

A False Document? Andreï Makine's *Le Testament français* and the Postmodern Theory of History

Helena Duffy

The past is autobiographical fiction pretending
to be a parliamentary report.

Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*

One does not go naked into the archive.

Arthur Coleman Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*

Art within the Archive

The protagonists created by Andreï Makine, a contemporary Russian-born French-language author,¹ can rarely access external reality directly, instead having to rely on texts mediating it. Even when, like the veteran of the Eastern Front featured in *La Fille d'un Héros de l'Union soviétique* (1992), Makinian characters have personally experienced a historical event, their understanding of it is invariably colonized by its textualized versions, which in Ivan's case is the myth of the Great Patriotic War forged by Soviet politicians and politically-oriented historiographers.² Similarly, the Russian princess staged in *Le Crime d'Olga Arbélina*

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1. Born in 1957, Makine studied and taught French in the Soviet Union before settling in Paris in 1987. He is the author of a play, of essays and of over a dozen novels, including those published under the name of Gabriel Osmonde.
 2. In Russia World War II is known as the Great Patriotic War. Referring to the Patriotic War against Napoleon, the term signifies the period of June 1941–May 1945, which is when the Soviet Union was involved in the worldwide struggle against fascism. The cult of the Great Patriotic War was an organized system of symbols and rituals that emphasized the Soviet soldiers' heroism to the detriment of loss and suffering, and that excluded all experience that did not fit in with the state-sponsored image of the war. See Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead. The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), hereafter *LD* in the text.

(1998), a novel set in France between the summers of 1946 and 1947, derives her knowledge about contemporary history from newspapers, which, to the heroine's dismay, present a grossly simplified image of the Liberation and its immediate aftermath while urging readers to draw a line under the six years of atrocities and to pick up their pre-war lives.

Out of Makine's novels the one that most flagrantly questions the document's ability to convey the past or even flaunts its fallacy is *Le Testament français* (1995) which, ironically, was taken not only by the critics but also — so it seems — by the authorities as proof of its author's French identity. Seemingly autobiographical, Makine's fourth work of fiction effectively legitimized the writer's claim to French as his language of creative expression and to France as his country of residence. For, up until the novel's publication, Makine had been seen by French literati as 'un drôle de Russe qui se mettait à écrire en français',³ and by French immigration officials as yet another Eastern European refugee undeserving of the honour of French citizenship. This sudden change of heart, which translated itself into prestigious literary prizes and French nationality, was undoubtedly due to the plot of *Le Testament français* and indeed to its apparently testimonial character;⁴ offering a first-person narrative, Makine's award-winning novel retraces the childhood and adolescence of a Russian who, despite bearing a different first name to the author's, could easily be taken for Makine's alter-ego.⁵ Believing himself to be of French origin, Alyosha, who grows up during the Khrushchev Thaw and Brezhnev Stagnation, becomes enthralled with his mythical homeland which,

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3. Andreï Makine, *Le Testament français* (Paris: Gallimard Folio, 1996), p. 313, hereafter *TF* in the text.
 4. Véronique Porra convincingly argues for a causal link between the content of *Le Testament français* and Makine's extraordinary success. Véronique Porra, 'Un Russe en Atlantide. Andreï Makine, du discours littéraire à la citoyenneté', in *Français et Francophones. Tendances centrifuges et centripètes dans les littératures françaises/francophones d'aujourd'hui*, ed. by János Riesz and Véronique Porra (Bayreuth: Schultz & Stellmacher, 1998), pp. 67–85.
 5. Nina Nazarova who is Russian and belongs to Makine's generation, argues that *Le Testament français* could easily be an autobiography. See Nina Nazarova, *Andreï Makine, deux facettes de son œuvre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004).

after his disappointing exposure to contemporary France in the early 1990s, the protagonist-narrator will preserve and eulogise in his writing. Alyosha's gradual and tortuous discovery of France through texts such as stories narrated by the Frenchwoman he believes to be his grandmother, history books, literature, press articles, photographs and artefacts reveals, as I shall show in the present article, the openness of sources to plural readings, the dependence of these readings on the interpreter's circumstances and the ability of the same documents to either corroborate or undermine discourses on the past. By questioning the reliability of historical materials *Le Testament français* potentially inscribes itself into the current of historiographic metafiction as Linda Hutcheon terms the postmodern novel that is 'intensely self-reflexive',⁶ 'fundamentally self-contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political' (*PP* 5). Additionally, as in historiographic metafiction that are simultaneously historical and contemporary,⁷ in Makine's fourth novel documents provide a link between two narrative levels: French (and Russian) history, and enquiries which the protagonist conducts during the period 1960–1970, and which frame and structure the stories from the past. Also, while typically countering the idea of history based on sources with 'impressionistic' representations, the Makinian narrator self-reflectively weaves into the diegesis epistemological questions concerning the retrieval of the past and the process of constructing history (*TPP* 71). Finally and once again characteristically, the protagonist's background and the dynamic nature of his knowledge complicate his interpretation of documents and, consequently, his understanding of history, illustrating the widely shared opinion that our reading of sources is determined by the questions we put to them and by our present position.⁸

6. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002), p. 5, hereafter *PP* in the text.

7. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 71, hereafter *TPP* in the text.

