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WHAT IS OBLMOVISM?

By Nikolai Dobrolyubov

The essay which appears below in abbreviated form was first published in the radical journal *Sovremennik* ("The Contemporary") in 1859, during the great public debate preceding the emancipation of the serfs. Its author (1836–61) was then twenty-three-years old but was already considered a leading literary critic. In 1856 he had become a follower of the materialist philosopher Nikolai Chernyshevski and in 1857 took over the literary column of *Sovremennik*. His chief contribution to literary criticism was his formulation of the theory of social types as represented in Russian literature. As a follower of Belinsky, he believed that literature must serve society as a positive guide, praising the good and condemning evil.

His essay on Oblomovism became the most celebrated of his writings. Immediately upon its appearance, it was used by the radical camp in its fight with the moderates and the liberals. One of the latter, Alexander Herzen, answered Dobrolyubov with an article entitled "Very dangerous." The term "oblomovshchina" has been incorporated into the Russian language. Lenin used it on many occasions and not long before his death seemed to find the disease still prevalent in Russia. "The old Oblomov," he wrote, "has remained, and for a long while yet he will have to be washed, cleaned, shaken and thrashed if something is to come of him."

For a biography of the creator of Oblomov, the writer Ivan Goncharov, see Janko Lavrin's *Goncharov*. F. Seeley's "The Heyday of the 'Superfluous Man' in Russia," *Slavonic and East European Review*, XXXI, 92–112, is a study of the Oblomov phenomenon. See also Franklin Reeve, "Oblomovism Revisited," *American Slavic and East European Review*, XV, 112–18, and Leon Stilman, "Oblomovka Revisited," *American Slavic and East European Review*, VII, 45–77. For another analysis of Goncharov, see Helen Rapp, "The Art of Ivan Goncharov," *Slavonic and East European Review*, XXXVI, 370–95. The novel itself is available in a paperback edition.

Where is the one who in the native language of the Russian soul could pronounce for us the mighty word "forward"? Century after century passes, and a half a million stay-at-homes, lubbers and blockheads are immersed in deep slumber, but rarely is a

man born in Rūs who is able to pronounce this mighty word . . . GOCOL.¹

¹ The epigraph, slightly misquoted, is from volume two of Gogol's *Dead Souls*.

From N. Dobrolyubov, *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Moscow, 1956), pp. 182–94, 204–17.

. . . Oblomov is not altogether a new personage in our literature, but never has he been presented to us so simply and naturally as he is in Goncharov's novel. Not to go too far back into the past, we shall say that we find the generic features of the Oblomov type already in Onegin;² and then we find them repeated several times in the best of our literary productions. The point is that this is our native, national type, which not one of our serious artists could brush aside. But in the course of time, as social consciousness developed, this type changed its shape, established a different relationship with life and acquired a new significance. To note these new phases of its existence, to determine the substance of its new significance, has always been an enormous task, and the talent who succeeded in doing it always did a great deal for the advancement of our literature. This is what Goncharov has done with his *Oblomov*. We shall examine the main features of the Oblomov type, and then we shall try to draw a slight parallel between it and several types of the same kind which have appeared in our literature at different times.

What are the main features of the Oblomov character? Utter inertness resulting from apathy towards everything that goes on in the world. The cause of this apathy lies partly in Oblomov's external position and partly in the manner of his mental and moral development. The external position is that he is a gentleman: "he has a Zakhar, and another three hundred Zakhars," as the author puts it.³ Ilya Ilyich (Oblomov) explains the advantages of his position to Zakhar in the following way:

² Onegin: hero of Pushkin's novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin*.

³ Zakhar: Oblomov's personal servant, a serf. The "three hundred Zakhars" are the serfs owned by Oblomov as part of his estate.

Do I fuss and worry? Do I work? Don't I have enough to eat? Do I look thin and haggard? Am I in want of anything? Have I not people to fetch and carry for me, to do the things I want done? Thank God, I have never in my life had to draw a pair of stockings on. Do you think I would go to any trouble? Why should I? . . . But I need not tell you all this. Haven't you served me since childhood? You know all about it. You have seen how tenderly I was brought up. You know that I have never suffered cold or hunger, that I have never known want, that I don't have to earn my bread and, in general, have never done any work.

Oblomov is speaking the absolute truth. The entire history of his upbringing confirms what he says. He became accustomed to lolling about at a very early age because he had people to fetch and carry for him, to do things for him. Under these circumstances he lived the idle life of a sybarite even when he did not want to. And tell me, pray, what can you expect of a man who grew up under the following circumstances:

Zakhar—as his [Oblomov's] nurse did in the old days—draws on his stockings and puts on his shoes while Ilyusha, already a boy of fourteen, does nothing but lie on his back and put up one foot and then the other; and if it seems to him that Zakhar has done something not in the right way, he kicks him in the nose. If the disgruntled Zakhar takes it into his head to complain, he gets his ears boxed by the adults. After that Zakhar combs Ilya Ilyich's hair, helps him on with his coat, carefully putting his arms into the sleeves so as not to incommode him too much, and reminds him that he must do so and so and so and so: on waking up in the morning—to wash himself, etc.

