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Slavophile Elements in Andreï Makine's Prose

Abstract: This paper aims to analyze the influence of the 19th-century Slavophile ideas like *samobytnost* (originality, uniqueness, distinctiveness) or *sobornost* (a common spiritual bond uniting members of a community) on Andreï Makine's novels *The Life of an Unknown Man* and *The Woman Who Waited*. Although he has lived in France since 1987 and writes exclusively in French, mainly for a French readership, Russia remains one of his great obsessions, which he poetically transfigures, in a Dostoyevskyan manner, into a world of both ugliness and beauty. Beyond the sordid and unbearable social reality, Makine suggests that there is a profound, authentic Russia, not in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but in the secluded and forgotten villages, where people like Vera and Volski, the main characters of the two novels, live organically in peaceful communities, keeping intact traditional Russian spiritual values.

Keywords: Slavophilia; Russia vs. the West; Russian Soul; Soviet Russia; *Sobornost*; *Samobytnost*.

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The publication in 1995 of *Dreams of My Russian Summers* (*Le Testament français*), the first book in history to win both the Prix Goncourt and the Prix Médicis, brought Andreï Makine out of anonymity and transformed him overnight from an obscure Russian immigrant into a celebrity in the French literary world, becoming known today as “the most Russian of French writers” (*le plus russe des écrivains français*). In addition to the distinctive poetic and musical style of his writing, Makine's hallmark is the harmonious blending of Russian and French experiences that allows him to continuously oscillate between the two geographical and cultural spaces, Russia/USSR and France.

Unlike another Russian exiled writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who always believed that his works would be read by his compatriots and would have an impact on the Russian cultural space, Makine, settled in France since 1987, decided to write in French mainly for a French readership, and thereafter, through translations, for the international audience¹. Nevertheless, Russia remains one of his great obsessions, which he poetically transfigures in most of his novels and turns it, in a Dostoyevskyan manner, into a world of both ugliness and beauty².

Among the reasons that led him to write in French, in addition to the need to address a French audience, he cites the desire to distance himself from the Russian language, which was still wooden, impoverished and highly ideological. But what defines Makine is not just French or just Russian, but his bilingualism, which, as he himself admits, allows him to see the mystery of things and to have access to a poetic, universal language that transcends all national languages.³ On the other hand, by choosing to write in French, he only wanted to distance himself from the Russian language, not from the literary and philosophical heritage of Russian culture, to which he feels strongly attracted. Eloquent in this sense is a fragment from the end of *Dreams of My Russian Summers*, in which the narrator says that when he saw his own books in bookshops, sandwiched between those of Lermontov and Nabokov, he was overwhelmed by a feeling of “giddy megalomania”⁴.

One of the intellectual traditions of the Russian cultural space that has influenced Andreï Makine’s prose and that has been insufficiently treated by exegetes is Slavophilia⁵. In order to fill this gap, I will first outline the main coordinates of the Slavophile movement and ideology, and then show how Makine integrates, updates and nuances various Slavophile ideas, themes and motifs in his novels, passing everything through the filter of his hybrid personality.

Slavophile Heritage

The Slavophile movement was initiated in the 1830s within the broader context of European Romanticism by a small group of Russian intellectuals who sought to address the problem of Russian national

identity. As Susana Rabow Edling mentions, “despite the great influence Slavophilism has exerted on Russian intellectual life, the ideology was formulated by only four persons”: Aleksei Khomiakov (1804–1860), Ivan Kireevsky (1806–1856), Konstantin Aksakov (1817–1860) and Iurii Samarin (1819–1876)⁶.

The need to articulate the Slavophile movement, philosophy and ideology arose in response to Russia’s Westernist vector, which was promoted by Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848), Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), Alexander Herzen (1812–1870), Timofei Granovsky (1813–1855) etc. Westernizers praised the reforms and policies introduced by Peter the Great and saw in the West a model of civilization that Russia must follow on the road to progress and emancipation. Slavophiles, on the contrary, believed that the attempt to adopt and assimilate Western laws, institutions, values, principles, along with the Western way of being and thinking, was not only undesirable, artificial and inefficient, but also impossible, due to the fact that the Roman-Germanic world (the West) and the Greco-Slavic world (whose main exponent was Russia) were not only different, but also opposite and incompatible. There is a difference between them not only in degree, but also in essence.⁷ This is because the Russian people have a certain originality, uniqueness, distinctiveness (the Russian term is *samobytnost/samobytnostʹ*) which gives Russia depth and authenticity and which must be cultivated in order to elevate Russia to its own greatness. Historically, the two major factors in the creation of this uniqueness were the Mongol invasion and the legacy of Byzantine Christianity.