8. For example, Hans-Georg Gadamer states that 'history must be written anew by every new present'. Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Text and Interpretation', trans. by Dennis J. Schmidt and Richard Palmer, in *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida*

As works of literature revisiting past events, historiographic metafiction manifest, as Hutcheon notes, ‘a contradictory turning to the archive and yet a contesting of its authority’ (*TPP* 81), which they do with the aim of challenging official historiography and offering a dissenting version of events. Likewise, Makine’s fourth novel both undermines the trace’s ability to validate a historical reality and argues for the superiority of a ‘literary’ history over the historian’s account of the past. However, as I wish to demonstrate, *Le Testament français* paradoxically asserts our total dependence on evidentiary material in historical inquiry. Furthermore, corroborating Hutcheon’s contentious claim about postmodernism’s ideological agenda (*PP* 179–200),⁹ the novel constructs on the basis of this material a politically-driven account of the past, yet this account is — uncharacteristically for historical metafiction — conservative rather than revisionist.

Makine’s representation of the cognitive process as vehiculated largely by sources illustrates the poststructuralist tenet asserting textuality’s inevitably intertextual character, postulated, amongst others, by Barthes or Foucault, aptly captured by Derrida’s dictum ‘il n’y a pas de hors-texte’ and inherited by practitioners of postmodernism. For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction shows history to be a discursive construct upon which fiction draws as easily as it draws upon literary texts, and which could never refer to any actual empirical world but only to other texts (*PP* 142–43): ‘the world is known only from its texts, its traces — be they literary or historical’ (*PP* 125). Challenging the realist concept of representation, historiographic metafiction is thus ‘self-consciously art within the archive’, as Hutcheon paraphrases Foucault’s definition of Flaubert’s writing (*PP* 125).¹⁰

The text’s incorporation of statements on the relics of the past, be they documents or non-verbal material objects (coins, utensils,

Encounter, ed. by Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 21–51 (p. 24).

9. Hutcheon goes against the dominant view of postmodernism as empty of political content postulated by, amongst others, Terry Eagleton or Fredric Jameson.

10. See Michel Foucault, ‘La Bibliothèque fantastique’, in *Travail de Flaubert*, ed. by Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1983), pp. 5–31.

buildings etc.), is a standard technique in historical writing.¹¹ According to Hayden White, a historian 'seeks to explain what happened in the past by providing a precise and reliable reconstruction of the events reported in the documents'.¹² As he argues elsewhere, 'For the narrative historian, the historical method consists in the investigation of the documents in order to determine what is the true or most plausible story that can be told about the events of which they are evidence.'¹³ Similarly, many pre-nineteenth-century historical novels were presented, as Elisabeth Wesseling observes, 'as the whole truth and nothing but the truth because [they were] based on eye-witness accounts, or on found factual documents, which the author supposedly merely edited without inventing anything himself [*sic*]' (*WHP* 33). In other words, in the times of Cervantes or Defoe, many novels derived authority from pretending to be documents or, in Kenneth Rexroth's words, 'false documents', their authors presenting themselves as mere 'literary executors' of true stories.¹⁴

Contrary to classical fictional works which, as Wesseling notes, assumed that history is an orderly and meaningful process with an inherent dynamics and purpose, postmodern historical literature questions the ideals of objectivity and impartiality, 'reject[ing] faithful adherence to the external authority of the sources as a criterion for historical truth' (*WHP* 72). Pioneered by the founder of modern source-based history, Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), who claimed that documents should be purified of misconceptions and mistakes before serving as evidence (*WHP* 123), this approach was promoted by R.G. Collingwood (1889–1943) who rejected the unquestionable authority

11. Elisabeth Wesseling, *Writing History as a Prophet. Postmodernist Innovations of the Historical Novel* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1991), pp. 122–23, hereafter *WHP* in the text.

12. Hayden White, 'Interpretation in History', *New Literary History*, 4.2 (1973), 281–314 (p. 282).

13. Hayden White, 'The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory', *History and Theory*, 23.1 (1984), 1–33 (p. 2).

14. Quoted by L.E. Doctorow, 'False Documents', in *E.L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*, ed. by Richard Trenner (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1977), pp. 16–27 (p. 19).

of sources; according to the English philosopher, historians must put documents in the witness box and question them according to a set of clearly defined principles.¹⁵ Finally, Theodor Lessing (1872–1933) did not believe remnants of the past to be entirely reliable since they are a product of human beings who perceived the world in terms of their own desires and preconceptions (*WHP* 123).

These issues have been taken up by Foucault, who situates the document at the heart of the difference between traditional historical studies and what he calls the ‘archaeology of knowledge’. Once seen as an eloquent source of information, the document has now become silent. This is because today’s historians no longer strive to interpret it, to verify its veracity or to judge its value, treating the document as ‘cette matière inerte à travers laquelle [l’histoire] essaie de reconstituer ce que les hommes ont fait ou dit’.¹⁶ Rather than making the silent traces of the past speak as documents, the historian-archaeologist devotes him/herself to their structural analysis, works from within them, turning them into monuments which in their inherent silence can be sorted, classified, put into relation with each other, but not interpreted. For Foucault, such a conception of documents has a considerable and manifold impact on our understanding of the historical process. One of its consequences is the incorporation into the methodological field of history of problems associated with the retrieval of the past, such as the building-up of a corpus of documents, the establishment of the principle of choice or the specification of the level and method of analysis (*AS* 14).

