Interpreting the Dream of Oblomov

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One of the most famous dreams in literature is the 'dream of Oblomov', centrepiece of the novel *Oblomov* by the Russian author Ivan Alexandrovich Goncharov. This novel is celebrated for its psychological and social insight, but notorious for its lack of action. In the first 150 pages the main character, Ilya Ilyich Oblomov, a landowning nobleman who lives in his flat in St. Petersburg, does not do much more than lie on his bed, sleeping, dreaming, pondering life, sighing to himself, sometimes yelling at his servant Zakhar and then dozing off again. The most common expression on his face, when he is at all awake, is one of serene unconcern. He appears to be a totally insignificant hero to begin with, and our impression of him hardly improves as the story develops.

Nonetheless, as soon as it was published, the novel was recognised as a masterpiece of literature, in Russia as well as abroad. The 'dream of Oblomov' in particular, with its elaborate descriptions of the immobility and inefficiency of Russian country life, was well received. The question is, why? What makes a book about such a seemingly unattractive protagonist interesting? In what way does the description of such a sleepy and dull kind of human existence appeal to the reader? Surely it is not in itself exciting, or for that matter encouraging, to read about human beings who suffer from pathological laziness to such an extent that they quite literally do not bother to move a finger.

And another question: what about the function of the dream in the novel? Is it merely an aesthetically satisfying, additional description of stagnation? (This is apparently a central theme.) Could it have been omitted without lessening our understanding? Or does it, like a real dream, provide us with unexpected, interesting, essentially intuitive information through which we grasp something of the deeper meaning of the daily events described?

For the answers to these questions I suggest that we invoke the help of depth psychological theory, in this case Jungian, and investigate the symbolic content of the dream. We may thus gain some insight not only into where the dream of Oblomov fits in the context of the novel as a whole, but also into how the dream

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contributes to our understanding of the universal dimension of Oblomov's lack of vitality.

Jungian Psychology and Art

Of special interest for our purposes is what Jung says about the correspondence between works of art and dreams. According to Jung, works of art and dreams have a lot in common. Both are manifestations of the unconscious and both have a compensatory function, in that they offer a symbolic representation of a state of affairs that is essentially compensatory of existing conscious views on the same subject. As in a dream, in a work of art an autonomous unconscious reality takes over and essentially shapes the book, the painting, the symphony. Therefore the result may sometimes be surprising to the artist him- or herself, being not what he or she consciously intended to create.

Dreams and works of art differ in that art is seen as a product essentially of the collective unconscious, whereas dreams can, but do not necessarily, reflect something of collective importance; unlike (most) dreams, works of art are compensatory not only of the conscious views of the artist, but also of the conscious views that dominate a culture. Because of this, undemocratic rulers often feel the urge to suppress free artistic expression. Depending on how tyrannical they are, they cannot allow alternative views on life, least of all views that, intentionally or otherwise, reveal a hidden, collective inclination to disapprove of the official perspective.

The Contents of the Novel

In order to see our dream in its context, it may be helpful to sum up in a few words what happens in the novel.

The book consists of four parts, in the first of which the landowner Oblomov spends his days lying in bed, sleeping, eating and developing some vague plans for his estate, which he himself takes seriously. He is dressed in his soft Persian dressing gown. He has been living like this for about eight years.

When we enter the story, Oblomov's peace of mind is most cruelly disturbed by two terrible, more or less sudden problems. He has had a letter with bad

financial news about his estate: his income will be 2000 roubles less than the year before. And secondly, he has to move to another apartment, because the owner has plans to convert the building.

His strategy for coping with these problems is twofold. First of all he forbids his servant Zakhar to bring him any more bad news, and secondly he remains in bed. When he isn't asleep or quarrelling with Zakhar he sighs things like: 'Oh dear, you can't run away from life. It gets at you everywhere.' Or he suddenly cries out: 'Mother of God, I'm in such a hurry.' And then he quietly resumes his nap. This goes on for about 150 pages.

In the second part a certain Andrey Karlovich Stolz, a half-German friend of Oblomov who grew up with him, now a very successful businessman with a good nature and a lot of well-directed energy, forces Oblomov to get dressed and to undertake some action. Among other things, he introduces him to a girl, named Olga. Stolz also manages to find Oblomov a temporary place to stay.

Oblomov and Olga start seeing each other. They fall in love. Olga is obsessed with the idea of redeeming her beloved. Stolz has asked her to make sure that Oblomov goes out, reads books and develops himself, and Olga wants to make this project a success. As soon as she discovers the Persian dressing gown, it is given away to some acquaintance.

