Hegel's Philosophy of History as the Unifying Thread of Goncharov's Trilogy

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> In vain did I wait that someone, besides me, would read between the lines, and coming to love the images, connect them into a unity and see what this unity is expressing. But this did not happen. Belinskii could have done this, but he wasn't there . . . and as for me, I don't see three novels; I only see one. They are all connected by a general thread, one consistent idea—the transition from one era of Russian life to another.[1]
>
> Ivan Goncharov, "Better Late than Never," 1879

Ivan Goncharov's first two novels *A Common Story* (*Obyknovennaia istoriia*, 1847) and *Oblomov* (1859) were both successful partly due to the reviews from two prominent critics: Vissarion Belinskii and Nikolai Dobroliubov. Belinskii, Goncharov's university friend, as well as an influential and well-known Hegelian, died less than a year after reviewing *A Common Story*, and Dobroliubov died two years after writing his famous article "What is Oblomovism?"[2] When Goncharov's third novel *The Precipice* (*Obryv*, 1869) came out, it was received with awful "condemnation." According to

1 Ivan Goncharov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvadtsati tomakh* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1997–2017), vol. 6, 444, 449.

2 Alexander Mihailovic argues that Dobroliubov critiques *Oblomov* "from a perspective that one would have to call Hegelian." Alexander Mihailovic, "'That Blessed State': Western and Soviet Views of Infantilism in *Oblomov*," in *Goncharov's Oblomov: A Critical Companion*, ed. Galya Diment (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998). 53.

Goncharov himself, this was because his former critics and champions had died and there was no one left to appreciate his work. To give an example, one of the reviews, by Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, was titled "Street Philosophy" (a derogatory term, similar to the English "kitchen philosophy") and blamed Goncharov for misrepresenting the generation of the 1860s. Ten years later, when Goncharov published "Better Late than Never" (*Luchshe pozdno, chem nikogda*), he specifically mourned the fact that Belinskii had died, and that Belinskii alone would have been able to discern the unifying principle of the trilogy.

"To look for influences, echoes of Hegel in Russian literature is not even necessary: they strike the eye!" Dmitrii Chizhevskii writes in his 1930 book *Hegel in Russia* (*Gegel' v Rossii*).[3] Addressing the Russian proclivity for Hegelian ideas of "analysis and synthesis," or "wholeness," "dialectic and concreteness, and the related notion that truth is a merging of real and ideal," in her book on Tolstoy, Donna Tussing Orwin calls "all thinking Russians in the 1850s" "children of the Hegelian forties," and, referencing Chizhevskii, points out that "nowhere else, in fact was the Hegelian tradition as uninterrupted as in Russia."[4] In the context of this intellectual history, Chizhevskii discusses how Hegel's ideas were adopted, adapted and developed by Russian thinkers such as Stankevich, Belinskii, Turgenev, Herzen, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. The writer whose name rarely comes up in relation to Hegel, however, is Ivan Goncharov.[5] Yet, when Goncharov attended Moscow University between 1831 and 1834, Hegel's thought was ubiquitous. The institution was "a hotbed for cultivation of German romantic idealism" and "several of the faculty, including Goncharov's influential professor of fine arts, Nikolai Nadezhdin, drew the bulk of their ideas from the German philosophers and especially from Fredrich Schelling."[6] Moreover, Lermontov, Belinskii, Herzen, Stankevich, and Aksakov were among Goncharov's classmates and some of them "formed now-famous

3 Dmitri Chizhevskii, *Gegel' v Rossii* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2007), 249.

4 Donna Tussing Orwin, *Tolstoy's Art and Thought, 1847–1880* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 15.

5 Only in the past decade have some studies of Goncharov's connection to Hegel appeared. Ilya Kliger has explored this connection in "Genre and Actuality in Belinskii, Herzen, and Goncharov: Toward a Genealogy of the Tragic Pattern in Russian Realism," *Slavic Review* 70, no. 1 (2011); and "Hegel's Political Philosophy and the Social Imaginary of Early Russian Realism," *Studies in East European Thought* 70, nos. 3–4 (2014).

6 Milton Ehre, *Oblomov and His Creator: The Life and Art of Ivan Goncharov* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 17.

philosophical circles for the study of German idealism—first Schelling and later Hegel—which continued to thrive and attract the leading minds of the age after their university days."[7]

I argue that Hegelian thought forms the "unifying thread" of Goncharov's trilogy that he referred to in "Better Late than Never," something that explains why Goncharov specifically rues Belinskii's passing in this later critical essay. In Goncharov's view, Belinskii was the only person who would have understood the Hegelian project of the trilogy. One of Belinskii's essays of literary criticism that popularized Hegelian philosophy in Russia was titled "A View of Russian literature of 1847" and included a review of Goncharov's first novel *A Common Story*, which Belinskii read as realism's dialectical manifestation, and, in a letter to Botkin, called "a frightful blow on romanticism, dreaminess, and provincialism."[8] Belinskii had been consumed by Hegelian ideas since at least 1841:

> The development of humankind is a continuous progressive movement, without any backwards return. Humanity moves in circles (i.e. moving forward, continuously returns back), but not in simple circles—in spirals (!)—and in its movement comprises many circles, from which the subsequent one is always wider and more extensive than the previous one . . .[9]

He recapitulates Hegel's schematic view of history as a spiral, a view already present in the works of Romantic thinkers and writers and worked out by Hegel on historical as well as subjective grounds—in other words, on the individual level as well as the level of political and historic events (broadly understood). This paper's argument is not an influence study per se; but rather an examination of how Hegelian historical consciousness illuminates the historicity present in Goncharov's works. In this chapter, I attempt to accomplish the critical task Goncharov hoped Belinskii would have done were he alive when Goncharov published the third novel.

I argue that the structure of Goncharov's trilogy embodies the "Hegelian Conception of History as the Developmental Structure for

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7 Ibid.