As Foucault’s heirs, postmodern novelists question the very possibility of applying hermeneutics to documentary evidence, query the stability of the inferred meaning and historical materials’ trustworthiness, and suggest that sources are as much tinged by fiction as retrospective accounts themselves. One of these novelists is the author of *Le Testament français*, a novel that shows affinity with the

15. W.J. van der Dussen, *History as a Science. The Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood* (New York: Springer, 1981), pp. 139–41.

16. Michel Foucault, *L’Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 14, hereafter *AS* in the text.

works of fiction analysed by Hutcheon and, by extension, with the contemporary theory of history. To prove this, in the first part of the present article I show that Alyosha's vision of France changes according to the story forms used to narrativize French history. I then argue that while being a flagrant critique of today's Hexagon and/or a lament of the Soviet Union's collapse, the apocalyptic image of Makine's *terre d'accueil*, offered by the novel's epilogue, expresses the impossibility (or the unwillingness?) to know empirically any reality, be it past or present. This is because reality always reaches us pre-textualized and requires further textualizations so that it can be understood, stabilized and preserved. Lastly, I speculate about both the possible ideological reasons for the dual status of documents that in *Le Testament français* either support or undermine historical discourse, and the novel's divergence from the model found in historiographic metafiction. I do so by suggesting the author's reactionary urge to create for the benefit of his Western readers a highly idealized portrait of imperial Russia, be it tsarist or Soviet, and thus to revive his homeland's former superpower status at the time following the USSR's collapse.

The Siberian Suitcase

As a young boy already aware of his dual origin but not ready yet to embark on an independent study of France, Alyosha finds his understanding of French history and culture on stories narrated by his adoptive grandmother who has been living permanently in Russia since the Civil War. Importantly, Charlotte Lemonnier's discourse is validated by 'ces vestiges du passé' (*TF* 23), as the narrator calls the newspapers, photographs and objects found in his grandmother's 'Siberian suitcase'. The decision of Albertine, Charlotte's mother, and later that of Charlotte herself to transport this heavy piece of luggage across Europe and then back and forth across Russia, communicates the Frenchwomen's urge to preserve history as well as their faith in the

importance of documentary evidence in the reconstruction of the past.¹⁷ The fact that Albertine once transports the newspapers-filled suitcase by mistake implies her subconscious need to safeguard France's past and with it her own national identity, even at the expense of bare necessities. Indeed, for the two Parisians stranded in Siberia, which in the 1920s must have seemed very remote and culturally backward in relation to the City of Light, these documents constituted 'un minuscule archipel français' (*TF* 326).

However, by metaphorizing the newsclippings held by the suitcase as silver coins coloured by the patina of centuries, the narrator implies the disappearance of their original worth, which was information about contemporary history, and its replacement by their artefact quality. As for the suitcase itself, its comparison to a treasure chest connotes a repository of jealously guarded valuables, which in this case are memories. Suggesting that Charlotte emplots French history as an adventure story, these similes also encourage critical distance towards the Frenchwoman's discourse while re-presenting France as a lost civilisation, an idea which, before becoming explicit in the novel's epilogue, underlies Charlotte's entire narrative. For example, illustrated by a photograph showing deputies travelling by boat to the Assemblée Nationale, the Frenchwoman's tale about the 1910 floods turns France into a mythical polity that can no longer be directly apprehended but must be reconstituted from whatever remnants are available: 'Car le pays que j'avais à explorer n'existait plus, et je devais reconstituer la topographie de ses hauts lieux et de ses lieux saints à travers l'épais brouillard du passé' (*TF* 126).

Before returning to the complex role of apocalyptic imagery in *Le Testament français* in the final part of the article, I shall concentrate on the hermeneutic issues raised by the relics from the past, on these relics' (un)reliability and on the fluctuating vision of France they produce. Confirming the notion that documents are open to interpretation and that this interpretation is conditioned by the circumstances of the

17. See Hélène Mélat, 'Testament français ou testament russe?', *La Revue russe*, 21 (2002), 41–49 (p. 42).

documents' retrieval, Alyosha's understanding of historical sources is often comically aberrant since it is produced in a culturally and politically alien context. Defined by his grandmother as 'un simple village' (*TF* 43), Neuilly-sur-Seine appears to the young Russian as a collection of wooden *izbas* inhabited by *kolkhozniks* amidst whom the elegant Marcel Proust swings his tennis racket. By the same token, the French president Félix Faure is endowed with Stalin's pharaonic solemnity while his death in a woman's arms is inconceivable to the protagonist brought up with the Soviet leaders' official austerity. Likewise, Alyosha imagines that at the end of the floods the French felt what the Russians experience after a long winter or a war. These examples both challenge the simplistic referential notion of a natural and one-to-one relationship of words to concepts at the heart of Saussurian linguistics and endorse the post-structuralist (and postmodern) scepticism about the accessibility of the real world in terms of signification (*PP* 148–49). Yet, paradoxically, the key to France-Atlantis, as Alyosha calls Charlotte's quasi-legendary homeland, is precisely language, which reflects the self-contradictory situation where discourse, as Hutcheon says, constantly 'uses and ironically abuses, asserts and denies the conventions within which it operates.' (*PP* 150) Another point implicitly made by the afore-mentioned episodes is the inextricable relationship between past and present: the former, as Johann Gustav Droysen noted, can be known insofar as it exists in the present through, amongst others, documents and monuments.¹⁸ According to this 'perspectivist' conception of historical knowledge, shared by Croce and Collingwood, historians 'select only those facts from the wealth of data confronting them that they deem relevant to the questions which they put to the past, while discarding the rest' (*WHP* 71). Similarly, discussing Foucault's, Barthes's or Derrida's understanding of history, White observes that the past appears to them 'as an absent presence [...] that must be read and rewritten in response to present interests, concerns, desires, aspirations,

18. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 91, hereafter *CF* in the text.

and the like'.¹⁹ He then argues that '*historical* inquiry is born [...] of the desire to determine what certain events might *mean* for a given group, society, or culture's conception of its present tasks and future prospects' (*HP* 487).

