IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Goncharov's *Oblomov: Metahistory to Metaphysics*

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ABSTRACT

The history of Russia has seen many changes both in philosophical attitudes and actual life. Russian Realism brought modernism into European literature and the Russia it reflects in Goncharov's novel *Oblomov,* created the term 'Oblomovism'. This old fashioned world of acceptance of fate showcased an attitude the complete opposite of the world of action, career advancement and progress which was overtaking the rest of the world. Today, with the destruction caused to the patterns of life by extreme greed and consumerism, a study of an alternate view is powerful. Oblomov, like old Russia, could not survive 'progress'; therefore we can read the book as a philosophic protest against constant stress on work and career, an acceptance of slower patterns and ultimately as a questioning of the choices that the modern world has made.

KEYWORDS

Oblomovism
Progress
Action
Futility

The confrontation between the old and the new which we see in Goncharov's novel *Oblomov,* was the culmination of a process which began with the reforms Peter the Great introduced into seventeenth century Russia. Historians have debated whether by these changes Peter wrenched his country from its true path forcing it into an alien mould.[1] Could this be a cause of the angst seen in early Russian writing? The modernization of Russia was considered essential by many, and by the nineteenth century this westernization had caused a schism between the Slavophiles and the Francophiles, the first clinging to the past, the second determined to push Russia into the future. It is this conflict which is at the core of *Oblomov***.**

Peter Tchaadayev in *A Philosophic Letter* (1836) was convinced that Russia's salvation lay in joining Europe. He wrote:

"*While the whole world was building anew, we created nothing. We remained crouched in our hovels of log and thatch. In a word, we had no part in the new destinies of mankind*."[2]

Oblomov was written a little after this, in a period of great changes, social, revolutionary, intellectual and literary. Goncharov's own life is characteristic of the duality that existed in the minds of many nineteenth century Russians. Emotionally Goncharov clung to a stable old fashioned past, but intellectually he saw the need for a more modern, active life. This vital dilemma becomes the leit-motif in his novels.[3] The change from the established order was difficult for many members of the upper- classes. Their old personal lives and habits no longer fitted into the new historical Russia being created. It was this which made them "superfluous men," or as Lavrin explains the term, individuals who belonged nowhere, put out of gear by economic circumstances and by history itself.[4] Oblomov can be seen then as the recording of the metahistory of one such ordinary Russian, a culmination of a line of "superfluous heroes," who begin with Pushkin's Onegin. But where most Russian characters struggle against their sense of uselessness or boredom, Oblomov decides that he will not struggle at all.

In sharp contrast to the sweep of grand narrative for which a Tolstoy or Dostoevsky is famous, at the beginning of Russian Realism, during the reign of Czar Alexander II (1818-1881), a sense of utter hopelessness pervaded the country. Chronic boredom was not restricted only to heroes of books; Goncharov himself wrote to his sister Anna in 1869, "I feel so incredibly bored wherever I go."[5] Oblomov's disaffection is then only an extreme form of a malaise that truly affected much of upper class Russian society. Gorki, speaking in 1934 at the first Congress of Soviet writers said:

"The main and basic theme of pre- Revolutionary literature was the tragedy of a person to whom life seemed cramped, who felt superfluous in society, sought therein a comfortable place, failed to find it and suffered, died, or reconciled himself to a society that was hostile to him, or sank to drunkenness or suicide."[6]

Goncharov's book starts with the 'little' history of one such man, the author was interested in the psychology of Oblomov long before he began writing this novel. During the early years of his career as a civil servant Goncharov drew (in the character of Tyazhelenko) his first sketch of "a man of unexampled and methodical laziness and heroic indifference to the bustle and turmoil of life."[7] It is not known exactly when he began writing *Oblomov* but "Oblomov's Dream" was published in a supplement of the *Contemporary Review* in 1849, and ten years later the book *Oblomov* was published in the periodical *Home Annuals***.**

The entire story of Oblomov follows a single line of development. It begins and ends with Ilya and within the framework of the four sections our knowledge of Ilya Ilyich Oblomov increases as we see him in his relationships with Zahkar, Stolz, Olga and Agafya.[8] We should realize that Goncharov is already going beyond history and into symbolism by the very name Oblomov. The name derives from 'Oblomok', meaning a ruined fragment.[9] The progress of the novel is slow, the whole first part being devoted to a single morning and afternoon spent while Oblomov tries to get up. There is no real action as Oblomov lives in his dressing gown which becomes the symbol of his stagnation. This gown is cast off during his summer romance but it waits for his return in the suburbs of Vyborg.

