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Oblomov and Hegel:
Circles of Time and Structure
in Dialectical Progression

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Literature provides privileged access to action. Some pieces of literature, however, like Ivan Goncharov's novel *Oblomov*, are supposedly about inaction: its protagonist Oblomov is notorious for his "laziness" and "inability," to deal with the outside world, and the novel itself has often been called "plot less." In his novelistic *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel treated literary forms as crucial to the philosophical understanding and construction of human agency that in itself links it to philosophy. According to Hegel, successful human agency involves a reciprocal relationship between the subject and the world: Spirit for Hegel is rational and contains no inherent contradictions to subject's realization in it, and if the subject overcomes his despair and finds his own way of looking at the world, he can be reconciled with Spirit and feel "at home" in the world. Such agency, for Hegel, is free, successful and attains the highest satisfaction, absolute knowledge (of himself and the world) and finds harmony in the dialectical reconciliation of opposites.

Hegel published his *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807, when Goncharov was not yet born. However, Hegel was read and revered by the enthusiastic Russian intellectuals exactly during those years when Goncharov attended Moscow University. Moreover, he was a frequent guest at Belinsky's house when the influential critic was reading and discussing Hegel. Whether Goncharov was directly or indirectly influenced by Hegel remains unclear, but what has become apparent is a substantial convergence between *The Phenomenology* and *Oblomov*, a philosophical and structural dialogue that leads to reconsiderations of Oblomov's established stereotype of laziness, his lack of agency and "regress," and the novel's fame for its stagnant plot less character. In my opinion, *Oblomov*, is a philosophical novel about action and movement that engages the dialectical structure pivotal to Hegel's novelistic *Phenomenology*.

The traditional matrix of the educational novel doesn't quite work with either of these works; however, they both demonstrate strands and elements of it. These two works deviate from their respective genres and come closer to each other; they in fact have similar plot developments

and notions of becoming. Examining the correlations between the novelistic philosophy of Hegel and Goncharov's novel of introspection, I would like to argue that *Oblomov* is a philosophic novel about movement and becoming rather than stagnation, and that Oblomov's seeming lack of agency is, in fact, agency in and of itself. In return, Hegel's *Phenomenology* is a novelistic philosophy that mobilizes movement, rupture and process.

I will briefly focus on the general correspondences between *The Phenomenology* and *Oblomov* in relation to the Bildungsroman elements in order to illuminate Hegel by means of *Oblomov*, and *Oblomov* by means of Hegel. Then, I will illustrate this through my reading of *Oblomov's* Part One, the hero's awakening in relation to the emergence of self-consciousness in *The Phenomenology*. This account will involve discussions of Hegel's master/slave dialectic, which also involves a moment of standing up, certain awakening (self-certainty) as reflected in these dialectics' manifestations in *Oblomov*: the protagonist's relations with his serf Zakhar and some of his guests, presented in the theatrical setting of Oblomov's room. Finally, I will discuss Oblomov's supposed "regress" as a completed circle to suggest that it is rather "progress" on a spiral. I will discuss this dialectical progress in relation to a walk Oblomov's friend Stoltz and his wife Olga take at the end of the novel to also further emphasize the themes of awakening and death so essential to educational novels.

According to classic genre divisions, *Oblomov* and *The Phenomenology* do not only belong to completely different disciplines, namely literature and philosophy, but the ways in which they take new place in these fields are wildly unconventional. Hegel's *Phenomenology* boasts novelistic tendencies while *Oblomov* is frequently regarded as lacking the traditional elements of the Bildungsroman. Oblomov, in fact, is said to be an antithesis to a Bildungsroman. According to Galya Diment and many other Goncharov critics, *Oblomov* has a quite simple structure and plot, yet is successful *despite* the looseness of its plot. Dmitry Pisarev, Goncharov's contemporary writer and social critic claims that not only is Oblomov inactive completely 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.”¹

This oversimplified plot summary, according to the stereotype of Oblomov’s “inaction,” could go along these lines: Oblomov fails to leave his bed for 1/3rd of the book (all of Part One), becomes troubled with his problems, when his childhood friend Stoltz appears on the scene, moves Oblomov and introduces him to Olga. Oblomov fails to make the love story with Olga work; he regresses into his slumber and dies from inaction. “A “sleeper” like Oblomov,” writes Diment, “would have been a literary curiosity at any time, but for the first half of the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on *bildungsroman* and novels of education, *Oblomov* must have been a truly stunning book.” Diment calls Oblomov “a perfect antithesis to a *bildungsroman* and even a cruel parody of one” because “despite Stoltz’s and Olga’s best efforts, Oblomov simply refuses to “develop” or “progress” in the manner expected of him as a literary hero” (Diment 18).²

However, Oblomov, in fact, does “develop” and “progress” in a way similar to Hegel’s hero consciousness’ progresses through failure and success, moving from determinateness to self-reflection and back to determinateness, circulating through the dialectic where a return is not simply “regress” but implies progress as well. Looking into the dialectic nature of Goncharov’s thought and the questions of awakening, transformation and death, I want to suggest that perhaps if 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, as

¹ See Roman IA Goncharova "Oblomov" v russkoi kritike: Sbornik statei (Leningrad, 1991).

² Diment, A Critical Companion to Oblomov: “If one can detect glimpses of Samuel Beckett’s protagonists in this description, so, apparently, could Becket himself: he reportedly read *Oblomov* before writing *Waiting for Gadot* (1952).”

Goncharov tries to show us how symbiosis of opposites is possible (if not necessary), and what it might ultimately achieve – a philosophical novel about dialectical progression (Stern xv).

The Phenomenology has often been discussed as a Bildungsroman by many prominent scholars such as Josiah Royce, Judith Butler, and Allen Speight, among others.³ It is widely recognized as an unconventional contribution to the philosophical tradition in the way it incorporates literary works into its content and literary aspects into its structure. According to Hegel, literature is integral to a philosophic undertaking. As Allen Speight points out, “For Hegel, the question of narrativity and agency loomed largest in writing *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, a riddingly allusive work whose far-from-obvious narrative structure has, by turn, been characterized as that of a tragedy, a comedy, and (perhaps most frequently) a Bildungsroman” (Speight 1).

An abstract philosophical work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* deviates from its genre gravitating towards the genre of the educational novel with its plot-like character. *Phenomenology* has a plot; it is a genealogical account of consciousness. *The Phenomenology* is a Bildungsroman about consciousness, which begins with sense-certainty, and thought its journey grows up into the crucial moment of self awareness, the “master” and “slave” dialectic, then withdraws into itself, becomes a Stoic, then turns into Skepticism, to only end up with a split dual unhappy consciousness by the 1/3rd of the book, and only truly begin the action when Reason suddenly appears on the scene. The dialectical movements speed up here to arrive at The Spirit and move into a macro level of the World Spirit and Absolute Knowing.

