CHAPTER II

Art—a yearning for the ideal

Before going on to the particular problems of the nature of cinematic art, I feel it is important to define my understanding of the ultimate aim of art as such. Why does art exist? Who needs it? Indeed does anybody need it? These are questions asked not only by the poet, but also by anyone who appreciates art—or, in that current expression all too symptomatic of the twentieth-century relationship between art and its audience—the 'consumer'.

Many ask themselves that question, and anyone connected with art gives his own particular answer. Alexander Blok said that 'the poet creates harmony out of chaos.' ... Pushkin believed the poet had the gift of prophecy. ... Every artist is ruled by his own laws but these are by no means compulsory for anyone else.

In any case it is perfectly clear that the goal for all art—unless of course it is aimed at the 'consumer', like a saleable commodity—is to explain to the artist himself and to those around him what man lives for, what is the meaning of his existence. To explain to people the reason for their appearance on this planet; or if not to explain, at least to pose the question.

To start with the most general consideration, it is worth saying that the indisputably functional role of art lies in the idea of knowing, where the effect is expressed as shock, as catharsis.

From the very moment when Eve ate the apple from the tree of knowledge, mankind was doomed to strive endlessly after the truth. First, as we know, Adam and Eve discovered they were naked. And they were ashamed. They were ashamed because they had understood; and then they set out on their way in the joy of knowing one another. That was the beginning of a journey that has no end. One can understand how dramatic that moment was for those two souls, just emerged from the state of placid ignorance and thrown out into the vastness of the earth, hostile and inexplicable.

'With the sweat of thy brow shalt thou earn thy bread ...'

So it was that man, 'nature's crown', arrived on the earth in order to know why it was that he had appeared or been sent.

And with man's help the Creator comes to know himself. This progress has been given the name of evolution, and it is accompanied by the agonising process of human self-knowledge.

In a very real sense every individual experiences this process for himself as he comes to know life, himself, his aims. Of course each person uses the sum of knowledge accumulated by humanity, but all the same the experience of ethical, moral self-knowledge is the only aim in life for each person, and, subjectively, it is experienced each time as something new. Again and again man correlates himself with the world, racked with longing to acquire, and become one with, the ideal which lies outside him, which he apprehends as some kind of intuitively sensed first principle. The unattainability of that becoming one, the inadequacy of his own I, is the perpetual source of man's dissatisfaction and pain.

And so art, like science, is a means of assimilating the world, an instrument for knowing it in the course of man's journey towards what is called 'absolute truth'.

That, however, is the end of any similarity between these two embodiments of the creative human spirit, in which man does not merely discover, but creates. For the moment it is far more important to note the divergence, the difference in principle, between the two forms of knowing: scientific and aesthetic.

By means of art man takes over reality through a subjective experience. In science man's knowledge of the world makes its way up an endless staircase and is successively replaced by new knowledge, with one discovery often enough being disproved by the next for the sake of a particular objective truth. An artistic discovery occurs each time as a new and unique image of the world, a hieroglyphic of absolute truth. It appears as a revelation, as a momentary, passionate wish to grasp intuitively and at a stroke all the laws of this world—its beauty and ugliness, its compassion and cruelty, its infinity and its limitations. The artist expresses these things by creating the image, *sui generis* detector of the absolute.

Through the image is sustained an awareness of the infinite: the eternal within the finite, the spiritual within matter, the limitless given form.

Art could be said to be a symbol of the universe, being linked with that absolute spiritual truth which is hidden from us in our positivistic, pragmatic activities.

In order to be engaged in any scientific system a person has to avail himself of logical processes of thought, he has to achieve an understanding, which requires as its starting point a particular kind
of education. Art addresses everybody, in the hope of making an
impression, above all of being felt, of being the cause of an
emotional trauma and being accepted, of winning people not by
uncontroversial rational argument but through the spiritual energy
with which the artist has charged the work. And the preparatory
discipline it demands is not a scientific education but a particular
spiritual lesson.