According to the Slavophile dualistic worldview, the West is perceived as decadent, degenerate, rotten, materialistic, corrupt, alienating, over-institutionalized and devitalized, i.e. full of negativity, and salvation can only be found in the purity of Russian soil, the only place where a new, positive, organic, happy civilization can be built. In one of the basic texts of Slavic ideology, *On the Nature of Education in Europe and its Relation to Russian Education*, Ivan Kireevsky notes that, unlike the West, Russian civilization does not focus on cerebral and rational knowledge, does not operate analytically, separating, creating identity or social divisions (body-soul, matter-spirit, self-otherness, public space-private space, etc.), “but tries to comprehend everything through a mystical-religious knowledge. It does not privilege exteriority, but interiority; it does not favor the individual, individualism, but community understood as sobornost’ (соборность), i.e., the spiritual communion of people manifested through fraternity, love and free cooperation.”⁸

According to the Slavophile school of thought, examples of spiritual unity, organic living and natural Christianity are to be found in the village, among peasants, rather than in the big cities – least of all in Sankt Petersburg, the artificial, alien and monstrous city symbolising “the catastrophic rupture with Holy Rus”.⁹ As defenders of the Russian way of life, Slavophiles “idealized the common folk (*narod*) as the true bearer of the national character (*narodnost*)”¹⁰ and accused the Westernizers of betraying “the Russian soul in favor of the mechanical, artificial, and above all arrogant Western mind.”¹¹

As we can see, Slavophilia is an ideology that operates with dichotomies,

with clear distinctions between Russia and the West. But although Makine takes up Slavophile themes, motifs and ideas in his novels, he strips them of their traditionalist, 19th-century flavor and adapts them to the postmodern context, creating a “trans-border text”¹² whose protagonists have liminal identities and yearn for a past that is more imaginary than real.

Russia vs. the West

In Makine's writings, the nineteenth-century dispute between Slavophiles and Westernizers becomes a polemic about the contrast between the Soviet past, onto which Slavophile values are retrospectively projected, and post-communist Russia, which has opened its doors to the Western way of life. Representative in this respect is the case of Shutov, the main character of the novel *The Life of an Unknown Man* (2009). The narrative is triggered by the existential impasse in which the protagonist finds himself, a Russian disenchanting writer who in the early 1980s was expelled from the USSR for opposing the communist regime and who has lived his last twenty years in France. Shutov is in a relationship with a much younger girl, Lea, a beautiful blonde with whom he has little in common, the age difference becoming more and more noticeable. In addition, the protagonist poetically transfigures his relationship with Lea, interposing a bookish distance between them: “Yes, that had been his mistake, his desire to love Lea as one loves a poem.”¹³ But while literature used to bind the two of them together, the decline of his fame as a writer (his manuscripts begin to be rejected by publishers) also serves as a stimulus for the decline of his relationship with Lea.

On one of their reading evenings, he read to her Chekhov's short story *A Little Joke*, which tells of a promising love between two timid lovers, the narrator and Nadia, but it was a love never followed through, as the two took different paths in life. However, although Nadia has since married someone else and has three children, the richness of her family situation is nothing compared to those dazzling moments in her youth when she experienced her first love and heard a declaration of love for the first time: "How we together once went to the ice rink, and how the wind brought to her the words 'I love you, Nadenka', isn't forgotten; for her now, it's the most joyous, most touching, and beautiful memory in her life..."¹⁴ Shutov sums up the whole story in the words: "two irresolute lovers, their meeting twenty years later. I love you, Nadenka..."¹⁵ – a phrase that actually reflects Shutov's biography, as he was in love in his youth with a former college classmate named Yana. The declaration of love "I love you, Nadenka" (which keeps reappearing throughout the novel) thus becomes a leitmotif that functions as a trigger for Shutov, awakening the memory of the one he once secretly loved, and Chekhov's text functions as a link to a time and space that no longer exists, the USSR: Shutov is "a dissident from the eighties of the previous century, an opposition figure exiled from a country that had since been erased from all the maps"¹⁶, but to which he nevertheless feels deeply connected.

The aura of his dissident past had already faded, and what remained only highlighted the age gap between him and Lea, who had begun to see him as a 'friend', if not a grandfather. The feeling of inadequacy and insignificance in the

France – a country "that fetishizes youth and has commodified literature"¹⁷ – was becoming more and more acute, which is why Shutov began to think about another space, where he had lived the first part of his life, clinging to the possibility of resuming an abandoned love relationship: "Shutov began to dream of the Russia he had not seen for twenty years and where, he believed, a life persisted, rocked to sleep by well-loved lines of verse. A park beneath golden foliage, a woman walking in silence, like the heroine of a poem."¹⁸ Therefore, under Chekhov's auspices, Shutov decides to go to Russia to see or even to reunite with Yana, hoping that, despite the years that have passed, she still remembers their youthful, unconfessed love. Yet in spite of the protagonist's hope of returning to a reality in which he can find himself, speaking the language of his childhood, and in which he will be able to feel at home again, in a deep and authentic Russia, Shutov finds to his astonishment that the Russia of the early 21st century in which he has arrived is profoundly westernized, and the irony makes Yana the perfect example of this new reality.