Oblomov is a Bildungsroman in a similar manner to *The Phenomenology*. *Oblomov* also follows a specific dialectical structure that opposes the traditional character of the Bildungsroman that it is so often positioned against. However, in this manner, *Oblomov*

³ See Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919), 147-156; Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Allen Speight, *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency*

develops and moves akin to the becoming of consciousness in *The Phenomenology*. Both Hegel's "hero" consciousness and Goncharov's "hero" Oblomov begin at a static point, but they traverse the dialectical circles. Unlike the traditional Bildungsroman, *Oblomov* does not begin with the hero's childhood, but instead it starts with the hero's awakening, reminiscent of Hegel's dialectic of the object at the stage of sense-certainty. From the dialectic of the object, however, Oblomov's consciousness comes to self awareness through his facing another consciousness – his serf Zakhar and his guests.

Part One of *Oblomov* represents the becoming of Oblomov's consciousness through circles of dialectical progression that in movement comprise a spiral. Oblomov moves from the dialectic of the object to his self awareness through the negation of certain qualities of the outside world that comes to him. *Oblomov's* Part One, roughly 1/3rd of the book, covers only one day and happens in one room and illustrates similar notions of becoming of the self-consciousness as seen in *The Phenomenology*. In a similar manner, the action in *Oblomov* truly begins and speeds up when Stoltz, Reason incarnate, suddenly appears on the scene. Right when Oblomov is suffering with a split dual unhappy consciousness of empirical and transcendental realms, Stoltz quickly appears on the scene, moves Oblomov, who moves from this spring day into his "active" summer of love with Olga, with whom Stoltz introduces him. However, there is success in some failures.

While the hero's failure in the relationship with Olga is commonly perceived as marking the hero's final decline, I agree with Victoria Somoff, that the romance itself represents more of a dream, which does not take into consideration one's mortality. The "failure" of the romance, on the other hand, "corresponds to an "awakening" in the novel, when Oblomov realizes that he cannot become someone else as Olga would have wished. Thus, the novel reverses the traditional notions of action and dreaming. After realizing the dreamy nature of his relations with Olga, Oblomov moves to the Vyborg Side (away from his center located Goroxovaya apartment),

marries the widowed sister of the landlord, has a son with her, and shortly dies supposedly from inaction. This circular motion is reflected in the trajectory of the main character's life and death.

Oblomov is a Bildungsroman, we could say, about Oblomov's life, from the moment of his awakening (his childhood is presented to us through the protagonist's dream) to his death at the end of the book, when his best friend Stoltz and his writer friend run into Oblomov's serf Zakhar. This event triggers Stoltz's memories, and he tells his writer friend Oblomov's life story. The end of the book reflects a circular motion as it turns back to its beginning in a curious way. Readers are referred to the beginning of the book, and in this way the structure of the story parallels the life and death of Oblomov as it functions in its dialectical motion, faithful to the typical style of the Bildungsroman. Many critics, however, interpret this circular motion of return as regress that signifies stagnation and see regress as a lack of significant action. This return is not a "regress," however, but rather a movement on a dialectical spiral, where a return implies both "regress" and "progress." Oblomov's return is not a return on a circle, but on a spiral, which stretched temporally implies as much progress as a finite life can imply at its end.

The process of agent's self-realization might appear to be "regressive" as the split is followed after a prenatal unity, Oblomov's idyllic notions of his childhood. Self-realization, Oblomov's circle of return into his blissful childhood, as overcoming the split of consciousness, might be interpreted as a return to this previous prenatal unity – making it a "regress." Hegel indeed describes the process of self-realization, that is, this overcoming of the split and alienation – as a return to oneself. But this is not a cyclical return, when the agent simply ends up where he started – but a return on a spiral – it is a return with a significant difference.

This return is education itself: Hegel describes education as a tracing of the notion to one's innermost being. Oblomov does not simply exclude the world of postnatal experience – he does reach out (or gets reached out to) – with various degrees of success, Oblomov encompasses the real world: he gets married after all, has a son, dies in his favorite state of sleep, having

achieved all of his articulated dreams, even that of “social criticism,” which he desired. Oblomov’s story of inaction is, in fact, a deeply psychological philosophy of action. His agency is successful as he was able to establish a reciprocal relationship between himself and the world very much in accordance with his own ways of looking at the world and found harmony in the dialectical reconciliation of opposites. *Oblomov* is a Bildungsroman as it shows Oblomov’s progression through the dialectical circles of becoming, which implies education and self-realization. “Distinct from Oblomov’s passivity in Part One, Part Four of the novel is organized by Oblomov’s arrival at a state of consciousness where all goals have already been achieved,” writes Somoff. I agree with Somoff, that “Oblomov’s life on the Vyborg Side constitutes the hero’s one and only period of conscious or awake state rather and is far from a cyclical return to the “stasis” of the novel’s Part One.”

The “stasis” of Part One, however, is also not simply “stasis,” but the hero’s awakening to a self-conscious being that will move towards the authentic self-realization of Part Four that Professor Somoff discusses, when Oblomov, “Thinking about his way of leaving, subjecting it to close scrutiny, and getting more and more used to it, decided at last that he had nothing to strive for, nothing more to seek, that he had attained an ideal of his life.” This authentic, albeit troubling realization for Stolz and Olga, is made possible by the development of Oblomov’s self-consciousness in Part One of the novel.

The notoriously plotless Part One of the novel demonstrates a movement of an educational novel right away. It is the moment of the hero’s awakening to his consciousness. Instead of beginning the novel with the traditional notion of a Bildungsroman with the hero’s childhood, Goncharov makes the building of his hero more philosophical: it starts with a Hegelian beginning – sense-certainty, with a consciousness’ struggle to make sense of the outside world it has come to. Goncharov first published an excerpt on Oblomov’s childhood, “The Dream of Oblomov: An episode from an unfinished novel,” and later decided to place this

introspective and retrospective account of Oblomov's childhood in the end of part one. This artistic decision is crucial to my argument here, namely that Part One of *Oblomov*, most infamous for the hero's inactivity and the stagnant plot, in fact, develops the hero into a self-conscious being. Having developed his self-consciousness through a dialectical becoming akin to Hegelian unfolding of "shapes of consciousness," Oblomov at the end of part one attains a personal history, becoming a novelistic hero.