Art is born and takes hold wherever there is a timeless and
insatiable longing for the spiritual, for the ideal: that longing which
draws people to art. Modern art has taken a wrong turn in
abandoning the search for the meaning of existence in order to affirm
the value of the individual for its own sake. What purports to be art
begins to look like an eccentric occupation for suspect characters
who maintain that any personalised action is of intrinsic value
simply as a display of self-will. But in artistic creation the personality
does not assert itself, it serves another, higher and communal idea.
The artist is always a servant, and is perpetually trying to pay for the
gift that has been given to him as if by a miracle. Modern man,
however, does not want to make any sacrifice, even though true
affirmation of self can only be expressed in sacrifice. We are
gradually forgetting about this, and at the same time, inevitably,
losing all sense of our human calling. . . .

When I speak of the aspiration towards the beautiful, of the ideal
as the ultimate aim of art, which grows from a yearning for that ideal,
I am not for a moment suggesting that art should shun the 'dirt' of the
world. On the contrary! The artistic image is always a metonym,
where one thing is substituted for another, the smaller for the
greater. To tell of what is living, the artist uses something dead; to
speak of the infinite, he shows the finite. Substitution . . . the
infinite cannot be made into matter, but it is possible to create an
illusion of the infinite: the image.

Hideousness and beauty are contained within each other. This
prodigious paradox, in all its absurdity, leavens life itself, and in art
makes that wholeness in which harmony and tension are unified.
The image makes palpable a unity in which manifold different
elements are contiguous and reach over into each other. One may
talk of the idea of the image, describe its essence in words. But such a
description will never be adequate. An image can be created and
make itself felt. It may be accepted or rejected. But none of this can
be understood in any cerebral sense. The idea of infinity cannot be
expressed in words or even described, but it can be apprehended
through art, which makes infinity tangible. The absolute is only
attainable through faith and in the creative act.

The only condition of fighting for the right to create is faith in your
own vocation, readiness to serve, and refusal to compromise. Artistic
creation demands of the artist that he 'perish utterly', in the full,
tragic sense of those words. And so, if art carries within it a
hieroglyphic of absolute truth, this will always be an image of the
world, made manifest in the work once and for all time. And if cold,
positivistic, scientific cognition of the world is like the ascent of an
unending staircase, its artistic counterpoint suggests an endless
system of spheres, each one perfect and contained within itself. One
may complement or contradict another, but in no circumstances
can they cancel each other out; on the contrary, they enrich one
another, and accumulate to form an all-embracing sphere that grows
out into infinity. These poetic revelations, each one valid and
eternal, are evidence of man's capacity to recognise in whose image
and likeness he is made, and to voice this recognition.

Moreover, the great function of art is communication, since
mutual understanding is a force to unite people, and the spirit of
communion is one of the most important aspects of artistic
creativity. Works of art, unlike those of science, have no practical goals in any material sense. Art is a meta-language, with the help of which people try to communicate with one another; to impart information about themselves and assimilate the experience of others. Again, this has to do not with practical advantage but with realising the idea of love, the meaning of which is in sacrifice: the very antithesis of pragmatism. I simply cannot believe that an artist can ever work only for the sake of 'self-expression'. Self-expression is meaningless unless it meets with a response. For the sake of creating a spiritual bond with others it can only be an agonising process, one that involves no practical gain: ultimately, it is an act of sacrifice. But surely it cannot be worth the effort merely for the sake of hearing one's own echo?

Of course intuition plays a part in science as it does in art, and this might seem to be a common element in these contrasting modes of mastering reality. However, despite its great importance in each case, intuition is not at all the same phenomenon in poetic creativity as it is in scientific research.

Equally, the term understanding denotes quite different things in these two spheres of activity.

Understanding in a scientific sense means agreement on a cerebral, logical level; it is an intellectual act akin to the process of proving a theorem.

Understanding an artistic image means an aesthetic acceptance of the beautiful, on an emotional or even supra-emotional level.

The scientist's intuition, even if it is like an illumination, an inspiration, will still always be a code standing for a logical deduction. It will mean that not all of the various readings based on the available information have been registered; they are being taken as read, held in the memory, not figuring as already processed data. In other words, knowledge of the law as pertaining in a certain area of science has allowed for some of the intermediate stages to be skipped.

