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In the best traditions of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Ulitskaya raises the bar with each successive book, taking on increasingly more demanding artistic and intellectual challenges and becoming a writer for everybody, not only for her own home readership. She moves far beyond the framework of tired clichés about the enigmatic Russian soul, and in place of laboured and portentous questions proffers her own answers.

Her new novel can justly claim a place in the first rank of an international hierarchy of major works which form the ideas through which their age is understood.

‘Imago’ is a term from biological science and, trained as a biologist, Ulitskaya deciphers human personality in genetic and medical terms in all her books. The imago is the phase in the development of an insect which corresponds to its formal adulthood. The insect imago is capable of reproduction and gradually proceeds through life to death. For a human being, however, the civilised and intelligent homo sapiens, there is potentially more to this phase, a phase of maturity, adulthood, responsibility, mental development, self-sacrifice and struggle.

Imago begins with the death of Stalin and his monstrous funeral attended by many millions and fraught with death. At the funeral the crowd in the centre of Moscow trampled one and a half thousand people to death, a fact concealed by the Soviet censorship. The finale of the novel is the death of the great Russian poet, Joseph Brodsky.

The heroes of Imago are three friends who come together in solidarity during their school years and live their entire lives side by side. Three small boys develop in a Moscow school under the watchful eye of a gifted teacher. An embryonic talented musician, gifted photographer, and poet of genius are readied for complete self-realisation. They are surrounded by an intelligentsia which consists not only of outstanding and brilliant but also of broken, dependent and

intimidated people. The system oppresses all of them, the tough-minded and those who are pathetically weak.

Many cave in at the first pressure from the KGB (the unfortunate photographer does so and becomes an informer), but many others resist the oppressive ideological force and rescue both their physical life and, even more importantly, their conscience. The artist, in the footsteps of Tolstoy, leaves the city, where he faces arrest, for the forests and villages and dissolves in the depths of Russia. Alongside the heroes are a great diversity of women, strong or crushed, bitchy or tender, and magnificently witty. Almost all of them are extraordinary people and their actions too are extraordinary. They love their men in their own individual way, frequently helping and saving them, sacrificing themselves in the process without regret.

The life of one KGB general, the father of the main heroine, is amazing. All his life he has loved a woman he himself sent to the Gulag, and who, when she is released from the camps, forgives him and their love continues. Equally amazing is the story of a former prisoner, an intellectual who fled Nazi Germany and was subsequently incarcerated in a Soviet concentration camp. Emerging from prison, he makes a career as a leading Soviet psychiatrist and is instrumental in consigning the post-war dissidents to the lunatic asylum because, in accordance with the clinical classification and his formal examination, they are 'factually psychologically unstable'.

As always with Ulitskaya, Imago is a novel about love, about destinies, and about characters. It is authentic psychological prose, but her new work is also broader than these definitions.

Ultimately this is a novel about failure to grow to maturity, failure to emerge fully from the cocoon, about people of the late 20th century living on the dynamism of adolescence but often, stuck in the phase of the run-up, never actually managing to take wing. Only a very few do attain the heights of which a human being is capable and which is most often achieved as the result of a magical indomitability, or through the agency of a creative profession, or the power of love.

Imago has a resonance and a reach which extends beyond the bounds of Russian literature. It is about all people of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is about the fact that in contemporary civilisation full maturity is almost never attained, especially if an individual who aspires to spread their wings and fly has some hobble, ideological or government-imposed, leaden and emasculating, weighing them down. Infantilism (or adolescence) is increasingly found in the modern world as a permanent condition, when the main features of a human being are present but have not ripened, have not found full expression. What should follow childhood is accomplished in a deformed manner or not accomplished at all. Adolescent civilisations form, in which people have ceased to mature. In this book Ulitskaya offers an innovative genre, a kind of anti-Bildungsroman, which will undoubtedly provide many people with food for thought and debate.

As always with this author, however, apart from the philosophical and moral charge, there is also emotional depth and wonderful artistry, a unique gift which renders her books accessible in dozens of languages to millions of readers. Only in her writing do we find that armour-piercing irony which enables episodes to pass, often in a single paragraph, from high tragedy to almost

Shvejkian comedy. Imago is a very serious and very funny book.