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Crítica cívica russa e o sonho idílico em Oblómov, de Ivan Goncharov

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Abstract: Nikolai Dobroliubov's and Dmitrii Pisarev's reviews of Ivan Goncharov's novel *Oblomov* have gone into history as exemplars of Russian civic criticism. Their main argument centers on the eponymous protagonist's seeming inability to exit his lethargic condition, which they interpret as a symptom of the Russian status quo at the time of the Great Reforms. In the present article, I argue that the case of *Oblomov* demonstrates the limits of the civics' mimetic criticism. The dominant chronotope of the novel, namely the idyll, indicates that *Oblomov* is not in essence a novel about the hero's inability to change (which would presuppose a willingness to, or desire for, said change), but rather about his longing for a restorative past which is ultimately inaccessible to him.

Resumo: As resenhas de Nikolai Dobroliúbov e Dmitri Píssarev do romance *Oblómov*, de Ivan Gontcharóv, entraram para a história como exemplares da crítica cívica russa. O seu principal argumento se concentra na aparente incapacidade do protagonista homônimo de sair da sua condição letárgica, condição que os críticos consideram ser sintomática do *status quo* russo na época das Grandes Reformas. No presente artigo, defendo que o caso de *Oblómov* demonstra os limites da crítica mimética de autoria desses representantes da crítica cívica. O cronotopo dominante do romance, isto é, o idílio, indica que *Oblómov* não é, essencialmente, um romance sobre a incapacidade do herói de se transformar (o que pressuporia uma vontade ou desejo de tal mudança), mas sim sobre o seu anseio por um passado restaurador que, em última análise, lhe é inacessível.

Keywords: Russian civic criticism; *Oblomov*; Ivan Goncharov; Idyll; Chronotope

Palavras-chave: Crítica cívica russa; *Oblómov*; Ivan Gontcharóv; Idílio; Cronotopo

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In the aftermath of the publication of Ivan Goncharov's (1812–1891) novel *Oblomov* in 1859, two of the foremost Russian civic critics of the time, Nikolai Dobroliubov (1836–1861) and Dmitrii Pisarev (1840–1868), responded to the novel with reviews in which they, each in their own way, asked why Oblomov appeared to be unable to change his ways. Goncharov¹ foregrounds the protagonist's inability to change when Stolz (Shtol'ts), his half-German childhood friend, diagnoses his rejection of any life goal as "Oblomovshchina" in Part II, Chapter IV of the novel.² Oblomovshchina renders the protagonist powerless when he is faced with shifting living (primarily material) conditions; like a disease, Oblomovshchina has been traditionally understood as a condition imposed upon the hero, eliminating or curtailing his power of agency in the process. Yet Il'ia Il'ich Oblomov's nostalgia for the idyllic countryside and seeming lack of interest in his present condition can also be interpreted as a conscious and voluntary refusal to define a forward-looking goal for his existence. Rather than accepting an extraneous goal for his life, Oblomov prefers to reflect and remember the past, which remains safely ensconced in his memory and untouched by

1 GONCHAROV, 2008, p. 196, and GONCHAROV, 1977, v. 4, p. 183.

2 Subsequent references to the novel will be to the English translation by Marian Schwartz only (GONCHAROV, 2008), checked against the Russian edition (GONCHAROV, 1977, v. 4). "Oblomovshchina" is sometimes called "oblomovitis" in English, underscoring its quasi-medical diagnosis.

his present condition. From someone unable to change, then, Oblomov may instead turn into someone for whom the past, not the future, is the endpoint of his existence.