Oblomov feels very alive now that he is involved with Olga. They want to marry as soon as he has settled his affairs so that they can live on his estate. Oblomov is full of plans, sometimes even deliriously happy.

However, there is also a shadowy side to his relationship with Olga. It can't be denied that he often feels exhausted by her demands. He is for example always afraid that she will examine him about the books he is supposed to be reading, or ask him his opinion about the current political situation. In fact, she 'does not permit the faintest shadow of somnolence on his face', and it is all rather fatiguing.

The beginning of the third part forms the turning-point of the book. By some more or less criminal trick, of which Oblomov is of course an easy victim, he is forced to move into a house in the country. This house belongs to a simple-minded widow of about 30 years of age who happens to be a very good cook.

The widow is very different from Olga. She takes care of Oblomov's every physical need, even before he realises himself what he would like. First of all she manages to get hold of his old Persian dressing gown, mends it and returns it to him. She cooks exquisite meals for him, while he lies on the sofa once again. In view of all this, it is not surprising that Olga waits in vain for her fiancé to settle his affairs and marry her.

In the fourth part Olga marries Stolz instead of Oblomov. Oblomov marries the widow and they have a child, a little boy, called Andrey, after Andrey Karlovich Stolz. A few years later Oblomov dies of a stroke, caused by a combination of overnutrition and lack of exercise. The little boy is adopted and raised by Olga and Stolz.

The Dream of Oblomov

The 'dream of Oblomov' was first published as a separate piece of literature. Later it was integrated into the larger con-

text of a complete novel. It occupies about one third of the first part of the book, the part in which Oblomov spends his days in bed. As Oblomov wonders, in a brief moment of lucidity between two naps, why he isn't like other people, he is unable to find the 'hostile source that prevents him from living as he should'. The unconscious then sends him a dream with the answer (in symbolic language, of course).

The dream describes how Oblomov used to live as a little child in his native village Oblomovka, how he is attentively looked after by his parents, his nurse and all the serfs. The role of his mother is especially emphasized: 'Seeing his mother, who had been dead for years, Oblomov even in his sleep thrilled with joy and his ardent love for her; two warm tears slowly appeared from under his eyelashes and remained motionless. His mother covered him with passionate kisses, then looked at him anxiously to see if his eyes were clear, if anything hurt him, asked the nurse if he had slept well, if he had waked in the night, if he had tossed in his sleep, if he had a temperature.' His mother is overprotective and does not allow Oblomov to live. With all kinds of tricks she keeps him inactive, infantile and helpless. Of course she does not want him to study either, and looks for every excuse to keep him at home. He once tried to escape her influence in a naughty attempt to participate in a quite innocent snowfight. His mother immediately sent the serfs after him, who finally '. . . got hold of the young master, wrapped him in the sheepskin they had brought, then in his father's fur coat and two blankets, and carried him home in triumph. At home they had despaired of seeing him again, giving him up for lost; but the joy of his parents at seeing him alive and unhurt was indescribable. They offered up thanks to the Lord, then gave him mint and elderberry tea to drink, followed by raspberry tea in the evening, and kept him three days in bed.'

So we see that Oblomov's mother, at least his mother as she appears in the dream, is very caring indeed. She has nothing less than absolute love for him, but at the same time she kills all disposition or inclination for development the boy might have had spontaneously. Oblomov is '. . . cherished like an exotic flower in a hot-house, and withers as soon as he enters real life.'

Apparently Oblomov suffers from a devouring mother complex, represented symbolically in the dream by the image of his mother. Still, Oblomov's problem is not just a personal one. All of the three little villages which together form Oblomovka, in which the dream is set, are dominated by the same complex. Each day in Oblomovka has two highlights: the first highlight is 'dinner' and the second, the absolute climax of the day, is the after-dinner nap. The 'Oblomovka' of the dream symbolically forms the realm of the mother complex. In this Oblomovka, there is no ambition in life other than having a good time. Stagnation and immobility are the rule, from time to time unexpectedly and unpleasantly interrupted by work. The dream of Oblomov depicts an idyllic mother-complex world — idyllic, but stifling.

I suggest we now return to our original questions. What makes a book about someone like Oblomov interesting? In what way does the description of this sleepy kind of human existence appeal to

the reader? And what about the function of the dream in the novel? Is the dream merely an additional description of stagnation? Or does it provide us, perhaps, with unexpected and interesting information? You will not be surprised by now that I wish to claim the latter.

