



column: Parisien Portrait

'Le Testament Francais' by Andrei Makine

by Raana Haider

"It was Charlotte who had taught me to pick out Parisian silhouettes in the midst of a great industrial city on the Volga; it was she who had imprisoned me in this fantasy of the past, from whence I cast absent-minded glances at real life."

— Andrei Makine

A literary panorama sweeping over the empire of the imperial Romanovs, the communist Soviet Union and a now-professed capitalist Russia intersperses with memories of a Paris of the Belle Epoque (the era in France before the First World War, the 1890s to 1914). The reminiscences of a Parisien grandmother, Charlotte in the plains of Siberia to her grandson, Andrei Makine, create a mesmerising tale of a nostalgic Parisien past and a harsh Russian reality.

Andrei Makine born in Siberia in 1957 sought political asylum in Paris in 1987 and has lived in Paris since. 'Le Testament Francais', written in French is Makine's fourth novel and has the unique and unprecedented distinction of having won both the Prix Goncourt and the Prix Medecis, two of France's most prestigious literary prizes. 'Le Testament Francais' was published in 1995 and the English translation in 1997. Having sold close to a million copies in France, it is now being published in translation in twenty-six other countries.

His is a veritable fairy-tale of rags-to-riches, of ignominy-to-fame. Andrei Makine having arrived in Paris, at first, "lived rough and wrote by day on park benches. Eventually he found work teaching part-time, but could not get his first novel accepted by a publisher until he pretended that he had translated it from a Russian writer's original. His third novel was published under his own name." Foreign writers writing in French face considerable obstacles. Their achieving literary recognition is thus a double feat. Alphonse Daudet wrote in 'Trente Ans a Paris' (Thirty Years in Paris), "I questioned the Russian writer about his method of work and was astonished that he did not do his own translations, for he spoke a very pure French, with just a hint of hesitation, owing to the subtlety of his mind. He confessed to me that the Academie and its dictionary paralysed him." For a brief discussion on the Academie Francaise (the bastion and caretaker of the French language). (See 'Sorbonne and its Soul').

In one of his many sessions with his grandmother, Makine and Charlotte discuss the French poet, Baudelaire, his poetry and the Russian translation. Referring to different translations of Baudelaire's poems, Charlotte remarks, "... you see: the translator of prose is the slave of the author and the translator of poetry is his rival." There is plenty of food for thought in this one line and such are the thoughts which have so enriched the book.

Makine's lyrical and poetic way with words reveals itself exquisitely when he writes of the French his grandmother spoke and the image and significance that language had on him throughout his childhood. He writes, "As for the French language, we basically regarded it as our family dialect. After, all, every family has its little verbal whims, its

tics of language, and its nicknames that never cross the threshold of the house, its private slang... Language, that mysterious substance, invisible and omnipresent, whose sonorous essence reached into every corner of the universe we were in the process of exploring. This language that shaped men, moulded objects, rippled in verse; belovéd in streets invaded by crowds... But, above all, throbbéd within us, like a magical graft implanted in our hearts, already bringing forth leaves and flowers, bearing within it the fruit of a whole civilisation. Yes, this implant, the French language."

Yet this fascination, love and knowledge — "this implant" — of the French language drove him to despair when his novels written in French were rejected by publishers and he was forced to invent a French translator of his works. He writes bitterly, "All this was the fruit of a pure and simple literary hoax on my part. For the novels had been written directly in French and rejected by publishers. I was 'some funny little Russian who thought he could write in French.' In a gesture of despair I had then invented a translator and submitted the manuscript, presenting it as translated from the Russian. It had been accepted, published and hailed for the quality of the translation. I told myself, at first bitterly, later with a smile, that my Franco-Russian career was still upon me. But whereas in childhood I had been obliged to conceal my French graft, now it was my Russianness which failed to find favour."

In an interview, Makine said that in his opinion, the Russian novel is written to be lived. And the French novel is written to be understood. Another food for thought... Living versus thinking? Is one a Russian experience and another a French intellectual exercise?

'Le Testament Francais' has been

variously acclaimed. Le Nouvel Observateur lauds the novel thus: "Every so often in literary life's routine, a miracle happens that makes up for a hundred disappointments. This year that miracle is Andrei Makine." Le Figaro Littéraire says, "Astonishing... a novel of great beauty." The Journal de Dimanche notes, "Bewitching... a beautiful, profound novel." The Irish Times exults, "Superb... one of the many fascinating facets of this sad, beautiful, old-world novel, which has echoes of Alain-Fournier's Le Grand Meaulnes, is its merging of contemporary French fiction with the 19th century Russian novel." The Literary Review states, "He communicates brilliantly the exquisite agony of nostalgia."