Yana was married to a man who worked in the oil industry and with whom she had a child, Vlad, but the marriage didn't work out, so they separated and now she works in the hotel business in St. Petersburg. Although he expected to meet a woman like a heroine of a Russian poem, "a disgruntled and corpulent babushka"¹⁹ whose body would have been affected by the passage of time but who would have preserved unaltered the values of the Russian way of life, Yana turned out to be a successful woman, deeply immersed in the capitalist fever that swept Russia at the turn of the millennium.

Slender, with straight blonde hair, a face carefully kept free of wrinkles, a youthful air, in the eyes of the protagonist “she corresponds to a certain type of European woman”²⁰ and, even more disconcertingly, looks a lot like Lea. Besides, she has a younger lover, a fact that destroys Shutov’s last shred of hope and makes him feel “like an actor who has just missed his cue”²¹. In this context, it is also significant that Shutov means jester in Russian, a “sad clown”, as the protagonist himself puts it.²²

Even the dialogue between the two, which is always rushed and syncopated, serves to emphasize the fact that Shutov and Yana belong to different time frames: he is stuck in the Soviet past, trying unsuccessfully to rekindle their youthful love, acting and speaking with a slowness and insecurity that always makes him miss the right moment, while she belongs to the present, to the generation of the new Russians, determined to keep up with the crazy pace of change that post-communist Russia is undergoing. As Helena Duffy states, “Yana’s appearance is the first sign of Russia’s loss of its cultural distinctiveness caused by its overzealous adherence to capitalism”²³. This phenomenon is all the more evident in the case of her son, Vlad, “a gangling youth in T-shirt and jeans, a fair-haired twenty-year-old such as one might come across in London, or Amsterdam, or an American sitcom”²⁴. Fully immersed in the capitalist worldview, Vlad speaks a language that Shutov has never heard before in Russia, using expressions such as ‘market analysis’, ‘book promotion’, ‘boosting sales’²⁵, and, in order to increase the profits of the publishing house where he works as an advertiser, he sells “books like vacuum cleaners”²⁶.

The easy-going cynicism with which Vlad treats literature in this new society of the spectacle amazes and angers Shutov, but although he would like to tell the young man about the former value of literature, about samizdat, about the ordeals writers had to endure because of texts undesirable to the Soviet regime, about how “in the old days a collection of poems could change your life but a single poem could also cost the life of its author”²⁷, he is unable to articulate his thoughts, again missing the right moment: “I should have told him’, thinks Shutov and knows he could not have found the right words: a verbal block that makes him unable to explain the richness of that wretched past.”²⁸ The inability to capture reality in words is a defining theme of Makine’s novel, referring both to the past, which, despite all its shortcomings – of which Shutov is aware – still retains indescribably positive values in the memory of the protagonist, and to the present, because the vocabulary of the Russian language, which Shutov possesses, lacks terms that could describe or translate the new Russian society, which is fervently and violently embracing capitalism. “The words that falter within him, rendered fragile by the passage of so many years, are too frail to cut through the noise”²⁹ that has engulfed St. Petersburg, all the more so because Shutov arrives there on the very day of the city’s tricentennial anniversary, which functions as a carnivalesque and alienating amplifier.

Built according to the Western model, St. Petersburg has always been perceived by the Slavic tradition as an artificial city and alien to the Slavic idea, a negative moment in history, against which the Russians must position themselves in opposition to mark

their uniqueness in the world. The Westernist vector is all the more pronounced in the St. Petersburg of 2003 in Makine's novel, a phenomenon that perplexes Shutov: people are dressed as if they were in the streets of a Western city, speak English, have posters of Madonna and Andy Warhol in their homes, drink whisky and martinis and enjoy to the full the newly discovered consumerism. In Yana's apartment, for example, "Shutov eats, amazed by the variety of the food, the quality of the coffee. This is the kind of apartment, the type of food, which in the Soviet era the Russians used to picture when they spoke of the West... And here it is, they have recreated a quintessence of the West that he himself never really experienced in the West at all."³⁰

The person who is supposed to counterbalance the whole Westernist tendency in *The Life of an Unknown Man* is Georgy Lvovich Volski, the title-character, an 80-year-old paraplegic who lives in one of the communal flats (*communalka*) bought by Jana to be turned into luxury apartments and who, because of the festivities that have blocked the city, cannot yet be evicted and moved to a retirement home. The spatial indicators show from the outset that we are dealing with a process of transformation that is perceived as a loss, as a reduction in value: from a communal apartment, a place of sharing, solidarity and exchange of ideas (especially in the kitchen), to a luxury apartment where the rooms, equipped with all the necessary utilities, are clearly separated, a place of spacious individualism.

