WHAT IS OBLOMOVISM?

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."


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 Rüs who is able to pronounce this mighty word . . . Gogol.1

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

... 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 Ongedin; 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 must 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. His position 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 incommodate 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, to put on his coat, carefully putting it on, to comb his hair, to do everything else that he wants to do. 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 by the characters who inhabit Oblomov. They 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 Oblomov of the ability to move of his own volition. That is not the case at all. Oblomov 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 lis
tened to a beetle droning and followed
climbing over fences and jumping
across ditches. When everybody in 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. Be
sides, gentleness which grows into timidy
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
flunky is; nobody treats his subordi
nates 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 lat
er 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 over
come. Willingly he confines his activi
ties to his three hundred Zakhar. If he
had a hundred, a thousand times more
Zakhars,he would meet with no oppo
sition, and he would boldly kick in the face everybody who had any dealings with
him. Conduct of this kind is not to be
not evidence of a brutal nature; Oblom
mov himself, and all those around him,
would regard it as very natural and nec
essary. . . . 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 pro
vided him with an income that did not
exceed ten thousand rubles in assign
ates; 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 ambi
tions.

Sometimes he liked to picture himself
an invincible general, compared with whom
not only Napoleon but Alexander the
Great was a nonentity; he would picture
himself up to bellicose and heroic ambi
tions. Sometimes he would picture himself
as a great thinker or artist who is fol
lowed by devoted followers; sometimes
ominous and generous.

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 individuality, the slave of every
woman, of every newcomer; the slave of
every rascal who wishes to get him un
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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 meepl 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 composition, Ivanov—ideal blies 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 piled up in a corner and indifferently watched the peasant comply with the regulations, or how he had to do his task, or how he would have had to develop under somewhat different conditions. In his present position he cannot find an occupation to which he would be inclined at all. And wished to write, but diligence to him was loathsomest; nothing From his pen would come.

Rudin too launched out in this field and was forced by necessity to the chosen "the first pages of the essays and works he intended to write." Tentetnikov 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 the rest in 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, and all the others who had set down to their tasks as determined by the inherent meaning of the work in this field in spite of the differences 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 Bel'tov,° he must certainly have written something; besides, he was 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 Miznap who was going to Siberia.° What came out of this the reader knows... The same Oblomovshchina reigned in the whole family....

° Pechorin; the principal character of A Hero of Our Times; Bel'tov; the hero of Who Is To Blame?
Sound asleep, a stroll, an entertaining book, A forest glade and a babbling brook, A dark-eyed beauty, Young and fresh to kiss sometimes, The world, a battle, a festal meet, A forest glade and a babbling brook, A dark-eyed beauty, Young and fresh to kiss sometimes, The world, a battle, a festal meet.

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 stirrily only in 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 quizzing 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 vapidly; 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 her. . . 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.

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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 nature 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 told 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 not be tempted 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-flying style, if he were paid without trial or investigation, they ruin without pay or investigation. They eat him out of house and home, they drink up his wine, they drive him to drink, they induce him to move? Well, that is a really difficult task. Mud would never stick to him! But where is there to bribe him for? To make him move? Well, that is really a 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 Tarantyev, Zaterty and Ivan Matveyich arrive—ugh! What awful and disgusting. This shows that really alien to them, superficial; in all the things they talk and dream about they get no further than idleness if by the equal distribution of wealth people were robbed of the incentive to accumulate capital.

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 personal liberty, 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 cumbrous, I know that he is an Oblomov. When I hear an army officer complaining that parades are exhausting, I know from the first words he utters that he is an Oblomov. When, in the magazines, I read liberal rantings, I know that the author is an Oblomov. When I see a woman of fashion in a ball gown I know that she is an Oblomov.

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of joy over the fact that at last something has been done that we have been waiting and hoping 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 Rus' 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 de- liver 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 Zakharas 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 Il'yich 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 worn out, disillusioned, having lost the strength to live, but not his honesty and loyalty. His heart has never uttered a single false note, to 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 and 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 falsehood, why not? Because he was too lazy to get up from his couch. And if he were dragged from his couch and forced to move 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 Tarantyev, Zaterty and Ivan Mate- vyich 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—by the Russian manner, released—without trial or investigation), they ruin him and say his peasants are the cause of...
... 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. Stolzes, men of an integrative 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, 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 we can gather from Goncharov's novel 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 know. He went to see the chief of Ivan Matveyevich, to whom Oblomov had given the promissory note, had a friendly talk with him, and after this Ivan Matveyevich 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 deeds outside of his fortune of ten million, or a noble landlord like Kostanzhoglo, who suffers all this in silence, and, for that reason, does not 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, 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 we can gather from Goncharov's novel 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 know. He went to see the chief of Ivan Matveyevich, to whom Oblomov had given the promissory note, had a friendly talk with him, and...
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.