Stagnation is apparent from the beginning of the novel; whenever Oblomov is spoken about time appears immobilized and we have a prominence of static images. The entire book too has a slow meditative movement, as if Goncharov while watching history unfold, the freeing of the serfs and other monumental events, decides to go beyond history into a philosophical realm of ultimate issues.[10] The numerous visitors who try to rouse Oblomov in the first part are more symbolic than realistic; aspects of life coming up against Oblomovism and being gently repelled. They represent the busy world of progress – journalism, the Civil Service, all of which Oblomov has dabbled in and given up. Because of Zahkar and the three hundred and fifty serfs, all Oblomov's work is done for him. He therefore repudiates all work or effort and decides to live as effortlessly as possible. But in a world of constant bustle with Russia hoping to 'progress' and catch up with European development this effortless existence seems to show an arrested development, an inability as well as an unwillingness to adapt oneself to a new life.[11]

Oblomov seems to refuse to 'grow up' or progress, he want to remain in a child-like fairy land, where there will always be someone to take all the decisions, just as all decisions were made for him at home in Oblomovka. He is much too lazy to do anything for himself and ultimately becomes too lazy even to live.[12]

We can see Goncharov's character as an anti-hero in a literary sense because of this refusal to make any effort to take the plot forward,[13] and in his heroic struggle to remain unaffected by the changing times. His bailiff's letter, warning of a reduction in his income, and his landlord's request to vacate the flat, cause tremendous mental upheaval in Oblomov's placid existence. These two events interrupt the mental planning of improvements at Oblomovka and disturb his peace of mind. But Oblomov is proud of the fact that unlike his scurrying friends he has the time and peace to really live:

"He felt a quiet satisfaction at the thought that he could stay in bed from nine till three and from eight till nine and that there was ample scope for both his feelings and his imagination." (*Oblomov*, 33)

Life for Ilya consists of two halves; action and work which mean boredom, and the opposite, rest and quiet enjoyment. In the novel he has rejected the first half as useless and is now deciding how best he will enjoy the second half at Oblomovka.

Ilya is by no means portrayed as stupid or dull, he recognizes that he is not like the others he sees around him, but he concludes that his destiny is different. Perhaps, his ability to do anything had been stifled in the hot-house atmosphere at Oblomovka, when his parents, relatives and well-wishers feared he was too delicate to study, play or work. We are shown how from his childhood, "his energies finding no outlet, turned inwards and withered, drooping." (*Oblomov*,142) This pattern is repeated throughout Oblomov's life. Childhood restrictions prevented any action and when his adolescent dreams of a perfect world could not be achieved, instead of struggling he decides to stop trying at all. Stolz tells him:

"I suppose you're too lazy to live," and he replies,
"Well, I suppose I am Andrey." (*Oblomov*.170)

All that he wants now is that life should not disturb his peace.

His brief belief that he has fallen in love with Olga takes him out of his torpor for a short time. Yet Oblomov is clear-sighted enough to realize that he cannot cope with these exertions for long and shies away from the permanent responsibilities marriage will bring. He finds a more peaceful substitute to Olga in Agafya who unfortunately kills by kindness.[14] Oblomov however is content, for he has found in her a substitute to Oblomovka; a means of escape from the urgencies of time and responsibility.