Surprisingly, Shutov finds in the character of Volski everything that, in his memory or in the books he had read, was

associated with deep, authentic Russia. This isolated old man, who spoke to no one and was thought by all to be mute, forms a special bond with Shutov and opens up to him, telling him the story of his life. He too has loved only one woman all his life, Mila, whom he met during the war – when, young and fearless, he sang in one of the choirs that went to the front to encourage the Russian soldiers in their fight against the Germans – and with whom he lived happily for a time, only to lose her in Gulag. Though once famous and involved in society, inventing an innovative educational method to help disabled, abandoned and delinquent children (a book was written about him), Volski now maintains a voluntary pact of silence and remains immobilized in a room and, by extension, in a world he no longer recognizes and with which he no longer wants to deal. This is exactly how he justifies his silence: he says that he has nothing to talk about with the people around him; nothing that Yana, Vlad and the others who pass him say is of any interest to this 'Soviet dinosaur', who is even more stuck in the past than Shutov.

Everything we learn about Volski is designed to create a desirable antithesis to the generation of new Russians who have embraced capitalism and the Western way of life. While Yana and Vlad want to make as much profit as possible, Georgy Lvovich is content with a monthly pension of 1,200 rubles (the equivalent of \$40), an amount that equals "the tip Yana's friends leave the waiter in a night club. He does not even grumble. He reads. Makes no demands, uncomplaining, uncritical of the new life that will spring up out of his remains."³¹ The stoicism of the old man is, in the eyes of the protagonist, the perfect example of

Russian resignation to fate: whatever the circumstances, he remains at peace with himself, continuing to read the book he has started, drinking from his cup of tea according to his daily routine. While Yana “speaks in loud and artificially cheerful tones”³², surrendering herself to the material, to the external world, and exuberantly enjoying everything the present has to offer, the old man is silent, does not interact with the world around him, turning only inwards, anchoring himself in the memories of the Soviet era.

As always in Makine's novels, the Soviet period is not portrayed in a one-sided and unambiguous way. Usually, the author builds up a negative scenario by describing more and more atrocious situations and then, in this seemingly eminently destructive context, inserts an uplifting, positive element or aspect. For example, in *The Life of an Unknown Man*, after hearing Volski's story, full of love and tragedy, Shutov does not hesitate to describe it as monstrous, murderous and shameful, but immediately adds that it is also “one during which, every day, a man looked up at the sky”³³ – referring to the gesture that Georgy Lvovich and Mila resorted to after being separated by the Soviet regime, each imprisoned in different camps (from which he returned and she did not). Despite the restrictions, violence and oppression – or perhaps because of them – that moment in the day when they looked up and tried to meet each other's gaze in the sky took on mystical proportions and helped them to transcend their miserable conditions. But even when they were not yet incarcerated, “their joy came from the things one does not possess, from what other people had abandoned or scorned”³⁴.

Compared to the enormous range of choices available to Russians in the affluent post-communist society, the little that was available to people in Soviet times conditioned them to live a simple life and cherish the things that really mattered, giving them an inner freedom that was worth far more than the freedom of expression and movement of the 21st century. “When it comes down to it, we had such an easy life!” says the old man. ‘We had no possessions and yet we knew we were happy. In the space between two bullets whistling past, as you might say...’ He smiles and adds in jesting tones: ‘No, but look at those poor people. They're not happy!’”³⁵ The excess of materiality in Russia converted to capitalism has turned people into actors in a carnival show, a big show of the world in which roles and images proliferate endlessly, but from which meaning is missing. “Very physically, Shutov feels that the world thus referred to is one that spreads itself out horizontally, flat and perfectly level in each of its components. Yes, a flattened world.”³⁶ As a result, contemporary Russians no longer have the capacity to assimilate spiritual values, and the only character in the novel who retains such values is Voslki, an outcast, a relic of the past.

In a 2009 interview entitled “Makine contre les ‘russophobes’”, the author confessed that he had visited his homeland in 2003 to research for this novel and that, like Shutov, he had been surprised by the extraordinary vitality of this new Russia – a vitality that he did not condemn, but which frightened him. Post-communist Russia, which is experimenting with its newfound freedom, is a society that wants to forget its past, to break away from its roots, from its traditions, to put the whole

of the Soviet period on hold and to label it a fatal flaw in the order of history. Yet that era was not all bad, says Makine.

