

Culture and politics of laziness, from fairy tales to Oblomov and Bartleby*

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Abstract: The thesis of this paper is that laziness is not a psychological property of an individual subject but a collective sentiment: it is a reaction, or perhaps even a rebellion, against those who lock us within a culture that sees activity as a supreme value, often as an end in itself. Laziness is the response to those who force us to do and overdo, to give ourselves over to our occupations with zeal and constancy, total dedication and blind perseverance. So, it is not true that a lazy person does nothing, rather they do everything they can in order to not do anything. They work frantically in order to create the perfect conditions that allow them to activate their inertia. This paper tries to prove this thesis by analyzing some exemplary texts such as Goncharov's *Oblomov*, and linking it, upstream, with traditional Russian fairy tales and, downstream, with Melville Bartleby's famous tale.

Keywords: laziness; narrativity; values; having-to-do.

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1. A very happy man

Alexandre is a well-built man. He is tall, robust, muscular, capable of great feats and has an exceptional constitution for work. He is dashing in all aspects, including the erotic. Well aware of this is his young wife, the beautiful and rich landowner of a provincial French town in the 1960s. Every morning she leaves him a list written on the kitchen blackboard of all the tasks that need doing in the hundred hectares of the family estate. She keeps her eye on him all day long, in order to avoid him getting distracted or falling asleep. She clicks her fingers when she catches him about to give in to his tiredness. And he, grumbling, begins again, without neglecting his demanding nightly conjugal duties.

Alexandre grows tired of this routine, which has been the same for ten years now. He complains to himself. When he is on his own, he takes it out on the pumpkins in the field, smashing them with his feet. He attempts to put on airs and graces with his friends at the bar, and finds rare moments of quiet in the company of a small dog. However, he is not capable of reacting to his wife's tyranny. He puts up with the injustices and her manic obsession with activity, until an unexpected, random event leads to her having a fatal accident.

At the funeral, Alexandre struggles to maintain a contrite tone. He can already taste the change in rhythm for his finally emancipated existence. He sets the animals free in the courtyard, throws away his suit, substitutes the list of duties on the blackboard with a single euphoric verb: "to sleep". He stays in bed for two months, sending the dog out to do the shopping with the basket between his teeth, and using a complex system of hooks and pulleys to manage food and drink without ever having to leave his bed. It is pure happiness, the portended rest following that ferocious, ten-year tiredness.

He sleeps, and sleeps, and sleeps. He listens to the radio, plays his trumpet and eats. And he does not hesitate to pick up his rifle against those who, periodically, attempt to move him from his exasperated, enormous inaction. A laziness that is constructed, planned right down to its smallest details, longed for and prepared for who knows how long, long portended and finally satisfied.

The villagers have two different reactions to his unusual existential choice. Some slowly come to see him as a kind of guru for human liberation from the arrogance of work, and they decide to imitate him, also adopting a form of life that is living under the covers. Even school children fake illness en masse in order to stay away from their desks. Most of the others, however, not only gossip animatedly, but set a series of initiatives to get Alexandre to return to normal (from their point of view) active life. At one point they even send the town band to play at night under his window, but he has earplugs in and continues to sleep soundly.

It is the dog that brings about a turning point in the story. His tactical kidnap by Alexandre's friends from the bar forces Alexandre to abandon his sheets and return to his usual habits. The story ends here, with a kind of social pact between the protagonist and all the others. But Alexandre no longer takes orders, he will no longer break his back, he is no longer interested in the land and harvests, farms and fences, dedicating himself instead to fishing in the lake next to his house and a few fleeting love affairs.