The novel is the awakening and growing-up odyssey of a boy in Siberia. The paramount person in his first twenty-five years, is his French-born grandmother, Charlotte who came to Siberia in 1922. "half, or maybe a third of that journey, you know, I made on foot." Makine writes of his grandmother, "there was this Frenchwoman with the calm gaze of her grey eyes, elegant, despite the simplicity of her dress, slim and so different from the women of her generation, the babushkas (Russian grandmothers). In Moscow or Leningrad everything would have turned out otherwise. The motley humanity of the big city would have eclipsed what was different about Charlotte. But she had found herself in this little Saranza, ideal for living out endless days, each one like the last. Her pastlife remained intensely present to her, as if lived only yesterday."

During the holidays, Andrei and his sister spent long stretches of time with their grandmother. She would recall, reminisce and anecdote, an individual, a road or a place in Paris and leave its

vidid imprint on the adoring and growing Andrei. These memories were often supported by old sepia-coloured photographs or newspaper cuttings which she would extract from a battered suitcase which within it, contained sweet memories of a place and time. "The France of our grandmother like a misty Atlantis was emerging from the waves... France-Atlantis were revealing itself as a whole gamut of sounds, colours and smells. As we followed our guides, we were discovering the different elements which made up this mysterious French essence."

Glimpses of a Paris of by-gone days is recreated for Andrei Makine and for the reader. Charlotte recollects that, "At that time I must have been almost your age. It was the winter of 1910. The Seine had turned into a real sea. The people of Paris travelled around by boat. The streets were like rivers, the squares like great lakes. And what astonished me most was the silence..." Neully-sur-Seine (today, a central part of Paris) was composed of a dozen log cabins. "Oh! At that time Neully was just a village...". Of the Elysee Palace (the President of France's official residence), Makine writes, "The Elysee Palace appeared in the glitter of chandeliers and the shimmering of mirrors. The Opera dazzled us with the nakedness of women's shoulders and made us drunk with the perfume exhaled by the magnificent hair styles. For us Notre-Dame was a sensation of cold stone under a stormy sky. Yes, we could almost touch the rough, porous walls — a gigantic rock, shaped over the centuries, it seemed to us, by ingenious erosion... We could not picture the Eiffel Tower without seeing the mad Austrian who had jumped from this serrated steeple, whose parachute had failed him and who crashed in the midst of a gaping crowd."

The association and significance of a

cafe is memorably conveyed by Charlotte to Andrei. "We came upon a quite little bistro, the name of which Charlotte spelled out to us smilingly as she recalled it: Au Ratafia de Neully. 'This ratafia,' she would elaborate, the patron (the proprietor) served it in silver scallop dishes... So the people of our Atlantis could feel sentimental attachment to a cafe, love its name and discern an atmosphere that was special to it. And for their whole lives retain the memory that it was there, at the corner of a street, that one drank ratafia from silver scallop dishes. Yes, not from thick tumblers nor from goblets but from these fine dishes. It was our new discovery: this occult science which linked the place of refreshment, the ritual of the meal and its psychological tonality. 'In their minds, do their favourite bistros have a soul,' we wondered, 'or at least a face of their own?' There was only one cafe in Saranza. Despite its pretty name, Snowflake, it did not arouse any special emotion in us, any more than the furniture shop next door of the savings bank opposite." A delightful and meaningful expose on "this occult science... the ritual of the meal." Makine discovered early in childhood the total fascination of the French for the institution of the cafe and the entirely pleasant preoccupation with gourmet culinary living.

I read that Andrei Makine was discussing the possibility of 'Le Testament Francais' being made into a film. If it does happen, the film will be on the scale of 'Doctor Zhivago', based on Boris Pasternak's novel — a vast scenic panorama and larger-than-life characters so vividly portrayed. Charlotte's voyage from Paris to Siberia and Andrei's imaginary accompaniment on this voyage of discovery would make a beautiful and memorable film.

essay

Raymond Federman: His surfictionist Position

by Neamat Imam

MY relationships with Federman's writings started with appreciating his article 'Surfiction: A Position' published in the *Partisan Review* (1973). I was startled just to see how he played with the theme of modern fiction as a whole with special emphasis on its intellectual and experimental qualities. Writing fiction today (of course in 1973), he started in his natural and usual style, is no longer possible nor necessary because real fiction happens everyday, in the streets, in the space, everywhere. Borrowing Becklean art of dialoguing, he wrote that there was nothing to write about, nothing with which to write, and so there was nothing to write, since all the possibilities of fiction had been 'used up, abused and exhausted.' It is not that Federman was the first to speak like this about the prospect of fiction writing. To me he was interesting for the exposure of his impulse in dealing with such a theoretical and academic matter, especially when this very field has been focused on by various theoreticians from even other disciplines. Moreover, he himself is a writer of fiction and when criticizing the twentieth century achievement in this arena, he is found to criticize himself too. But following this, when I read some other articles written by him, it seemed to me that here was a person with special and distinct taste to speak at least on the large canvas of what is going on in today's American postmodern fiction, or the New Fiction, or Metafiction, or Antifiction, which is to Federman, Surfiction.