If Ilya Ilyich wants anything he has only to make a sign—and at once three or four servants rush to carry out his wishes; if he drops anything, if he reaches for something he needs and cannot get at it, if something has to be brought in, or it is necessary to run on some errand—he sometimes, like the active boy he is, is just eager to run and

do it himself, but suddenly his mother and his father and his three aunts shout in a quintet:

—"Where are you going? What for? What are Vaska and Vanka and Zakharka here for? Hey! Vaska, Vanka, Zakharka! What are you all dawdling there for? I'll let you have it! . . ."

And so Ilya Ilyich is simply not allowed to do anything for himself. Later on he found that this was much more convenient and he learned to shout himself: "Hey, Vaska, Vanka, bring me this, bring me that! I don't want this, I want that! Go and bring it! . . ."

The effect this position of the child has upon his entire moral and intellectual development will be understood. Its internal strength necessarily "wilts and fades." Even if the child tests that strength sometimes, it is only in whims and arrogant demands that others should obey his orders. It is well known that the satisfaction of whims develops spinelessness and that arrogance is incompatible with the ability really to maintain one's dignity. Becoming accustomed to make unreasonable demands, the boy soon loses the power to keep his wishes within the bounds of the possible and practical, loses all ability to make means conform with aims and is therefore baffled by the first obstacle that calls for the exercise of his own efforts for its removal. When he grows up he becomes an Oblomov, possessing the latter's apathy and spinelessness to a greater or lesser degree, under a more or less skilful disguise, but always with the same invariable quality—a repugnance for serious and independent activity.

An important factor here is the mental development of the Oblomovs, which, of course, is also moulded by their external position. From their earliest years they see life turned inside out, as it were, and until the end of their days they are unable to understand what their

relation to the world and to people should reasonably be. Later on much is explained to them and they begin to understand something; but the views that were inculcated in them in their childhood remain somewhere in a corner and constantly peep out from there, hindering all new conceptions and preventing them from sinking deep into their hearts. . . . As a result, chaos reigns in their heads: sometimes a man makes up his mind to do something, but he does not know how to begin, where to turn. . . . This is not surprising: a normal man always wants to do only what he can do; that is why he immediately does all that he wants to do. . . . But Oblomov . . . is not accustomed to do anything; consequently, he cannot really determine what he can do and what he cannot do—and consequently, he cannot seriously, *actively*, want anything. . . . His wishes always assume the form: "how good it would be if this were done," but how this can be done he does not know. That is why he is so fond of dreaming and dreads the moment when his dreams may come in contact with reality. When they do, he tries to shift the burden to another's shoulders; if there are no other shoulders, why then, *perhaps* it will get done *somehow*. . . .

All these features are splendidly noted and concentrated with extraordinary strength and truth in the person of Ilya Ilyich Oblomov. It must not be imagined that Ilya Ilyich belongs to some special breed of which inertness is an essential and fundamental feature. It would be wrong to think that nature has deprived him of the ability to move of his own volition. This is not the case at all. Nature has endowed him with the same gifts as she has endowed all men. As a child he wanted to run about and play snowballs with other children, to get one thing or another himself, to run down into the gully, to reach the near-

by birch wood by crossing the canal, climbing over fences and jumping across ditches. When everybody in the Oblomov house was taking his or her customary afternoon nap he would get up to stretch his legs: he "ran to the gallery (where nobody was permitted to go because it threatened to collapse any moment), ran round the creaking floor, climbed up to the dovecote, wandered down to the end of the garden and listened to a beetle droning and followed its flight with his eyes until it was far away." Sometimes he "got into the canal, grubbed about, found some roots, peeled off the bark and ate them with the utmost relish, preferring them to the apples and jam that Mama used to give him." All this might have served as the elements of a gentle and quiet character, but not of a senselessly indolent one. Besides, gentleness which grows into timidity and the habit of offering your back for others to climb on is by no means a natural characteristic of a man, but purely an acquired one, just like insolence and arrogance; and the distance between these two characteristics is not so great as is usually believed. Nobody is so able to hold his nose in the air as a flunkey is; nobody treats his subordinates so rudely as one who is obsequious towards his own superiors. With all his gentleness, Ilya Ilyich does not hesitate to kick Zakhar in the face when the latter is putting on his shoes; and if he does not do the same to others later on in life, it is only because he anticipates opposition which he would have to overcome. Willy-nilly he confines his activities to his three hundred Zakhars. If he had a hundred, a thousand times more Zakhars, he would meet with no opposition, and he would boldly kick in the face everybody who had any dealings with him. Conduct of this kind would not be evidence of a brutal nature; Oblomov himself, and all those around him,

would regard it as very natural and necessary. . . . It would not occur to any of them that it is possible and necessary to behave differently. But unfortunately, or fortunately, Ilya Ilyich was born a small country squire with an estate that provided him with an income that did not exceed ten thousand rubles in assignats;⁴ consequently, he could mould the destiny of the world only in his dreams. But in his dreams he was fond of giving himself up to bellicose and heroic ambitions.