2. Having (not) to do

This sort of fairy tale with a happy ending is a brief synopsis of *Alexandre le bienheureux* (*Very Happy Alexander*), a 1968 film directed by Yves Robert and starring a formidable Philippe Noiret as the main character. Why is this relevant, you may ask? Because it provides a perfect narrative synthesis of the central theses in this article regarding laziness. As we will attempt to demonstrate, laziness is not so much the manifestation of an individual character, the spiritual property of a single subject, but rather a kind of collective sentiment, a passion. If you prefer, laziness is a form of life that can grow and transform only within precise social and cultural contexts where hard work and inaction, work and rest, doing and not doing are considered central to social organisation and human life itself. In other words, the lazy person is never alone because they react to a system of values and behaviour that rejects inactivity, considering it a vice (if not a sin), though sometimes (albeit rarely) sees it as a virtue, a merit, an attitude to be pursued and praised. Alexandre is lazy because, in his village, doing nothing is viewed negatively by most people, who are all absorbed by domestic errands or agricultural activity. In fact, they work to get him out of bed by any means. From another perspective, Alexandre is considered a kind of saint because his laziness highlights the absurdity, the injustice of working until your back breaks. Laziness is a strongly moralised and polarised sentiment: an attitude that is judged to be profoundly negative sometimes, and profoundly positive at others. Inactivity divides the audience.

Laziness is a collective sentiment because it is a reaction, or perhaps even a rebellion, against those who lock us within a culture – a system of ideas and principles – that sees activity as a supreme value, often as an end in itself. The lazy are never alone. Laziness is the indignant response to those who force us to do and overdo, to give ourselves over to our occupations with zeal and constancy, total dedication and blind perseverance. Loafing about is a refusal to act, viewing inaction as an existential objective in order to resist those who would like to make us work, a protest against every form of senseless Stachanovism. An objective that must be fully met, a resistance to be reinforced, a protest to obstinately pursue. Alexandre detests the wife who exploits him mercilessly; and when she

goes on to a better life, he upends his lifestyle and no longer gets up from his bed, not even to eat. His is a derived indolence.

This is where the central nucleus of laziness comes from: it is not true that a lazy person does nothing, rather they do everything they can in order to not do anything. They work frantically in order to create the perfect conditions that allow them to activate their inertia. It seems like a paradox but we can see that it is not at all. We have already noticed this in the short story we are using as a sort of thought experiment: in order to stay in bed for a few months without doing a single thing, Alexandre adopts a complex system of pulleys, cords and hooks that allow him to always have access to what he needs in order to survive (food, wine), and in order not to get bored (wind instruments, the music stand with the score). It is clear therefore (implicit in the film though easy to discern) that he built this mechanical system himself, and not without effort or breaking a sweat. If, furthermore, the dog goes alone to do the shopping, this is only possible because he has previously trained it, making a particular effort in this regard. In order to be lazy, in order to act in a lazy way, a great deal of groundwork is necessary.

This article will attempt to argue and, hopefully, to demonstrate these theses. We will try to reconstruct a formal configuration of laziness, its unchanging traits and the generative dispositive that recognises its possible variations over time and space, in different societies and cultures. Laziness – referred to also by its numerous synonyms (idleness, indolence, sloth, inertia, apathy) and antonyms (diligence, hard work, dynamism, promptness and so on) – has been the object of reflection, both philosophical and otherwise, on various occasions, with different stories and unexpected fortunes. From a semiotic point of view, studying laziness means analysing some texts in which we can find some elements of a huge semantic area of the his pathemic configuration. So, we'll focus the analysis on the figure of the lazy person (often overlapping with that of the stupid person) in fairy tales and in some novels where he has a role of central importance. There is an underlying thread of continuity between fairy tales (especially when they are Russian) and novels from the same country. As such, we will consider the character who is without doubt the most famous, and most complex, literary sloth: Ivan Goncharov's Oblomov. This analysis will include a reflection on the character who could possibly be considered his American avatar, Melville's Bartleby. In these characters laziness is not simply taken to its extreme, but the ideology that proposes it to the world and refutes it entirely is deconstructed.

3. Warmth and stupidity

Champions of laziness can be found in fairy tales from all over the world. There are 'The Three Sluggards' from *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, in which a king names the laziest of his three sons as his predecessor. A son so lazy that he declares, "if they should hang me and if I already had the noose around my neck, and someone handed me a sharpened knife with which I could cut it away, I would leave myself be hanged rather than raise a hand". Effective hyperbole that pays off.