8 Vissarion Belinskii, Letter to V. P. Botkin of March 15–17, 1847, in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trinadtsati tomakh* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, 1953–1959), 12: 353.

9 Idem, "Rimskie elegii. Sochinenie Gete, Perevod Strugovshchikova," in Vissarion Belinskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trinadtsati tomakh* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, 1953–1959), vol. 5, 235–236. See Victor Terras, *Belinskij and Russian Literary Criticism: The Heritage* of *Organic Aesthetics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974).

Subject and Spirit," which Belinskii would have surely identified. The unifying thread of Goncharov's trilogy is Hegel's notion of history as an expanding spiral.[10] Each succeeding novel contains, expands, and complicates the previous one; as in Hegel's conception of history, this structure manifests itself both diachronically, in the succession of historical time periods, and synchronically, on ontological and conceptual, subjective and intersubjective, and socio-historical levels. Each subsequent novel in the trilogy recapitulates the previous one yet broadens its scope, forming a whole with an expanding trajectory, and only as a whole does the trilogy convey an all-encompassing sense of history that repeats itself within a circular progression. In Goncharov's novels, similar narrative strategies seem to be at work. They are salient in how each succeeding historical epoch is seen as the necessary result of the previous one. They are also notable in how each novel enlarges the scope of narration, looking not just at different epochs, but also panning back, allowing the reader access to the persistent structures, but now from different, expanding perspectives. These different frames are revealed first, in a single consciousness (*A Common Story*), then in the socially constructed self-consciousness (*Oblomov*), and finally within Spirit, in the social and historical world (*The Precipice*). The novels also roughly correspond to the Hegelian categories of Original History, Reflexive History, and Philosophic History.

In an indication that Goncharov conceived of his novels as a trilogy, I would note that he had already begun planning his third novel by the end of 1840s while he was still writing *Oblomov*. The fact that all three of the novels' titles start with *ob* strongly suggests that that they are meant to be understood as some kind of a continuum. Goncharov claims that the trilogy is bound by a unifying thread, a consecutive idea, Russian's transition from one epoch to the next one, change in an ever-expanding context.[11] In "Better Late than Never," Goncharov insists on their commonality: "I mentioned above that I see *one novel, not three*. They are all connected with one unifying thread, one consecutive idea—transition from one epoch of the Russian life I lived to the next—and the reflection of their phenomenon in my depictions, portraits, scenes and minute details."[12] He saw each of the novels as reflecting a particular historical moment, a decade of Russian

10 See Chizhevskii, *Gegel' v Rossii*, and Terras, *Belinskij and Russian Literary Criticism*.

11 Not collapse or decay (the third law of thermodynamics, the doomed Newtonian world) but a different sense of "embodied substance," more spiritual and Aristotelian.

12 Goncharov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, vol. 6, 444, 449.

life: *A Common Story* illustrates, in the example of Aleksandr's transformation into his uncle, the defeat of Romanticism by the so-called Realism of the 1840s. *Oblomov* describes the ensuing decade of disillusionment, the epoch of "sleep," while *The Precipice* depicts the "awakening" of the 1860s.

Before turning to Goncharov's trilogy to identify Hegelian threads and structures, I will first clarify what I mean by a Hegelian approach to history. This will allow me to articulate the ways in which Goncharov adapts an essentially Hegelian view of history in his narratives. After this brief introduction, the chapter will present one section for each of the novels: "*A Common Story:* Dialectical Antinomies of Opposing Worldviews"; "*Oblomov*: From Determinate Negation to Re-Cognized Unity and Synthesis"; "*The Precipice:* Dialectics of Art in Accelerated Motion of Synthetic Sublation"; and close with a concluding coda.

The Hegelian Conception of History as the Developmental Structure for Subject and Spirit

Hegel delivered lecture courses on the philosophy of history at the University of Berlin five times between the winter term of 1822–1823 and the winter term of 1830–1831.[13] Numerous commentators—Houlgate and Taylor among others—agree that, for Hegel, historical change is marked by the transformation of conceptual presuppositions.[14] When a set of conceptual presuppositions reveals a fundamental contradiction, a new historical form necessarily emerges as the result of this failure, as, for example, in the way Hegel sees "the moral view of the world" turning into "dissemblance or duplicity" until they are both sublated in "conscience," which synthesizes the 'beautiful soul' with evil and its forgiveness."[15]

Hegel insists that Spirit is necessarily embodied ("substance is equally subject"). Thus, for him, the succession of historical forms emerging from contradictions between conceptual presuppositions is also present on the level of the subject. In other words, this confrontation and resolution are manifested in the consciousness of finite individualized beings.

13 Joseph McCarney, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Hegel on History* (London: Routledge, 2000), 7.

14 Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 4–5.

15 G. F. W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 364, 410.

For this reason, Hegel's philosophy of history is greatly clarified by *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1806), which he considered an introduction to his entire philosophical system (on addition to philosophy of history, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* includes Hegel's philosophy of nature, logic, and aesthetics). To demonstrate how historical change accompanies changes in the subject, in *The Phenomenology*, Hegel uses three different frames through which historical change can be observed. The first frame focuses on the level of conceptual presuppositions observed in a single consciousness; the second one situates these conceptual presuppositions within the intersubjective context of the self-conscious being; and the third one centers on how these conceptual presuppositions play out on the level of Spirit (*Geist*), that is, on the social and historical platform.

Interestingly enough, in Hegel's introduction to *Philosophy of History*, he describes three different perspectives that any historian can adopt in relation to his subject matter, essentially repeating the tripartite pattern of historical forms discussed above. In Original History, the historian has a direct, immediate relationship to the events he describes; he is immersed in them. In Reflective History, the historian is removed in time from the past he recounts in his history. In Philosophical History, the historian focuses on the persistent structures present in history, on what stays the same while everything else changes, and on the necessary aspects of those changes themselves. Thus, in Hegel's historiographical analysis, subjectivity corresponds to three sorts of historical accounts: the self corresponds to Original History; the self-other relationship corresponds to Reflective History; and a historian who presents a Philosophical History necessarily synthesizes these previous forms by focusing on the unfolding Spirit of history itself.