Sometimes he liked to picture himself an invincible general, compared with whom not only Napoleon but even Veruslan Lazarevich was a nonentity; he would picture a war and its cause: for example, Africans would come pouring into Europe, or he would organize new crusades and would fight, decide the fate of nations, sack towns, show mercy, execute, perform acts of kindness and generosity.

Sometimes he would picture himself as a great thinker or artist who is followed by admiring crowds. . . . Clearly, Oblomov is not a dull, apathetic type, destitute of ambition and feeling; he too seeks something in life, thinks about something. But the disgusting habit of getting his wishes satisfied not by his own efforts but by the efforts of others developed in him an apathetic inertness and plunged him into the wretched state of moral slavery. This slavery is so closely interwoven with Oblomov's aristocratic habits that they mutually permeate and determine each other, so that it becomes totally impossible to draw any line of demarcation between them. This moral slavery of Oblomov's is, perhaps, the most interesting side of his personality, and of his whole life. . . . But how could a man enjoying the independent position of Ilya Ilyich sink into

⁴ Assignats: paper currency of considerably less value than the silver ruble. They were withdrawn from circulation in 1843.

slavery? If anybody can enjoy freedom, surely he can! He is not in the civil service, he does not go into society, and he has an assured income. . . . He himself boasts that he does not have to bow and scrape and humiliate himself, that he is not like "others" who work tirelessly, fuss and run about, and if they do not work they do not eat. . . . He inspires the good widow Pshenitsyna with reverent love for himself precisely because he is a *gentleman*, because he shines and glitters, because he walks and talks so freely and independently, because "he is not constantly copying papers, does not tremble with fear that he might be late at the office, because he does not look at everybody as if asking to be saddled and ridden on, but looks at everybody and everything boldly and freely, as if demanding obedience." And yet, the whole life of this gentleman is wrecked because he always remains the slave of another's will and never rises to the level of displaying the least bit of independence. He is the slave of every woman, of every newcomer; the slave of every rascal who wishes to get him under his thumb. He is the slave of his serf Zakhar, and it is hard to say which of them submits more to the power of the other. At all events, if Zakhar does not wish to do a thing Ilya Ilyich cannot make him do it; and if Zakhar wants to do anything he will do it, even if his master is opposed to it—and his master submits. . . . This is quite natural: Zakhar, after all, can at least do something; Oblomov cannot do anything at all. It is needless to speak of Tarantsev and Ivan Matveyich, who do everything they like with Oblomov in spite of the fact that they are far inferior to him both in intellectual development and in moral qualities. . . . Why is this? Again the answer is, because Oblomov, being a gentleman, does not wish to work, nor could he even if he wanted to; and he

cannot understand his own relation to everything around him. He is not averse to activity as long as it is in the form of a vision and is far removed from reality: thus, he draws up a plan for the improvement of his estate and zealously applies himself to this task—only "details, estimates and figures" frighten him, and he constantly brushes them aside, for how can he bother with them! . . . He is a gentleman, as he himself explains to Ivan Matveyich:

Who am I? What am I? you will ask. . . . Go and ask Zakhar, he will tell you. "A gentleman" he will say! Yes, I am a gentleman, and I can't do anything! You do it, if you known how, and help if you can, and for your trouble take what you like—that's what knowledge is for!

Do you think that in this way he is only shirking work, trying to cover up his own indolence with the plea of ignorance? No, he really does not know how to do anything and cannot do anything; he is really unable to undertake any useful task. As regards his estate (for the reorganization of which he had already drawn up a plan), he confesses his ignorance to Ivan Matveyich in the following way:

I don't know what barshchina⁵ is. I know nothing about husbandry. I don't know the difference between a poor muzhik and a rich one. I don't know what a quarter of rye, or oats is, what its price is, in which months different crops are sown and reaped, or how and when they are sold. I don't know whether I am poor or rich, whether I will have enough to eat next year, or whether I shall be a beggar—I don't know anything! . . . Therefore, speak and advise me as if I were a child. . . .

⁵ Barshchina: obligation of the serfs to work on the landowners' land and perform various services. During the first half of the nineteenth century the customary obligation was three days a week, though this was often exceeded. Equivalent to the French *corvée* before 1789.