In particular, we find a clear nexus between laziness and warmth in collections of fairy tales from those places with icy temperatures. The reference here is to the Russian magic fairy tales, where the figure of the lazy person – intersecting with that of the village idiot – is established in relation to their desire to avoid the freezing conditions of the steppe and remain forever attached to the stove, among ashes and dirt. Thus we find characters such as Ivan Zapechnik or Zamaraschka, as well as the better known Ivan Popelov or Zoluschka, who is the Russian equivalent of the better-known Cinderella. What's more, the Stove and the Cold are, in many cases, anthropomorphised, becoming characters in their own right. But the characterisation of these particular individuals who populate the fairy tale, be they human or non-human, is established within the general structure of the stories into which they are inserted, on the basis of the role they play in providing a resolution (or otherwise) to the story.

As we know, the structure of Russian magic fairy tales is fairly solid. There is an initial harmonious Situation (a happy family, peace that reigns supreme, fertile land) that is disrupted by an Antagonist who mysteriously arrives from Another Kingdom, causing serious Damage in the form of a kidnapping, a robbery, a famine or something similar. At this point it is necessary to find someone capable of facing the Antagonist, and making up the Lack. This is rarely the victim. More frequently it is someone with no interest in the case who is charged with leaving, reaching the Other Kingdom, defeating the Antagonist and removing the Lack. Like in myths or epic poems, the hero does not begin as a hero but becomes one over the course of the story, and is only recognised as such at the end after having overcome all the Challenges destiny has placed before him. His first action is therefore to leave the domestic hearth, to bid his old father goodbye, to take up the necessary tools (a horse, money) and face the terrible cold of the steppe or the dark tangle of the forest.

Very often, the character destined to become a Hero is the eldest of three brothers, the most courageous, desperate to embark on an adventure. The youngest of the three, however, doesn't think twice: he prefers to stay at home, close to the warmth of the stove amidst the ashes, doing nothing but keeping himself warm. As a result, his blind lack of will or audacity, his inactivity and

indifference towards the adventure is derided by the collective and he is referred to as the village idiot. Here, laziness and stupidity coincide. You are stupid because you are inactive, idle because you are not interested in acting and changing, cynical about the very idea of heroism.

But in fairy tales, it is always possible for things to be turned on their heads. The stupid one, like the Shakespearian fool, often solves various problems – his own and other people’s – thanks to his secret astuteness. The idler may, in turn, decide to leave on the adventure, no longer concerned about the stove and facing the snowy mantle of the Russian countryside. According to the famous folkloric mechanism of triplication, it often happens that the older brother fails, followed by the second. And so it is up to the third to try. And, incredibly, he is successful. So, the more stupid and lazy the boy is at the beginning, the more astonishing, noteworthy and impressively rewarded his success will be. As we know, this is the case with Cinderella, or in its Russian version, with its male protagonist, Ivan Popelov. The filthy aspect is only ever external: the souls of these protagonists are extremely beautiful, almost disarmingly pure.

The Russian fairy tale thus reveals the entirety of its activist ideology, its value system based on hard work, initiative, courage, and the will to do. An ideology that wraps itself in a precise climatic setting: one where heat is contrasted with cold, the stove with the steppe, the dark ashes with the white snow, dirt with cleanliness. Certain forms of figurative inversion can also be possible at this level, dramatically confirming the importance of the themes linked to temperature. In various tales, one of the hero’s labours consists of being burned in the stove of the witch’s house in the middle of the forest: making it out by the skin of their teeth renders them almost invincible. In other tales it is the stove itself that takes on the role of Benefactor, the person who provides the future hero with the magical means to resolve the situation. In others again it is the cold that becomes a fully-fledged character, taking on various roles.