In the frames of consideration in *The Phenomenology* and in the groupings in *The History of Philosophy*, temporal distance—the dilatory space between the events, and the historian's description of those events—serves a determining role. In *The Phenomenology*, distance determines the scope of narration, its focus. In *The Philosophy of History*, distance is used to classify different historical genres. From the perspective of *The Philosophy of History*, *The Phenomenology* itself could be viewed as an example of philosophical history. It is revealing that the dynamic distance of philosophical history here is achieved by what can be called *novelistic* means. The observing phenomenological consciousness corresponds closely to our sense of the narrator's role in a novel. That narrator

describes the experience of the "natural consciousness" (the character), allowing the reader to witness similar structures at work from various perspectives. I should reiterate that, for Hegel, history "happens" on both the social, objective level, and on the personal, subjective level. That is to say, one can witness the progress of history by examining social institutions (for example) and that this historical process is also reflected on subjective level of individual consciousness.

On the level of the subject, conceptual changes occur and movement is created due to both intersubjective contradictions and internal contradictions. In this way, the scope of the spiral expands not only from one historical form to another but also from conceptual transformations inside a singular consciousness to the role of these transformations in self-consciousness, the level of the subject, and, finally, to how such transformations in various subjects play out historically. On the most basic level of consciousness, the subject first sees the world as an independent external reality and the other as its opposition, its negativity. This opposition, of course, will reveal a contradiction (showing that the other is in fact itself) and lead to a transformation. As Charles Taylor writes, "The notion that the world is posited will allow Hegel to use a language in which he talks not just of things being identical with their other, but of things turning into their other."[16]

With this Hegelian notion of Original History, Reflexive History, and Philosophical History" in mind, we can see how each decade represented in Goncharov's narratives is distinct, yet also repeats patterns found in the previous one. Each novel examines these different yet analogous decades from various perspectives. The first novel looks at a particular conceptual switch within one consciousness; the second novel shows how such changes affect the overall life of a self-conscious being; and the third shows how such changes play out in a community. In short, each novel in the trilogy describes events of a particular decade in Russia's history (the 1840s, 50s, and 60s), and each novel has a particular narrative frame that forms a unit as an expanding spiral. When read as an intentional series, the trilogy reveals an overall expanding trajectory that forms a unit—a systematic view of history akin to Hegel's historic-philosophical paradigm.

16 Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 109.

A Common Story: Dialectical Antinomies of Opposing Worldviews

The plot trajectory of Goncharov's novel *A Common Story* follows the first movement of the Hegelian dialectic—namely, a shape of consciousness turning into its opposite as the novel traces the transformation of its idealistic protagonist Aleksandr Aduev into his antipode—the pragmatic uncle Petr Aduev. It is significant that one could translate the title variously: *An Ordinary Story/History, A Common Story/History,* or *The Same Old Story.* This double meaning of "story" / "history," which is lost in translation, is crucial here as it hints at the subjective and communal levels of historical conception at work.

A Common Story begins with the anticipation of change, with the upcoming disruption of the current unity between the subject and its surroundings as young Aleksandr Aduev prepares to leave his idyllic country life with "traditional" values to try to realize his dreams in the big and relatively progressive city of St. Petersburg. Seeking advice and patronage in the new and promising world, Aleksandr approaches his successful and pragmatic uncle Pëtr in the city. Their extreme opposition is emphasized throughout the novel. The uncle tells Alexander that he should not have come: "Your nature, it seems, is not such as to get accustomed to the new order. . . . You are a dreamer, and there is no place here for dreamers. . . . Here all your notions need to be turned upside down."[17] The uncle observes that there is a "great difference" between himself and his nephew in terms of temperament and character. Aleksandr is resistant to change and does not consider reconciliation with his pragmatic and "realist" uncle possible. He, too, sees a difference between them but interprets it as a difference between two contradictory worldviews: "My uncle," he writes to a friend, "is very prosaic. . . . It is as if his spirit is chained to the earth and never rises to a pure reflection, isolated from earthly squabbles, of the phenomena of the spiritual nature of man. For him heaven is inseparably bound to earth, and he and I, it seems, will never merge our souls completely."[18]

In a Hegelian and dialectical manner, the novel is "the history of the abolition of this difference": by the end the nephew and the uncle

17 Ivan Goncharov, *A Common Story*, in his *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, vol. 1, 62–63.

18 Ibid., vol. 1, 65.

switch positions.[19] This inevitable transformation of the nephew into the uncle happens not only on the level of the plot but also stylistically, on the level of language. Petr, who claims to call things by "their proper names," often makes fun of Aleksandr's inflated language "of a professor of aesthetics," and the uncle's "simple language" is continuously contrasted with the nephew's "wild talk." V. B. Brodskaia reads the novel as an opposition of two styles of speech, and U. V. Mann in his study of "the natural school" calls this opposition the "dialogic conflict" of the novel, which is, of course, also dialectical in nature.[20] Even the characterization of "the professor of aesthetics" connects us to Hegel in multiple ways. As Galya Diment notes in her discussion of similarities between Aduev and young Goncharov himself, "Aduev also shares [with Goncharov] three years at Moscow University. While there, Aleksandr is said to have worshipped the eloquence of 'our great, unforgettable Ivan Semionych,' whose rhetorical style closely resembles that of Nikolai Ivanovich Nadezhdin, young Goncharov's own beloved professor of esthetics."[21] Nadezhdin was a noted Schellingian, who had lectured extensively on Hegel's logic, aesthetics, and philosophy of history in general. Nadezhdin's influence is present here not only in this homage through the "great, unforgettable Ivan Semionych," but also through Goncharov's intricate incorporation of the philosophy he had learned partially from Nadezhdin into his novels. Speaking as a "professor of aesthetics" is presented as a negative trait from the perspective of the uncle, but this "wild talk" is not only how Aleksandr communicates, but also what Goncharov analyzes.