This article suggests that this seemingly inconsequential shift in understanding the limits of Oblomov's agency exposes a key weakness in the argument of the civic critics. While they saw in Oblomov's dissatisfaction with his present condition a symptom of Russia's revolutionary potential, they were unwilling to grant freedom of action to a character whose passivity appeared to run counter to their principles. At its most basic, then, the civic critics' response to the novel exposes the rift between their understanding of the function of literature on the one hand, and literature's own resistance to ideological and philosophical schemes on the other. This essay is divided into two parts, corresponding roughly to the two opposing sides of this rift. In the first part, I read Oblomov's dream as a manifestation of the chronotope of the idyll, and discuss the implications of such a reading to the development of the plot and of the novel's conception of time. In the second part, I focus on Dobroliubov's and Pisarev's readings of the novel and, more broadly, on their conception of the social or civic role of literature. I aim to show that their progressive views of the protagonist of Goncharov's novel were ultimately incompatible with the hero's professed idyllic inclinations, thereby exposing the limitations of the civic critics' own aesthetics.

Throughout the novel, Oblomov does not take any action in order to improve (or even maintain) his standards of living. Instead of taking over the administration of his loss-making estate, he outsources it to an obscure acquaintance of Tarant'ev's, a friend whose only claim to Oblomov's friendship is their provenance from the same region of Russia. Oblomov's attempt at a sentimental relationship with Olga collapses with his failure to provide reassurances that their material conditions would suffice for life together. Whether voluntarily or through the intercession of Stolz or Olga, Oblomov does not act in his own benefit, and it is only after Stolz uses his connections to retrieve control of Oblomovka on Oblomov's behalf that the protagonist's material comfort noticeably improves.

His last days are spent immersed in recollections of his childhood in Oblomovka superimposed upon his own present idyllic life on Vyborgskaia storona, a remote and sedate part of St. Petersburg that resembles a modern version of a pastoral setting. He lives there with Agafia Matveevna, the widow whom he married and who gave him a son: "A silence from somewhere long ago dawned on him, a familiar pendulum swung, he could hear the snap of a bitten thread, and familiar words were repeated and a whisper [...] The present and past merged and blended".³ The merging of past and present, melancholic as it may appear to be, constitutes for Oblomov the achievement of happiness late in his life. After Oblomov's death, a distraught Agafia Matveevna takes her brother back in the house, her life irreversibly changed following the protagonist's departure: "She realized that her life had played itself out and was done shining, that God had put a soul into her life and pulled it back out".⁴ Zakhar, Oblomov's servant since his childhood, survives from Agafia's charity after his master's death, but ultimately becomes a beggar following her death. Oblomov's death thus brings change, albeit portrayed in tragic tones, to those who depended on him during his life, namely his widow and the lackey Zakhar, both of whom become victims of her brother's pettiness. Oblomov's son, on the other hand, had been raised under the tutelage of Stolz, in a sign that the Oblomov family estate might continue in the family after Ilia Ilich's death.

Oblomov regards with indifference his living conditions and the preservation of his assets and estate; conversely, these are things that Stolz associates with the moral salvation of his friend, and which constitute therefore the central point of his lifelong battle to spur Oblomov into action. Not just as a material condition, Oblomov's living situation also poses "a metaphysical issue," in Vsevolod Setchkarev's phrasing: "Oblomov realizes that his mind is gradually atrophying. He is well aware of his growing apathy. He does not *want* to do anything about it however, because inactivity becomes more and more a metaphysical issue for him, a kind of persuasion,

³ GONCHAROV, 2008, p. 528.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 538.

a philosophical system, in which reason and will finally coincide".⁵ "Reason" and "will" coincide when both faculties acquire a single referent or group of connected referents in Oblomov's worldview: the past, memory, and imagination, particularly a backward-looking vision that would be capable of enlivening the past. Milton Ehre argues that, through dreams Oblomov "reveals his inner self and achieves a depth and range beyond the single plane of caricature".⁶ These dreams hark back, first and foremost, to Oblomov's childhood, "the crucial experience of man's life," which he accesses by means of "memory, his most important mental faculty".⁷