This is exactly how Ilya Ilyich looked upon life. The ideal happiness that he described to Stolz consisted in nothing more than a life of plenty, with conservatories, hothouses, picnics in the woods with a samovar, etc.—a dressing-gown, sound sleep and by way of a rest in between—idyllic walks with a meek but plump wife, gazing at the peasants at work. Oblomov's mind was so moulded from childhood that he was able, even in the most abstract arguments, in the most utopian theories, to halt in the present and never leave this *status quo* in spite of all arguments. In depicting his conception of ideal bliss Ilya Ilyich never thought of asking himself what its inherent meaning was, he never thought of asserting its lawfulness or truth, he never asked himself where these conservatories and hothouses were to come from, who was to maintain them, and on what grounds he was to enjoy them. . . . Failing to put such questions to himself, failing to clear up his own relation to the world and to society, Oblomov, of course, could not grasp the meaning of his own life and, therefore, found everything he had to do irksome and tedious. When he was in the civil service he could not for the life of him understand why all those documents were being written; and failing to understand, he could think of nothing better than to resign and do no more writing. He went to school, but he could not understand the purpose of this instruction: and failing to understand, he piled his books up in a corner and indifferently watched the dust accumulating on them. He went into society, but he could not understand why people visited each other; and failing to understand, he gave up all his acquaintances and lolled on his couch for days on end. He tried to become intimate with women, but he began to ask himself what could be expected of them,

what one should expect of them; and after pondering over the matter, and failing to find an answer, he began to avoid women. . . . Everything bored and wearied him, and he lolled on his couch filled with utter contempt for the "human ant heap," where people worried and fussed, God knows what about. . . .

Having reached this point in explaining Oblomov's character we deem it appropriate to turn to the literary parallel we drew above. The foregoing reflections have brought us to the conclusion that Oblomov is not a being whom nature has completely deprived of the ability to move by his own volition. His indolence and apathy are the result of upbringing and environment. The main thing here is not Oblomov, but Oblomovshchina. Perhaps Oblomov would even have started work had he found an occupation to his liking; but for that he would have had to develop under somewhat different conditions. In his present position he cannot find an occupation to his liking because he sees no meaning in life in general and cannot rationally define his own relations to others. This is where he provides us with the occasion for comparing him with previous types, which the best of our writers have depicted. It was observed long ago that all the heroes in the finest Russian stories and novels suffer from their failure to see any purpose in life and their inability to find a decent occupation for themselves. As a consequence, they find all occupations tedious and repugnant, and in this they reveal an astonishing resemblance to Oblomov. Indeed, open, for example, *Onegin*, *A Hero of Our Times*, *Who Is To Blame?* *Rudin*, *Unwanted*, or *Hamlet from Shchigry County*⁶—in every one of these you will

⁶ *A Hero of Our Times*: a novel by Lermontov. *Who Is To Blame?* a novel by Herzen; the other works are by Turgenev.

find features almost identical with Oblomov's.

Onegin, like Oblomov, gives up society because he was

Weary of inconstancy
And of friends and friendship too.

And so he took to writing:

Abandoning wild gaiety
Onegin stayed at home,
He picked his pen up with a yawn
And wished to write, but diligence
To him was loathsome; nothing
From his pen would come.

Rudin too launched out in this field and was fond of reading to the chosen "the first pages of the essays and works he intended to write." Tentetnikov⁷ also spent many years writing "a colossal work that was to deal with the whole of Russia from all points of view," but in this case too, "this undertaking was confined mainly to thinking: his pen was bitten to shreds, drawings appeared on the paper, and then everything was thrust aside." Ilya Ilyich was not behind his brothers in this respect; he too wrote and translated—he even translated Say. "Where is your work, your translations?" Stolz asked him later. "I don't know, Zakhar put them away somewhere. They are lying in the corner, I suppose," Oblomov answers. It appears, therefore, that Ilya Ilyich may have done even more than the others who had set down to their tasks as determinedly as he had. . . . Nearly all the brothers in the Oblomov family set to work in this field in spite of the difference in their respective positions and mental development. Pechorin alone looked down superciliously upon "the storymongers and writers of bourgeois dramas"; but even he wrote his memoirs. As for Beltov,⁸ he must certainly have written something; besides, he was

⁷ A character of Gogol's *Dead Souls*.

an artist, he visited the Hermitage and sat behind an easel planning to paint a large picture depicting the meeting between Biren who was returning from Siberia and Münnich who was going to Siberia. . . . What came out of this the reader knows. . . . The same Oblomovshchina reigned in the whole family. . . .

"But this is not yet life, it is only the preparatory school for life," mused Andrei Ivanovich Tentetnikov as he, together with Oblomov and the whole of that company, plodded through a host of useless subjects, unable to apply even an iota of them to actual life. "Real life is in the service." And so, all our heroes, except Onegin and Pechorin, go into the service; and for all of them this service is a useless and senseless burden, and all end up by resigning, early and with dignity. Beltov was fourteen years and six months short of qualifying for a clasp because, after working with intense zeal for a time, he soon cooled towards office work and became irritable and careless. . . . Tentetnikov had some high words with his chief, and, moreover, he wanted to be useful to the state by personally taking over the management of his estate. Rudin quarrelled with the headmaster of the high school at which he served as a teacher. Oblomov disliked the fact that all the members of the staff spoke to the chief "not in their natural but in some other kind of voices, squeaky and disgusting." He rebelled at the idea of having to explain to his chief in this voice why "he had sent a certain document to Arkhangelsk instead of Astrakhan" and so he resigned. . . . Everywhere we see the same Oblomovshchina. . . .