As Ehre argues, the novel "is only apparently the story of two characters diametrically opposed to each other. Actually, it is a novel where one character recapitulates the history of the other. The uncle's "common story" took place before the novel began."[22] The earlier stage of youthful enthusiasm already contains the seeds of pragmatism that will grow

19 Milton Ehre, *Oblomov and His Creator* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), 114.

20 V. B. Brodskaia, "Iazyk i stil' romana I. A. Goncharova 'Obyknovennaia istoriia,'" *Voprosy slavianskogo* iazykoznaniia 3 (1953); Iu. V. Mann, "Filosofiia i poetika 'natural'noi shkoly,'" in *Problemy tipologii russkogo realizma*, ed. N. L. Stepanov and U. R. Fokht (Moscow: Nauka, 1969), 246.

21 Galya Diment, *The Autobiographical Novel of Co-Consciousness: Goncharov, Woolf, and Joyce* (University of Florida Press, 1994), 25–26.

22 Ehre, *Oblomov and His Creator*, 127.

over time, and as the nephew assumes the role of the uncle, the latter is reminded of his past romantic self. In a sense, the uncle and the nephew turn out to have been the same all along, and the difference between them is only a temporal one. Their stories are the same but have taken place at different historical junctures. Over the course of the novel the nephew is alienated from his romantic self and becomes more like his uncle, but the uncle turns out to have already undergone the same process in his youth. Mann suggests that the difference lies in the appearances, the level of expression—that is to say, in their self-presentation and linguistic style.

The dialogic conflict turns out to be dialectical in nature. The novel is replete with conceptual oppositions that switch positions: poetry and prose; romanticism and realism; idealism and materialism; transcendental and earthly pragmatic concerns, and so on. By the end of the novel the opposition between these poles is challenged as positions switch. Petr's wife Lizaveta Aleksandrovna seems to occupy a space in the middle between uncle and nephew when it comes to the realm of emotion. Her unhappiness pushes Pëtr to reevaluate his life priorities. Perhaps she could have embodied a kind of resolution or synthesis of their contrasting states, but the novel only demonstrates this second stage of the dialectic, namely the move from thesis to antithesis, or in Hegel's own terminology, from unity to alienation, without providing any synthesis or consciously regained unity. It is not until the next novel of the trilogy that unity emerges, becoming part of the next novel's plot. As can be seen from even a brief list of the antipodes that collide in the novel, they concern character and worldview as well as historical tendencies of the decade and epochs of prevailing aesthetic forms and theories.

A Common Story can be read as a parody of the often-misinterpreted Hegelian notion of "reconciliation with reality" for no reconciliation, in fact, takes place. The novel does not even present a synthesis, and only showcases the dialectic from thesis to antithesis or from unity to alienation, in Hegel's own terminology. The subsequent novels will zoom out, maintaining this dialectical change within its fabric and structure, but encompassing more. *Oblomov* will not only introduce a nuanced reorientation from external and discursive representation to a much more internal and even potentially anti-discursive exposition, but will also offer synthesis at the end. *The Precipice* will go so far as to end with a crucial phase, one that is not fully achieved even within *The Phenomenology* itself—namely, mutual recognition.

Oblomov: From Determinate Negation to Re-Cognized Unity and Synthesis

Goncharov's second novel in the trilogy, *Oblomov*, expands the scope of narration: it will show not only how disenchantment follows alienation diachronically but also how, synchronically, opposing notions interact on a more complex, subjective and intersubjective levels, and how they construct the self-consciousness of the hero. Oblomov's departure from his idyllic family estate is only glossed over, as this episode was already dealt with in detail in the previous novel with Aleksandr's departure. We find Oblomov in St. Petersburg, already disappointed both with his youthful aspirations and with the urban conditions. We have moved from the decade of "dreamers" (1840s) of *A Common Story* to the decade of "sleepers" (1850s). *The Precipice*, according to Goncharov, is set in the decade of "awakening," namely the reformative (1860s). *Oblomov*'s narration is also more internally focused. Its plot does not trace the hero's socialization and transformation into "everyman," as in *A Common Story*, but instead focuses on the protagonist's resistance to accepting the values of society with its prefabricated identities.

Oblomov's intersubjective relations, the distinctions between him and the "others" (*drugie*) are not simple and programmatic. In other words, the dialectic is once again woven through the fabric of the novel in addition to providing its overall structure. As a dialectical hero, Oblomov himself turns his views upside down, one moment feeling his superiority over the others, the next lamenting his inferiority, and in the next part of the novel, in fact, trying to be like these others. When his serf Zakhar dares to compare him to "others" because these others work all the time, run around without stopping, and humble themselves in front of superiors, Oblomov is offended. Yet only a few pages later, he arrives at a diametrically opposed definition of the others: "'the other'—hardly sleeps," he notes yawning, "'the other' is amused by life, goes everywhere, sees everything, everything triggers his curiosity . . . And I! . . . . am not 'an other!'"[23]

In addition to recognizing a difference between himself and the others, Oblomov recognizes a difference *within* himself: "All this, after all, I could have . . . after all, I can write, it seems; I used to write, it happened, not only letters, but things much smarter! Where did that all disappear to?"[24]

23 Ivan Goncharov, *Oblomov*, trans. S. Pearl (New York: Bunim & Bannigan, 2006), 129.
24 Ibid.

What the narrator calls one of the clearest and "most conscious moments in Oblomov's life" is not only the recognition of an unrealized potential but also an internal contradiction, a difference within his own identity, between the self and the not-self. Hegel, who had defined identity as self-consciousness, writes: "Identity is at the same time self-relation, and what is more, negative self-relation; in other words, it draws distinction between it and itself."[25] This is a temporal self-difference that Oblomov recognizes, very much in accordance with Hegelian dialectic and difference within primary and secondary qualities of real and normative essences: "The internal relationships of an entity may secure for it enough determinacy for its parts to be different from each other, but not for it to be different from some other entity to which it is otherwise unrelated. This seems to be one of the points of Hegel's curious argument against the suggestion that there are two different worlds, one of which is the inverse of the other."[26] It is the realization of this distinction, of a contradiction within himself, that drives Oblomov to question his identity (and to contextualize it through his dream) and to attempt to connect with his previous more active self.