Hegel begins *The Phenomenology of Spirit* with a section titled "Sense-Certainty: Or the 'This' and 'Meaning'." As Allen Speight, puts it: "Sense certainty is the first of what Hegel terms "shapes of consciousness" – that range of figures that stretches from this chapter to the concluding chapter on "Absolute Knowing" – but it is also the first of the three initial moments of the work that Hegel groups together under the notion of "consciousness" (Speight 36). Robert Stern refers to this section "consciousness" as *the dialectic of the object* as consciousness is understood as a standpoint from which what is true for the subject is an *object* that is *other* than itself (Hegel 166). While it would be possible to demonstrate each of the shapes of consciousness developing one from another in the begging of Oblomov's part one, I will speak only of sense-certainty, perception and the dialectic of the object in general to discuss Oblomov's movement from the dialectic of the object to the dialectic of subject, namely his transformation into a self-aware being.

The beginning of *Oblomov* corresponds to the form of consciousness (sense-certainty or the dialectic of the object) on many levels. First of all, the reader as subject (or audience) is introduced to the protagonist as to *an object*. We are introduced to Oblomov in bed in a particular location in his Gorohovaya apartment. His full name Ilya Ilyich Oblomov is revealed to us in the opening sentence-paragraph. The following paragraph begins with a deictic (indexical) sentence "Это был человек лет тридцати двух-трех от роду ..." ("This was a man of thirty two-three years of age from birth"). Gonchrov's detailed introductions to Oblomov

in his room, to his attributes and features read as character and sense descriptions for a play. My translation of “это” into the deictic pronoun “this” doesn’t do justice to Goncharov’s use of the impersonal *objective* pronoun “это” either: Goncharov uses “это” instead of “он,” in other words, “it” and “this” instead of “he” or “Oblomov.” In a sentence where he is speaking of the vagueness of Oblomov’s countenance, he is using a vague pronoun, which is of neuter gender and is mostly used to refer to objects rather than subjects (he uses the same technique introducing Oblomov’s guests later as well). While in English, it would be stylistically awkward to have the full name of the character introduced and then refer to him with “this” or “it” in the very beginning of the next paragraph, Goncharov is doing this quite intentionally. He is making our encounter of the object of inquiry immediate or receptive, also theatrical, I would say, or as Hegel puts it in the sense-certainty development: he is letting the object present itself for us to apprehend rather than comprehend (Hegel 59). Indeed, for pages Goncharov, through his detailed external descriptions, is letting Oblomov reveal himself to us: “softness,” for example, he says, was the governing expression of not only Oblomov’s face but all of his soul, which was openly shining in all of his body and eyes.

Oblomov himself, on the other hand, in this dialectic of the object, is a consciousness who experiences the world directly or intuitively, without yet applying concepts: Oblomov encounters his own room as an arrangement of objects by some external force: “he would look around so indifferently as if asking “who brought and arranged all these things?”⁴ Even his thoughts in this initial descriptions are presented as external influences, compared to birds, continually used as the subjects of the sentences, emphasizing Oblomov’s passive manner of apprehension in this initial stage of becoming. This passive manner of gaining knowledge, according to Hegel, presents consciousness as “an unshakable hook-up to the world on which

⁴ Сам хозяин, однако, смотрел на убранство своего кабинета так холодно и рассеянно, как будто спрашивал глазами: "Кто сюда натащил и наставил все это?"

knowledge is built” (Stern 44). So we as readers, or considering the theatrical sense of part one of *Oblomov* – as audience, are apprehending, purely receiving this building up knowledge about the story-world we have entered; but as the knowledge starts accumulating with the first pages and as the protagonist gains properties as *object* and comes to life, he himself becomes this unshakable hook-up in the experience of sensing.

What is at stake at this stage of pure receptivity is a reconciliation between the object (the “this” the subject is experiencing) and the subject himself (the experiencing “I”). This desired reconciliation presents a linguistic difficulty for sense-certainty. This problem of the clash of particularity and universality is apparent from the very first page of *Oblomov*. We know that we, as the narrator himself later phrases “discover” Oblomov on a particular morning and a particular room. The following descriptions are ambiguous: *is* this Oblomov as he is described “*now*,” at this moment, or is this how he *is*, in general, “always.” The Russian text of the novel doesn’t provide a definite answer.

Moreover, Goncharov further accentuates this linguistic ambiguity of sense-certainty by describing Oblomov as not “this” and not “that,” maybe “this” and maybe “that.” “Ilya Ilyich’s completion,” he writes, “was neither rosy nor swarthy not even positively pale, but rather, nothing in particular, or at least that was how it seemed, perhaps because Oblomov had grown flabby beyond his years, either through lack of exercise or lack of fresh air – or maybe both.” Oblomov at this point is presented to us as a sensuous and particular being that the narrator is trying to describe in universal terms. Hegel writes about this linguistic problem of sense-certainty: “Of course, we do not imagine, the universal This or Being in general, but we utter the universal; in other words, we do not strictly say what in this sense-certainty we mean to say. But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we mean to say, and since the universal is true of sense-certainty and language expresses what is true alone, it is

just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we mean.” (Hegel 60).

Becoming the subject of the story, Oblomov himself starts facing this linguistic problem of reconciliation of opposing definitions that both have grounds yet clash into one another. Irritated and anxious about the presented necessity of moving from his Goroxovaya apartment, and the need of traveling to his estate to administer improvements he has been planning, and now, after the visit of the doctor – the need of traveling abroad for his health, Oblomov gets into a familiar theatrical quarrel with his serf Zakhar. He is offended by Zakhar’s reference to “others:” as in “others” move, and travel, why can’t you? Explaining how Zakhar has hurt him, Oblomov presents his notion of “others:” “They’re beyond redemption. Nothing can help them. They gobble down a potato or a piece of herring. They are indigents, constantly on the move, tossed from pillar to post.... Oh, just moving. That’s your ‘other’ for you!... They are the kind who clean their own boots and dress themselves. Sometimes they try to pass for a gentlemen, but it’s a sham; they have no notion of what a servant is....” This passage is often used to illustrate Oblomov’s “laziness” and his pride for being an idle landowner. However, only a few pages later, Oblomov himself refutes his notion and even gets embarrassed: “He found himself engaged in a deep analysis of the comparison between himself and ‘others’. He thought and thought and finally arrived at a definition of ‘others’ diametrically opposed to the one he had given Zakhar.”