Indeed, the USSR may have been nothing more than a humanly atrocious parenthesis, but, and it is extremely dangerous to say it, existentially fascinating. Because we have there a messianism which, for the first time in human history, has imposed itself in the lives of three generations. The idea was so generous that we cannot reject it altogether. When we reflect coldly on this, we realize that there is always something to save in an era: here, there is Volski, his love, the brotherhood, the fervor.³⁷

The role of literature, according to Makine, is precisely to give a voice to unknown and marginalized people like Georgy Lvovich Volski, who have a lot to say but cannot express their life experience in words. As in all of his work, Makine privileges the personal, subjective perspective on the history of the USSR, not the perspective of the masses, and much less the official one – be it positive, praising and glorifying the communist past, or negative, indiscriminately stigmatizing an entire historical segment and getting lost in clichés and stereotypes. The latter, however, is precisely the perspective adopted by the new Russians the protagonist meets during his visit to St Petersburg, which is why, towards the end, “the violent feeling suddenly overcomes Shutov that he will never be a part of the Russian world that is now being reborn within his native land. (‘So much the better!’ he says to himself.) He will remain to the end in an increasingly despised and indeed, increasingly unknown, past.”³⁸

But Shutov’s journey from France to Russia is a failure only at first sight.

Although it did not lead to the revival of the old love of his youth, the Petersburg experience did offer Shutov the chance of a providential encounter with an old man who “is a whole era on his own”³⁹ – an embodiment of the values often associated with the Russian soul: altruism, compassion, self-sacrifice, modesty, non-confliction, acceptance of whatever hardships fate brings, emphasis on spirituality and inwardness rather than the materiality of the world, etc. From a Slavophile point of view, Volski’s way of being, which is radically different from that of the Western world, is an expression of the distinctiveness (*samobytnost*) and purity of the Russian/Slavic cultural and spiritual area. He does not allow himself to be dragged down by foreign influences but preserves unaltered the memory of a past that was undoubtedly terrible, but which still left room for the glimpse of the absolute.

The Russian Soul is a Woman

While Volski represents the male version of the Russian soul in Makine’s perspective, the female version is represented by Vera, the title-character of the novel *The Woman Who Waited*. As the title suggests, Vera (which means faith, truth in Russian) is a woman who lives in the village of Mirnoe in Arkhangelsk, a northern region of Russia, and who has been waiting thirty years for her husband, who left for the war in 1945 when she was only sixteen. The name of the village is significant for what happens in the novel: Mirnoe comes from the word mir (мир), which in Russian means either peace (referring to the peaceful and organic community in which Vera lives) or world (the implication being

that this village encapsulates the essence of the Russian world in its authentic, profound version). The chronological factor is also important, because it is precisely in the 1970s, in Makine's vision, that we find the seeds of the corruption of the traditional values of Russian society, i.e., the seeds of capitalism and westernisation.⁴⁰ The narrator himself (the authorial 'I', who remains unnamed) is a promoter of Westernism at the beginning of the novel⁴¹. He is a twenty-seven-year-old writer who is part of a group of Russian intellectual dissidents from Leningrad who are passionately discussing the revolutionary counterculture movements of May '68, chatting with American journalists who have come to discover the Soviet universe, praising freedom and the Western way of life, and wanting to escape from "Planet Nyet" ("Planet No"), where thousands of slaves of the regime, by their resignation, are consolidating the "prison society" called the USSR.⁴² During those clandestine meetings, the narrator confesses, they were mediocre actors, acting out a copy of the West that "was in some respects more authentic than the original. Above all, more fraught with drama. For the liberties taken on those evenings did not always go unpunished."⁴³

Most of these dissidents do indeed leave for the West, although it is retrospectively noted that they were no better off there. But the protagonist stays and decides to take on a commitment that one of his friends who wanted to flee the country, Arkady, could no longer fulfil: to go to the Arkhangelsk region to write a series of texts on local customs and traditions: "In the provinces, you know, they always want a graduate from Moscow or Leningrad.

It's for their commemorative album. Some town anniversary or a folk festival. Whatever. You should go. Go and jot down a few fibs about the gnomes in their forests. But the main thing is, there'll be lots of material for your anti-Soviet satire..."⁴⁴

Arkady's plea is not the only factor that triggers the novel's action. There is also the existential malaise the protagonist experiences when he learns that the woman he loves has cheated on him (with the American journalist), which awakens in him a desire to escape from the Leningrad context, where there was too much casualness and everyone was in a hurry, but also a still uncertain desire to escape from his own self. Therefore, as in *The Life of an Unknown Man*, we have a character who sets out in search of something (in this case local folklore) because of a woman – a woman "incapable of waiting", as the narrator later says, to emphasize the contrast with Vera, who has waited her entire life – but the place he arrives at gives him access to a reality or to a truth far more important than his original superficial purpose. As Arkady's quote suggests, the young writer begins his journey with an air of superiority conferred by the status of a man educated in the metropolis, for he was coming "from the country's intellectual capital, the only truly European city in the empire, and was thus a virtual westerner"⁴⁵. Analyzing everything in terms of progress, he expected to find in this forgotten village a group of backward people who would only serve as raw material for a satire on the failure of communism. And although Mirnoe is indeed in a deplorable situation, the life of the people there and especially his relationship with Vera will radically change the protagonist's view of the world and

his whole value system. As Helena Duffy states, “to the blasé young writer who arrives from Leningrad to research wedding and funeral rites, Mirnoie appears to be the perfect application of Communism or rather of Slavophiles’ ideal of communalism based on belief in people’s inherent virtue and goodness.”⁴⁶