"Contradiction is the very moving principle of the world," writes Hegel.[27] Oblomov realizes this contradiction, the difference between himself and his past self. His closest friend, Stolz, also verbalizes this gap. Oblomov then moves from the "inactive" part one of the novel to the activity of parts two and three, where he again reads and writes, attends social gatherings, courts Olga, and even travels out of town and moves to another apartment. He now begins to act in the manner of his guests, whom he had earlier criticized heavily in his mind for their "meaningless" running around and their pretense of activity. This activity, when Oblomov becomes aware of it, reveals another contradiction, that between his physical activities and spiritual aspirations. In other words, he comes to realize that he does not desire what Stolz and Olga wish for him. This contradiction is of a different sort. Previously the gap was between two temporally removed selves, and brought up the question of what made these two selves with such different characteristics into a single individual. Now the gap is between the inner self and the outer expression. The question is: What makes this active social

25 Hegel, "Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, or The Lesser Logic," in William Wallace, *The Logic of Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Outlook Verlag GmbH, 2018), 163.

26 Michael Inwood, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 124.

27 Hegel, "Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences," 174.

engagement the correct way to live if it does not correspond to and does not reflect Oblomov's own desires?

If the realization of the previous contradiction had moved Oblomov outwards and into attempts at transforming himself into a certain opposite, the realization of the contradiction between his inner and outer lives moves him to revert to his former self. This is not a return without a difference, of course, but a unity, mediated by experience, a regression that is also temporal progress. Oblomov breaks things off with Olga, whose ultimate goal was to change her lover, to prevent him from the sedentary and peaceful life he enjoyed so much and to make him more like his mobile and energetic friend Stolz. Oblomov gives up his hopes of realizing himself according to Olga's and Stolz's expectations, moves to the Vyborg Side, and dons his dressing gown, the infamous symbol of his sluggish domestic existence. He marries his widowed landlady, who takes care of him like his mother and the nannies took care of him in Oblomovka. It is also important to remember that, in addition to realizing his own dreams of an idyllic domestic life, Oblomov becomes a source of happiness for his wife, Agafia Matveevna, and her children, whom he accepts equally together with the son Agafia bore him. Moreover,

> Oblomov himself was now the very embodiment, the true and perfect personification of peace, quiet, contentment and tranquility. As he examined and contemplated his existence, as he settled deep into it, he had finally concluded that he had nowhere further to go, nothing further to seek, that he had achieved his ideal, although without the poetry, without the grace and distinction with which his imagination had sometimes invested it when he used to dream of a seigneurial, spacious style of life on his ancestral country estate amidst his peasants and retainers.[28]

Admittedly, Oblomov dies shortly after this realization, but he dies a happy man, in his preferred state, which is sleep.[29] Why is a man who dies having realized all his dreams and ideals considered by his friends as well as readers and critics alike a failure? Why is that the case, even if Oblomov

28 Goncharov, *Oblomov*, 418.

29 Before we deem Oblomov's agency unsuccessful, we also have to consider the book's place within the trilogy. Whereas the first novel showed the most basic step of the dialectic of oppositions collapsing into each other, *Oblomov* demonstrates the unfolding of the dialectic in the subject formation, and only the third novel expands its scope wide enough to demonstrate how this plays out in the society at large.

spends the last part of his life in a way of life that he has chosen and that corresponds to his inner nature? The answer to this question is circular: it is precisely because of the lack of this recognition that Oblomov's agency is not successful. As Hegel reminds us, the subject's own identification with his actions (or the lack thereof) is not sufficient. This correspondence has to be recognized by his community (in the first instance, by the narrator who is telling the story) for the agency to be successful. It is possible to assume that the non-Stolz narrator understands better; consider how telling it is that he is described as also having "sleepy eyes" at the very end of the book.[30] The lack of equilibrium between Oblomov's own self-realization and the narrator's valued judgement of it (Stolz's perspective) gives more responsibility and agency to the reader, requiring him to recognize both the novel's narrative structure and Oblomov's agency.

Oblomov is all too often read as a "plot-less" novel about the eponymous protagonist's purported "laziness" and his "inability" to deal with the outside world. The novel, in fact, is said to be an antithesis to a *Bildungsroman*. According to Diment and many other Goncharov critics, *Oblomov* has a relatively simple structure and plot, yet is successful *despite* the looseness of its plot. Dmitrii Pisarev, Goncharov's contemporary writer and social critic claims that not only is Oblomov inactive due to his own nature, but that the novel itself has almost no events or action in it, and its plot can be summarized in two or three lines. If we consider the structural and philosophic similarities between the novel and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we can challenge this pervasive interpretation. Oblomov is a philosophical novel about movement and becoming, rather than stagnation, and Oblomov's seeming lack of agency is, in fact, agency in and of itself. Looking into the dialectic nature of Goncharov's thought and the questions of awakening, transformation, and death, we might suggest that while in *The Phenomenology* "the discussion progresses from 'Consciousness' to 'Absolute Knowing,' as Hegel tries to teach us how dialectical thinking is possible, and what it might ultimately achieve," in *Oblomov* the plot is moving from Oblomov's struggle to deal with the outside world ('consciousness' stage and into self-consciousness), to Oblomov's death. Goncharov attempts to show how the symbiosis of opposites is possible (perhaps even necessary), and what it might ultimately achieve—a philosophical novel

30 The narrator's "sleepy eyes" are generally understood to recall Goncharov himself, who was aware that people compared him to a sleepy-eyed fish.

about the very nature of dialectical progression. Oblomov does in fact "develop" and "progress" in a way similar to how Hegel's hero consciousness progresses through failure and success, moving from determinateness to self-reflection and back to determinateness circling through the dialectic, where a return is not simply "regress" but implies progress as well.