What remains the same, after Oblomov’s transformation from the object of the reader’s or the spectator’s apprehension on the first pages of the novel into the apprehending subject of the following scenes, is this constant “I,” the seemingly solid point of accumulating knowledge through sensory experience. However, this too becomes a problem for sense-certainty movement. This problem is presented by other “I”s, other subjects with different perspectives that seem to negate the universality of this particular subjectivity. And this is when first Zakhar and then Oblomov’s guests start coming in, demonstrating both a negation of Oblomov’s sense-

certainty and marking his movement into other shapes of the dialectic of the object into the dialectic of the subject.

Goncharov's decision to have all the action happen in Oblomov's room is not only to emphasize the protagonist's grotesque inactivity, which generates movement around, but also to show his awakening into a social being. Having guests coming to Oblomov rather than Oblomov going out into the world, Goncharov presents his social awakening as if under a magnifying glass: instead of reading about his movement, we are observing movement around Oblomov and reading dialogues about movement. By not moving, Oblomov generates movement; apprehending the notions of movement of others, he starts comprehending one's embedment in institutions of life. "The comedy of "I and the Others," writes Milton Ehre, "or of "Oblomov and the World," depends upon a certain narrowing of character and consequent avoiding of complexity of motive and thought. Character is reduced to a series of gestures – Zakhar pounding on the stove to remind us of prosaic reality – or to an emblematic representation of a normative world" (Ehre 166). This is an unfair claim to the complexity and crucial importance of Zakhar's character and his significance in Oblomov's becoming.

Oblomov's self-realization in Part One happens due to his reciprocal relation to his serf Zakhar as well as his antithetical relation to his five guests: Volkov, Sudbinsky, Penkin, and Alekseev. Zakhar is Oblomov's double, and by *perceiving* Zakhar, Oblomov comes to realize his own essence constituted by very similar characteristics. As Robert Stern puts it in his reading of Hegel, "consciousness, having come to see that it cannot coherently think of its individuality in terms of some sort of unique individuating essence, is now ready to conceive of individuals as being constituted by characteristics they have in common with other individuals" (Stern 51).

Oblomov's and Zakhar's reciprocal relationship will further mark Oblomov's transition into self-consciousness and what Hegel calls "The Truth of Self-Certainty." While Zakhar's active presence early in Part One contributes immensely to Oblomov's progression through the

dialectic circles of sense-certainty, perception and force and understanding, his role is even more crucial in traversing Oblomov into the dialectic of the subject. Thus, for discussing perception, which is a shape of consciousness, more active, yet still within the shape of consciousness and the dialectic of the object, I will focus on the role of Oblomov's guests in general, and discuss one of them, Volkov, more in detail to illustrate the claims I make about the significance of their involvement in both character and plot development.

Having become perception, the consciousness *takes* what is present to it to be a universal. Indeed, Oblomov takes his guests to be representatives of universal traits and categories, certain types, but this does not undermine the complexity of their role in Oblomov's self realization and becoming. Volkov is a young "social butterfly," Sudbinsky, a government official, Penkin, a journalist; then, we have Tarantaev, an angry "parasite," and Alekseev, an unnoticeable man of no distinct features. They all present certain characteristics for Oblomov's observation. "Oblomov's visitors, each decked out in a uniform indicating his social station," writes Ehre, "They enter the Gorokhovaya flat to highlight, through their active involvement in social role, Oblomov's grotesque passivity" (Ehre 166). How "active" is their involvement, however?

Volkov, the first guest, is a young man, shining (aglow) with health. "Envy overcomes one, looking at him," writes Goncharov, setting up the platonic dichotomy between appearances and essences right away, which is an essential foundation for Hegel's conception of the perception stage of consciousness. Volkov's impeccably shining attire is particularly emphasized: he is even coming from the tailor. Volkov wants Oblomov to join him for a party at a popular house, "everybody is going to be there!" he explains. "No, not everybody," is Oblomov's reply. Throughout their interaction the linguistic and philosophical interplay of verbs "being," "going," and "doing" is lost in translation. For example, when Oblomov invites Volkov for dinner that evening to tell him literally "what has been how" ("как там что было") at the party and at the ballet, Volkov answers "I gave my word to Mussinskys" ("Не могу, дал слово к Муссинским").

Stephen Pearl translates this as “I promised the Mussickys.” Such phrasing places an accent on the importance of the people, the Mussinskys that Volkov has promised to visit. However, in the original the use of the preposition “к” (to) signifies a direction, and implies an ellipsis of the verb “to go” and places accentuation on the movement from point to point rather than the direct object (i.e. the people whom Volkov promised). Volkov constantly uses verbs of movement and direction; for Volkov “being” is equated with “going.” Goncharov’s playful discourse with these verbs makes us question Volkov’s “activity” as pointless movement (“going”) between locations that in fact implies stasis as true movement would involve “doing” with pauses for reflection necessary for dialectical progress.

Oblomov uses “doing” instead. “What is there to do at the Mussinskys?” he asks. The answer is that half the town is “being” there (“там полгорода *бывает*”). “What is there to do at the Mussinskys?” Volkov repeats Oblomov’s question, and answers with “This is such a house where they talk about everything” (“Как что делать? Это такой дом, где обо всем говорят...”) The literal translation sounds awkward, and Pearl translates this answer as “At the Mussinsky’s? My dear fellow, you’ll find half the town there. You’ll find people talking on every possible subject.” While stylistically more appealing such translation loses the pun and the philosophical implications. In his answer, Volkov now substitutes “doing” with “talking” and uses passive constructions without the “activity” implications of the English translation (“you will find”). Pearl insistently translates Volkov’s speech into active voice, while reversing Oblomov’s use of active voice in Russian into passive voice in English. Most notably, Volkov’s question “Will you be being?” (“Вы будете *бывать*?”) at “the summer dances that will be.” “No, I think, I won’t be” (“Нет, я думаю, не буду.”) is translated as “You will be going, won’t you?” losing the philosophical implications of Hamlet’s question “to be or not to be,” and Oblomov’s definite answer: no, if “being” is simply “going,” then, “I won’t be.”

Moreover, Oblomov, in his conversation with Volkov, lays out the Hegelian problem of one and many that the consciousness faces at the stage of perception, and realizing and expressing his desire of reconciliation, marks a further transition into the next Hegelian shape of consciousness titled force and understanding. When Volkov enthusiastically advocates the party at the Mussinskys for “talks about everything,” Oblomov claims “that’s exactly why it is boring because it’s about everything.” Then “start going” (“посещайте”) to the Mezurskys, suggests Volkov, “there talks are about one thing: arts.” “A century about one and the same!” exclaims Oblomov. So the choice that Volkov is presenting to Oblomov is: about everything in one day or about one thing all the time, and Oblomov proclaims both scenarios as “hellishly boring.” This dialectic of one and many, symbolically presented in this dialogue is still at the level of sense-experience. Volkov, and “his activities” are simply presented as objects with many properties that are not held together with any meaningful essence. As Stern puts it, “because perception is still at the level of sense-experience, the universals out of which it takes individuals to be constituted are of the simplest kind, that is, they are sensible properties, like being white, cubical, and so on” (Stern 51). Indeed, Goncharov first presents Oblomov’s guests as objects with many superficial properties, i.e. characteristics that, as Oblomov himself puts it, are “empty” and “fragmented.”