'Oblomov' was the natural state of the Oblomovia of Ilya's childhood. In his dream we see how the entire land seems to lie under a spell of inertia.[15] In *At Home*, Goncharov wrote, "The very exterior of my native town represented but a picture of sleep and stagnation,"[16] and this sleep and stagnation is portrayed literally when in the dream, after the afternoon meal, the entire population of Oblomovka dozes off to sleep. For Oblomov, as for many Russians, this world represented the perfection of human life. This was a world in which the only concern was food, where Oblomov's father:

"Did nothing but walk up and down the room all day with his hands behind his back, take snuff, and blow his nose, while his mother passed on, from coffee to tea, from tea to dinner." (*Oblomov*, 123)

But historically this world had passed away. The new Russia needed people who acted, and even Ivan Matreyevich is incredulous when Oblomov announces, "I am a gentleman and I can't do anything." (*Oblomov*, 354) Oblomov realizes he is a misfit in the new society but comforts himself with the belief that he was born not to be a gladiator but a personal spectator at the battle of life. Oblomovism affects other characters in the book too. Tarantyev and Alexeyev are drones; both parasitically feed off Oblomov, just as numerous dependants fed at the family table in Oblomovka. Oblomovism had spread through all aspects of Russian society.

There seems little in the mere story of *Oblomov* powerful enough to establish it as a classic of Russian Literature. However as Mirsky says, Oblomov becomes more than a character. He is symbolic of one side of the soul of the Russian gentry, its inaction, and ineffectiveness.[17] It is this sociological issue which Dobrolyubov commented on in his essay "*What is Oblomovismchina?*" For Dobrolyubov, Oblomov is an unreliable drone,[18] a gentleman bred to believe that, "it is more honourable to sit with folded arms than to fuss with work." For Dobrolyubov, Oblomov, is not the master but a slave because his total incapacity to act makes him wholly dependent on the wills of others.[19] Dobrolyubov traces Oblomovism through Russian literature and condemns Onegin and Pechorin as types of Oblomov. For him, Oblomov is at least more honest than these sophisticated drones, for he makes no effort to hide his idleness or fill his days with social talk or by strolling along Nevsky Prospect.[20]

Dobrolyubov's bitterest criticism was against those members of the upper classes whose, "most sincere and heartfelt striving is the striving for response,"[21] but one tends to agree with Gifford when he says that the social interpretation set out by Dobrolyubov does not tell us the complete truth about *Oblomov*.[22] The socio-historic facts may help us to understand the reasons for Oblomovism but do not explain the phenomenon entirely. Oblomovism was a Russian phenomenon and Oblomov has become a myth in the manner of *Don Quioxte*.[23]

In his autobiographic sketch *Better Late Than Never* Goncharov wrote:

"I was struck first of all by the lazy image of Oblomov in myself and in others. I instinctively felt that little by little the elementary attributes of a Russian man were occurring to this figure."[24]

And though a Russian historian claimed Oblovism to be a disease of the Russian national character,[25] it has universal and metaphysical features. Oblomov raises an essential question; why must a man do something if he can live without doing anything? Clive, in his book on *Intuitive Existentialism*, has seen in Oblomov, "a healthy if eccentric respect for indolence as against the constant fretting inseparable from careerism."[26] So we can also read the book as a philosophic protest against the frenetic hustle and bustle of the new world, marching inexorably into Russia, sweeping away the traditional philosophical acceptance of a given fate and destiny, which had sustained the people through many centuries.

Kierkegaard too seems to share Oblomov's viewpoint when he writes:

"I do not care for anything. I do not care to ride for the exercise is too violent. I do not care to walk, walking is too strenuous. I do not care to lie down for I should either have to remain lying down and I do not care to do that, or I should have to get up again, and I do not care to do that either. Summa Summarum. I do not care at all."[27]

Oblomov suffers from that sense of futility, which overcomes many when they realize the insignificance of their presence in this world. He realizes how frankly inessential his work really is and resigns from the Civil Service, but in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, his seemingly frivolous withdrawal from living can be considered in a more serious light. After the horrors of two World Wars, Concentration Camps and the Atom bomb, existentially "our psyches today are so disturbed by the uselessness of all conceivable goals that we are overwhelmed by despair."[28] Oblomov like many thinking people in our world chooses to "opt out" of the rat race. Recognizing mans' ultimate superfluity, he faces the truth of his own unimportant existence with a certain courage and honesty.