Like White's narrative historian,²⁰ Alyosha's grandmother fills in gaps, suppresses, subordinates, highlights, orders and interprets historical facts drawn from documents, her own recollections and postmemory, as Marianne Hirsch calls a trans-generational mode of remembering.²¹ In this process she distorts the chronology and continuity of French history and, by validating her stories with haphazardly chosen and then freely interpreted press cuttings, she literally — to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss —, severs and carves up historical facts:²²

Le temps qui coulait dans notre Atlantide avait ses propres lois. Précisément, il ne coulait pas, mais *ondoyait* autour de chaque événement évoqué par Charlotte. [...] Le choix des événements était plus ou moins subjectif. Leur succession obéissait surtout à notre fiévreuse envie de savoir, à nos questions désordonnées. [...] Charlotte puisait ses connaissances tantôt dans la valise sibérienne, tantôt dans ses souvenirs d'enfance. Plusieurs de ses récits remontaient à une époque encore plus ancienne, contés par

19. Hayden White, 'Historical Pluralism', *Critical Inquiry*, 12.3 (1986), 480–93 (p. 485), hereafter *HP* in the text.

20. Hayden White, 'Interpretation in History', *New Literary History*, 4.2 (1973), 281–314 (pp. 281–82), hereafter *IH* in the text. See also Hayden White, 'The Question of Narrative', p. 2.

21. Although Hirsch applies the term to traumatic memories and in particular to those of the Holocaust, its use is often extended to any recollections. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). The idea of postmemory has been used in relation to Makine's writing by Stéphanie Bellemare-Page, although the critic restricts her discussion to traumatic memories. Stéphanie Bellemare-Page, 'La littérature au temps de la post-mémoire: écriture et résilience chez Andreï Makine', *Études littéraires*, 38.1 (2006), 49–56. Without using Hirsch's term, Julie Hansen notes that Alyosha 'appropriate[s] others' memories'. Julie Hansen, "'La simultanéité du présent': Memory, History and Narrative in Andreï Makine's Novels *Le Testament français* and *Requiem pour l'Est*", *MLN*, 128.4 (2013), 881–899 (p. 887).

22. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), p. 340, hereafter *PS* in the text.

son oncle ou par Albertine qui eux-mêmes les avaient hérités de leurs parents. Mais nous, peu nous importait la chronologie exacte! Le temps de l'Atlantide ne connaissait que la merveilleuse simultanéité du présent. (*TF* 116–18)

Hence, Alyosha situates the French visit of Nicolas II and his wife, which in reality took place in 1897, right after the 1910 floods, making it seem to coincide with France's emergence from a natural disaster and nature's springtime rebirth. This inaccuracy represents what Droysen considered the historians' 'artistic' activity in which, as White puts it, they 'constructed an appropriate literary representation of the "realities" thus seen in a prose discourse' (*IH* 284). At the same time, illustrating what White calls the moralizing function of historical narrativity,²³ the discrepancy may be ideologically underpinned, stressing the regenerating powers of imperial Russia's representatives. Politically motivated or not, Alyosha's overt dismissal of the importance of historical exactitude echoes the postmodern equation of history and fiction, which both, according to Hutcheon, 'derive their force more from verisimilitude than any objective truth', are 'linguistic constructs' and are 'equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality' (*PP* 105). Inspired by White's narrativist notion of historical interpretation (*HP* 499), this view is shared by Patricia Waugh for whom history and fiction are marked by the illusion of verisimilar narrative: while history can only exist within textual boundaries, real people and events are recontextualized in the act of writing.²⁴ Thus, rather than appearing paradoxical, the systematic authentication of Charlotte's 'artistic' discourse may indicate history's belonging to the interpretative and not explanatory sciences,²⁵ and, as we shall now see, the documents' limited evidentiary quality and openness to multiple readings.

23. Hayden White, 'The Narrativization of Real Events', *Critical Inquiry*, 7.4 (1981), 796–97.

24. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 106.

25. This view is shared by Julie Hansen who argues that 'Makine's novels privilege the cognitive mode of memory over the pragmatic one'. Hansen, 'La Simultanéité du présent', p. 883.