The Oblomovs resemble each other very closely in domestic life too:

⁸ Pechorin: the principal character of *A Hero of Our Times*; Beltov: the hero of *Who Is To Blame?*

Sound sleep, a stroll, an entertaining book,
A forest glade and a babbling brook,
A dark-eyed beauty,
Young and fresh to kiss sometimes,
The bridle of a restive steed,
Dinner to suit his fastidious needs,
A bottle of light wine,
Solitude, tranquillity,
Holy is the life Onegin leads. . . .

Word for word, except for the steed, this is the kind of life that Ilya Ilyich regards as the ideal of domestic bliss. Oblomov does not even forget the kissing of a dark-eyed beauty.

"One of the peasant women," muses Ilya Ilyich, "with a tanned neck, her sleeves rolled up above her elbows, her sly eyes shyly drooping, just a little, only for appearance sake resisting the squire's embraces, but actually enjoying them . . . only—the wife mustn't see, God forbid!" (Oblomov imagines that he is already married). . . .

The types which great talent has created are long lived; even today there are people who seem to be copies of Onegin, Pechorin, Rudin and the others, and not in the way in which they might have developed under other circumstances, but exactly in the way they were depicted by Pushkin, Lermontov and Turgenev. It is only in the public mind that they become more and more transformed into an Oblomov. It cannot be said that this transformation has already taken place. No, even today thousands of people spend their time talking, and thousands of others are willing to take this talk for deeds. But the fact that this transformation has begun is proved by the Oblomov type which Goncharov has created. His appearance would have been impossible had society, at least some section of it, realized what nonentities all those quasi-talented natures are, which it had formerly admired. In the past they decked themselves in cloaks and wigs of different fashions and were attractive because of their diverse talents; but to-

day Oblomov appears before us in his true colours, taciturn, reclining on a soft couch instead of standing on a beautiful pedestal, wearing a wide dressing-gown instead of an austere cloak. The questions: *What is he doing? What is the meaning and purpose of his life?* have been put plainly and bluntly without being obscured by any secondary questions. This is because the time for social activity has arrived, or will soon arrive. . . . And that is why we said in the beginning of this essay that we regard Goncharov's novel as a *sign of the times*.

Indeed, look at the change that has taken place in public opinion concerning the educated and smooth-tongued drones who were formerly regarded as genuine leaders of society.

Before us stands a young man, very handsome, adroit and educated. He moves in high society and is successful there; he goes to theatres, balls and masquerades; he dresses and dines magnificently; he reads books and writes well. . . . His heart is stirred only by the daily events in high society; but he also has ideas about higher problems. He is fond of talking about passions,

About age-old prejudices
And the fatal secrets of the grave . . .

He has some rules of honour: he can

A lighter quitrent substitute
For the ancient yoke of barshchina,

sometimes he can refrain from taking advantage of an unsophisticated young woman whom he does not love, and he does not overrate his successes in society. He stands sufficiently high above the society in which he moves to be conscious of its vapidty; he can even abandon this society and retire to his seat in the country, but he finds it dull there too, and does not know what to turn his hand to. . . . Out of idleness he quarrels with his friend and thoughtlessly kills

him in a duel. . . . Several years later he returns to society and falls in love with the woman whose love he had formerly spurned because it would have meant surrendering his freedom to roam about the world. . . . In this man you recognize Onegin. But look more closely . . . it is Oblomov.

Before us stands another man with a more ardent soul, with wider ambitions. This one seems to have been endowed by nature with all that which were matters of concern for Onegin. He does not have to worry about his toilet and his clothes, he is a society man without that. He does not have to grope for words or sparkle with tinsel wit, his tongue is naturally as sharp as a razor. He really despises men, for he is aware of their weaknesses. He can really capture the heart of a woman, not for a fleeting moment, but for long, perhaps forever. He can sweep away or crush every obstacle that rises in his path. In only one matter is he unfortunate: he does not know which path to take. His heart is empty and cold to everything. He has tried everything; he was sated with all the pleasures that money could buy when still a youth. He is weary of the love of society beauties because it has brought no solace to his heart. Learning has also wearied him because he has seen that it brings neither fame nor happiness; the ignorant are the happiest, and fame is a matter of luck. The dangers of the battlefield too soon bored him because he saw no sense in them, and quickly became accustomed to them. And lastly, he even grows tired of the pure and simple-hearted love of an untamed girl of whom he is really fond because even in her he finds no satisfaction for his impulses. But what are these impulses? Whither do they lead? Why does he not yield to them with every fibre of his being? Because he himself does not understand them and does not take the

trouble to think about what he should do with his spiritual strength. And so he spends his life jeering at fools, disturbing the hearts of unsophisticated young ladies, interfering in the love affairs of other people, picking quarrels, displaying valour over trifles and fighting duels over nothing at all. . . . You remember that this is the story of Pechorin, that he himself has explained his own character to Maxim Maximich to some extent, almost in the same words. . . . Please look closer: here too you will see Oblomov. . . .