The first testimony about Vera is given by Otar, the Georgian driver of the truck that takes the protagonist to Mirnoe, an ex-convict who lives his life according to the stereotype of Georgians in Russia: “lovers obsessed with conquests, monomaniacal about sex, rich, unsophisticated.”⁴⁷ At the entrance to the village, they spot Vera accompanying and supporting an old woman, and that’s all it took for Otar to launch into a long tirade about how this tall, beautiful woman is wasting her life waiting for a ghost, deliberately choosing solitude and fidelity to an absentee⁴⁸. However, even this man, who never misses an opportunity to make a sexual comment or a sexist joke, did not allow himself to denigrate Vera: “I sensed that, violent as he was in his refusal to understand this woman, at the same time, since he was a true mountain dweller, her waiting inspired in him the almost holy respect that is due to a vow, a solemn oath...”⁴⁹

From this passage at the very beginning of the novel we already learn an important aspect about Vera and her relationship with the others. For all the sick and poor old women left in Mirnoe, Vera is both a maternal figure and a surrogate daughter⁵⁰, who dedicates her life to helping them at a time when they have nothing to do but wait resignedly for death. Because all the men have gone to war and never returned (or came back wounded and crippled), the

village is heavily depopulated, and half the houses are unoccupied. Seeing this, the narrator even comments: “You move in. You make yourself at home. This is real communism!”⁵¹ Despite the possible dose of irony in the narrator’s statement, it is certain that the precarious post-war situation has conditioned these women to a way of life that emphasises ideas of commonality and community (which recall the Slavophile concept of *sobornost*). They live off what the surrounding forests and lakes provide and share what they have – an organic simplicity that is praised in the Slavophile tradition. “The idyllic quality of the village is further enhanced by the fact that it is populated mainly by women, who in Makine’s writings embody traditional Russian values such as humility, patience, resignation, serenity and devotion to tradition.”⁵²

As David Gillespie notes, the peaceful and harmonious community of Mirnoe is reminiscent of High Field, the village described by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in *Matryona’s House*, a text that belongs both to the Soviet “Village Prose” movement⁵³ and to the Slavophile tradition. Solzhenitsyn’s story begins with Ignatich, a Russian teacher of mathematics and a former prisoner of the Gulag who feels the need “to creep away and vanish in the very heartland of Russia – if there were such a place”⁵⁴. He is fortunate enough to experience this kind of feelings in High Field, a village from which everyone wants to escape, but which in the narrator’s vision is “the very place where a man would be glad to live and die”⁵⁵. There he meets Matryona, a poor single woman in her sixties, who welcomes him into her old house with all the hospitality of the Russian soul. Like Vera in Makine’s novel, Matryona’s husband

had gone to war and never returned, and in the fifteen years that passed she never received a death notice, and his body was never found. But you rarely see a shadow of sadness on Matryona's face, for she has one sure way of regaining her spirits: work. And although she's very ill and older than Makine's Vera, Matryona works tirelessly, helps everyone willingly and doesn't ask for money. She has not the slightest interest in material things, outward appearance or village gossip, so that even her mean and scornful relatives could not fail to recognize her goodness and simplicity. In Ignatich's eyes, Matryona becomes almost a saint, the embodiment of that deep and authentic Russia that keeps its spiritual values intact.

Vera from *The Woman Who Waited* shares all these attributes, but they do not exhaust the semantic potential of this character. Because of her immersion in a sacred waiting, through which Vera transcends time and selflessly renounces the possibility of finding worldly happiness, Monique Grandjean says that in Vera's case we are dealing with a mystical love that constitutes a bond with her absent husband projected into eternity⁵⁶. Those who insist on the suffering she endured for all that she gave up see in her a *Mater dolorosa*⁵⁷ or a martyr, and those who focus more on her relationship with the sacred, with the profound truth to which she has access, compare her to the figure of the Mother-of-all, initiator into the mysteries⁵⁸.