Re-Narrativizing History

Unless we are dealing with what White calls ‘non-narrativistic’ accounts such as the annals, history writing and reading always takes place a posteriori and therefore causal connections between events, ranked in the light of subsequent history, are established. Made by White (*CF* 9), amongst others,²⁶ this observation is echoed by Michael Roth’s discussion of Lewis Payne’s photograph taken just before the convict’s execution and famously analysed by Barthes. Like Payne’s picture, which preserves time from decay but reminds us of decay outside time, thus creating what Roth calls an ‘ontological disturbance’,²⁷ Alyosha’s awareness of the 1917 Revolution overshadows his appreciation of the Tsar’s French visit; the Marseillaise played or the Heredia poem recited in Nicolas’s presence appear uncannily ominous. More importantly, the protagonist’s knowledge of the Tsar’s fall shakes his trust in history while diminishing his hitherto unreserved admiration for France. Comparing himself to an archaeologist (*TF* 58) or to an archivist (*TF* 153), Alyosha rummages through the Siberian suitcase to discover a history uncensored by his grandmother and therefore different from the sanitized account produced with a child in mind. While the image of the now older Tsar blessing the troops going into World War I has a similar effect on Alyosha’s perception of Nicolas’s French visit as Barthes’s knowledge of Payne’s death on his viewing of the convict’s photo, the news of the February Revolution and of the establishment of Kerensky’s government not only creates an ‘ontological disturbance’ and upsets Alyosha’s conception of history as a continuous and causal process, but also undermines his belief in the unequivocal and stable meaning of facts. The French people’s enthusiastic reception of Nicolas’s abdication casts doubt on the honesty of their earlier hospitality, which makes Alyosha accuse them of hypocrisy and question the reliability

26. See also R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 244.

27. Michael S. Roth, ‘Photographic Ambivalence and Historical Consciousness’, *History and Theory*, 40 (2009), 86–91.

of historical discourse: “Où est la vérité?” [...] “Tout est faux! Traîtres, traîtres! Ce menteur à moustaches... Un Président, tu parles! Mensonges...” (TF 61–62)

Significantly, Charlotte counters her grandson's rage, provoked by his discovery of, as White would put it, the inherent discontinuity, disruption, and chaos of the past that are the lot of postmodern historians,²⁸ by making him a gift of a pebble that captures a high point in both her own and France's past. Originally a present from an officer taking part in a parade celebrating the victory at Verdun, the stone is meant to rehabilitate France in Alyosha's eyes by invoking one of the grandest moments in its military history. Yet, before learning its twofold meaning, the protagonist takes ‘Verdun’ for the ugliest specimen in his grandmother's collection of stones which he vandalizes by discarding some pebbles and tearing up the papers wrapped around them. Additionally, he takes the words marked on the pieces of paper — ‘Fécamp’, ‘La Rochelle’, ‘Bayonne’, ‘Biarritz’, ‘Verdun’ — for names of mineralogical samples, thus behaving like the children who, when travelling by train, mistake the terms ‘LADIES’ and ‘GENTLEMEN’ for towns' names.²⁹ Like Lacan's example where it is only as signs placed on two adjacent doors that ‘LADIES’ and ‘GENTLEMEN’ clearly refer to toilets, the pebble episode demonstrates the signifier's inherent potential to mislead. It also undermines the idea of the signifier/signified relationship's organic wholeness, re-positioning the signifier as an a priori meaningless element in the closed and differential system of language. That this linguistic contention may be extended to documents or artefacts transpires from other examples in *Le Testament français*, such as the ‘bartavelles et ortolans truffés rôtis’ served to the Tsar in Cherbourg. Just as the mysterious-sounding dish finds no match in the impoverished Soviet diet and therefore remains an empty signifier, in the secularized Soviet culture the *prie-dieu* on which the

28. Hayden White, *The Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 50.

29. Jacques Lacan, ‘L'Instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud’, in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), pp. 493–528 (p. 499).

Empress Alexandra knelt during her French visit will never be ‘stuffed’, to borrow the Lacanian term, with meaning. Similarly, in Soviet history manuals the term ‘tsar’, hitherto denoting for Alyosha an enlightened monarch admired by the French, is a bloodthirsty tyrant, responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent people.

As suggested by this last example, Charlotte’s ‘impressionistic’ history is contested by historiography proper when Alyosha embarks on a systematic study (*TF* 153), progressing chronologically ‘d’un siècle à l’autre, d’un Louis au suivant, d’un romancier à ses confrères, disciples ou épigones’ (*TF* 153). His scholarly endeavours are, however, quickly thwarted, as Soviet libraries prove to be hostage to ideology and, consequently, unevenly stocked: for instance, the French Communist Party or the Paris Commune are given preference over Louis XIV, a fact supporting the widely shared observation that one reason for the historians’ selectivity is indeed politics (*WHP* 126), history being inseparable from ideology and disinterested inquiry being an unthinkable ideal.³⁰

Consequently, Alyosha will draw further historical knowledge from literature whose ability to convey the past is confirmed by the impact of a Victor Hugo poem on his friend, Pashka. ‘Sur une barricade’ narrates the story of a boy standing together with grown-up communards in front of a firing squad. The twelve-year old asks the executioner-in-chief for a permission to take his watch to his mother before being shot; then, having been granted escape, dutifully returns to put himself against the wall. However frustrated Pashka may be by the open-endedness of Hugo’s story (we never learn whether the boy gets shot), his tears prove Northrop Frye’s point that to become comprehensive the historian’s discourse must become ‘mythical in shape, [...] so [that it] approaches the poetic in its structure’.³¹ Indeed, ‘l’écho de cette histoire en fait si simple, racontée à des milliers de kilomètres du lieu de sa naissance,

30. Hayden White, ‘The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation’, *Critical Inquiry*, 9.1 (1982), 113–37 (p. 114).

31. Northrop Frye, ‘New Directions from Old’, in *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), pp. 53–54.

avait réussi à arracher des larmes à un jeune barbare et le pousser nu dans la neige' (*TF* 165).