In a fairy tale entitled “Cold” the character with the same name appears as an Antagonist but is actually revealed to be quite the opposite. Rather, they are a kind of Benefactor. The tale is reminiscent of *Cinderella*. An old woman has three daughters, the first of which, Martina, is a step-daughter whom she treats terribly, whilst the other two are treated like princesses. Martina is forced to do all the housework, tidying and cleaning, but is nevertheless unjustly accused by her stepmother of being lazy and dirty. The other two, who are truly lazy, get up late and do nothing but argue. When Martina reaches marrying age, the old lady abandons her step-daughter in the middle of a forest dressed as a bride and orders her to be kind to Cold, her future consort, granting him his every wish. Martina, terrorised, has no choice but to accept. She is utterly frozen, but when Cold arrives asking her over and over, “You’re hot, aren’t you?”, each time she answers yes. She is thus protected with furs and covers, showered with gifts and

sent home. The old woman, shocked by the unexpected treatment Martina has received, sends her other two daughters to the same place. Needless to say, these two treat Cold so badly that he leaves them in the forest to die of thirst. The final transformation is that the step-mother and step-daughter are reconciled, and Martina can be married with great fanfare to a handsome young man from the village.

The game of parallels and inversions is clear. The very clean and obedient girl who was presumed to be lazy manages to face the challenge of the cold despite the continuous meanness of her step-mother, and is rewarded for it. The truly lazy ones, who are petulant and litigious, do not know how to overcome the challenge Cold places before them and they die. The ideology of the Russian fairy tale is thus confirmed.

4. The Politics of Oblomovism

As we have seen, the ideology that dominates European folklore – proverbs, riddles, legends, fairy tales – is firmly against laziness. Thus, beyond the Calvinist beliefs and progressive instances of modernity, capitalist efficiency and Stachanovite movements throughout space and time, the Russian fairy tale tradition that we have examined in the previous chapter promotes the idea of an existence that points to self-realisation, to the conquest of individual identity and social recognition as the results of a series of tests that are valiantly passed. It is thanks to this conviction that, in the stories collected by Afanasyev, the one who is stupid is the lazy one who does not want to leave on the adventure, who has no intention of taking on the cold of the steppe in order to secure a hero's future. Rather, he prefers to stay at home, curled up next to the warmth of the stove. He lives among the ashes, the mess, the dirt. He does nothing but enjoy the domestic warmth. And he is scorned for this fundamental inaction, this incapacity, this lack of will, this systematic absence of any possible adventurous spirit. But sometimes, the situation is turned on its head, and following the failures of his older brothers (and in spite of them) he finally sets out and resolves the problematic situation, removing the lack which gave rise to the story so that, by the end, he will be crowned the brave victor in spite of himself. The ambivalence of the figure of the stupid man reverberates through that of the lazy man, constituting its structure.

Oblomov, the eponymous protagonist of the novel by Ivan Aleksandrovich Goncharov (1859), seems to be a literary transposition of fairy tale anti-heroes such as Ivan Popelov, Cinderella or Filthy-Face. Oblomov appears as kind of male Cinderella lost in 19th century St Petersburg, where he shows a tenacious resistance to all those changes that the modern myth of progress tries to impose. He longs for the golden age of his childhood in the east, he dreams of family

frivolities and the atavistic inaction of the peasants who half-heartedly work their land. But he fully understands – almost physically, in the very fibres of his being – that nothing like that can ever return. Thus he perennially lies on the sofa, living in filth among the cobwebs, next to the stove to ward off the cold of the city, waiting but without really knowing what for or why. And it is also when he attempts to change, paying attention to the world that would like him to be active and dashing, he will soon understand he is wrong to do so: it simply isn't worth it.

And yet, his life choice is configured as a kind of lazy man's revenge against the ideology of doing, of being adventurous, fearless, an ideology that is so prevalent in traditional Russian fairy tales. What's more, it is the revival of someone who does not limit themselves to opposing a positive laziness with a negative dynamism, but who deconstructs the ideology on which such activism relies piece by piece, revealing its limits, its constitutive violence, its profound bad faith. Oblomov hates Afanasyev: over the course of the book this name is used to refer (erroneously) to a squalid ministry worker.

4.1 The Narrator

Let's revisit some of the essential passages from Goncharov's novel, with the help of the wonderful film adaptation by Nikita Michalkov (1980) that at some points is even more intense and enlightening (for our purposes) than the literary text.