As Milton Ehre expresses, “Oblomov himself perceives their fragmentation, the total identification of a man with his role, and makes in the center of his argument against joining the world: “Where is man here? Why is he fragmented and scattered about in pieces?” “And how little of man is necessary here: his mind, his will, his feelings – why is this so?” “Man, give me man!” (Ehre 166). What Ehre misses, however, is that by negating the qualities presented by his guests, Oblomov defines his own way of being and joins the world on his own authentic terms, which in Hegelian terms signifies successful agency.

After each guests visit, Goncharov presents an internal quoted monologue of Oblomov negating the properties (adjectives that qualify) presented to him by the guest and evaluating his properties. As Stern phrases “perception treats each individual as a co-instantiation of some collection of property-instances in a single special region,” in our case Oblomov’s theatrically stages one room. However, the consciousness cannot “retain the reductionist conception of the individual with which it began” (Stern 57). Thus it needs to start negating this sensuous experience by further evaluation, and this is precisely what Oblomov’s little “introspections” after each guest’s leave accomplish, moving his character through the circuitous dialectic of becoming.

The realization of what Hegel calls “inverted world,” a radical reversal of positive behavior into a negative one, is essential for the emergence of self-consciousness. In our case this is manifested in each guest’s falsely presented appearance as “active” participants of the social world. Oblomov (as well as the reader) needs to look behind the appearances and re-evaluate the activity of these representatives of movement, which is stagnation itself. Volkov, the paragon of a busy bug, literally says: “My service is such that there is no need of being in duty.” Pearl translates this as “Thank God, with a job like mine, you don’t have to go to any office.” This makes it sound as if Volkov’s job is home-based or more likely “itinerary,” but Volkov is implying that he hardly does any work, very similarly to Sudbinsky. The next guest Sudbinsky too, subtly yet conspicuously to a philosophic eye of Oblomov, implies that he hardly works despite his accolades to himself as a hard worker and an embellishment to the ministry. After Sudbinsky’s boastful yet pretentiously modest tales about promotions and much work, Pearl translates Oblomov to almost exclaim “So it’s nothing but work, work, work?” to which Sudbinsky replies “Yes, it’s terrible, although it’s nice working for a man like Foma Fomich, he always finds something to give you, even if you’ve done nothing to deserve it.” The logical implications of this affirmative “yes” are such as if it’s Oblomov’s opinion that “it’s terrible” and

Sudbisky slightly agrees yet refutes it right away by praising his good boss who rewards him even if he has done nothing to deserve it. But he is in fact implying that he hardly does anything at all. In the original, Oblomov says something like “Oh so that’s how: in service! You work,”⁵ which has a melancholic tone and a degree of admiration to it. Sudbinsky, on the other hand, replies: “Terrible! Terrible! But of course, with a man like Foma Fomich, it’s a pleasure to serve: he won’t leave you without premiums; even those who do nothing, he won’t forget to reward even those.”⁶ The careful punctuation of this sentence with its explanatory colon and paralleling semicolon speaks much about Sudbinsky’s appearing “activity” which is only for display just like Volkov’s and the rest of the guest’s.

This “inversion” or the Platonic duality of appearances and essences is a fundamental realization in Hegel’s dialectic of the object that moves consciousness to self-certainty. This movement is once again clearly played out in Part One of *Oblomov* and the protagonist’s attempts to understand the inversions of how the guests present themselves and how they really are. Oblomov not only is called a modern-day Plato twice in the novel,⁷ but his dialogue with Volkov is reminiscent of Plato’s *Ion*, and not accidentally, I believe. Ion is a rhapsode, an imitator, and Socrates through the dialogue shows that Ion has no authentic knowledge despite his popularity. The dialogue starts with very much like Volkov’s entrance into Oblomov’s comically theatrical room. Where have you come from? asks Socrates Ion. From festivities where he has won first prize. In the next phrase, Socrates comments on Ion’s shiny attires and success, saying that this sometimes arouses envy in him. Volkov’s shiny clothing and his popularity in society are the properties through which we (the reader and Oblomov) perceive him. Moreover, when Volkov leaves, Goncharov writes a stand-alone sentence paragraph: “И он

⁵ Так вот как: все в трудах! - говорил Обломов, - работаешь.

⁶ Ужас, ужас! Ну конечно, с таким человеком, как Фома Фомич, приятно служить: без наград не оставляет; кто и ничего не делает, и тех не забудет.

⁷ Once in Part One, and once in Part Four by the narrator. Stoltz himself calls Oblomov a philosopher several times in the novel.

исчез” (“And he vanished.”) Plato’s *Ion* is translated into Russian as “Ион.” Pearl translated this as “The next moment he was gone,” and changes the paragraph break. This is problematic for many reasons. “Исчез” is not simply “gone,” but has connotations of “being lost,” “disappearing,” which can refer both to Volkov’s leave as well as his disappearance as a human being due to his inauthentic and empty imitation of society fashion and social norms.

Goncharov often has stand-alone sentence-paragraphs that put great emphasis on the statement, and this is important: it’s not simply a matter of punctuation rules. For example, in one of quarrels with Zakhar, Oblomov is admonishing him for breaking the sofa: “You broke it,” he says. “I didn’t break it, it broke itself, it’s not going to last a century, is it? It has to break at some point.” After this, we get a stand-alone sentence-paragraph saying. “Ilya Ilich didn’t find it necessary to prove the opposite.” Pearl blends this with the previous paragraph: “I didn’t break it,” replied Zakhar,” “it just collapsed, you can’t expect things to last forever – it had to go sometime!” Ilya Ilich did not feel it necessary to contest the point and asked only: “Found it yet?”

This blending of the sentence “Ilya Ilich didn’t find it necessary to prove the opposite” with the previous and upcoming paragraphs makes it lose its pun and significance. Standing alone, this sentence catches the reader’s attention: it’s not simply about the sofa; it’s about Oblomov and his life and death. Century is the ideal life-span of a man, and both Zakhar and Oblomov often use it, but Pearl alternates this with words like “forever” “for long” etc, losing the existential implications about human mortality, which might change our view of Oblomov’s failure as an agent: “it’s not going to last a century, is it? It has to break at some point!”