But here is another man who is more conscious of the path he is treading. He not only knows that he is endowed with great strength, he knows also that he has a great goal before him. . . . It seems that he even suspects what kind of goal it is and where it is situated. He is honourable, honest (although he often fails to pay his debts), ardently discusses not trifling matters, but lofty subjects, and asserts that he is ready to sacrifice himself for the good of mankind. In his mind all problems have been solved, and everything is linked up in a living harmonious chain. He enraptures unsophisticated youths with his overpowering eloquence, and hearing him speak they too feel that they are destined to perform something great. . . . But how does he spend his life? In beginning everything and finishing nothing, attending to everything at once, passionately devoting himself to everything, but unable to devote himself to anything. . . . He falls in love with a girl who at last tells him that she is willing to give herself to him although her mother has forbidden her to do so—and he answers: "Good God! Your Mama disapproves! What an unexpected blow! God, how soon! . . . There is nothing to be done, we must be resigned. . . ." And this is an exact picture of his whole life. . . . You have already guessed that this

is Rudin. . . . No, even he is now Oblomov. If you examine this character closely and bring it face to face with the requirements of present-day life you will be convinced that this is so.

The feature common to all these men is that nothing in life is a vital necessity for them, a shrine in their hearts, a religion, organically merged with their whole being, so that to deprive them of it would mean depriving them of their lives. Everything about them is superficial, nothing is rooted in their natures. They, perhaps, do something when external necessity compels them to, just as Oblomov went visiting the places that Stolz dragged him to, he bought music and books for Olga and read what she compelled him to read; but their hearts do not lie in the things they do merely by force of circumstances. If each of them were offered gratis all the external advantages that they obtain by their work they would gladly give up working. By virtue of Oblomovshchina, an Oblomov government official would not go to his office every day if he could receive his salary and regular promotion without having to do so. A soldier would vow not to touch a weapon if he were offered the same terms and, in addition, were allowed to keep his splendid uniform, which can be very useful on certain occasions. The professor would stop delivering lectures, the student would give up his studies, the author would give up writing, the actor would never appear on the stage again and the artist would break his chisel and palette, to put it in high-flown style, if he found a way of obtaining gratis all that he now obtains by working. They only talk about lofty strivings, consciousness of moral duty and common interests; when put to the test, it all turns out to be words, mere words. Their most sincere and heartfelt striving is the striving for repose, for the dress-

ing-gown, and their very activities are nothing more than an *honourable dressing-gown* (to use an expression that is not our own) with which they cover up their vapidity and apathy. Even the best educated people, people with lively natures and warm hearts, are prone in their practical lives to depart from their ideas and plans, very quickly resign themselves to the realities of life, which, however, they never cease to revile as vulgar and disgusting. This shows that all the things they talk and dream about are really alien to them, superficial; in the depth of their hearts they cherish only one dream, one ideal—undisturbed repose, quietism, Oblomovshchina. Many even reach such a stage that they cannot conceive of man working willingly, with enthusiasm. Read the argument in *Ekonomicheskii Ukazatel'* to the effect that everybody would die of starvation resulting from idleness if by the equal distribution of wealth people were robbed of the incentive to accumulate capital. . . .⁹

Now the riddle has been answered,
A word for it has now been found.

That word is—*Oblomovshchina*.

Now, when I hear a country squire talking about the rights of man and urging the necessity of developing personality, I know from the first words he utters that he is an Oblomov.

When I hear a government official complaining that the system of administration is too complicated and cumbersome, I know that he is an Oblomov.

When I hear an army officer complaining that parades are exhausting, and boldly arguing that marching at a *slow pace* is useless, etc., I have not the slightest doubt that he is an Oblomov.

When, in the magazines, I read liberal denunciations of abuses and expressions

⁹ *Ekonomicheskii Ukazatel'* (Economic Guide): a St. Petersburg economic journal of laissez faire leanings.

of joy over the fact that at last something has been done that we have been waiting and hoping for for so long, I think to myself that all this has been written from Oblomovka.

When I am in the company of educated people who ardently sympathize with the needs of mankind and who for many years have been relating with undiminished heat the same (and sometimes new) anecdotes about bribery, acts of tyranny and lawlessness of every kind, I, in spite of myself, feel that I have been transported to old Oblomovka. . . .

Who, then, will in the end shift them from the spot to which they are rooted by the mighty word "forward!" which Gogol dreamed of, and for which Rūs has been longing and waiting for so long? So far we find no answer to this question either in society or in literature. Goncharov, who understood and was able to reveal our Oblomovshchina to us, could not, however, avoid paying tribute to the common error which is prevalent in our society to this day: he set out to bury Oblomovshchina and deliver a panegyric over its grave. "Farewell, old Oblomovka, you have outlived your time," he says through the mouth of Stolz, but what he says is not true. All Russia which has read, or will read, *Oblomov* will disagree with him. No, Oblomovka is our own motherland, her owners are our teachers, her three hundred Zakhars are always at our service. There is a large portion of Oblomov within every one of us, and it is too early to write our obituary. We and Ilya Ilyich have not deserved the description contained in the following lines:

He possessed what is more precious than intelligence: an honest and loyal heart! This is natural gold; he has carried it untarnished through life. Jostled on every side, he fell, cooled, at last fell asleep, worn out, disillusioned, having lost the

strength to live, but not his honesty and loyalty. His heart has never uttered a single false note, no mud has stuck to him. No bedecked lie will ever flatter him, and nothing can divert him to a false path; let an ocean of baseness and evil surge around him; let the whole world poison itself with venom and turn upside down—Oblomov will never bow down to the idol of falsehood, his soul will ever remain pure, bright and honest. . . . His is a soul that is crystal clear; there are few men like him; he is a pearl among the mob! You could not bribe his heart with anything, you can rely on him always and everywhere.