Moreover, unlike Solzhenitsyn's story, Makine's novel has an erotic dimension. The narrator emphasizes Vera's physical beauty, saying that he is sexually attracted to her, and the two even end up spending the night together. However, the sexual act

is perceived as sacrilegious⁵⁹, which means that the narrator never ceases to ascribe to Vera the aura of a saint. Besides, no matter how hard he tries, he never manages to unravel the mystery of this woman, to explain her rationally, to define her, to give her a satisfactory label. Like Shutov and Volski in *The Life of an Unknown Man*, the protagonist of this novel feels that words cannot explain or capture the "essence" of this woman, who remains ineffable to the end. At some point, after spending more time with Vera and seeing what a day in her life looks like, he admits it: "Self-denial, altruism"; subconsciously, this woman's character still provoked phrases in my mind that were attempts to define it. But they all failed in the face of the impulsive simplicity with which Vera acted"⁶⁰; or another example after a few pages: "Goodness, altruism, sharing... All this struck me now as much too cerebral, too bookish."⁶¹

This perspective had already been introduced at the very beginning of the novel, in the passage with Otar, who says that although he cannot (rationally) understand Vera, he feels a sacred respect for her. It is therefore a mystical-spiritual approach that transcends reason, logos and language – an approach favored by the Slavophiles in their Russia vs. the West dialectic.

Conclusion

What transpires from the above analysis is that, although we cannot label Andreï Makine as a Slavophile writer, there are certainly Slavophile themes and ideas in his prose, such as *samobitnost*, *sobornost*, the Russian soul or the conflict Russia – the West. Disillusioned by both contemporary French and heavily westernized Russian

society, Makine turns his attention to the Soviet past of his childhood. Not to the official, regime-instrumented history, but to the personal histories of a few marginal and unknown characters like Volski and Vera, who, despite their eccentricity, or precisely because of it, represent the male and female versions of the Russian soul, associated with innate goodness, selflessness, personal dignity, spirituality, communal harmony, respect for tradition, a strong sense of justice, etc., i.e. with the uniqueness of the Russian national identity. By foregrounding such characters, Makine suggests that beyond the sordid and unbearable social reality of Soviet Russia, 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 remained intact.

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NOTES

1. David Gillespie, "Bartavels, Ortolans and Borshch: France and Russia in the Fictional Worlds of Andreï Makine", in *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*, Vol. 24, Nos. 1–2, 2010, p. 6.
2. *Ibidem*, p. 2.
3. See: École nationale des chartes – PSL, "Rencontre avec Andreï Makine", *Youtube*, 11:00-13:10; 1:02:35- 1:03:02, posted on 24.04.2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idS--aMv6bU>.
4. Andreï Makine, *Dreams of my Russian Summers*, translated by Geoffrey Strachan, New York, Schimon & Schuster, 1998, p. 220.
5. Among the few who have written about Slavophile elements in Makine's prose, or at least suggested that such an interpretative key is possible: Helena Duffy, "Grandmothers and Uncles: The Role and Status of Old People in Lidia Bobrova's Babousya and Andrei Makine's Novels", in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2011; Helena Duffy, *World War II in Andreï Makine's Historiographic Metafiction*, Leiden, Boston, Brill Publishers, 2018; David Gillespie, "Bartavels, Ortolans and Borshch: France and Russia in the Fictional Worlds of Andreï Makine", in *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*, Vol. 24, Nos. 1–2, 2010, pp. 1-18; Gillespie, David, "Border Consciousness in the Fictional Worlds of Andreï Makine", in *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences*, No. 5, 2012, pp. 798-811. Parry, Margaret, Marie-Louise Scheidhauer, Edward T. Welch (eds.), *Andreï Makine, Perspectives Russes*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2005. Marie-Louise Scheidhauer, Edward Welch, Margaret Parry (eds.), *Andreï Makine: la rencontre de l'Est et de l'Ouest*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2004.
6. Susana Rabow Edling, *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2006, p. 7.
7. Michael Boro Petrovich, *The Emergence of Russian Pan Slavism 1856-1870*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1956, p. 35, 47.
8. Ivan Vasilevich Kireevsky, "On the Nature of Education in Europe and its Relation to Russian Education", in *Kireevsky I.V. Mind on the Way to Truth*, Moscow, Pravilo Very, 2002, p. 151-213 [Иван Васильевич Киреевский, „О характере просвещения Европы и о его отношении к просвещению России”, in Киреевский И.В. Разум на пути к истине, Москва, Правило веры, 2002. с. 151-213]; Janko Lavrin, "Khomyakov and the Slavs", in *The Russian Review*. Vol. 23, No. 1 (Jan., 1964), p. 42; Constantin Tonu, "Comparatismul ca etică a alterității", in Mihaela Ursa (ed.), *Comparatismul clujean – instantaneu în mișcare*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2022, pp. 173-174.
9. Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2002, p. 160.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 133.
11. Ian Buruma & Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies*, London, Penguin Books, 2005, p. 88.
12. David Gillespie, "Border Consciousness in the Fictional Worlds of Andreï Makine", in *op. cit.*, p. 799.
13. Andreï Makine, *The Life of an Unknown Man*, translated by Geoffrey Strachan, London, Sceptre, 2010, p. 19.
14. Anton Chekhov, "A Little Joke", in *Berfrois*, translated by Zoöey Park, december 7, 2022, <https://www.berfrois.com/2022/12/a-little-joke-by-anton-chekhov/>.
15. Andreï Makine, *The Life of an Unknown Man*, p. 19.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 26.