Goncharov also starts many of his paragraphs with words starting with the letter O, which creates a visual reference to the cyclicity of life, so often discussed in the novel, as well as to the dialectic nature of his thought in the novel. This would be impossible to maintain in translation, but the paragraph breaks have not only visual (Os imagined three-dimensionally comprise a

spiral) but also philosophical implications. Goncharov often uses separate paragraphs with opposing worldviews that placed separately demonstrate the dialectical movement in the novel (for example how Goncharov further uses characteristics of the guests to develop Oblomov's character by his negation of these properties). When Pearl sometimes blends these paragraphs, his integration often changes the intended opposition, and not only resolves the dialectical nature of the novel, but presents Oblomov as more "passive" as his suppositions are refuted within one paragraph rather than shown as his own different worldviews developing in dialectical unfolding. After the guests come and go, making rounds, in chapters two and three of Part One, not only does Oblomov give his own analysis of the individuals, but Goncharov uses their characteristics in Oblomov's own character development in the narrated analysis of part five and further sections of the novel. Like in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Goncharov uses the introduced shapes of consciousness to further traverse his protagonist, transcending failure.

Oblomov, having realized the aporia of perception, moves to force and understanding, where he defines himself by simply negating what he has perceived in his guests. However, as Stern points out, "consciousness as understanding has therefore failed to attain rational satisfaction: by conceiving of the scientific image as a simple negation of the manifest image, all that can be ascribed to the 'inner' (and 'true') world is the opposite of whatever we perceive, none of which helps us understand or explain what we perceive" (Stern 64). At this stage, Oblomov ends up confused and wondering about his own nature, asking "how come I am like this?" He has had two opposing definitions of "others" and now is questioning his own nature. "The conclusion of this moment – as of the section on consciousness in general," writes Speight – is that consciousness of a thing is possible only for a self-consciousness (Hegel 164). The movement of *The Phenomenology* will shift from a concern with objects of cognition to the cognizer as agent, a transition that will require a move from terms of eighteenth-century natural science to the balder terms of a life-and-death struggle." (Speight 42).

Oblomov's dream with its introspective and retrospective qualities manifests Oblomov's having traversed into the stage of self-consciousness, where he himself sees and understands his inclinations. This transition largely occurs thanks to the life-and-death struggle similar to Hegel's master/slave dialectic, which involves a moment of awakening, i.e. realization of one's mortality.

Oblomov's awakening is like the consciousness's submersion into the immediacy of life. Soon, he is faced with another consciousness – his serf Zakhar. Having spent one and a half hours in bed, thinking and planning solutions to his two problems, Oblomov, finally explains: “What am I doing really?... Conscience is needed: time to get to work! Just some will, and... Zakhar! he called.⁸” Zakhar's role in Oblomov's becoming is critical, and takes a privileged part in his transformation from sense-certainty to self-certainty and towards shapes of consciousness Hegel subtitles “freedom of self-consciousness,” which comes after his famous chapter “Lordship and Bondage,” better known as master/slave dialectic. With Zakhar's first appearance, the question of consciousness' freedom is immediately introduced: the Russian word “воля” can be translated as will, volition, pleasure, purpose as well as freedom. This freedom is not to be taken as concerning only Zakhar; it is simultaneously about Oblomov's own self-certainty and the will and freedom of his consciousness in its becoming.

Zakhar is Oblomov's double; faced with Zakhar, Oblomov contemplates his own nature as if shown in his dusty mirror. Oblomov's desperate call for will and Zakhar is a call for reality, a necessity to prove his own existence, as what else but another human being could actually confirm this muddle of thought, in which we first discover Oblomov, to be life itself. Hegel begins his chapter on Lordship and Bondage asserting that “self-consciousness... exists only in being acknowledged” (Hegel 111). This is the beginning of the Hegelian recognition process:

□ - Что ж это я в самом деле? - сказал он вслух с досадой. - Надо совесть знать: пора за дело! Дай только волю себе, так и...
- Захар! - закричал он.

“Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self” (Hegel 111). If with the guests that will soon start flocking Oblomov’s room, his attempts to preserve his individuality are by negating the qualities and life they represent, with Zakhar, these attempts are attained in recognition and reciprocal acknowledgment that lies behind the appearance of witty confrontation.

After Oblomov calls Zakhar for the third time in just about half an hour, Zakhar’s grumbling turns to death. These metaphorical references to “the life and death struggle” are as complex, multifaceted and subtle as Hegel’s master/serf dialectic itself. “Lord in Heaven. This is killing me, I’d sooner be dead!” translates Pearl. This creates reversed references to Hegelian notions. Capitalized Lord, “the absolute Lord” for Hegel is “the fear of death” (Hegel 117). Zakhar, however, says nothing like “this is killing me” but rather “what suffering! I hope death comes soon.” Moreover, he addresses “god” with the informal pronoun “ты” rather than “вы,” with which he addresses Oblomov.⁹

The dynamics of Zakhar’s and Oblomov’s interactions are further complicated. After the tiring attempts to make Zhakar clean the room, Oblomov looks at Zhakar reproachfully, while Zhakar looks out the window. Both sigh indifferently. Oblomov, as if thought, “You brother, are more of an Oblomov, than I am.” Zhakar almost thought, “Liar, you’re only a master of talking wise and pitiable words, but I know you don’t care about dust and spiderwebs.” In the Pearl translation, this becomes, “His master looked at him, as if to say, you know you’re even more of an Oblomov than I am myself.” This use of the possessive pronoun changes the dynamics of this passage, referring to the social status of the speakers, even as it alters this. It is significant that

⁹ – Ах ты, господи! – ворчал Захар, отправляясь опять в кабинет. – Что это за мученье? Хоть бы смерть скорее пришла!

Zhakar, in thinking this, refers to Oblomov with the informal pronoun “ТЫ” instead of “ВЫ,” which makes him comment much more familiar; it already begins to break up the barrier between master and serf. Oblomov addresses both Zhakar and Stolz with the same word, “brother.” This juxtaposition of “master” and “brother,” and the change from the informal use of “you” into the formal “you” changes the dynamics. Moreover, Zakhar’s grumbling here is with tender familiarity: while Oblomov wants to convince himself that he cares about cleanness of his possessions, Zakhar knows, he does not. Zakhar defends his own sloppiness by witty replies he considers Oblomov a master of (“you are only a master of coming up with wise yet pitiable things to say”). I didn’t invent the mice, I didn’t invent the dust, starts laughing Zakhar. He makes Oblomov laugh as well.