Georg Lukács discusses *Oblomov* as an example of the "Romanticism of Disillusionment."[31] For Lukács, the novel is the epic of the world abandoned by God, a world that has lost the subject's unity with it. The novel forms that emerge as a consequence of this alienation rely on a discord between the subject and the world: either the soul is narrower than the world ("Abstract Idealism") or the soul is "wider and larger than the destinies which life has to offer it" ("Romanticism of Disillusionment").[32] The latter is:

> a purely interior reality which is full of content and more or less complete in itself enters into competition with the reality of the outside world, leads a rich and animated life of its own and, with spontaneous self-confidence, regards itself as the only true reality, the essence of the world: and the failure of every attempt to realize this equality is the subject of the work.[33]

Lukacs's theory and classification is inherently Hegelian, of course. Lukacs himself acknowledges that he wrote *The Theory of the Novel* during his intellectual turn from Kant to Hegel. Both the emergence of the novel as a result of an alienated world after the unity of the epic world and the outward and inward directionality of "Abstract Idealism" and "Romanticism of Disillusionment" are dialectically constructed. Not surprisingly, the next category is "Attempted Synthesis." We could see how Goncharov's trilogy could be interpreted as following these three types of novels. But we could also argue that *Oblomov* could be read as an "Attempted Synthesis" as well, if we acknowledge that Oblomov finds realization in the world on his own authentic terms and regains unity in a self-conscious manner. This realization, however, is often ignored because it remains outside the main narrative frame due to that frame's specific construction.

As in *A Common Story*, Hegelian notions such as identity/difference and negation are at the heart of character development in *Oblomov*.

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31 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 112.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

Before Oblomov's dream, the ending of part one provides the protagonist with a personal history and suggests reasons for his current disenchanted state. He is first introduced to the reader as "non-distinct" and then developed as a character through determinate negation. For Hegel, determinate negation yields positive content, which means that by determining what something is not, we delineate what it is: "For it is only when it is taken as the result of that from which it emerges, that it is, in fact, the true result; in that case it is itself a *determinate* nothingness, one which has a *content*."[34] Soon after Oblomov's struggles to wake up at the beginning of the novel, guests begin to arrive, one after another. Whereas *A Common Story* is mostly composed of drawing room conversations, the entire part one of *Oblomov* takes place in the protagonist's study. However, instead of one contrasting worldview of Aleksandr's uncle, Oblomov is presented with multiple different perspectives. His five guests, each representing a particular social "type," express their characters in conversation, in the course of which, and by negating each worldview in his mind, Oblomov develops his own character, for himself and for the reader. He resembles neither the social butterfly Volkov nor the careerist Sudbinskii, neither the garrulous journalist Penkin nor the opportunistic Tarantiev. Importantly, he is nothing like Alekseev, a man of no distinct features: as Hegel has shown, determinate negation does yield a positive content. In the process of rejecting the worldviews of his guests, Oblomov builds up his own. The way Oblomov's character is developed reflects Hegel's view that self-consciousness is socially constructed and that it is through intersubjective relations that a person becomes aware of his identity. Oblomov's rejection of activity is not mere negativity, just as Hegel's Spirit, in negating and overcoming contradiction, produces a positive, something that exceeds the sum of the two opposed concepts.

The Precipice: Dialectics of Art in Accelerated Motion of Sublation

The Precipice, the longest and most complicated novel of the trilogy, incorporates themes and elements from the previous novels. However, as part of an expanding spiral, it offers a change of perspective. It also deals much more explicitly with the themes introduced more latently in the previous novels: subject and identity construction (*Bildung* or anti-*Bildung*), the

34 Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 51.

relationships between form and content, intergenerational conflict, various art forms, and the ebb and flow of human energy and interest in life. More self-conscious both in form and content, *The Precipice* is also much more concerned with itself: it is a self-referential meta-novel, which writes itself through Raiskii's failure to write.

The protagonist of *The Precipice*, Raiskii, is often viewed as the reincarnation of Oblomov, the way Oblomov is seen to be the reincarnation of Aduev, albeit at different time periods. Goncharov himself writes in the preface to the novel:

> All the characters—Aduev, Oblomov, Raiskii, and others comprise one character, hereditarily reincarnated—and in Grandmother the whole old Russian life was reflected with barely verdant fresh sprouts of Vera, Marfenka . . . someday I'll point out this connection myself, but now I only regret that I did not clarify everything at an earlier time.[35]

To complicate the matter, Goncharov distributes Oblomov's signature qualities among many different characters in *The Precipice* (as Hegel does with "shapes of consciousness" in *The Phenomenology*). He thus shows how the same states of consciousness can manifest themselves differently in different subjects and how the "rigid immobile forms" of apparent oppositions are much more multiform than first meets the eye. *The Precipice* opens with an introduction of two gentlemen: Boris Pavlovich Raiskii and Ivan Ivanovich Aianov. The descriptions of Raiskii's appearance remind the reader of the opening paragraphs of *Oblomov*. But whereas Oblomov's facial expressions never lose their softness, even as they fluctuate between worry and boredom, changeability is Raiskii's defining trait.[36] In terms of behavioral characteristics, Aianov at first seems to be the complete opposite of Oblomov, and shows many traits of Oblomov's guests: he attends parties like Volkov, and has an official position but hardly works like Sudbinskii. But within the same opening pages, we find out that Aianov refuses to leave Petersburg, like Oblomov. Just like Oblomov, he has health issues from sedentary life and has been prescribed by a doctor to travel to some spring waters, yet refuses to travel. In his article "The Intentions, Issues and Ideas of the Novel *The Precipice*," Goncharov writes: "In a true work of

35 "Predislovie k romanu 'Obryv,'" in I. A. Goncharov, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1952–1955), vol. 8, 141–169.