Though Goncharov exposes Oblomov's inertia, the limitation of Stolz's viewpoint is also portrayed. The author himself wrote, "I never had any faith in materialism or in anything people like to deduce from it."[29] While showing many characters in the novel caught up suddenly in a world of materialism, Goncharov describes these too by the term "superfluous people" (*Oblomov,* 48). However none of them dare or care to accept this fact at all. Oblomov dismisses Petersburg society as "all dead men," whose irrelevant interests are "not normal" (*Oblomov,* 75). And the cyclical view of history which Oblomov gives us also seems to stress the ultimate futility behind all historical effort:

"You learn and read that at a certain date the people were overtaken by all sorts of calamities and were unhappy, then they summoned up their strength, worked, laboured in preparation for better days. At last they came- but clouds gathered again, the edifice crashed down, and again the people had to toil and labour." (*Oblomov*, 68)

It is important also to note that while Stolz defines Ilya's existence as a sort of "Oblomovitis" he fails to answer Ilya's questions as to the meaning and purpose of life. Such metaphysical notions are beyond most of the 'new' Russians. Stolz works, like many today, for the sake of working, he never allows himself to doubt the aim of all his industry. Oblomov at least has the courage to doubt.

As we turn from Oblomov to those around him we see that in Zakhar, Goncharov presents an offshoot of his master. Zakhar too beongs to the timeless world of Oblomovka where there is no striving or struggling to achieve or improve. When Oblomov dies Zakhar becomes a beggar, a misfit in Petersburg society unable to find a niche once the last traces of Oblomovka have passed away.

In the portrayal of Olga, Goncharov follows the pattern from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* of the inadequate hero and the deserving heroine who is ultimately disappointed.[30] But, though Olga is a credible and human creature her more important role seems to be a symbolic one. It is Olga who becomes a symbol of Russia. Russia through her tries to salvage the old world as represented by Oblomov, and like her, Russia gives up and turns to the new world Stolz represents. Olga is attracted by Oblomov's essential goodness and sensitivity. She believes that if Oblomov could be cured of his negative qualities he could continue to occupy a leading role in Russian society, without resigning his place to Stolz.[31] But Oblomov and old Russia had historically already accepted defeat. Olga's efforts are fruitless. For Dobrolyubov Olga represents the new life and moves even beyond Stolz in her search for "something."[32] But despite her faith in her powers to rouse Ilya, Olga gives up and Russia mourns with her when they realize Oblomov cannot come back to life.

Once Olga realizes that Oblomov will not change she turns to Stolz for her future. Russia, with her, turns sadly away from her first love to the more stable, sensible, progressive, new man. Goncharov himself criticized his creation of Stolz as "too weak and pale, the idea peeping through him too nakedly,"[33] and Dobrolyubov felt such characters "do not yet exist in our society."[34] Perhaps it was for this reason that Stolz is made half- German. He is the antithesis of Oblomov, yet each friend values the other. Goncharov would have liked to see Oblomov co-operate with Stolz in the creation of a new Russia,[35] but this was impossible. There remained only a choice between Oblomovism and Stolzism and it was inevitable that the latter would be the victor. Stolz has the qualities of resolution, self-control and practical sense, which the new age demands and which had been lacking in Oblomov and his predecessors.[36] Stolz is not merely a representative of western materialism; he is shown as caring for others, the all round capable man so needed to bring Russia into the new age. It seems significant that Oblomov's son will be brought up by Stolz.

Oblomov's son is the positive hope offered in this "epic of transition."[37] He is the future of Russia- an amalgamation of its past and present. The son of Oblomov an aristocrat, and Agafya, a petty bourgeois, brought up by Stolz the new active intellectual, young Andrey is Goncharov's hope for the new age. The old Oblomovka has gone forever; a railway line destroys its isolation as Stolz promises to carry out Oblomov's youthful dreams for his estate with the young Andrey:

"The time is coming when something huge will overwhelm us. A strong healthy storm is on its way. It is already quite close and soon it will sweep away the idleness and complacency in our society, the prejudices against work and the stagnant boredom. I shall work, and in another twenty-five or thirty years everyone will work. Everyone."[38]

But Oblomov's questions, which were the questions that not only Goncharov but all the great Russian authors raised, remained unanswered. The meaning and purpose of our action and life are the metaphysical questions behind all religion and philosophy. Perhaps, like Goncharov and his hero, we too are still seeking these answers.