And even though a scientific discovery may seem to be the result of inspiration, the inspiration of the scientist has nothing in common with that of the poet.

For the empirical process of intellectual cognition cannot explain how an artistic image comes into being—unique, indivisible, created and existing on some plane other than that of the intellect. Here it is a question of agreeing on terminology.

In science, at the moment of discovery, logic is replaced by intuition. In art, as in religion, intuition is tantamount to conviction, to faith. It is a state of mind, not a way of thinking. Science is empirical, whereas the conception of images is governed by the dynamic of revelation. It's a question of sudden flashes of illumination—like scales falling from the eyes; not in relation to the parts, however, but to the whole, to the infinite, to what does not fit in to conscious thought.

Art does not think logically, or formulate a logic of behaviour; it expresses its own postulate of faith. If in science it is possible to substantiate the truth of one's case and prove it logically to one's opponents, in art it is impossible to convince anyone that you are right if the created images have left him cold, if they have failed to win him with a newly discovered truth about the world and about man, if in fact, face to face with the work, he was simply bored.

If we take Lev Tolstoy as an example—especially those works where he was particularly resolute in his search for a precise, well-ordered expression of his ideas and moral inspiration—we see how, every time, the artistic image he has created as it were pushes aside its own ideological frontiers, refuses to fit into the framework imposed on it by its author, it argues with them, and sometimes, in a poetic sense, even contradicts its own logical system. And the masterpiece goes on living by its own laws, and has a tremendous aesthetic and emotional impact even when we don't agree with the author's fundamental tenet. It very often happens that a great work is born of the artist's efforts to overcome his weak points; not that these are eliminated, but the work comes into existence despite them.

The artist reveals his world to us, and forces us either to believe in it or to reject it as something irrelevant and unconvincing. In creating an image he subordinates his own thought, which becomes insignificant in the face of that emotionally perceived image of the world that has appeared to him like a revelation. For thought is brief, whereas the image is absolute. In the case of someone who is spiritually receptive, it is therefore possible to talk of an analogy between the impact made by a work of art and that of a purely religious experience. Art acts above all on the soul, shaping its spiritual structure.

A poet has the imagination and psychology of a child, for his impressions of the world are immediate, however profound his ideas about the world may be. Of course one may say of a child, too, that he is a philosopher, but only in some very relative sense. And art flies
in the face of philosophical concepts. The poet does not use ‘descriptions’ of the world; he himself has a hand in its creation.

Only when a person is willing and able to trust the artist, to believe him, can he be sensitive and susceptible to art. But how hard it sometimes is to cross the threshold of incomprehension which cuts us off from the emotional, poetic image. In just the same way, for a true faith in God, or even in order to feel a need for that faith, a person has to have a certain cast of soul, a particular spiritual potentiality.

In this connection the conversation between Stavrogin and Shatov in Dostoievsky's *The Possessed* springs to mind:

"I just wanted to know—do you yourself believe in God or don't you?" Nikolai Vsevolodovich looked at him \[ i.e. Shatov—A.T. \] sternly.

"I believe in Russia and Russian Orthodoxy . . . I believe in the body of Christ . . . I believe that the Second Coming will be in Russia. . . . I believe . . . " Shatov began to splutter in desperation.

"And in God? In God?"

"I . . . I shall believe in God."

What is there to add? It is a brilliant insight into the confused state of soul, its decline and inadequacy, that are becoming an ever more chronic syndrome in modern man, who could be diagnosed as being spiritually impotent.

The beautiful is hidden from the eyes of those who are not searching for the truth, for whom it is contra-indicated. But the profound lack of spirituality of those people who see art and condemn it, the fact that they are neither willing nor ready to consider the meaning and aim of their existence in any higher sense, is often masked by the vulgarly simplistic cry, 'I don't like it!' 'It's boring!' It is not a point that one can argue; but it is like the utterance of a man born blind who is being told about a rainbow. He simply remains deaf to the pain undergone by the artist in order to share with others the truth he has reached.

But what is truth?