Federman's article 'Imagination as Plagiarism' (or, playgjarism!) was published in *New Literary History* (1976). In addition to this, his literary vistas 'Fiction Today or The Pursuit of Non-knowledge' and 'Self-reflexive Fiction' were published receptively in *Humanities in Society* (1978) and *Columbia Literary History of The United States* (1988). In all the pieces here he investigated the pattern, existence, cause and the scientificity of this surfiction.

Federman uses the coinage 'surfiction' because, what is said about fiction usually, that it imitates reality, with which Federman starts his discussion, is but words said without proper understanding. For Federman fiction reveals the 'fictionality' of reality. He finds

mention worthy similarities between the fictionists and the surrealists. The surrealists open alleys and lanes of human subconscious, their ideological unconscious and entertain the viewer with streams of thought and feeling. The same conclusion may be drawn of the fictioneers: they too create an autonomous reality whose only concern is to transform reality, to abolish reality and to abolish the notion that reality really exists.

In this connection Federman discovers a kind of affirmative differentiation in the attitude of the fiction writer. When somebody sits to write something, his or her motto remains not to produce what has already been produced, but to mould a new sphere of sensibility, a sensibility that ensures and sanctifies human development and progress in the related field. For this reason, fiction today, or surfiction, proclaims a difference in form and presentation from the traditional realistic novels. To say in different words, fiction today liberates *difference* itself; it encourages the Foucauldian inevitability of dialectic-free negation-free divergence, arbitrarily playing with the previous images of fiction, images that were carefully created by fictioneers over the ages.

According to Federman, the absolute ingredient of this surfiction is displacement; but what is to displace?— the difference between the real and the imaginary, between the conscious and the subconscious, between the truth and the untruth. Surfiction has the purpose to demolish all forms of duplicity, all the systems of ethical and aesthetic marginality. It will talk about itself; it will talk for itself; it will only BE. A piece of fiction will definitely be the autobiography of fiction itself, informing the reader of the turns and transformation of its own voice and flesh and structure and attitude.

II

For such a successful surfiction, which will happen before the reader's eyes continuously disturbing, destroying and degrading what the writer wanted to mean, Federman divides his proponents into four distinct parts: the reading of fiction, the shape of fiction, the material of fiction, and the meaning of fiction. In fact, these four vital issues are interconnected and interwoven, for they mutually (dis) qualify (and also quantify) each other for the creation of

a unified life of the fiction. In the reading of fiction he proposes that the very concept of syntax in writing a language correctly must be transformed, since the arrangement of words in sentences — which is named the syntactic order of words — creates and controls the meaning of sentences. Logocentric rules of syntax-making reduce the fiction writer's ability to say things in new way or to say what is left unsaid or to challenge what is left unchallenged; they forbid the words from enjoying their own polite (or violent) nature and bring impotence to the probability of their multiplicity of meaning. He cites the example of other arts and says that in all other art forms there are always three essential elements at work: who creates, the medium of transmission, and who receives. In fiction writing the first and the third are given proper place: they are brought into action — practically or metaphorically, and the second one — the medium of writing — is negated or not given proper consideration as a medium without which the whole process becomes obsolete. Language for fiction serves as a vehicle, the duty of which remains circumscribed to carry the say of the author without holding an independent entity. Federman says that there was language in the beginning and not the writer; he also says that language writes the writer and not the language. The language. The reader, for this reason, is advised by Federman to read the language engaged in a fiction not as functional, rather fictional.

About the shape of fiction Federman is dependent on the circumvolution of language. Since the question of an organized plot in fiction is far than obsolete, a plot which the realistic and pseudo-realistic novels wanted to give, the language in surfiction will improvise itself, continuously changing its position and meaning or revealing the folds and curves it creates. Whatever shape it takes, its duty is to question that shape. Whatever has it to present, its duty is to denounce that presentation. It takes shape while taking shape. If in life things are not linear and continuous, then the shape of fiction cannot contain what could be termed linear and continuous narrative. For this reason, the prime and foremost capital and order of fiction are chaos, digression and spontaneous rearrangement. It simply need not take a shape, shape that dominates the world of knowledge.