In an earlier passage leading to this mutual laughter, Oblomov points to Zakhar’s sloppiness, blaming him for not doing anything. “What the bondsman does is really the action of the lord,” writes Hegel. Oblomov knows that the same reproach could be directed towards him. “You are more of an Oblomov than I am,” Oblomov replies after Zakhar’s defenses. “How am I not doing anything?!” Zakhar gets offended. “I try, without even attempting to preserve my life!” “This consciousness,” writes Hegel, “the bondsman has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death; the absolute Lord” (Hegel 117). Neither Oblomov nor Zakhar seem fearful of death, however. Despite their playful recreation of the Hegelian life-and-death struggle, they both seem cognizant yet not fearful of death. They recognize human mortality as a given of life.

Zakhar would have died for his master without even thinking twice. He would not even consider it an act of bravery. He did not theorize about his feelings towards Oblomov, but was filled with devotion. When the reader is ready to be filled with admiration for Zakhar’s devotion, Goncharov, in a Hegelian manner, gives us a negating paragraph. If Oblomov’s life depended on

Zakhar's staying up all night, he would certainly fall asleep. Zakhar is, indeed, full of contradictions just like Oblomov. Zakhar's presence is not reduced to mere symbolic gestures as some critiques claim.

Zakhar proves Oblomov's success in failure like Stoltz and Olga do. To finally demonstrate the educational elements of *Oblomov*, akin to that of *The Phenomenology*, I will take a look at Stoltz's growth and transformation, and the more truthful realization of human mortality, demonstrated during a walk he takes with Olga in part four of the novel.

In her study "Time After Time, Temporal Ideology of *Oblomov*," Christine Borowec agrees that the character Oblomov operates within cyclical temporality, but argues that Stoltz operates within linear temporality. This is an example of possible misreading if we ignore the dialectic nature of *Oblomov*. There is a philosophically interesting walk that Stoltz and his wife Olga take in the alley in Part Four (an often overlooked passage), which prevents me from accepting the possibility of linear temporality in this novel. The walk not only reveals Stoltz's deeply philosophical dialectic, but also reveals that he too now operates within cyclical temporality, proving that Goncharov uses cyclical temporality throughout the novel, I suppose quite intentionally laying bare ideas of dialectical progression.

Stoltz's and Olga's walk in the alley, in my opinion one of the most philosophical walks in the literature of the time, worth Tolstoy's pen, is triggered by Olga's sadness due to contemplations about human finitude. After three-four years of a happy marriage, she is melancholic like Oblomov was earlier: "How can I possibly be wanting something more, what more is there to want? Where is there to go? Nowhere! The road doesn't go any farther... No, it can't be, it can't be that I've reached the end of life's journey!" she ponders. What is significant for us in her contemplations is the use of this metaphor for life. It is a road, and it is a journey. She feels she might have hit a dead end: the road doesn't go any further, resulting in boredom. This bothers Olga and she begins to ponder about the nature of life's journey, and temporality is

the subtext of her contemplations. While some roads might be quite circuitous, usually a reference to a road implies a certain directness. Thus, in this translation Olga clearly seems to be implying a linear and progressive temporality, in which her own progress might have stopped. If we look into the Russian version, however, we discover that the original metaphor was “круг жизни,” which literally translates into “a circle of life.” So in fact she is wondering if she might have completed a full circle, but Stoltz alleviates her worries by trying to explain that life is not a circle, but a spiral in dialectical progression. The philosophical content of the conversation is also reflected in the formal pattern of the walk. Talking about the Hegelian dialectic and his formula of determinedness-self reflection model, which extended in circular temporality comprises a spiral, Stoltz and Olga are in fact walking in circles. The walk comprises three and a half rounds, forming a distinct spiral extended in time. This key and vital point is completely lost in translation.

If we look closer to the content of the conversation, we will see that Stoltz’s attempt to explain Olga’s sadness is nothing short of Hegel’s ambition, and in fact reflects his philosophy. “Sometimes an active questioning mind tries to probe beyond the normal limits and, of course, finds no answers, and that’s when the melancholy sets in... a temporary dissatisfaction with life... a deep-seated frustration with life for not yielding up its secrets. It’s not your private melancholy, it’s a malaise of mankind,” says Stoltz. This questioning, he explains, leads to an abyss where there are no answers, but this abyss only forces the consciousness to bounce back to life even with greater zeal. Stoltz emphasizes the process, the dialectic movement from the abyss to passionate life and back again.

While talking about life’s cyclicity, Stoltz is leading Olga in circles. “He led her off the path and made her stand facing the moonlight.... He took her by the waist and led her back onto the path.” In the Russian version, “made her stand” is translated from “оборотил,” literally

turned around, and then “lead her again into the alley.”¹⁰ The emphasis of the repetition and the return is lost in translation. In the original, Stoltz and Olga are clearly walking in circles, while in the translation the pattern is turned to back-and-forth. “When they reached the end of the path for the *third time* she would not let him turn back (обернуться), and this time it was she who led him into the moonlight and regretted him questioningly.” “Обернуться” would be more literally translated as “turn around,” which brings up the rotation and circular movement.

Thus Stoltz and Olga are walking in circles (which in movement becomes a spiral) and talking about the dialectical circles of life. I find it unreasonable to state that Stoltz operates within linear temporality while he is clearly emphasizing the cyclical nature of life. And if for him and Olga this cyclical nature is working itself out in time, forming a Hegelian spiral, for Oblomov it is one full circle at this point with no distinct dimension of time as he had died, but the novel itself stretching his life over time, comprises a spiral, which involves a dialectical progression.

Zakhar introduces the theme of death into the novel, and reappears at the end of the novel, having outlived his master, but having come to resemble him even more: Zakhar’s account of reasons for his unemployment sound like Oblomov’s own accusations to the society for not allocating understanding of human nature. Zakhar does not want to leave Oblomov’s grave, crying: “Unwilling am I to leave the dear grave... What a lord Lord took from us! He lived for people’s happiness; he should have lived for a hundred years.” This encounter of Zakhar happens when Stoltz is accompanied by his friend liberator, who asks what happened with Oblomov. “Perished (died) for no reason,” answers Stoltz – and not as Pear translates: “He died, just expired without leaving a trace – what a waste.” Stoltz is not such a utilitarian. His “got lost,” “perished,” while having a minute component of regret for Oblomov’s not living up to his social potential, now are mostly euphemisms for death. Stoltz knows better now, he has come to learn

¹⁰ Он повел ее за талию опять в аллею.

about human mortality and reconsider his notions of “progress” as presented in the beginning of the novel: “work for its own sake,” and never settling for the peace Oblomov dreamt about. By the end of the novel, Stoltz has come to realize the necessity of pause for actual movement. He has come to love the idyllic life Oblomov described to him as his dreams. Stoltz now enjoys similar melancholic moments with his wife Olga, albeit alternating them with fervent activity. Stoltz has immensely developed throughout the novel, very much like Oblomov himself had done much earlier: “Stoltz looked at love and marriage from an original standpoint that may have been exaggerated, but was at least unique and independent. In this, as in all things, he pursued a free and – so it seemed to him – simple course, but what a hard apprenticeship of observation, patience and effort he had to serve before finally learning to take these “simple steps.” Stoltz has changed and developed. When his writes friend asks Stoltz what were the reasons of Oblomov’s death, Stoltz replies: “Reason... what reason? Oblomovshina!” He asks his friend to write down his tale, perhaps it might be useful for someone. This slight didactic component is emphasized throughout the novel, giving it unshakable elements of a Bildungsroman.