I think that one of the saddest aspects of our time is the total destruction in people's awareness of all that goes with a conscious sense of the beautiful. Modern mass culture, aimed at the 'consumer', the civilisation of prosthetics, is crippling people's souls, setting up barriers between man and the crucial questions of his existence, his consciousness of himself as a spiritual being. But the artist cannot be deaf to the call of truth; it alone defines his creative will, organises it, thus enabling him to pass on his faith to others. An artist who has no faith is like a painter who was born blind.

It is a mistake to talk about the artist 'looking for' his subject. In fact the subject grows within him like a fruit, and begins to demand expression. It is like childbirth . . . The poet has nothing to be proud of: he is not master of the situation, but a servant. Creative work is his only possible form of existence, and his every work is like a deed he has no power to annul. For him to be aware that a sequence of such deeds is due and right, that it lies in the very nature of things, he has to have faith in the idea, for only faith interlocks the system of images (for which read: system of life).

And what are moments of illumination if not momentarily felt truth?

The meaning of religious truth is *hope*. Philosophy seeks the truth, defining the meaning of human activity, the limits of human reason, the meaning of existence, even when the philosopher reaches the conclusion that existence is senseless, and human effort—futile.

The allotted function of art is not, as is often assumed, to put across ideas, to propagate thoughts, to serve as example. The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good.

Touched by a masterpiece, a person begins to hear in himself that same call of truth which prompted the artist to his creative act. When a link is established between the work and its beholder, the latter experiences a sublime, purging trauma. Within that aura which unites masterpieces and audience, the best sides of our souls are made known, and we long for them to be freed. In those moments we recognise and discover ourselves, the unfathomable depths of our own potential, and the furthest reaches of our emotions.

Except in the most general terms of a sense of harmony, how hard it is to speak of a great work. It is as if there were certain immutable parameters to define the masterpiece and single it out from among surrounding phenomena. Furthermore, to a great extent the value of a particular work of art is relative from the point of view of those who appreciate it. A masterpiece is a judgement of reality, complete and finished and with an absolute bearing on that reality; its value lies in giving full expression to a human personality in interaction with the spirit. It is often thought that the significance of a work of art will be made clear by collating it with people, by bringing about a contact
Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

1 Cor 13, 1-16
between it and society. In a general way this is true, only the paradox is that at that point the work of art becomes wholly dependent on those who receive it, on who is able to sense, or to play out, those threads which connect the particular work first with the world at large and then with the human personality in his individual relationship with reality. Goethe is a thousand times right when he says that it is as hard to read a good book as it is to write it. And it is no good imagining that one’s point of view, one’s own assessment, is objective. Only through the diversity of personal interpretations does some sort of relatively objective assessment emerge. And the hierarchical order of merit which works of art take on in the eyes of the crowd, of the majority, mostly comes about as a result of sheer chance: for instance, if a particular work has been fortunate in its interpreters. Or again, for other people one person’s aesthetic field of vision may throw light less on the work itself than on the personality of the critic.

Works of criticism tend to approach their subject in order to illustrate a particular idea; far less often, unfortunately, do they start off from the direct, living, emotional impact of the work in question. For an unclouded perception you have to have an outstanding capacity for original, independent, ‘innocent’ judgement. Generally people look to familiar examples and prototypes for confirmation of their opinion, and a work of art is assessed in relation to, or by analogy with, their private aspirations or personal position. On the other hand, of course, in the multiplicity of judgements passed upon it, the work of art in its turn takes on a kind of inconstant and other hand, of course, in the multiplicity of judgements passed upon it, the work of art in its turn takes on a kind of inconstant and many-faceted life of its own, its existence enhanced and widened.

The works of the great poets have never yet been read by mankind, for only great poets can read them. They have only been read as the multitude read the stars, at most astrologically, not astronomically. Most men have learned to read to serve a paltry convenience, as they have learned to cipher in order to keep accounts and not be cheated in trade; but of reading as a noble intellectual exercise they know little or nothing; yet this only is reading, in a high sense, not that which lulls us as a luxury and cools or over-heating. Beauty is in the balance of the parts. And the paradox is that the more perfect the work, the more clearly does one feel the absence of any associations generated by it. The perfect is unique. Or perhaps it is able to generate an infinite number of associations—which ultimately means the same thing.