As we saw, the dream shows clearly to the reader what is the matter with Oblomov. Though Oblomov is an adult in years, from the unconscious point of view he is still a seven-year-old boy, living in total emotional and physical dependency in the world of his mother, or better, of *the* mother; the reader recognizes from the evident symbolism in the dream that Oblomov is in the sweet paws not of his own mother, who has been long dead, but of a very powerful mother complex, and that all his fake arguments in the rest of the novel against starting an independent life of his own are really the cunning tricks of this dominant mother complex. It is 'she' who prevents him from marrying Olga, too. The mother complex is always against individuation. Oblomov himself badly wants to marry Olga, but he cannot. Whenever he seriously thinks of marriage, he starts to worry, with the same kind of arguments his mother used to keep him home when he should have gone to school. What if Olga will be disappointed in him? Isn't she too young? What if she falls in love with someone else some day? And anyway, if they get too much involved, it will be difficult to part. In short: the project is full of dangers.

The dream also helps us understand the symbolic meaning of many other elements in the novel, for example why towards its end the mother complex, in the form of the widow, gets hold of Oblomov once more and finally kills him. One might say that she cuddles him to death.

And, apart from what the dream shows to the reader, within the logic of the novel the content of the dream is compensatory of the conscious insight of Oblomov, since the dream — in a very dreamlike way — represents a truth Oblomov himself is not aware of: namely, that he is still this seven-year-old boy, whereas he himself has the illusion, at least at this stage of the book, that he is a grown-up, efficiently devising valuable ideas about ameliorating the position of his serfs and inventing ways of enlarging the income he has from his estate.

It cannot be maintained, however, that the figure of Oblomov is of a totally negative nature, that he can be described only *ex negativo*. Oblomov may be a negative figure when you look at him from the rational father-complex point of view, and indeed it cannot be denied that he lacks many good qualities, but there is also a hidden beauty in his character, a beauty which Olga, Stolz and the widow do not fail to notice. There is something kind and genuine about him that is valuable. Also, he is always sincerely interested in the well-being of his fellow human beings. It may be true that Oblomov is not at all fit for the struggle of life, yet it is a loss that he dies. Even long after his death he is still generally mourned, because they had all loved his 'crystal-clear soul'. There is no feeling whatsoever of 'good riddance', neither in the characters of the novel nor in the reader.

The Novel in its Historical Context

According to what we said at the beginning, art is supposed to provide some knowledge or insight compensatory of what is generally believed. In what way can we consider Goncharov's novel as compensatory of the contemporary conscious views held in Russian society?

The novel was originally published in 1859. In Russia the transition from a traditional feudal form of society to a pre-capitalistic one was rapidly taking place. Two years later, in 1861, serfdom was actually abolished by Tsar Alexander II.

Now Goncharov's novel is often considered a powerful condemnation of serfdom, albeit, it is always added, in an indirect and implicit way. But in 1859 this condemnation of serfdom comes somewhat late to be original. All educated people at the time of Goncharov, including the conservative tsar, knew that serfdom had had its time and that the feudal system was no longer working, so they did not need Goncharov to lift this insight into the realm of general awareness.

No, it is my opinion that the real message — or, if you want, the real value or the real meaning — of the novel is to be found elsewhere, namely in the minute description of what is irrevocably lost. The novel, most of all in the 'dream of Oblomov', presents a lyrical and sympathetic description of the much despised feudal mother-complex form of society. Maybe the contemporary common opinion was somewhat too enthusiastic, then, about the miracles of modern life, and too contemptuous about the old-fashioned, superstitious feudal form of society still existing in the country.

One last remark in this respect: Stolz has all the positive qualities one can think of, but he isn't convincing as a literary figure and you do not really identify or sympathise with him. Goncharov himself calls the character of Stolz 'weak and pale, the idea peeping through him too nakedly'. Goncharov admits, in so many words, both that it was his intention to create in Stolz a convincing embodiment of modernity, and that he failed. We know from letters that Goncharov explicitly wanted to write a novel to depict the negative qualities of the feudal Oblomov way of life. Well, he didn't succeed. Against his own convictions the novel became not a condemnation, but a celebration of a lost world. As happens often in art the 'objective psyche' took over and overruled the conscious plan the artist had in mind.

The novel ends on an optimistic note: the son of Oblomov is adopted by Stolz and Olga. The end of the book expresses the hope that in the coming pre-capitalistic, no-nonsense father-complex way of life there may still be a place for the Oblomov 'offspring', the non-calculating, inefficient, but at the same time sincerely poetical, kind, quiet and friendly Oblomov mentality.

Further Reading

Ivan Goncharov, *Oblomov*, Translated and with an introduction by David Magarshack, Penguin Classics, 1988 (original edition 1859, St. Petersburg)