Eleven years after *Oblomov* was published, Lenin was born at Simbirsk. It seems ironically symbolic that the author who loved yet exposed the old Russia and the founder of the new Soviet society should share the same birth place.

ENDNOTES

[1] Lionel Kochan, (1962), *The Making of Modern Russia*, London: Jonathan Cape, 92.

[2] Kochan, 145

[3] Janko Lavrin, (1954), *Goncharov: Studies in Modern European Literature and Thought*, ed. Erich Heller, Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 10.

[4] Lavrin, 20.

[5] Lavrin, 14.

[6] Kochan, 210.

[7] All references to *Oblomov* are to Ivan Goncharov, *Oblomov* (1859) trans. & Intro. by David Magarshack, (1981), Harmondsworth: Penguin. All further references and page numbers follow quoted passage in the text. Introduction, viii.

[8] Henry Gifford, (1973), "Goncharov," in *Nineteenth – Century Russian Literature: Studies of Ten Russian Writers*, ed. John Fennell, London: Faber & Faber, 136.

[9] Henry Gifford, (1950), *The Hero of His Time: A Theme in Russian Literature*, London: Edward Arnold, 150.

[10] Henry Gifford, (1964), *The Novel in Russia: From Pushkin to Pasternak, Modern Language and Literature*. Series ed. J.M. Cohen, London: Hutchinson University Library, 58.

[11] Lavrin, 27.

[12] Lavrin, 28.

[13] Marjorie Boulton, (1975), *The Anatomy of the Novel*, London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 160.

[14] Gifford, "Goncharov," in *Nineteenth Century Russian Literature: Studies of Ten Russian Writers*, ed. John Fennell, 136.

[15] *Ibid*., 134

[16] Lavrin, 28.

[17] D.S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature: Comprising a History of Russian Literature and Contemporary Russian Literature* ed. & abridged, Francis. J. Whitfield, (1949), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 182.

[18] N.A. Dobrolyubov, "What is Oblomovshchina?" in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans J. Fineberg, (1956), Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 211.

[19] Dobrolyubov, 187.

[20] Dobrolyubov, 200.

[21] Dobrolyubov, 208.

[22] Gifford, "Goncharov," in *Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature: Studies of Ten Russian Writers*, ed. John Fennell, 134.

[23] *Ibid*., p.137.

[24] Richard Freedom, (1973), *The Rise of the Russian Novel: Studies in the Russian Novel from Eugene Onegin to War and Peace*, Cambridge: At the University Press, 136.

[25] Lavrin, 35.

[26] Geoffrey Clive, (1972), *The Broken Icon: Intuitive Existentialism in Classical Russian Fiction*, London, New York: The Macmillan Company, xvi.

[27] Clive, 63. Quotation from Kierkegaard, "Diapsalmata" in *Either/Or***.**

[28] Clive, 84.

[29] Goncharov, *Oblomov*, Introduction, x.

[30] Gifford, "Goncharov" in *Nineteenth- Century Russian Literature: Studies of Ten Russian Writers*, ed, John Fennell, 136.

[31] Ivar Spector, (1952), *The Golden Age of Russian Literature*, Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers. 1st pub.1943, 94.

[32] Dobrolyubov, 216.

[33] Goncharov, *Oblomov*, Introduction, x.

[34] Dobrolyubov, 213.

[35] Spector, 93.

[36] Gifford, *The Hero of His Time: A Theme in Russian Literature*, 157.

[37] Lavrin, 10.

[38] Anton Chekhov, *The Three Sisters* in *Selected Works in Two volumes: Plays Vol. II*, rpt. (1973) Moscow: Progress Publishers, 97.