The inferiority of historiography to historical fiction is further underscored when the former destroys Alyosha's feel for France's past, turning facts into 'les papillons écartelés sur leurs épingles sous une vitre poussiéreuse' (*TF* 175). Instead of a misty day greeting Nicholas II in Cherbourg, the protagonist sees 'les pages des livres, les dates en caractères gras. Et la voix se mettait à commenter, à comparer, à citer. Je me sentais atteint d'une étrange cécité...' (*TF* 169). Yet, in White's terms, the exclusiveness of the two versions of French history is only superficial since 'there are an infinite number of stories contained [in the facts], all different in their detail, each unlike every other' (*IH* 294). The discrepancy between these different accounts occurs thus on two levels: that of narrativizing the bare facts where different historians may deem different events important, and that of emplotment where 'mythic consciousness' operates, where history is told according to a set of (literary) conventions and where different plot structures from amongst 'the archetypal story forms that define the modalities of a given culture's literary endowment' may be used (*IH* 291). Choosing from 'pre-generic plot structures' like those identified by Frye,³² and used by White to detect 'fictive' elements in historical narrative, Charlotte emplots France's past as a fairy tale, an adventure story or a romance, whereas Soviet scholars follow tragedy, literature of espionage or political thriller (*IH* 290–92). This is exemplified by the contrast between the historians' emphasis on the disloyalty of John the Fearless and Isabeau of Bavaria, and Charlotte's romantic vision of these personages, authenticated by a plaque commemorating the Duke of Burgundy's 1419 assassination.

In Barthesian terms, Alyosha's historical knowledge destroys Charlotte's myth of France by depriving signifiers of the secondary level of meaning and woefully restoring them back to their signifieds. Previously swelling with the idea of the Entente Cordiale, the roast

32. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 162, hereafter *AC* in the text.

bartavels and ortolans are now reduced to roasted birds. Alternatively, as contemporary theoreticians of history would argue, here one mythical account of past events displaces another. Indeed, according to Lévi-Strauss, the interpretation of history is necessarily mythical and the coherence of history is that of a myth (*PS* 341–48), a fact that is to do more with the nature of language than with the interests of the group for which history is written.³³ Likewise, Frye, as read by White, agrees that ‘there is a mythic element in “history proper” by which the structures and processes depicted in its narratives are endowed with meanings of a specifically fictive kind’ (*IH* 2919). This is perhaps because we are characterized by, as Barthes contends, ‘une résistance invincible à croire au passé, à l’Histoire, sinon sous forme de mythe’.³⁴

In any case, the protagonist’s independent research invariably unsettles his grandmother’s version of history and discredits France in his eyes, just as — we presume — Soviet historians intended. Characteristically, Alyosha’s anger is abated by the recasting of France in a military context, thus likening it to the Khrushchev’s and Brezhnev’s Soviet Union where the cult of the Great Patriotic War reached its apogee and was used to both justify the USSR’s militarism and expansionism, and to divert the nation’s attention from the dire economic situation (*LD* 95–157). As in the previously discussed pebble episode where Alyosha is appeased by the memory of Verdun, the protagonist now calms himself by contemplating a reproduction of a painting showing a group of French soldiers crossing the street of a poor village. He notes the warriors’ advanced age, disparate uniforms and fatigue, guessing them to be the very last able-bodied men in a mass recruitment, all the young soldiers having already been killed or wounded. Crucially, this episode roughly coincides with the premature death of Alyosha’s parents, which indirectly results from the war, and with the protagonist’s concomitant discovery of the Great Victory’s hidden face: ‘toute une

33. For a discussion of Lévi-Strauss’s views on history, see Hayden White, ‘Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination’, *History and Theory*, 14.4 (1975), 52–55.

34. Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Notes sur la photographie* (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 1980), p. 136.

génération de tués, de mutilés, de “sans jeunesse” (*TF* 202). Hence, just as Verdun corresponds to the Soviet Union's legendary victory over fascism, Alyosha must be identifying the elderly soldiers with the Great Patriotic War's unsung victims, now themselves advanced in age. Illustrating White's remarks about historians' interpretation of the past in the light of their present, and about their task consisting in putting flesh on the bare bones of historical facts, the protagonist sees one of the soldiers as the embodiment of the patriotism, simplicity, resilience and unquestionable acceptance of fate that all invariably characterize the Russians populating Makine's oeuvre. Under Alyosha's gaze, the man comes to life: ‘Pour une fraction de seconde mon cœur sembla battre au même rythme que le sien. Triomphant de la peur, de la fatalité, de la solitude.’ (*TF* 178) This identification proceeds from, amongst others, the picture's ‘réalisme très fouillé’ (*TF* 177) which, while indicating its mimetic and hence documentary value, in Frye's terms, provokes precisely a recognition of a familiar reality, making spectators say “How like that is to what we know!” (*AC* 136) Similarly, the dreary landscape composed of ‘les maisons basses [qui] se recroquevillaient derrière des haies maigres, où les arbres rabougris frissonnaient sous le vent d'hiver’ (*TF* 178), meant to reflect the soldiers' condition, challenges Charlotte's portrayal of her homeland as a land of palaces as splendid as France's history, and further closes the gap between the Hexagon and Russia, repeatedly depicted by Makine as a bleak and poor land.