The return to childhood is depicted via the chronotope of the idyll. The concept of the chronotope was introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin, most notably in his long essay "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," to denote the unity of time and space as it is represented in literary works. Chronotopes are often associated with specific genres, yet the novel, being a particularly malleable literary form in Bakhtin's conception, is especially capable of accommodating different chronotopes within the boundaries of a single text. *Oblomov*, Bakhtin claims, develops the "Stendhal-Flaubert life of development" of a *Bildungsroman* (itself a chronotopic form) in which the idyll is broken apart and demolished by the forces of the protagonist's maturation in society.⁸ Notably in *Oblomov*, the idyll persists as a goal to which the protagonist yearns to return. The idyllic chronotope, Bakhtin writes, is marked by

an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one's own home. Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one's children and their children will live.⁹

5 SETCHKAREV, 1974, p. 134.

6 EHRE, 1974, p. 160

7 Ibid., p. 201.

8 BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 234–5.

9 Ibid., p. 225.

Time in the idyll is thus predominantly cyclical: it follows the sequence of seasons that characterizes economic activity in the countryside (planting crops, tending for them, and harvesting during specific times of the year) rather than any sort of historical time. This causes Bakhtin to declare that “the idyll does not know the trivial details of everyday life”.¹⁰ Predictable and routine events in the life of an individual and their community, such as births, deaths, daily labor, weddings, and meals, acquire substantial importance in the idyll, but come to transcend their semblance of being quotidian or unremarkable: “Anything that has the appearance of common everyday life, when compared with the central unrepeatable events of biography and history, here begins to look precisely like the most important things in life”.¹¹ As a result, the absence of progressing time in the idyll precludes the possibility of a life (or a plot) made up of non-routine events organized in logical progression and in forward-moving time.

Like the idyll, uniformity of space and absence of temporal progression characterize Oblomovka in Chapter IX, Part I of *Oblomov*. Alluding to Oblomov’s dream, Setchkarev writes that “The days of this peaceful life were segmented by meals and their meticulous preparation, the years by religious feasts and family anniversaries, again carefully prepared and always falling into identical patterns”.¹² In addition to the description of the expanses and the series of picturesque scenes around the estate, the narrator depicts the smooth flow of the river (“The river raced merrily”),¹³ another evocation of the continuity and cyclicity of existence. The sequence of seasons is described as a precise and repetitive process: “The year completed its cycle in due and untroubled course”.¹⁴ This corner of the world is even immune to that record of unexpected events, the newspaper, with its news of natural disasters such

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 226.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 226.

¹² SETCHKAREV, 1974, p. 129.

¹³ GONCHAROV, 2008, p. 104.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 105.

as storms and lightning: “The newspapers never ran anything of the kind about this corner blessed by God”.¹⁵ The impression that the infant Oblomov is living in a fairy-tale land is reinforced by his nanny’s tales, which feature a landscape and characters that hardly differ from Oblomovka and Oblomov themselves:

Then Oblomov dreamed of another time. One endless winter’s night he pressed close to his nurse, and she whispered a story to him about a fantastic place where there was no night or cold, where miracles happened all the time, the rivers flowed with milk and honey, and no one did anything all year round, and all they knew, all the livelong day, were fine lads like Ilya Ilich and beauties the likes of which no tale has told nor pen described, living lives of pleasure.¹⁶

Language, as manifested in these children’s stories, is static and timeless: Oblomov’s father and grandfather had heard these same stories when they were children, from their own nannies and tutors, “down through the ages and generations”.¹⁷ Such utter stagnation leads to a condition very similar to death in Oblomovka.¹⁸ The narrator refers to the quiet that reigns in the house after lunch as a “Dead silence”.¹⁹ For those who do not belong to this idyllic universe, entering it is akin to an experience of death: “Entering a hut, in vain would you call out. Dead silence would be the reply”.²⁰

To those who belong to the idyll, however, it is rather the outside world that reminds them of death: at the end of the chapter and the dream, Oblomov remembers another instance, the second in the dream, of coming out of the house when unattended by the nanny or his mother. It is a winter day, and he runs out to play with other children in the snow. As he is brought back in the house by concerned servants and members of the family, they think he died for having been out

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁸ EHRE, 1974, p. 182.