Vyacheslav Ivanov9 made some extraordinarily penetrating and apt comments on this when he wrote of the wholeness of the artistic image (which he calls ‘symbol’): ‘A symbol is only a true symbol when it is inexhaustible and unlimited in its meaning, when it utters something that cannot be set forth, that does not correspond to words. It has many faces and many thoughts, and in its remotest depths it remains inscrutable . . . . It is formed by organic process, like a crystal . . . . Indeed it is a monad, and thus constitutionally different from complex and reducible allegories, parables and similes. . . . Symbols cannot be stated or explained, and, confronted by their secret meaning in its totality, we are powerless.’

How arbitrary are the decisions of art critics on the significance or superiority of a work. Without for a moment suggesting—in the

Diamonds are not found in black earth; they have to be sought near volcanoes. An artist cannot be partially sincere any more than art can be an approximation of beauty. Art is the absolute form of the beautiful, of the perfected.

And the beautiful and the finished in art—what is proper to the masterpiece—I see wherever it becomes impossible to single out or prefer any one element, either of content or of form, without detriment to the whole. For in a masterpiece no component can take precedence; you cannot, as it were, ‘catch the artist at his own game’ and formulate for him his ultimate aims and objectives. ‘Art consists of its not being noticeable’, wrote Ovid; Engels declared that, ‘The better hidden the author’s views, the better for the work of art.’ The work of art lives and develops, like any other natural organism, through the conflict of opposing principles. Opposites reach over into each other within it, taking the idea out into infinity. The idea of the work, its determinant, is hidden in the balance of the opposing principles which comprise it—thus ‘triumph’ over a work of art (in other words a one-sided explanation of its thought and aim) becomes impossible. That was why Goethe remarked that ‘the less accessible a work is to the intellect, the greater it is.’

A masterpiece is a space closed in upon itself, not subject to either cooling or over-heating. Beauty is in the balance of the parts. And the paradox is that the more perfect the work, the more clearly does one feel the absence of any associations generated by it. The perfect is unique. Or perhaps it is able to generate an infinite number of associations—which ultimately means the same thing.

One thing is certain: a masterpiece only comes into being when the artist is totally sincere in his treatment of his material. Diamonds
light of what I have been saying—that my own judgement is objective, I should like to take some examples from the history of painting, specifically of the Italian Renaissance. How many generally accepted evaluations there are, which fill me, at least, with nothing but amazement.

Who has not written about Raphael and his Sistine Madonna? The idea of man, who had attained at last his own personality in flesh and blood, who had discovered the world and God in himself and around him after centuries of worshipping the mediaeval Lord, on whom his gaze had been fixed so steadily as to sap his moral strength—all of this is said to have found its perfect, coherent and ultimate embodiment in that canvas by the genius of Urbino.

In a way, perhaps, it has. For the Virgin Mary, in the artist's representation is an ordinary citizen, whose psychological state as reflected in the canvas has its foundation in real life: she is fearful of the fate of her son, given for people in sacrifice. Even though it is in the name of their salvation, he himself is being surrendered in the fight against the temptation to defend him from them.

All of this is indeed vividly written into the picture—from my point of view, too vividly, for the artist's thought is there for the reading: all too unambiguous and well-defined. One is irritated by the painter's sickly allegorical tendentiousness hanging over the form and overshadowing all the purely painterly qualities of the picture. The artist has concentrated his will on clarity of thought, on the intellectual concept of his work, and paid the price: the painting is flabby and insipid.

I am talking about will and energy, and a law of intensity which seems to me to be a condition of painting. I find this law illustrated in the work of one of Raphael's contemporaries, the Venetian, Carpaccio. In his painting he solves the moral problems which beset people of the Renaissance, dazzled as they were by a reality filled with objects, with people, with matter. He solves them by painterly means, quite different from that quasi-literary treatment which gives the Sistine Madonna its sermonising, fictional tone. The new relationship between the individual and external reality he expresses with courage and nobility—never falling into sentimentalism, knowing how to conceal his bias, his quivering delight in the face of the emancipation.