First and foremost, it is worth bearing in mind that the present events of the novel are, as we learn from the final pages, recounted by Stolz (Oblomov's great confidante to whom we shall return) to a scholar friend, who from the brief description ("a fat man with an apathetic, pensive face, with eyes that seemed half-asleep") sounds like a caricature of the author. Stolz will then create a novel that acts as a summary of what he has been told. A classic literary device used by the narrator to make his own act of storytelling believable: I say what I know, and I know it because I was told it by someone who was there. What the narrator tells us of the vicissitudes of the protagonist and other characters, of their thoughts and feelings, is filtered. With everything that entails in terms of the narrative, moral, aesthetic and, ultimately, political choices, determining what is said and not said, when he is silent and when he is emphatic, when he explains and when he surreptitiously passes judgement. The Oblomov that we know hails therefore from the impression Stolz already has of him. The tale opens on a Saturday, May Day in fact (Goncharov's irony is constant) in Ilya Ilyich Oblomov's living room, where he is laid out on the sofa in the half-light. He will remain there – among papers and mess, cobwebs and bugs, furniture covered in dust and worn upholstery, the remains of meals from the day before, books left open, last year's

papers, letters yet to be responded to, ritual visits of friends and acquaintances – for the entire first part of the book: some one hundred and seventy pages. As we are told, lying down “for Ilya Ilyich was his natural state” (6). Living with Oblomov in that apartment in a cold, anonymous St Petersburg is Zakhar, his indolent servant, who is partially responsible for and complicit in the decayed state of the furniture. He is an individual who is constantly assailed by criticisms and insults from the master of the house. The two live in symbiosis, they love one another, hate one another, unable to do without the other like in Hegel’s famous dialectic. Oblomov reproaches Zakhar for disturbing him with futile, bothersome matters such as the butcher’s bills, the rent, normal working hours, but then he delegates all daily inconveniences to him. Zakhar would like to bring his master back to the prosaic, everyday reality, holding him responsible for his own lack of productivity. But deep down he enjoys the soft, relaxed and inconclusive life.

We quickly learn a great deal about Ilya Ilyich, and while he may appear a simple man, he is actually tortured by continual doubts regarding the meaning of existence and a generic desire to work that he, however, keeps at bay. His inner peace is constantly threatened by external events that demand he take action and be aware of things in life. The epithets the narrator reserves for him – lazy, indolent, ineffective, apathetic, sad, fearful, bored – are in part proven wrong and in part confirmed by the (few, in actual fact) actions that he carries out in the four other parts of the novel: his plans for improvements to his country estate at Oblomovka, looking for a new apartment, falling in love with Olga Sergeevna, making himself seem busy in order to make her feel guilty, giving up on courting her (too much work), marrying the commoner and perfect housewife Agafia Pshenitsina and having a child with her. Added to this is his act of dying, without any effort or pain, of a stroke.

4.2 No transformation?

Let’s stop here for a moment, and admit something. By reformulating Oblomov’s story we are also adding in our own: recognising one’s own bias (as insistent as it is inevitable) is the best way of moving past the deception of objectivity, setting in motion a hermeneutic machine that goes in search of interpretations that are pregnant with implicit textual analysis. It is both incredibly easy and impossible to sum up Oblomov’s story. It is so easy because over those five hundred-odd pages, the protagonist does very little, and his story – in this case radically opposed to the dominant western ideology ruled by subjective adventures and social realisation – brings about no transformation. The hero does not overcome any hardship, he does not change, he does not defeat any antagonist, and he is not recognized as hero. The end of the tale

coincides with the death of its protagonist: without any difference having been made, and, as such, without meaning. At least at first glance. However, at the same time it is difficult to explain the tale narrated by the novel (or the film) because this lack of transformation in the protagonist, this cancellation of meaning that rules his existence, is in some ways apparent: everything happens in his inner world and flows irresistibly into the external world of society, history, the culture of his and our time. Oblomov is not apathetic. Rather, he is unproductive, inactive, radically sceptical about the magnificent and progressive opportunities open to humanity. It is precisely because of this that inside and around him lots of things happen, all of them passionate, emotional, moral. Whereas the lazy man is someone who, as we have seen, resists the world that wants to make him work in any sense or in any way, Oblomov goes beyond this label. On one hand, he resists the fleeting dynamism that surrounds him, escaping the frenetic capitalist rhythms of production and the dominant norms, yet on the other, he is tireless on the plane of emotional and therefore, ideological, processes. He works in order not to work, but at the same time he carries out a very particular work: he does not oppose the dominant values with another value system, rather he calls into question the value of the other people's values, explaining step by step their unpleasant provenance and their inane consequences. He deconstructs it in a radical way: after all, *oblom* in Russian means isolation, but it also means fragment, splinter.