Apocalypse Now

Alyosha's textual image of French history, which has finally reconciled the ‘artistic’ and the ‘scientific’ accounts, is tested years later when confronted with reality: ‘C'est en France que je faillis oublier définitivement la France de Charlotte...’ (*TF* 297). The vulnerability of Alyosha's vision is articulated with eschatological imagery, which, however, may equally express the hero's despondency at the recent collapse of Communism, portrayed in Russia itself with ‘[a]pocalyptic

fin-de-siècle commonplaces'.³⁵ This is confirmed by the mournful tone of the protagonist's description of the Soviet Union's demise: 'nous [the protagonist and his fellow journalists at Radio Free Europe] restions devant ce vide, tels des personnages en cire d'un cabinet de curiosité, des reliques d'un empire défunt' (*TF* 298). Unlike many of his colleagues who emigrate to America, which may signify their decision to embrace capitalism and/or be a metaphor of suicide,³⁶ in the face of his homeland's disappearance Alyosha settles in France, a country at least metonymically related to the Soviet Russia of his childhood. After a short-lived sense of homecoming, the protagonist is seized by a sense of impending doom, symbolized by the demolition of a building across the road from his hotel. A mirror fixed to the only remaining wall reflects the sky, anticipating the imminent return of culture to nature. Rendered melancholy by a profound sense of loss, Alyosha muses about being crushed by the rubble and then, as if he were indeed an archaeological artefact, fantasizes about burying himself, which he does in a way when, homeless, he moves into a house-tomb in the cemetery of Père-Lachaise. There he symbolically dies and, three days later, returns to life, a detail possibly alluding to the second coming of Christ predicted by the Apocalypse and, by extension, to the Slavophiles' idea of Russians as the 'chosen people' and their correlated association between (spiritual) homelessness, messianic nomadism and the apocalyptic (*CP* 31). Such a reading of the protagonist's gesture is further sustained by the position Alyosha assumes inside the miniature funeral chapel: he lies on the ground, arms spread in a position evocative of crucifixion. Moreover, the narrator describes the tomb as simultaneously cramped and spacious, clean and dry, and identifies it as his first 'chez-moi' since he left Russia (*TF* 303). As discussed by Elisabeth Bronfen, the lack

35. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places. Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 215, hereafter *CP* in the text.

36. Overcome by an insurmountable sense of loss, the protagonist of Makine's novel *Requiem pour l'Est* (2000) goes to the United States to meet certain death at the hands of the CIA. It is noteworthy that already in Dostoyevsky's work a move to America is synonymous with suicide (*CP* 32).

of boundaries between the concepts of womb, tomb and home³⁷ is also illustrated by the attribution of regenerative powers to the protagonist's temporary abode; Alyosha quits the tomb-womb as the latest offspring of two illustrious French families owning the chapel, whereby their genealogical tree becomes the Tree of Life prominently featured in the Apocalypse.

To (re)create the history of his newly adopted family, the protagonist uses his imagination to supplement the lapidary information about the deceased (dates of birth and death, professions) engraved on the chapel's walls, in the process of which he 'mélang[e] histoire et littérature' (TF 304):

C'était un flux d'images dont l'acuité vivante et très concrète me faisait presque mal. *Je croyais entendre* le froissement de la longue robe de cette dame qui montait dans un fiacre. [...] *J'éprouvais physiquement* l'immobilité engoncée de ce notable en habit noir: le soleil, la grande place d'une ville de province, les discours, les emblèmes républicains tout neufs... Les guerres, les révolutions, le grouillement populaire, les fêtes se figeaient, pour une seconde, dans un personnage, un éclat, une voix, une chanson, une salve, un poème, une sensation — et le flux reprenait la course entre la date de la naissance et celle de la mort. [...] Je devine le climat de leurs jours et de leur mort. [...] Et je *ressens* la fragilité de ce visage disparu le 10 mai 1969, je la ressens comme une émotion intensément vécue par moi-même... Ces vies inconnues me sont proches. (TF 304–05, *emphasis added*)

37. Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body. Truth, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 65. Bronfen quotes Jurii Lotman: '[t]he elementary sequence of events in myth can be reduced to a chain: entry into closed space — emergence from it [...]. In as much as closed space can be interpreted as "a cave", "the grave", "a house", "woman", (and correspondingly, be allotted the features of darkness, warmth, dampness), entry into it is interpreted on various levels as "death", "conception", "return home" and so on; moreover all these acts are thought of as mutually identical'. Bronfen also mentions Edgar Morin's explanation of the analogy of death-birth: 'Mother, grotta, earth, cavern, house, tomb, night, sleep are concepts that mutually recall and refer to each other', p. 74, n. 29.

Alyosha's approach to historiography evokes White's discussion of the translation of the annals, composed of bare dates and facts, into 'history proper': gaps are filled in with narrative, discontinuities eradicated and casual connections between events established (*CF* 9). Furthermore, implicitly following Hegel's suggestion that a historical account not only must take on a narrativized form but also display a certain content, namely 'a politicosocial order' (*CF* 11), Alyosha turns the non-narrative history of highly ranked army officers, civil servants and artists at the service of the colonial enterprise into an apology for the French empire 'qui avait jadis resplendi aux quatre coins du monde...' (*TF* 305)