¹⁹ GONCHAROV, 2008, p. 117.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

in the cold: "At home they had despaired of ever seeing him again, considering him lost. But at the sight of him, alive and unharmed, his parents' joy was indescribable".²¹ To Oblomov and his circle, existence inside Oblomovka, seemingly timeless, immutable, and space-bound, is real life, blissfully devoid of metaphysical considerations: "Did they ever ask themselves why life had been granted them? God only knows. If so, how did they reply? In all likelihood, they didn't".²² While their stupor may resemble death to those who come from outside, to them change itself is associated with death, insofar as it would ultimately break the interminable sequence of days identical to each other: "They would have been sorry if circumstances had brought changes, of whatever kind, to their daily life. Longing [*toska*] would have gnawed at them had tomorrow not resembled today, and the day after tomorrow not resembled tomorrow".²³ In the dream, past, present, and future merge to create something resembling timelessness.

Although Oblomov is not in his idyllic estate, throughout the novel he is infected with a similar resistance to change, skeptical as he is that any action would improve his lot. Having irretrievably lost in actuality the timeless existence of Oblomovka, not due to his inaction but rather due to his action (having left the estate to study and serve in the city) and to the natural cycle of life and death of those with whom he shared his existence in childhood, Oblomov can do nothing but remember, using memory as the very means through which he can revive that idyll. The result is that the idyll, as a chronotope that subverts the temporal boundaries of each individual life and between individual lives,²⁴ and which rejects a forward-moving and forward-looking time (what we usually call a narrative), is retrieved or evoked through a process that consists exactly of setting time into a historical framework, of giving it the physical characteristics of historical time itself.

21 Ibid., p. 151.

22 Ibid., p. 128.

23 Ibid., p. 140.

24 BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 225.

In other words, Oblomov's dream, his recollection of the idyll, is at the same time a violation of that idyll, as it fixates it into a specific (and inaccessible) time in the past, namely his own childhood. Conversely, Oblomov, existing in the present time, longs to return to a past time posited as (atemporal) idyll, yielding a paradox: in order to reenact this idyll, Oblomov has to set it in past time, to give it temporality, and to acknowledge his own existence as a being trapped in historical time, endowed with a past and with a present, and facing a future which he cannot control. As I will demonstrate in the following section, the civic critics too struggled to reconcile Oblomov's existence in time (and their interpretation of *Oblomov* as a document of its own time) with Oblomovka's simultaneously existence as idyll and historically situated recollection.

Stolz ascribes to Oblomovshchina the ultimate cause of Oblomov's perceived decadence from heir of an estate whose territory spreads as far as the eye can see ("This entire corner, for fifteen or twenty versts around, presented a series of picturesque studies and cheerful, smiling landscapes")²⁵ to an anonymous and powerless citizen living on the outskirts of St. Petersburg. Yet, to civic critics such as Dobroliubov, Oblomov is not just a pathetic character; he is an indictment of the stagnation assailing all spheres of Russian life following the highs of the country's triumph over Napoleon, in a long process that culminated in the Empire's defeat in the Crimean War, three years before the publication of Goncharov's novel. It was not just Oblomov who suffered from Oblomovshchina, then, but all of Russia. But to what extent is this extrapolation warranted? All literary commentary is allegorical interpretation, as Northrop Frye points out,²⁶ and so the argument that Oblomov's condition of lethargy and inaction is emblematic of the Russian condition is entirely defensible. But could it be that, in their urge to draw an analogy between Oblomov and Russia, Dobroliubov and Pisarev attribute less agency to the novel's protagonist than he is due?

