculated, too serious, too aesthetic, without surprises, without humour, densely packed with banalities, clichés and worn-out metaphors. It's a blatant homage to Proust, but without the Proustian richness and intensity. After analysing several passages in terms of how they sound in Russian[8], Tolstaya concludes that "this is not how a Russian writes for Russians (for himself), this is how a Russian writes for the French (for «them»), as if he «understands» what is required of him, what «they» need, how to attract «their» attention"[9] (Tolstaya 1998). The impression one gets from reading Makine's novel, she claims, is that we are dealing with a cultural hybrid, a linguistic chimera, a literary basilisk, a Russian pretending to be French, writing in French, with a French reader/publisher in mind, describing Russia as an imaginary Frenchman would do.

Moreover, according to Tolstaya, if this novel, which caused a sensation in France, had been published in Russia, it wouldn't have won the slightest prize, and no one would have bothered to translate it into other languages (Tolstaya 1998). This diatribe is all the more interesting and perplexing because, as David Gillespie notes, Tatyana Tolstaya is guilty of the same intellectual dishonesty for which she attacks Makine. That's because, in addition to the harsh and scathing review I quoted above, published "in the Russian-language magazine *Znamia*, for a Russian readership" (Gillespie 2012, 800), she wrote another review of the same novel, this time for an English-language readership, in *The New York Review of Books*, in which she praised Makine for his poetic evocation of France, but also for his passionate and powerful portrayal of Russia, "a country where cruelty and reverie form a paradoxical unity" – adding that this portrayal that could only have been made by someone who was born in Russia and spent thirty years of his life there (Tolstaya 1997).

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[8] She read the novel in Russian, translated from the French by Y. Yakhnina and N. Shakhovskaya in 1996: Андрей Макин. 1996. *Французское завещание*. Роман. Пер. с французского Ю. Яхниной и Н. Шаховской. "Иностранная литература", № 12.

[9] "Так не пишет русский для русских (для себя), так пишет русский для французов (для «них»), как бы «понимая», что от него требуется, что «им» надо, чем привлечь «их» внимание" (my translation).

But it is not only Russian critics who have said that Makine's depiction of his native and adopted country was a major factor in his extraordinary success in 1995. Adrian Wanner, for example, argues that the immense popularity of the novel *Dreams of My Russian Summers* is at least partly due to the fact that Makine seems "to confirm the French sense of cultural superiority over more «barbarian» societies such as Soviet Russia" (Wanner 2002, 111). The novel tells the coming-of-age story of the narrator, Alyosha, a young boy who lives in the 1960s and 1970s in an industrial city on the banks of the Volga and spends his summers with his French grandmother, Charlotte Lemonnier, in Saranza, a quiet town on the edge of the steppe. Learning French from his grandmother and listening to her fascinating stories about the France of her youth, the boy feels "a French implant" growing in his heart. As a result, he lives his life torn between two identities and two worldviews, that of a Russian and that of a Frenchman, the conflict between them being the driving force of the whole narrative.

One of the most emblematic passages explaining this duality is when the protagonist analyses the word Tsar: "when I pronounced the Russian word «ЦАРЬ» a cruel tyrant rose up before me; while the word «tsar» in French was redolent of lights, of sounds, of wind, of glittering chandeliers, of the radiance of women's bare shoulders, of mingled perfumes, of the inimitable air of our Atlantis" (Makine 1998, 39). Alyosha admits that there is tyranny, evil, torture, suffering, self-mutilation, censorship and oppression in the USSR. But he confesses that he still feels irrevocably bound to it. That he loves it despite its absurdities, atrocities and monstrosities. Or rather, because of them, for he sees in them "a higher meaning that no logical reasoning can penetrate" (Makine 1998, 144). There is a certain Slavophile influence in this fragment – a tradition that insisted on the idea of a clear difference between, on the one hand, rational, logical-mathematical Western Cartesian thought and, on the other hand, Slavic or Russian thought, which does not operate analytically, separating things into their constituent elements in order to understand them, but which glimpses the essence of things through a mystical-religious, irrational approach (Tonu 2023, 127).

The image of Russia becomes a bit more nuanced thanks to the contrast between the big, nameless, Stalinist-style industrial city on the Volga, where Alyosha has to spend most of his time, and the small, sleepy, dusty provincial town of Saranza, a peaceful place, "lost in the middle of an endless plain" (Makine 1998, 126), where his imagination could run free. Makine's suggestion, which he would develop further in other novels (such as *The Life of an Unknown Man* and *The Woman Who Waited*), is that beyond the sordid, depressing and oppressive social reality of the USSR, "where censorship, violence and atrocities were almost ubiquitous, there is a deep and authentic Russia, not in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but in the endless steppes, in the remote and forgotten villages, where traditional Russian spiritual values have remained intact" (Tonu 2023, 136) and where the Russian soul is truly at home.

During his holidays in Saranza, Alyosha is swept away on the seductive waves of his grandmother's stories to an idealised France that he calls "our Atlantis". Embellished and romanticized in Charlotte's words, this country becomes a fabulous and mythical realm onto which the boy projects all his fantasies and desires, a compensatory universe in which he can always escape from everyday Soviet life. Conceived as a radical otherness of the USSR, the imagined French space is endowed with all the positive characteristics that are supposed to counteract the shortcomings of the Soviet reality. French elegance and refinement contrasts with Russian barbarity and coarseness; freedom with censorship; lightness with excess; rationality with absurdity; French sensuality, charm and love with animalism and crude sexuality (Charlotte's rape) etc. (Mélat 2002, 42)

In the young narrator's imagination, this distant and mysterious France is associated with femininity, with the ideal lover, and the French language allows him to be initiated into the mysteries of love and eventually to mature (Sala 2009, 53-54). But it is a France of the past that has been re-created in words and transfigured by his and Charlotte's imagination. As he himself admits towards the end of the novel, "the France that had appeared one day in the middle of the steppes of Saranza owed its birth to books" (Makine 1998, 228). In other words, "for most of the novel, before the narrator's actual visit to Paris, Makine's (and Alyosha's) France is a mere linguistic and literary construct" (Wanner 2002, 113). Years later, however, when the protagonist finally arrives in the long-dreamed-of Atlantis, he discovers that the real France, capitalist and bureaucratic, has little in common with the object of his desires.

Nevertheless, Makine's criticism of this disappointing present is always accompanied by an emphasis on what France once was and what it could become again. A glorious past and a belief in the vitality of the values that make up Frenchness (*francité)*, which he defines as a constant and passionate search for new forms. Makine's exhortation, expressed artistically in the novel *Dreams of My Russian Summers*, and further developed in another book, *Cette France qu'on oublie d'aimer* (2006), is that we should learn to love France again.

These declarations of love for his host country and the portrayal of Russia as either inferior and barbaric or as an exotic land described in stereotypical and clichéd terms could not fail to flatter the French public. In addition, Makine's recourse to the ingenious trick of pseudo-translation, the deliberate instrumentalisation of biographical aspects in order to create a personal mythology, and the way in which he emphasised his hybrid Franco-Russian identity, contributed at least in part to his overwhelming literary success in France and then on the international stage.

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