4.3 Others

There are two passages in the novel that contribute to our protagonist's characterisation, and which are therefore worth further consideration. In the first of these Zakhar, conversing with his master, compares Oblomov's life to that of any other person: "Well, I just thought that if other people just like us can move, then why can't we?" (Goncharov, 2006, p. 97) His master's reaction is one of unbridled fury. Ilya Ilyich sends Zakhar away, but he is very disturbed. He reflects at length on this comparison between himself and 'the others', and is shocked by the fact his faithful servant was able to do this comparison. His sense of self worth is profoundly wounded. He then calls Zakhar back and embarks on a lengthy response. The scene is particularly theatrical (depicted expertly in the film by Michalkov): the servant has understood the gravity of the situation from the tone of his master's voice. He hesitates before entering the room, stopping on the threshold. Oblomov is sitting on the edge of the bed and calls him over. Zakhar takes one small step at a time, terrorised. The tension rises. Ilya Ilyich observes Zakhar with disdain as he moves his gaze around the room in half-light, pretending everything is fine. His master asks for kvass several times, signalling that the long reprimand is about to begin. As he grows progressively drunk, he becomes sharper, more serious, more solemn. Ilya Ilyich attempts to explain to

his servant why he is so hurt, but Zakhar declares several times that he does not understand his reasons.

These 'others' you talk about, they are your down-and-outs, coarse, unwashed, unschooled ruffians, they sleep in a bundle of rags in the street. [...] They're the kind who clean their own boots and dress themselves. Sometimes they try to pass for gentlemen, but it's a sham; they have no notion of what a servant is. They have no one to fetch and carry for them and they run their own errands. They light their own stoves and even do their own dusting. (Goncharov, 2006, p. 101)

This is the world of Afanesyev's fairy tales, the world inhabited by all those ambiguous Cinderellas.

Oblomov attempts to explain to his "poisonous" servant his dismay at being considered (him!) 'another'. He uses simple terms, elementary images that his servant will be able to understand, depicting himself as a real lord: "Oh so I'm in 'another' class altogether? Just listen to yourself for a moment; there you go again with your 'another'. Have you ever stopped to consider how those 'others' live? These 'others' of yours have to work all the time, constantly busy and rushing here and there; if they don't work, they don't eat. These 'others' bow and scrape, they beg, they humble themselves" (Goncharov, 2006, p. 102). The picture he paints of himself is one of impressive arrogance: "So I'm one of the 'others'! Do you see me rushing about, do you see me working? Am I short of food or something? Am I such a pitiful sight, all skin and bone? Do I lack for something?" (Goncharov, 2006, p. 102). Zakhar asks for forgiveness, he prostrates himself, but does not understand. And Oblomov does not understand how Zakhar cannot understand. And so the scene comes to an end.

But Ilya Ilyich is truly shaken, and not even he really knows why. The problem is complex, and it is not resolved by this sort of claim to aristocratic privilege, in this panegyric of individualism. A little later, despite being in the grips of the kvass-induced stupor, he cannot stop thinking about these 'others' and the difference that separates him from them, a difference that he perceives very clearly, but that he is unable to put into words. At a certain point in his ruminations, he attempts to invert his point of view: he is indolent, lazy, incapable, whilst the 'other' is probably much better than him, who knows. "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. He had to admit that "others" would have finished all the letters, without the "whiches" and the "thats" getting in each other's way; "others" would have moved into a new apartment by now and would have put the plan into effect and would have been to the estate and back by now. [...] " 'others' enjoy life, go everywhere, see everything, involve

themselves in everything and I'm...well I'm just not one of them!" (Goncharov, 2006, p. 107).