In the section dealing with the material of fiction, Federman is found to take the highest freedom. In his own words: 'Since writing means filling a space (blackening pages), in those spaces where there is *nothing* to write, the writer can, at any time, introduce material (quotations, pictures, charts, diagrams, designs, illustrations, doodles, lists, pieces of other discourses, etc.) totally *unrelated* to the story he is in the process of inventing. Or else he can simply leave those spaces *blank* because fiction is as much what is said as what is not said, since what is said is not necessarily true, and since what is said can always be said in another way (emphasis mine). Fiction written in this mode may seem alien, quite estranged from human experience, but that is what it is. These fictions are termed experimental by some critics and publishers, in spite of the fact that the apparent experimentality leaves them virtually unread, a definite injustice frequently done to these books.'

Federman speaks of some *word-beings* instead of what we call characters in a story who will occupy the spaces in a book to talk about themselves. 'What will replace,' he says, 'the personages (the hero, the protagonist) of traditional fiction who carried with him the burden of a name, an age, parental ties, a social role, a nationality, a past, and sometimes a physical appearance and even an interior psyche, will be a creation, or better a *creature* that will function outside any predetermined conditions of society, outside any precise moment of history.' This creature or being will be the language of humanity. It will be committed to fiction only, without having any attachment with or weakness for the traditional sense of morality or rationality.

Federman is more likely to keep a fiction framed on the surfictional discourses open-ended and inconclusive than to give it a semantic or semiotic completeness. Since the syntax is far-fetched (necessarily untouched!), since the organization of that syntax does not oblige the traditional taste of squeezing meaning from a piece of fiction, and since the logic of characters systematically entangled together is subordinated or abolished, surfiction remains completely the product of imagination and a subject to interpret in multiple ways. Being the legacy of imagination, surfiction will shun and activate imagination to enter sensitive layers gradually

to mother more imagination than one practiced and engaged just now. The reader will not be influenced by what is said by the writer, rather he will be the subject of what his imagination attains from such a fiction since there will be no characters in which he may find the reflection of their own heart. At this stage it may be relevant to mention that Federman attacks the Sartrean literary project for its social and political commitment and says that to a great extent the reason why Sartre's idea of literary commitment failed is that he wanted all writers to agree on a system of moral, social and political values, therefore denying the possibility of exploration and innovation into other systems. True that Federman admires Sartre, but it is for his theory of freedom, freedom which is not strictly and necessarily inclined socially, politically, or morally. Federman admonishes: now some people might say that the situation of fiction today is not very encouraging, but one must reply that it is not meant to encourage those who say that!

III

Federman has suggested some impossibilities. For example, about the reading of fiction he says that a reader will not respond to the pagination provided by the fictionist; rather he will read a piece of fiction from the very page he wants to which may begin from last page and *advance* to the first page, from middle to the end, from middle to the first page; or he may read only the

blank spaces which are set by the fictionist without any purpose, to get from it no practical knowledge. He speaks of inventing a new typographical design and a new pagination system to free the fiction from what it is now. He proposes that the pages in a book need not be of the same uniform rectangular size and the books no longer need to be rectangular boxes. About the shape of the fiction, he notes that surfiction will be the metaphor of its own narrative process and narrative progress, and will establish and generate itself as it writes itself. The *word-being* as the material of fiction also demands investigation and scrutiny. If the being is committed to nothing but only to itself, and moves and runs and progresses and also un-makes itself of its own independent accord, what will happen to the mind that works on the processing of such fictions! What will happen to the writer who gave language the importance of being more than simple medium and made possible such a piece or pieces of fiction! And also what will be the use of the existence of such surfictionists! The *bard* sees the three tenses and is an omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient creator — such Blakean quality of the fiction writer is of no concern in the surfictional world of Federman, because the writer need not say (see) anything for the reader since the reader is responsible for what he will look for in a fiction.

To be continued

events

Lecture on Recent Developments in Dictionary Design

Dr Hilary Nesi of the University of Warwick, UK, will deliver a lecture on *Recent Developments in Dictionary Design* today at 4 pm at the Centre for Advanced Research in the Humanities of the University of Dhaka, (3rd floor, Lecture Theatre Building, behind the Arts Building). Professor Niaz Zaman, Chair of the Department of English, will preside over the special lecture while Dr Narayan Biswas, Director of the Centre, will conduct the proceedings. Dr Nesi is an expert in Dictionary Design, Concordances and Corpus Studies, Computer Assisted Language Learning and English Language Teacher Training, and has been in Dhaka since June 21 to conduct a six-day workshop on English for Academic Purposes for the teachers of the Department of English, University of Dhaka, as part of the link programme sponsored by the British Council between these Departments and the University of Warwick. Dr Nesi's lecture will be of interest to all students of English language and is open to the public.