We shall not dilate on this passage, but every reader will observe that it contains a great untruth. Indeed, there is one good feature about Oblomov, namely, he never tries to fool anybody, but always appears what he is—an indolent drone. But pray, in what *can he be relied on?* Only, perhaps, when nothing need be done; here he will certainly distinguish himself. But if nothing need be done we can do without him. He would not bow down to the idol of evil! But why not? Because he was too lazy to get up from his couch. And if he were dragged from his couch and forced to his knees in front of that idol he would not have the strength to get up. He cannot be bribed with anything. But what is there to bribe him for? To make him move? Well, that is a really difficult task. Mud would never stick to him! Yes, as long as he lies alone on his couch everything goes well; but as soon as Tarantsev, Zatyrtsev and Ivan Matveyich arrive—ugh! What awful and disgusting things begin to take place around Oblomov. They eat him out of house and home, they drink up his wine, they drive him to drink, they induce him to sign a false promissory note (from which Stolz, somewhat unceremoniously, in the Russian manner, releases him without trial or investigation), they ruin him and say his peasants are the cause

of it, they extort enormous sums of money from him for nothing at all. He suffers all this in silence and, for that reason, of course, never utters a false note. . . .

Paying tribute to his times, Mr. Goncharov provided an antidote to Oblomov in the shape of Stolz; but as regards that individual, we must repeat the opinion that we have always expressed, namely, that literature must not run too far ahead of life. Stolz, men of an integral and active character that makes every idea a striving and translates it into deeds the moment it arises, do not yet exist in our society (we have in mind the educated section of society, which is capable of loftier strivings; among the masses, where ideas and strivings are confined to a few and very practical objects, we constantly come across such people). The author himself admits this when he says about our society:

There! Eyes have opened after slumber, brisk, wide footsteps, animated voices are heard. . . . How many Stolz with Russian names must appear!

Many must appear, there can be no doubt about that; but for the time being there is no soil for them. And that is why all we can gather from Goncharov's novel is that Stolz is a man of action, always busy with something, running about, acquiring things, saying that to live means to work, and so forth. But what he does and how he manages to do something worthwhile where others can do nothing, remains a mystery to us. He settled the affairs of the Oblomov estate for Ilya Ilyich in a trice—but how? That we do not know. He got rid of Ilya Ilyich's false promissory note in a trice—but how? That we know. He went to see the chief of Ivan Matveyich, to whom Oblomov had given the promissory note, had a friendly talk with him, and

after this Ivan Matveyich was called to the chief's office, and not only was he ordered to return the note, but was also asked to resign. It served him right, of course: but judging by this case, Stolz had not yet reached the stage of the ideal Russian public leader. Nor could he have done so; it is too early. For the time being, even if you are as wise as Solomon, all you can do in the way of public activity is, perhaps, to be a *philanthropic tavern licensee* like Murazov, who performs good deeds out of his fortune of ten million, or a noble landlord like Kostanzhoglo¹⁰—but further than that you cannot go. . . . And we cannot understand how in his activities Stolz could rid himself of all the strivings and requirements that overcame even Oblomov, how he could be satisfied with his position, rest content with his solitary, individual, exclusive happiness. . . . It must not be forgotten that under his feet there was a bog, that the old Oblomovka was near by, that he would have had to clear the forest to reach the highroad and thus escape from Oblomovshchina. Whether Stolz did anything in this direction, what he did, and how he did it—we do not know. But until we know we cannot be satisfied with his personality. . . . All we can say is that he is not the man who “will be able to pronounce in a language intelligible to the Russian soul that mighty word: ‘forward!’”

Perhaps Olga Ilyinskaya is more capable of doing this than Stolz, for she stands nearer to our new life. We have said nothing about the women that Goncharov created, nothing about Olga, or about Agafya Matveyevna Pshenitsyna (or even about Anissya or Akulina, women also with peculiar characters), because we realized that we were totally unable to say anything coherently

¹⁰ Murazov and Kostanzhoglo: characters in *Dead Souls*.

about them. To attempt to analyze the feminine types created by Goncharov would be to lay claim to expert knowledge of the feminine heart. Lacking this quality, we can only admire Goncharov's women. The ladies say that Goncharov's psychological analysis is amazing for its truth and subtlety, and in this matter the ladies must be believed. . . . We would not dare to add anything to their comment because we are afraid of setting foot in a land that is completely strange to us. But we take the liberty, in concluding this essay, to say a few words about Olga, and about her attitude towards Oblomovshchina.