17. Helena Duffy, "Grandmothers and Uncles: The Role and Status of Old People in Lidia Bobrova's Babousya and Andreï Makine's Novels", in *op. cit.*, p. 165.
18. Andreï Makine, *The Life of an Unknown Man*, p. 27.
19. Helena Duffy, "Grandmothers and Uncles: The Role and Status of Old People in Lidia Bobrova's Babousya and Andreï Makine's Novels", in *op. cit.*, p. 165.
20. Andreï Makine, *The Life of an Unknown Man*, p. 57.
21. *Ibidem*, p. 74.
22. *Ibidem*, p. 42.
23. Helena Duffy, "Grandmothers and Uncles: The Role and Status of Old People in Lidia Bobrova's Babousya and Andreï Makine's Novels", in *op. cit.*, pp. 165-166.
24. Andreï Makine, *The Life of an Unknown Man*, p. 57.
25. *Ibidem*, p. 76.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 78.
27. *Ibidem*, p. 81.
28. *Ibidem*, p. 82.
29. *Ibidem*, p. 72.
30. *Ibidem*, p. 63.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 96.
32. *Ibidem*, p. 59.
33. *Ibidem*, p. 245.
34. *Ibidem*, p. 186.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 237.
36. *Ibidem*.
37. Andreï Makine, "Makine contre les Russophobes", in *L'Express*, interviewed by Marianne Payot, published on 20.01.2009, https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/makine-contre-les-russophobes_823304.html: "En effet, l'URSS n'aura peut-être été qu'une parenthèse humainement atroce, mais, et c'est extrêmement dangereux de le dire, existentiellement passionnante. Car nous avons là un messianisme qui, pour la première fois dans l'histoire humaine, s'est imposé dans la vie de trois générations. L'idée était tellement généreuse qu'on n'arrive pas à la rejeter en bloc. Quand on réfléchit froidement à cela, on s'aperçoit qu'il y a toujours quelque chose à sauver dans une époque: ici, il y a Volski, son amour, la fraternité, la ferveur." (trad. aut.)
38. Andreï Makine, *The Life of an Unknown Man*, p. 248.
39. *Ibidem*, p. 94.
40. Helena Duffy, "Grandmothers and Uncles: The Role and Status of Old People in Lidia Bobrova's Babousya and Andreï Makine's Novels", in *op. cit.*, p. 163.
41. "I was a westerner of straw", he will specify later. Makine, *The Woman Who Waited*, translated by Geoffrey Strachan, New York, Arcade Publishing, 2006, p. 50.
42. *Ibidem*, pp. 30-31.
43. *Ibidem*, p. 25.
44. *Ibidem*, pp. 35-36.
45. *Ibidem*, p. 50.
46. Helena Duffy, "Grandmothers and Uncles: The Role and Status of Old People in Lidia Bobrova's Babousya and Andreï Makine's Novels", in *op. cit.*, p. 159.
47. *Ibidem*, p. 9.
48. It is not until the very end that we find out that her husband is in fact still alive, only that he chose to go to Moscow after the war in order to advance more easily in the party hierarchy. He went on to become "a typical Soviet apparatchik", as the narrator comments. *Ibidem*, p. 164.
49. *Ibidem*, p. 13.
50. Margaret Parry, Marie-Louise Scheidhauer, Edward T. Welch (eds.), *Andreï Makine, Perspectives Russes*, p. 11; Helena Duffy, "Grandmothers and Uncles: The Role and Status of Old People in Lidia Bobrova's Babousya and Andreï Makine's Novels", in *op. cit.*, p. 160.

51. Andreï Makine, *The Woman Who Waited*, p. 45.
52. Helena Duffy, "Grandmothers and Uncles: The Role and Status of Old People in Lidia Bobrova's Babousya and Andreï Makine's Novels", in *op. cit.*, p. 160.
53. David Gillespie, "Bartavels, Ortolans and Borshch: France and Russia in the Fictional Worlds of Andreï Makine", in *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.
54. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "Matryona's House", in *Stories and Prose Poems*, translated by Michael Glenny, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, p. 3.
55. *Ibidem*, p. 4.
56. Monique Grandjean, "Makine face au Mystère: amour humain, amour divin dans La femme qui attendait", in Margaret Parry, Marie-Louise Scheidhauer, Edward T. Welch (eds.), *Andreï Makine, Perspectives Russes*, pp. 91-103.
57. Andreï Makine, *The Woman Who Waited*, p. 73.
58. Margaret Parry, Marie-Louise Scheidhauer, Edward T. Welch (eds.), *Andreï Makine, Perspectives Russes*, p. 11.
59. Andreï Makine, *The Woman Who Waited*, p. 158.
60. *Ibidem*, p. 102.
61. *Ibidem*, p. 108.