25 GONCHAROV, 2008, p. 104.

26 FRYE, 1990, p. 89-92.

The civic critics wrote from a tradition, inherited from their mentor Nikolai Chernyshevskii (1828–1889), that regards literature as a mimetic art form fulfilling primarily a utilitarian function, namely to depict the status quo and to show a path towards the resolution of social problems. To these critics, the value of a work of literature is directly related to its ability to be read as a mimetic reproduction of reality. Thus they engaged in a modality of allegorical interpretation whereby individual characters and their actions constitute a commentary on the national condition. This did not always go well with literary scholars in the twentieth century, in the wake of historical poetics, formalism, structuralism, and various other schools founded on immanent readings of literary texts. Setchkarev dismisses Dobroliubov's review of *Oblomov* by pointing out its (many) misinterpretations and undue extrapolations, as well as by claiming that the critic "discussed the novel exclusively as a kind of social pamphlet in keeping with the trend of the time".²⁷ Ehre is more sympathetic to Dobroliubov, calling his article "influential (and perceptive)",²⁸ yet his own analysis of the novel owes very little to "What Is Oblomovshchina?" ("Chto takoe oblomovshchina?," 1859). Evgenii Lampert dedicates one chapter each in his book to profound analyses of the theories and ideas of Dobroliubov and Pisarev; perhaps due to the fact that literature as praxis was always subordinated to ideas within their philosophical conceptions, however, little room is given to their reviews of literary works, and Lampert says nothing about divergences between the critics' views of the novels and what the novels themselves contained.²⁹

Although a detailed discussion of literary realism and mimesis lies beyond the scope of the present essay, the civic critics' approach raises the question of whether, and if so to what extent, an ostensibly fictional work of literature can be analyzed as a mimetic reproduction of reality. In "What Is Oblomovshchina?,"

27 SETCHKAREV, 1974, p. 139.

28 EHRE, 1974, p. 196, fn. 93.

29 Lampert's critical stance regarding these works of literature does not help him much to this end. Although he admits that *Oblomov* is a "remarkable novel," he criticizes "its vapid and slovenly style" (LAMPERT, 1965, p. 270)

Dobroliubov³⁰ asserts that “Goncharov appears before us above all as an artist with the ability to express the whole gamut of manifestations of life. [...] Is this the highest ideal of artistic activity, or is this perhaps even a shortcoming that reveals the artist’s weakness in his impressionable nature?”³¹ To Dobroliubov, in writing *Oblomov* Goncharov might have gone beyond the acceptable limits of mimicry, as his criticism of the fastidiousness of descriptions and of the static plot demonstrate. Such a view of *Oblomov* is particularly surprising coming from a critic who “refused to take works of art at their face value until he saw them as symptoms of the condition of men, and only after having discovered their core of truth relevant to men”.³² For it is Dobroliubov himself who claims that Goncharov’s novel is an emblem of the times: “In the type of Oblomov and in all this Oblomovshchina we see more than simply the felicitous product of a strong talent; we find in it a literary work of Russian life, an emblem of the epoch”.³³ Evidently Dobroliubov, in spite of his criticism of Goncharov’s style, finds his novel to be useful enough to be able to draw conclusions about real life from it. By such a term as “emblem of the [present] epoch,” Dobroliubov sees in Oblomov a dominant type in Russian society of the mid-nineteenth century, a contemporary manifestation of a type that traces its genealogy back to Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin, Lermontov’s Pechorin, and others.

Literary fiction and reality are even more closely connected in Pisarev’s writing; to him, the “quality of a work of art (...) was determined by its subject-matter: what had meaning were the facts and the words which conveyed them. What failed to give an authentic sensation of life was wholly dispensable”.³⁴ In focusing on those elements of the literary work that have direct repercussions on his perception of reality, Pisarev ends up privileging “a psychological analysis of literary characters and an