Gogol wrote to Zhukovsky in January, 1848: '. . . it's not my job to preach a sermon. Art is anyhow a homily. My job is to speak in living images, not in arguments. I must exhibit life full-face, not discuss life.'

How true! Otherwise the artist is imposing his thoughts on his
audience. And has anyone said that he is cleverer than the people in the auditorium, the reader with a book in his hands, or the theatre-goer in the stalls? It is simply that the poet thinks in images, with which, unlike the audience, he can express his vision of the world. It is obvious that art cannot teach anyone anything, since in four thousand years humanity has learnt nothing at all.

We should long ago have become angels had we been capable of paying attention to the experience of art, and allowing ourselves to be changed in accordance with the ideals it expresses.

It's ridiculous to imagine that people can be taught to be good; any more than they can learn how to be faithful wives by following the 'positive' example of Pushkin's Tatiana Larina. Art can only give food—a jolt—the occasion—for psychical experience.

But to return to Renaissance Venice... The crowded compositions of Carpaccio have a startling, uncanny beauty. Perhaps I could even risk calling it: the Beauty of the Idea. As you stand before them you have the disturbing sensation that the inexplicable is about to be explained. For the moment it is impossible to understand what creates the psychological field in which you find yourself, unable to escape the fascination of the painting which transfixes you almost to the point of fear.

Several hours may go by before you begin to sense the principle of the harmony in Carpaccio's painting. And once you have understood it, you remain for ever under the spell of its beauty and of your initial rapture.

When you analyse it, the principle is extraordinarily simple, and expresses in the highest sense the essentially humanistic basis of Renaissance art; far more so, indeed, in my opinion, than Raphael. The point is that each of the characters in Carpaccio's crowded composition is a centre. If you concentrate on any one figure you begin to see with unmistakable clarity that everything else is mere context, background, built up like a kind of pedestal for this 'incidental' character. The circle closes, and as you gaze at Carpaccio's canvas your will follows, meekly and unwittingly, the logical channel of feeling intended by the artist, wandering first to one figure apparently lost in the crowd, and then on to the next.

It is not at all my intention to persuade readers of the superiority of my own views on two great artists; nor to instil respect for Carpaccio at the expense of Raphael. All I want to say is that although in the end all art is tendentious, that even style is committed, the same tendency can either be swallowed up in the fathomless layers of artistic images which give it form, or it can be overstated as a poster, as it is in Raphael's Sistine Madonna. Even Marx, poor materialist, said that tendency in art had to be hidden, so that it didn't stick out like springs out of a sofa.

Of course every independently expressed idea is precious as one of the myriad pieces of mosaic that come together to form a general pattern of the way that creative man looks at reality. But all the same...

If we turn now for clarification of my theory to the work of one of the film makers to whom I feel closest, Luis Bunuel, we find that the driving force of his films is always anti-conformism. His protest—furious, uncompromising and harsh—is expressed above all in the sensuous texture of the film, and is emotionally infectious. The protest is not calculated, not cerebral, not formulated intellectually. Bunuel has too much artistic flair ever to fall for political inspiration, which in my view is always spurious when it is expressed overtly in a work of art. The political and social protest voiced in his films, however, would be enough for several directors of lesser stature.

Bunuel is the bearer, above all else, of poetic consciousness. He knows that aesthetic structure has no need of manifestos, that the power of art does not lie there but in emotional persuasiveness, in that unique life force of which Gogol wrote in the letter quoted earlier.

Bunuel's work is deeply rooted in the classical culture of Spain. One cannot imagine him without his inspired link with Cervantes and El Greco, Lorca and Picasso, Salvador Dali and Arrabal. Their work, filled with passion, angry and tender, intense and defiant, is born on the one hand of a deep love of country, and on the other of their seething hatred for lifeless structures, for the brutal, impassive milking dry of brains. The field of their vision, narrowed by disdain, takes in only that which is alive with human sympathy, the divine spark, ordinary human suffering—with those things which for centuries have seeped into the hot, stony Spanish earth.