Moreover, true to the traditional features of an educational novel, the heroes have experienced transformations: Stoltz’s and Olga’s life resemble Oblomov’s own dreams, Zakhar has become even more of an Oblomov, albeit, like Oblomov’s double contributing to his immortality as a literary hero; Oblomov’s own life ended in realization of his dreams. Zakhar’s own crying make Oblomov’s life not a waste as both the narrator and Oblomov have taught us in the beginning of the novel that a wasted life is one, after the termination of which, no one recalls the person or cries. Considering Stoltz’s own transformation and life education, I believe that at this point, when he names oblomovshina as the reason of Oblomov’s death, he has this concept redefined. It is true that when Stoltz first used oblomovshina – it stood for stagnation and idleness for him. Oblomov himself, however, scrutinized the concept more philosophically right away: “ob-lo-mov-shchi-na” Oblomov repeated slowly, enunciating separately the syllables of

this strange new word, “ob-lo-mov-shchi-na.” Pearl’s proper syllable division does not correspond to my Russian edition, in it Oblomov takes the word into “Об-ло-мовщина” and then “Обло-мов-щина.” Oblomov is educated enough to be able to break the word into proper syllables. However, in this enunciation, he is scrutinizing the etymology of the word: he first separates “Ob” then “Oblo.” This is of crucial significance to his and Goncharov’s notions of becoming, “progress,” and the nature of temporality to intricate for understanding “progress” or “regress.” Ob and Oblo, I believe, stand for cyclicity of life, comprising a Hegelian spiral, and the pattern of dialectical progression, which is as much regress as progress as the return is always with a difference.

Galya Diment writes in her introduction to the Pear translation: “In addition to being famous for *Oblomov*, Ivan Goncharov is also legendary in Russia for the fact that all of his three novels start with the same two letters – an “o” followed by a “b.” This is true, but I believe is not only “somewhat intentional” and explained by Goncharov’s superstitious nature. Diment posits that Goncharov decided to encode these letters into his later two novels as lucky letters because of the success of his first novel “Common Story.” It is not superstition but philosophy that is encoded in these letters. Ob, as well, as successive o’s placed in the beginnings of successive paragraphs create a visual illusion of a spiral that reflects the Hegelian idea of dialectical progress. “Oblo,” on the other hand, as Loshits has suggested, is the root of Oblomov and means a circle. A circle placed in time stretches into a spiral. Taking the word *oblomovshina* into improper syllables, Oblomov is looking for its root and etymology: he emphasizes “ob” and “oblo,” pointing to cyclicity of life. When Stoltz names *oblomovshina* as the reason for Oblomov’s death, he has it redefined by now. I read “Reason... what reason? *Oblomovshina!*” as “Reason... What reason?! A cycle of life!” similar to Zakhar’s “it’s not going to last a century, is it? it’s going to break at some point!”

“The idea of progress was not part of the Russian peasant worldview; the very word “time,” *vremya*, is derived from the verb *vertet'sya*, “to revolve,” spin or spiral around,” notes Caryl Emerson.¹¹ These deep-rooted beliefs could have been one of the reasons why Hegel’s spiral view of history and his philosophy in general were so enthusiastically adapted in Russia. I believe that both the Russian etymology of time as circular in nature, and the Hegelian dialectic are among the reasons why Goncharov bases *Oblomov* and all of his work on this underlying pattern of a spiral, which combines notions of progress and regress in dialectical unfolding.

Philosophy feeds literature not only with ideas but also helps reveal these ideas behind the images, characters and plot developments. Looking into Hegel’s conception of human agency, and the significant convergences between *The Phenomenology* and *Oblomov* helped me recognize that *Oblomov* is a philosophical novel and Oblomov’s lack of agency is agency in itself. Analyzing Hegel’s “literary turn” and his understanding of human agency, Speight argues that “behind Hegel’s extraordinary appeal to literature in *The Phenomenology* lies a philosophical project concerned with understanding human agency in the modern world” and that tragedy, comedy, and the romantic novel represent a sequence of essential categories for our self-understanding as modern agents.

Hegel saw philosophy and literature as intrinsically related and involved in one and the same project of construing agency and action. In modern academic and publishing worlds, philosophy and literature are often separated into almost mutually exclusive disciplines that at times might overcome the “ancient quarrel” and join in into collaborative projects. However, we gain great insight by reading, for example, Merleau-Poincy’s *Phenomenology of Perception* along with Proust’s novels *In Search of Lost Times*, and academic work on these 20th Century philosopher and novelist have proven fruitful. A century before, in Hegel’s time, such

¹¹ See Emerson, Caryl. *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

intellectual incorporations (what we would today call “multi-disciplinary” approach) were probably at its highest. As the modern German philosopher Dieter Henrich puts it, there has hardly been “any time in history, before or after, in which the connection between literature and philosophy was as direct and mutual’ as in the period following 1781.”¹² This is very unfortunate as not only does literature provide privileged access to action, but so does philosophy provide literature with foundation, inspiration as well as privileged access to its reconstruction, i.e. literary theory. Looked at Hegel’s *Phenomenology* in relation to *Oblomov*, a novel written decades later and in another country shows how such parallel readings reveal dialogues across cultures and time, and are relevant for our post-modern understanding of classic masterpieces, human agency as well as the modern separation between philosophy and literature. Caryl Emerson calls Goncharov’s *Oblomov* “an under-appreciated masterpiece that is only slightly about laziness, mostly about everything else.” Looking at *Oblomov* through the lenses of Hegelian philosophy helps reveal that *Oblomov* is a philosophical novel about human agency, and Oblomov’s “laziness” is agency in and of itself and can help us with our modern understanding of agency successful in failure.

¹² Allen Speight, *The philosophy of Hegel*, P 101.

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