30 DOBROLIUBOV, 1975, p. 179-180.

31 All translations from Dobroliubov’s and Pisarev’s writings below are mine.

32 LAMPERT, 1965, p. 263.

33 DOBROLIUBOV, 1975, p. 181.

34 LAMPERT, 1965, p. 334.

anatomy of their intellectual and moral attitudes”,³⁵ treating characters as if they were exclusively living human beings. Pisarev states that “Creative work with a preconceived practical goal is an illegitimate occurrence; it must be ascribed to those writers who are lacking in mighty talent, who instead are endowed with a moral sense capable of turning them into good citizens, but not artists”.³⁶ Pisarev thus treads a fine line between the negation of an external goal to a work of literature and the necessity of incorporating this same work into a network of meaning related to reality in order to measure its value. For characters to be regarded as real, it is necessary for the work of fiction to be freed from any indoctrinating role that might be imposed on it. Yet if the work of literature cannot *a priori* possess any moral goal, then who is to impose this network of extrinsic meaning, of external associations, on the literary work? To Pisarev (unlike to Dobroliubov), literary realism cannot quite be associated with absolute mimicry. It is instead up to the critic or reader to contextualize and find the necessary associations with reality in the work of literature. For example, referring to Oblomov’s apathy in his 1859 review of the novel, Pisarev writes that

This apathy consists of a phenomenon common to all humankind, it is expressed in the most variegated forms and is engendered by the most heterogeneous causes; yet throughout these instances the dreadful question plays the central role: “what should I live for? towards what should I work?”—a question to which one is often unable to find a satisfactory answer.³⁷

Pisarev seems to reach for a proto-existentialist reading of the protagonist, turning him into a Sisyphean archetype; along the way, however, he seemingly deprives Oblomov of the specificity granted by his embeddedness in a specific work of literature by asserting that Oblomov’s apathy is a universal condition elicited by several causes, not all of which would be relevant in Oblomov’s own case.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 336.

³⁶ PISAREV, 1955, v. 1, p. 3.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

To his credit, Pisarev ascribes a measure of psychological depth to Oblomov and other characters in the novel, even though the most obvious reason for the protagonist's apathy—namely the temporal barrier that separates him from the idyll of his dreams—seems to escape the critic. In his turn, Dobroliubov is apparently unwilling to consider Oblomov's motivations altogether. His consideration of life in Oblomovka is fully incompatible with the very notion of the idyll that Oblomov attempts to rescue: "In Oblomovka, nobody asked themselves: what is life for, what kind of life is this, what is its meaning and purpose?"³⁸ The dismissive answer to this question from those who lived in Oblomovka is fully in line with their blissful ignorance of non-cyclical, finite personal time—that is, of individual death. Dobroliubov saw in Oblomov a character susceptible to change in the present time, that is, a character who would be willing to realize in the present that timeless, idyllic past that constitutes his nostalgic object of desire:

Drawing his ideal bliss, Ilia Ilich did not even think of asking himself about the intrinsic meaning of this ideal, did not think of confirming its legality and truth, did not ask himself: where will these conservatories and greenhouses come from, who will take care of maintaining them and for what purpose will he utilize them?³⁹

Dobroliubov sees Oblomov's dream as a forward-facing dream, a manifestation of a desire that would find its materialization in the future, and towards which, so the critic appears to suggest, Oblomov would strive in his life. This notion, which posits a merger of the idyll of Oblomovka with a kind of utopia projected onto future time, has been taken up more recently by Sonja Koroliov, who argues that Oblomovka itself, as Oblomov envisions it, does not really correspond with the "historical" estate of the protagonist's past and instead constitutes a merging of past and future in its own right.⁴⁰ In contrast to this view, I see in Oblomovka fundamentally the manifestation of a past irretrievable except through memory

38 DOBROLIUBOV, 1975, p. 184.

39 Ibid., p. 184.

40 KOROLIOV, 2021, p. 105-106.

(or imagination); to link it with a forward-facing utopia would entail the possibility (though by no means the likelihood) that such a utopia could still be achieved at some point in future time. Whether a chronotope confined to the past (as I argue) or one that constitutes a combination of the two non-present timeframes (as Koroliov suggests), what stands out is the paradoxically immaterial character of the estate, given the fact that it does not exist concretely in the present, and that—as Dobroliubov himself points out—the material conditions of its existence are entirely irrelevant to Oblomov (hence the idyllic, and potentially utopian, nature of the place).