36 It is important to note that Raiskii is only a few years older than Oblomov: they are both in their mid-thirties.

art . . . people themselves have to recur in various types under the influence of this or that nature, customs, and upbringing, so that some constant and determinate image of a form of life appears and people of this form appear in various kinds and examples."[37] In *The Precipice,* Goncharov also crafts Sofiia, Raiskii's cousin and romantic interest, as another reincarnation of Oblomov, albeit one apparently devoid of emotions. Raiskii claims that Sofiia has withdrawn from life into the past of her ancestors and is sleeping her life away. Moreover, Sofiia herself repeats—almost verbatim—certain views expressed by Oblomov. She also contrasts herself with the others that have to work and worry. But while Oblomov had articulated this sentiment to his serf, Sofiia expresses it to Raiskii, who talks back, telling her that her political views are problematic. Familiar attributes and characteristics, situations and conversations persist in this playfully congested manner, preventing the reader from clearly mapping the characters of this novel onto those of the previous ones.[38]

Raiskii's friend Leontii, the bookworm of the novel, also looks to the past for inspiration and ideals: he loves antiquity so much, he perceives his own promiscuous wife as a Roman statue, and argues that antiquity already knows all the forms modernity might need. Raiskii wonders if Leontii fails to believe in progress and development—his own favorite concepts:

> How can I not believe? I believe! All this rubbish and trifle that modern man has crumbled into will disappear: all this is preparatory work, collecting and a mixing of not yet cognized material. These historical crumbs will gather and be molded by the hand of fate again into one mass, and colossal figures will pour out of this mass again over time, an even, whole life will flow again, which will subsequently form a second antiquity. How not to believe in progress! We lost the path, lagged behind great examples, lost many of the secrets of their being. Our business now is to gradually climb the lost path again and to achieve the same strength, the same perfection in thought, in science, in rights, in mores and in one's social economy . . . wholeness in virtues and, perhaps, in vices! The baseness, the little things, and the

37 Goncharov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii,* vol. 6, 527.

38 Moreover, both the characteristics and the situation are complicated in *The Precipice*. Whereas in Oblomov the protagonist's qualities were mostly treated as personal attributes (for example, how Oblomov relates to his own thoughts), now they attain an external, social significance (how enthusiasm or indifference affect the social relations of the characters).

> rubbish—everything will turn pale: a man will straighten himself and will again stand on his iron legs . . . That is progress![39]

Like many German Romantics and German idealists such as Hegel, Leontii views antiquity as a lost paradise with a unity (*tsel'naia zhizn'*), from which modernity has been alienated, but which can—and will—be regained. When Raiskii expresses surprise that Leontii is the "same old student," who nurtures "life that has outlived itself," Leontii points out that he "nurtures people who have outlived themselves" whereas Raiskii nurtures "ideals and patterns/forms (*obrazy*) that have never lived" and claims that art also feeds on antiquity.[40] Raiskii himself sees Leontii existing within "the simplicity of life forms," within "a narrow frame."[41]

Raiskii's concern with aesthetics is also intricately connected with his concern with love. In his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel writes: "As this subjective spiritual depth of feeling, love does not occur in classical art, and when love does make its appearance there, it is generally only a subordinate feature in the representation or only connected with sensuous enjoyment."[42] In the production of Romantic art, by contrast, love, Hegel claims, plays "a preponderating role."[43] Raiskii fluctuates between these two domains: the realm of classical art in which form and content correspond and produce only sensuous pleasure and Romantic art in which love is a decisive factor and a driving force. Raiskii is facing a problem that Belinskii had identified in his review of *A Common Story*: the Romantic's and idealist's inability to love due to the dynamic of preconceived notions about love and its cerebral rather than emotional nature. A theoretical approach to love, related to idealism, theory, program, etc., which Hegelian dialectics is meant to sublate, according to Belinskii, impedes its practical realization. As Belinskii writes,

> Every kind of love is true and wonderful in its own right as long as it is in the heart and not the mind. But Romantics are especially inclined towards cerebral love. First they come up with a program of love and then they look for a woman worthy of them, and in consequence of her absence love someone

39 Goncharov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii,* vol. 6, 207–208.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 222.
42 G. F. W. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art,* trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 563.
43 Ibid., 562.

> else in the meantime: it costs them nothing to command themselves to love for they do everything with their head and not their heart. They need love neither for happiness nor for pleasure, but for the justifications of their lofty theories of love in action. They love by the book and most of all fear any digressions from a single paragraph of their program. Their main purpose is lofty love that never condescends to the level of ordinary people.[44]

Raiskii's "program" or love narrative is so heavily based on Pygmalion and Galatea that, when feeling defeated, he gives up both on his novel and Romantic notions of love and turns to sculpting, a classical form of art. At the end of *Oblomov* we meet the narrator of the book, to whom Stolz tells Oblomov's life story; in *The Precipice* we might similarly wonder if the book we are reading may be the very novel Raiskii is struggling to write.