In any case, Oblomov is very clear on the fact he could never be 'another', no matter what their traits may be, positive or negative. Ilya Ilyich experiences a profound sense of detachment to the others due to his scepticism about any form of efficientism, of vitalism, of a generic will to live even. He knows he is different, that he is a different kind of being, but he is unable to explain it. What he does not accept is the idea of an extended sociality, of a collective existence among strangers that, despite doing all he can to get to know them, remain as distant as ever, well beyond emotions, passions, and confused reverie. In fact, "He now experienced one of the most vivid flashes of insight in his whole life." (Goncharov, 2006, p. 107) And it is a sad, painful, paralysing recognition: there is an unbridgeable gap between him and the others, a profound different that, however, remains inexplicable: "But I would really like to know... how come I'm like this?" His voice sank to a whisper again and his eyes were tightly shut. "Yes, why...it must be...because... But no matter how hard he tried, he just could not get it out" (Goncharov, 2006, p. 109). His tongue is halted by sleep, and with it his thoughts, by the sudden onset of an ancestral slumber.

4.4 In Oblomovka

What follows is the second step in our consideration of this novel: the famous ninth chapter of the first part of the book, the only one to have its own title, 'Oblomov's Dream'. It was written, it seems, some ten years before the novel itself, and is thus considered by many to be both a digression and the book's central nucleus. A great deal has been said about these fifty pages of great complexity, with many rightly insisting on its stylistic difference to the rest of the book (an idyll nestled in an event narrated with strongly realistic tones), which seems to signal a more profound diversity - that between the nature of Ilya Ilyich and his ghosts, his 'others'. Narrated almost entirely in the present tense, this novelistic addition exposes a chronological past that is presumed, but a cognitive contemporaneity that is very much certain. An apparent flashback that acknowledges the obsession that occupies Ilya Ilyich's mind throughout the book, that fills and corroborates his never calm mind, but which he never manages (and perhaps does not want) to formulate verbally or to share with just anyone. It is not surprising that Michalkov scatters fragments of it throughout the course of his film. We could say that Oblomov's dream is the figurativisation of his specific form of laziness, the profound nature (cognitive, emotional, somatic) of Ilya Ilyich. Not simply a justification of his inaction, nor a fantastical-literary depiction of ineptitude, as has been said, as much the (perhaps unique) way of expressing and articulating the passion that is at once naïve and complex,

defined by the novel itself (through the first person narrative voice that belongs to Stolz) as *Oblomovism*.

So, Oblomov falls asleep as he always does, but this times it happens immediately after he has had the altercation with Zakhar about ‘the others’, which brings into focus (without giving it a name) the profound difference between himself and the rest of society. And he dreams. He dreams of a fantastical world, a typical *reverie* of the happy childhood of Ilya Ilyich in that “peaceful spot” in the world that is Oblomovka, the family’s country estate where life passes (remember: this entire discourse is written in the present tense) in a calm, low-key way free from daily anxieties, fractures, traumas or fatal enemies. It is not a given that the Oblomovka of his dreams is the same as the real one from which Ilya Ilyich continues to receive unsettling messages about peasants abandoning the fields and an ever-dwindling harvest. But nor is the opposite known to be true. There is, of course, a hiatus, a crack between the two, and this is the precise location of Oblomov’s internal experience, his strategic laziness, his tragic inability to want to act. Ilya Ilyich is lacking will to live and to do because no one has ever given it to him, neither forcing with authority (which, as we will see, was the case for Stolz) nor coaxing it out of him with affectionate conviction (as could have been his case). In Oblomovka there are no Senders and as such nor are there any plans of action or passion:

The rules of life were simply handed down just as they were, from father to son, as they had been for countless generations [...] After all, what was there to think about, to get excited about, to find out about; what goals were there to strive for? None of this was necessary; life like a stream flowed gently past them. (Goncharov, 2006, p. 136)

Thus Ilya Ilyich’s father spends his time moving all over the house, taking no interest in the countryside and showing no particular concern for his son and, therefore, failing to impart to him any teachings for the future. His mother showers him with affection, with caresses and sweets of every kind, but she does not give him a value system. The old people of the village are even less help in this regard, absorbed as they are by the legends, sayings and gossip of the area. The only person who confers a sort of tradition and culture to young Ilyusha is his nanny, through her detailed versions of fairy tales and myths from original Russian folklore, filled with heroes and damsels in distress, demons and brigands, spirits, dragons and other figures that capture the child’s imagination, leaving him with a generic sense of melancholy and fear of the outside world. The ‘out there’ of which Oblomovka has no direct experience.