Fidelity to their prophet-like calling has made these Spaniards great. The tense, rebellious force of El Greco's landscapes, the devout asceticism of his figures, the dynamic of his elongated proportions and savagely cold colours, so uncharacteristic of his time and familiar, rather, to admirers of modern art—gave rise to the
Andrey Rublyov
Audrey Rublyov and the Mad

legend that the painter was astigmatic, and that this explained his tendency to deform the proportions of objects and space. But I think that would be too simple an explanation!

Cervantes' Don Quixote became a symbol of nobility, sacrifice, selfless generosity and fidelity, and Sancho Panza of sound common sense. But Cervantes himself was if anything more faithful to his hero than the latter to his Dulcinea. In prison, in a jealous rage because some scoundrel had illicitly brought out a second part of Don Quixote's adventures that was an affront to the pure, sincere affection of the author for his child, he wrote his own second part of the novel, killing off his hero at the end so that nobody else could sully the sacred memory of the Melancholy Knight.

Single-handed, Goya took on the cruel, effete power of the king and made a stand against the Inquisition. His sinister 'Caprichos' became the embodiment of dark forces, flinging him from savage hatred to animal terror, from vicious contempt to quixotic battle against madness and obscurantism.

The historical fate of the genius is amazing and instructive. These sufferers chosen by God, doomed to destroy in the name of movement and reconstruction, find themselves in a paradoxical state of unstable equilibrium between a longing for happiness and the conviction that happiness, as a feasible reality or state, does not exist. For happiness is an abstract, moral concept. Real happiness, happy happiness, consists, as we know, in the aspiration towards that happiness which cannot but be absolute: that absolute after which we thirst. Let us imagine for a moment that people have attained happiness—a state of complete human freedom of will in the widest sense: at that very instant personality is destroyed. Man becomes as solitary as Beelzebub. The connection between social beings is cut like the umbilical cord of a new-born infant. And consequently, society is destroyed. With the force of gravity removed, objects go flying off into space. (Of course some may say that society ought to be destroyed so that something completely new and just can be built on the debris! . . . I don't know, I am not a destroyer . . .)

An acquired and pocketed ideal could hardly be called happiness. As Pushkin said, 'There is no happiness on earth, but peace and will there are.' And you only have to look carefully into masterpieces, penetrating their invigorating—and mysterious—power, for their purport, at once ambivalent and sacred, to become clear. They stand on man's path like ciphers of catastrophe, announcing, 'Danger! No entry!'

They range themselves at the sites of possible or impending historical cataclysms, like warning signs at the edge of precipices or quagmires. They define, hyperbolise and transform the dialectical embryo of danger threatening society, and almost always become the herald of a clash between old and new. A noble but sombre role!

Poets distinguish that danger barrier sooner than their contemporaries, and the earlier they do so the closer they are to genius. And so, often enough, they remain incomprehensible so long as the celebrated Hegelian conflict is maturing within the womb of history. When the conflict at last takes place, their contemporaries,
shaken and moved, erect a monument to the man who gave expression, when it was still young, vital and full of hope, to this force which brought about the conflict and which has now become the clear and unequivocal symbol of a triumphant move forward.

Then the artist and thinker becomes the ideologue, the apologist for his time, the catalyst of predetermined change. The greatness and ambiguity of art lies in not proving, not explaining and not answering questions even when it throws up warning inscriptions like, 'Caution! Radiation! Danger!' Its influence has to do with moral and ethical upheaval. And those who remain indifferent to its emotional reasoning, and fail to believe it, run the risk of radiation sickness . . . Little by little . . . Unbeknownst to themselves . . . With a foolish smile on the broad, imperturbable face of the man convinced that the world is as flat as a pancake and rests on three whales.

Masterpieces, not always distinguished or distinguishable among all the works with pretensions to genius, are scattered about the world like warning notices in a mine field. And it's only by good luck that we're not blown up! But that good luck generates a disbelief in the danger and allows the growth of fatuous pseudo-optimism. When that sort of optimistic world view is the order of the day, art naturally becomes an irritant, like the mediaeval charlatan or alchemist. It seems dangerous because it is disturbing . . .