The Precipice has the widest scope and most complicated plot of the trilogy and it ends with an event that Goncharov himself considered the culmination of the trilogy. Ilya Kliger points out that "The reception history of *The Precipice* has repeatedly highlighted the fact that the very sections of the novel Goncharov believed to be crucial have been almost unanimously condemned by its critics."[45] What saves Vera from her paralyzing bout of melancholy is the grandmother's own confession that she had gone through a similar experience in her youth.[46] This event reminds us of the ending and the overall trajectory and plot of *A Common Story*, where Aleksandr and his uncle exchange roles as we learn about the uncle's past. But there is an essential difference between what happens between Aleksandr and his uncle and between Vera and grandmother. Aleksandr and the uncle never acknowledge the validity of the other's position, but through the negation of their own position end up in the place of the other.

While in *A Common Story,* the nephew finds out about the uncle's past, in *The Precipice,* it is the matriarch of the novel who confesses that she had had a love life similar to her niece Vera's. In *A Common Story*, the realization of shared experience did not bring reconciliation, but in *The Precipice* there is forgiveness following this confession. Moreover, if in *Oblomov*, the

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44 Vissarion Belinskii, "Vzgliad na russkuiu literaturu 1847 goda," in his *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh* (Moscow: OGIZ, GIKHL, 1948), vol. 3, 766-857, 823.

45 Ilya Kliger, "Resurgent Forms in Ivan Goncharov and Aleksandr Veselovsky: Toward a Historical Poetics of Tragic Realism," *Russian Review* 71, no. 4 (2012): 4.

46 We could consider here the (dialectical) importance of melancholy in relation to sloth (Oblomov) and acedia.

return to the world of his childhood was achieved only through the similarity between ways of life in Oblomovka and The Vyborg Side apartment, in *The Precipice* Raiskii is actually back at his childhood home Malinovka, and involved within his community. Ehre argues that *The Precipice* "concludes with the most extensive, if not the most convincing, synthesis in Goncharov's fiction."[47] Crucially for this analysis, this is not just the conclusion of the third novel, but the resolution of the trilogy towards which each individual novel was moving by building up on the previous one and widening its scope to arrive at a totalizing and all-encompassing synthesis at the end. In his early Christian writings, in a little piece titled "Love," Hegel claims that love can break down the opposition between subject and object and introduce unity to life. A certain disappointment in the power of love to break down all opposition led Hegel to the idea of dialectical motion and development. He renames "Life" as "Spirit" and "Love" as "Mutual Recognition," casting it as only a possibility, which never takes place and only drives the dialectic forward.

What takes place between Vera and the Grandmother is mutual confession and recognition. Mutual recognition is a potentiality in sections of *The Phenomenology* such as the master and slave dialectic, pleasure and necessity, the law of the heart and the frenzy of self-deceit and so on, which are all *moments* in a larger dialectical progression, i.e. that they are all *historical*, not merely free-floating concepts. In the large section titled "Morality," also a stage in *The Phenomenology* that has the analogue of the final synthesis in confession, Hegel describes the very possibility of a mutual confession that remains impossible in the context of recognition. Here consciousness is split into yet another duality of extremes: acting and judging consciousnesses. When the acting consciousness confesses ("I am wicked"), instead of recognizing oneself in the other's actions ("I am wicked too"), the judging consciousness judges ("You are wicked!").[48] The action of the judging consciousness relies on hypocrisy, "because it passes off such judging, not as another manner of being wicked, but as the correct consciousness of the action, setting itself up in this unreality and conceit of knowing well and better above the deeds it discredits, and wanting its words without deeds to be taken for a superior kind of reality."[49] The acting consciousness,

47 Ehre, *Oblomov and His Creator*, 245.
48 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 405.
49 Ibid.

however, perceives this judging precisely as another manner of being wicked and judges it as such, thus the confession remains one-sided and the situation is reversed. This transforms the acting consciousness into a judging consciousness and the positions are switched, not unlike with Aleksandr and his uncle. However, Vera's confession is followed by a similar and *reciprocal* confession from the Grandmother, presenting the ultimate synthesis of the trilogy. This reciprocity and crucial moment of synthesis does not only restore unity of identities in difference but functions as an expansion that reinforces the structural architectonics of the Hegelian expanding spiral.

Conclusion

Goncharov was convinced that contemporary critics failed to notice the unifying Hegelian thread of the three novels. He bemoaned the fact that Belinskii, who had written a positive review of the first novel in the trilogy, had not lived to see the publication of the final two parts. Today, critics rarely consider Goncharov's novels as a trilogy; when they do read it as a trilogy, they usually privilege one novel over the other two. In addition, recent studies have tended to dismiss the particular sense of history at work in Goncharov's trilogy: Ehre, in *Oblomov and his Creator* claims that Goncharov's characters "drift out of time and history." [50] Diment in *Goncharov's Oblomov: A Critical Companion* similarly comments on Goncharov's "remarkable lack of historical perspective." Here, I have sought to demonstrate that far from "lacking historical perspective," Goncharov's work has a very particular—and very Hegelian—philosophy of history at its core, one that can only be articulated by examining each novel in the context of the trilogy. The compositional history of the trilogy as well as Goncharov's later remarks attest to this underlying structure of an expanding spiral and the trilogy's unified diachronic and synchronic dialectical development. What is intriguing about Goncharov's treatment of history is its adherence to the notion that historical change transpires in a pre-determined manner: each historical period can find its cause in the preceding period, each repeats its predecessor and unfolds from the latter's contradictions, revealing a very Hegelian, dialectical understanding of historical change, which

50 Ehre, *Oblomov and His Creator*, 12.

operates within substance as well as subject. This figuring of history as an Archimedean spiral is clear even from the titles, which all begin with the letter "O" (in Russian *ob*).[51] These circles are inscribed into each story's title. When placed together in three dimensions, they articulate a curve, which comprises a spiral.

51 The titles, all three starting with *ob*, do tend to hint that by the time he was writing *Oblomov* he was already thinking of some kind of a continuum, which he then upheld with *Obryv*.