Teleology is a central tenet of the civic critics' worldview: humankind is progressing towards a common goal, and it is up to the arts to depict, or reflect on, the current conditions that necessitate interventions for the good of humankind. Utopia might thus seem to be a suitable expression of the endpoint of human progress; so could the idyll, if appropriately contextualized. Notably, science and reason, being central agents of progress for the civic critics, would need to be incorporated into either utopia or idyll, yet neither Oblomov nor the other inhabitants of Oblomovka are guided by rationality or scientific inquiry—see, again, Dobroliubov's horror at Oblomovka's indifference to the material conditions underlying Oblomov's illusion of plenty. Against the civic critics' teleology, the entire novel that follows Oblomov's dream in Part I is consistent proof of Oblomov's ineptitude to accomplish anything in the present or towards a better future. While Dobroliubov implicitly assumes that Oblomov would be guided by a spirit of progress, the protagonist is instead a living subversion of teleology: to him, there is no achievable future that would differ in any significant manner from his present, and both of these time periods are characterized solely by the absence of that idyllic timelessness to which Oblomov constantly returns in his dreams.

If Oblomov will not consider the issue of how paradise on earth will be maintained in its material splendor, someone else will, namely Stolz. Stolz, who eventually takes over the administration of the estate and who raises Oblomov's son

(named after Stolz himself), rejects the seemingly pointless musings of Oblomov and replaces them with concrete action that will contribute to his material welfare and, as Dobroliubov suggests, to the economic development of Russia. Here Dobroliubov establishes a dichotomy involving the two characters that spills, again, into extra-literary reality:

Paying tribute to his epoch, Mr. Goncharov also portrayed the antidote to Oblomov—Stolz. But in regards to this individual we must once again repeat our constant opinion: literature cannot rush too far ahead of life. In the life of our society we still do not find people, such as Stolz, with a solid and active character in which every thought becomes an aspiration and turns into action.⁴¹

Stolz is thus rejected as a potential positive hero because he represents a type not yet concretized in Russian society. Yet the civic critics' diagnosis of Oblomovshchina as a condition assailing Russia as a whole may constitute, by the same token, an unwarranted extrapolation: as my discussion above has demonstrated, Oblomov's idyll represents an imagined past that can be reconstituted only through a highly individualized memory. This idyll (and Oblomov along the way) strives to exist outside of history, not as part of it; rather than an "emblem of [his] time" (and thus potentially a diagnosis of a contemporary condition) Oblomov resembles, instead, the Benjaminian archetype of the melancholy who wishes to transcend the boundaries of time.⁴²

Oblomov's inability to change is a voluntary choice, and herein lies a key difference between the protagonist of Goncharov's novel and the civic critics' conception of Oblomov as an individual who, by dint of the circumstances, is unable to act despite his own will. It was seemingly inconceivable to the civic critics that any character would exercise free will by yearning for a long-lost, perhaps partially invented, past; instead, Dobroliubov was convinced that Oblomov was working—ineffectively—towards reconstituting that past in the future, while Pisarev saw in Goncharov's protagonist an emblem, not of

41 DOBROLIUBOV, 1975, p. 206-207.

42 BENJAMIN, 2009.

his time, but of a universal human condition, a kind of proto-Marxist alienation from the material conditions of production, and proto-existentialist questioning of the meaning of life. The issue is not necessarily that their interpretations and extrapolations may be unfounded (although it is not always easy to see *Oblomov* in Dobroliubov's review of the novel). Rather, in their urge to draw pragmatic lessons from a work of literature, Dobroliubov and Pisarev quite consciously overlook the implications of *Oblomov's* own poetics, such as the role of the idyllic dream in precluding any kind of forward-looking solution to Oblomov's existential plight. In eliding the boundaries between literary reality and social reality, the civic critics ended up unduly neglecting the extraordinary complexity of lived existence and literature alike.

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