In intellectual development, Olga is the highest ideal that a Russian artist can find in our present Russian life. That is why the extraordinary clarity and simplicity of her logic and the amazing harmony of heart and mind astonish us so much that we are ready to doubt even her imaginary existence and say: “There are no such young women.” But following her through the whole novel we find that she is always true to herself and to her development, that she is not merely the creation of the author, but a living person, only one that we have not yet met. She more than Stolz gives us a glimpse of the new Russian life; from her we may expect to hear the word that will consume Oblomovshchina with fire and reduce it to ashes. . . . She begins by falling in love with Oblomov, by believing in him and in the possibility of his moral transformation. . . . She toils long and stubbornly, with loving devotion and tender solicitude, in an effort to fan the spark of life in this man and to stimulate him to activity. She refuses to believe that he is so incapable of doing good; cherishing her hopes in him, her future creation, she does everything for him. She even ignores conventional propriety, goes to see him alone without telling anybody,

and, unlike him, is not afraid of losing her reputation. But with astonishing tact she at once discerns every false streak in his character, and she explains to him why it is false and not true in an extremely simple way. He, for example, writes her the letter we referred to above and later assures her that he had written it solely out of concern for her, completely forgetting himself, sacrificing himself, and so forth.

No, she answers, that is not true. If you had thought only of my happiness and had believed that for it it was necessary that we should part, you would simply have gone away without sending any letters.

He says that he fears that she will be unhappy when she learns that she had been mistaken in him, ceases to love him, and loves another. In answer to this she asks him:

Where do you see my unhappiness? I love you now and I feel good; later I will love another, hence, I will feel good with him. You need not worry about me.

This simplicity and clarity of thought are elements of the new life, not the one under the conditions of which present-day society grew up. . . . And then—how obedient Olga's will is to her heart! She continues her relations with Oblomov and persists in her love for him, in spite of unpleasantness, jeers, etc., from outside, until she is convinced of his utter worthlessness. Then she bluntly tells him that she had been mistaken in him and cannot combine her fate with his. She continues to praise and pet him while she rejects him, and even later, but by her action she annihilates him as no other Oblomov was ever annihilated by a woman. Tatyana says to Onegin at the end of the romance:

I love you (why conceal it?),
But to another my troth is plighted,
To him forever I'll be true.

And so, only formal moral duty saves her from this empty-headed fop; if she were free she would have flung her arms around his neck. Natalya leaves Rudin only because he himself was obdurate from the very outset, and on seeing him off she realizes that he does not love her and she grieves sorely over this. There is no need to speak of Pechorin, who managed only to earn the *hatred* of Princess Mary. No, Olga did not behave to Oblomov in that way. She said to him simply and gently:

I learned only recently that I loved in you what I wanted you to have, what Stolz pointed out to me, and what he and I conjured up. I loved the future Oblomov! You are unassuming and honest, Ilya; you are tender . . . like a dove; you hide your head under your wing—and you want nothing more; you want to coo in the loft all your life. . . . But I am not like that: that is not enough for me; I want something more, but what—I don't know!

And so she leaves Oblomov and strives towards her *something*, although she does not quite know what it is. At last she finds it in Stolz, she joins him and is happy; but even here she does not halt, does not come to a dead stop. Certain vague problems and doubts disturb her, there are things she is trying to fathom. The author did not fully reveal her emotions to us and we may err in our assumptions concerning their nature. But it seems to us that her heart and mind were disturbed by the spirit of the new life, to which she was immeasurably nearer than Stolz. We think so because we find several hints of this in the following dialogue:

"What shall I do? Yield and pine?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "Arm yourself with

firmness and serenity. We two are not Titans," he continued, embracing her. "We shall not follow the Manfreds and Fausts and challenge disturbing problems to mortal combat, nor shall we accept their challenge. We shall bow our heads and wait humbly until the hard times pass, and life, happiness, will smile again. . . ."

"But suppose they never leave us: suppose grief disturbs us more and more?" she asked.

"Well, we'll accept it as a new element of life. . . . But no, that cannot be, it cannot happen to us! It is not your grief alone, it is the common ailment of mankind. You have suffered only one drop. . . . All this is frightful when a man loses his grip on life, when he has no support. But in our case. . . ."

He did not specify the *our case*, but it is evident that it is *he* who does not wish to "challenge disturbing problems to mortal combat," that it is *he* who wants to "humbly bow his head. . . ." She is ready for this fight, she longs for it and is always afraid that her tranquil happiness with Stolz may grow into something that resembles the Oblomov apathy. Clearly, she does not wish to bow her head and wait humbly until the hard times pass, in the hope that life will smile again later. She left Oblomov when she ceased to believe in him; she will leave Stolz if she ceases to believe in him. And this will happen if she continues to be tormented by problems and doubts, and if he continues to advise her to accept them as a new element of life and bow her head. She is thoroughly familiar with Oblomovshchina, she will be able to discern it in all its different shapes, and under all masks, and will always be able to find strength enough to pronounce ruthless judgement on it. . . .