One remembers how Luis Bunuel, when *Un Chien Andalou* first appeared, had to hide from the infuriated bourgeois and actually take a revolver in his back pocket whenever he left the house. That was the beginning; he had already started to write, as the saying goes, across the paper instead of on the lines. The man in the street who was just getting used to cinema as an entertainment given him by civilisation, shuddered in horror at the soul-searing images and symbols, designed to épater, of this film which is indeed very hard to take. But even here Bunuel remained sufficiently an artist to address his audience not in poster-language, but in the emotionally infectious idiom of art. How wonderfully apposite is Tolstoy's remark in his diary on March 21, 1858: 'The political is not compatible with the artistic, because the former, in order to prove, has to be one-sided.' Indeed! The artistic image cannot be one-sided: in order justly to be called truthful, it has to unite within itself dialectically contradictory phenomena.

It is natural, therefore, that not even specialist critics have the
delicacy of touch required to dissect for analysis the idea of a work and its poetic imagery. For an idea does not exist in art except in the images which give it form, and the image exists as a kind of grasping of reality by the will, which the artist undertakes according to his own inclinations and the idiosyncrasies of his worldview.

In my childhood my mother suggested I read War and Peace for the first time, and for many years afterwards she would often quote from the novel, pointing out to me the subtlety and detail of Tolstoy’s prose. War and Peace thus became for me a kind of school, a criterion of taste and artistic depth; after that it was no longer possible to read trash; it would give me an acute feeling of distaste.

Merezhkovsky in his book about Tolstoy and Dostoievsky criticises those passages where Tolstoy's characters engage in philosophy, formulating as it were their final ideas on life . . . However, although I agree entirely that the idea of a poetic work must not be put together purely intellectually, or at any rate agreeing in general terms that this is so, I still have to say that we are talking about the significance of an individual in a literary work, where the sincerity of his self-expression is the only pledge of his worth. And even though I think Merezhkovsky's criticism is based on perfectly sound reasoning, it doesn't stop me from loving War and Peace even, if you like, for those passages that are 'a mistake'. For the genius is revealed not in the absolute perfection of a work but in absolute fidelity to himself, in commitment to his own passion. The passionate aspiration of the artist to the truth, to knowing the world and himself in the world, endows with special meaning even the somewhat obscure, or, as they are called, 'less successful' passages in his works.

One might even go further; I don’t know a single masterpiece that does not have its weaknesses or is completely free of imperfections. For the individual bias that makes the artist, and his obsession with his own idea, are the source not only of the greatness of a masterpiece but also of its lapses. Again—can lapses be the right name for something that is organically part of an integral world outlook? The genius is not free. As Thomas Mann wrote: 'Only indifference is free. What is distinctive is never free, it is stamped with its own seal, conditioned and chained.'

**CHAPTER III**

**Imprinted time**

*Stavrogin:* ... in the Apocalypse the angel swears that there'll be no more time.

*Kirillov:* I know. It's quite true, it's said very clearly and exactly. When the whole of man has achieved happiness, there won't be any time, because it won't be needed. It's perfectly true.

*Stavrogin:* Where will they put it then?

*Kirillov:* They won't put it anywhere. Time isn't a thing, it's an idea. It'll die out in the mind.

—F. Dostoievsky, *The Possessed*

Time is a condition for the existence of our T. It is like a kind of culture medium that is destroyed when it is no longer needed, once the links are severed between the individual personality, and the conditions of existence. What is known as the moment of death is also the death of individual time: the life of a human being becomes inaccessible to the feelings of those remaining alive, dead for those around him.

Time is necessary to man, so that, made flesh, he may be able to realise himself as a personality. But I am not thinking of linear time, meaning the possibility of getting something done, performing some action. The action is a result, and what I am considering is the cause which makes man incarnate in a moral sense.

History is still not Time; nor is evolution. They are both consequences. Time is a state: the flame in which there lives the salamander of the human soul.

Time and memory merge into each other; they are like the two sides of a medal. It is obvious enough that without Time, memory cannot exist either. But memory is something so complex that no list of all its attributes could define the totality of the impressions through which it affects us. Memory is a spiritual concept! For instance, if somebody tells us of his impressions of childhood, we can say with certainty that we shall have enough material in our hands to form a complete picture of that person. Bereft of memory, a person becomes the prisoner of an illusory existence; falling out of