Henceforth Alyosha's world will be divided by the cemetery wall, the fall from which — head down and seemingly endless — evidently marks the protagonist's rebirth. While the graveyard represents a textualization of France, the wall's other side holds the post-apocalyptic reality over which the sun has irrevocably set. The only people found in the abandoned nocturnal city, whose empty streets all run downhill as if luring the scarce passers-by to an all-engulfing vortex, are non-European immigrants. Like the Black vagrant emerging from a cardboard box covered with hieroglyphs — the alphabet of yet another fallen empire —, they cannot speak French, and, as Alyosha's fellow Russian claims, are 'les nouveaux barbares' (*TF* 321). Driving straight ahead at full speed, the infrequently passing cars seem to be fleeing the endangered capital, while buildings cast deep shadows and have the unreal quality of a film set. Suddenly, as Alyosha experiences a spell of dizziness and the world around him starts disintegrating, he is transported back to the textual universe by an inscription commemorating the 1910 floods, which, sharing the genealogical tree's life-giving power, may be an allusion to the River of Life also featured in the Apocalypse: 'Le monde se désagrègeait, le mur cédait sous ma paume, les fenêtres dégouлинаient sur les façades blêmes des maisons... [...] J'entendais le silence brumeux, le clapotis de l'eau au passage d'une barque' (*TF* 306–8). Such a representation of contemporary reality suggests not only the narrator's vehement disapproval of today's France (and Russia), and his concomitant nostalgia for the 'good old days', but also the impossibility

of the empirical cognition of reality which, in order to be accessed, must be pre-textualized.

To a post-apocalyptic France, which *Le Testament français* represents as swamped by a wave of non-white immigrants (TF 321), Alyosha opposes a country constructed in language on the basis of sources from the past. His project repeats the endeavours of Charlotte who, unable to return to or even to maintain links with her homeland, dealt with the hard Soviet reality by reconstructing France from books, newspapers and objects she had brought with her to Russia; her France was 'un pays composé de mots, dont les fleuves ruisselaient comme des strophes, dont les femmes pleuraient en alexandrins et les hommes s'affrontaient en sirventès' (TF 324). Having moved from a quarter where 'on pouvait traverser [l]es rues sans entendre un mot de français' for a much more expensive part of Paris (TF 322), Alyosha furnishes the newly rented flat with antiques, turning it, as he himself realizes, into a museum (TF 329). There he painstakingly reconstructs Charlotte's biography, the *avant-texte* of *Le Testament français*, a novel that under the guise of restoring the turn-of-the-century France breathes life into another fallen empire: the USSR.

Conclusions

Going beyond the initial critical reaction to Makine's award-winning novel, mostly read as an apotheosis of French culture or as a clichéd representation of both France and Russia, Charlotte's mythological plotting of French history may be seen as a metafictional comment on the process of representing a country's past to a foreign (and naïve, not to say childlike) audience. The very moderate success of Makine's first two and — thematically — strictly Soviet novels, and the relatively warm reception of *Au temps du fleuve Amour* (1994) that anticipates the narrative pattern of *Le Testament français* by contrasting bleak Soviet reality with a simplified and one-dimensional portrayal of France by films starring Jean-Paul Belmondo,' seems to have taught the author to

adjust his representation of history to the expectations of his Western (and mainly French) readers.³⁸ *Le Testament français* thus confirms Lévi-Strauss's notion that history is always 'l'histoire-pour' (PS 341), an idea shared by White for whom the past is represented 'from the perspective of the interests of specific agents or groups' (HP 487) and 'in the interest of some infrascientific aim or vision.' (IH 288) As we have seen, Makine's fourth novel also endorses White's views on the inevitable 'fictionality' of narrative history and on the openness of historical evidence to diverse, yet not necessarily mutually exclusive, narrativizations. Moreover, in *Le Testament français* documents have a paradoxical status characteristic of the programmatically self-contradictory historiographic metafiction: notwithstanding their essential ambiguity, they are the only source of information about the past, the existence of an empirically experienced reality being virtually impossible. However, Makine's fourth novel unsettles the pattern noted by Hutcheon, for, while challenging the documents' evidentiary potential, it puts them in the service of a politically motivated history and, notably, of a reactionary agenda. While endorsing Hutcheon's view of postmodern art as intrinsically ideological, *Le Testament français* uses a carefully calculated selection of documents, be they fictive or authentic, to, firstly, liken Russia to France without, nevertheless, diminishing its exoticism, whereby Makine's homeland becomes simultaneously accessible and attractive to the author's intended readers. Secondly — and more importantly —, historical sources help Makine to rewrite his homeland's past. By focusing on the Tsar's French visit, the October Revolution, World War I or the two facets of the Great Patriotic War, *Le Testament français*, written shortly after the USSR's collapse, strives to reinstate a powerful — tsarist or Soviet — Russia on the world's political map. Furthermore, while invoking his homeland's imperial

38. Makine's target audience are clearly the French, although his works also enjoy some popularity in other Western countries. *Le Testament français* is Makine's only novel translated into his native tongue, yet its Russian reception was far from enthusiastic. See, for example, Adrian Wanner, 'Andreï Makine: "Seeing Russia in French"', In *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), pp. 19–49 (p. 20).

past and stressing its pivotal role in defeating fascism, Makine represents his compatriots as victims of despotic rulers, fate, inhospitable topography and climate and, finally, history that the author shows to be made up uniquely of wars, terror and revolutions. Consequently, the Franco-Russian novelist strives to undermine the predominant Western view of Russia as an aggressor and of its citizens as both complicitous in their rulers' offences and masters of their own misery. Assisted in his task by Christian and especially eschatological imagery, Makine revives the Slavophiles' apocalyptic rhetoric, including their vision of Russia as the saviour and martyr of a degenerate West.

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