What’s more, Oblomovka is the kingdom of negation. The text that describes it (‘Oblomov’s Dream’) is filled with negative phrases, both in the

description of the landscape and that of its inhabitants: “there is no sea”, “no high mountains, no cliffs or precipices, no dense forests: nothing at all imposing, wild or menacing”, “there is no twittering of birds”, “In the spring no sudden blizzards return to blanket the fields”, “Winter [...] stays in character [...]; there is no taking by surprise with sudden thaws and no imposition of the tyranny or cruel frosts”, “there are no robberies, murders, or calamitous events; their tranquillity is never broken by strong passions or ambitious enterprises”, “It was a place that the Lord never visited with plagues of any description”, the people of Oblomovka “would never have believed you if you had tried to tell them that other people did their ploughing, sowing, reaping or marketing in some different way” and so on. This kind of negative *ekphrasis* derives from the fact that such an imaginary land, and the sleepy and seclude life that continues within it, is characterised by a two-fold denial: that of utopia (the Golden Age of the romantics, as sublime as it is unreachable) and of dystopia (identifiable with the prosaic St Petersburg where Ilya Ilyich went to live for some reason). The static serenity that characterises such a way of life, this Oblomovism, is the result of this two-fold, preliminary renunciation: a neutral term, a neither-nor, rhetorically obtained thanks to a series of anti-phrases that fill the text and render Oblomovka with its obtuse inhabitants a town outside of time and space. In short, it is presented as being without identity.

These good people saw life as nothing but an ideal of peace, quiet and total inactivity, interrupted from time to time by certain unpleasant events such as illness, loss, disputes and, yes, even work. They put up with work as a punishment inflicted long ago on their remote ancestors and inherited by them, but they could never grow to like it and took every opportunity to avoid it, regarding such avoidance as right and proper. (Goncharov, 2006, p. 135)

Oblomovka is lacking nothing, in the sense that we do not perceive any lacerating sense of lack, and therefore no form of desire is able to emerge. The anti-utopia imagined by Ilya Ilyich throughout his life is that of an existence without ambition or regret, free from aspirations and sacrifice, agitation and nostalgia, longing and ideals. In short, an existence without any regime of desire. The happiness that comes from this curious Eden without positive characteristics, ends up leading to a general feeling of death: in the cabins “dead silence is all you will get”, “it was a sleep that swallowed everything, that nothing could overcome, the true image of death”, “everything is dead”. This is because no existential questions ever occur to anyone: “And what other conclusion would you have him draw: “How did the adults of Oblomovka live? Did they ever ask themselves: “What’s the purpose of life?” God knows. And what was their answer? Most probably, none at all” (Goncharov, 2006, p. 135). This is the source of the cyclical questions Ilya Ilyich constantly asks himself about his own

uncertain personality, his own indolent nature, but which are destined to forever remain unanswered, exactly as has happened for generations for the people of Oblomovka who are so used to living in that small, basic community that they cannot conceive of a society that is even marginally more complex.

This is Oblomovism, the sentiment that permeates Ilya Ilyich's entire existence, an illness according to 'other people', which is in no way the stubborn revenge or passive acceptance of an ancestral inactivity to be cultivated at all costs, but a tragic calling into question of the opposition between hard work and idleness, another neutral term, as is habitual in that eternal, meaningless form of life practiced at Oblomovka.

The comparison with Stolz, who was born and raised at Verchlyovo, a few *versts* from Oblomovka will later testify to this.

4.5 Stolz as Opponent

A series of typical characters pass before Ilya Ilyich as he lays stretched out on the sofa in torn house robes for the whole of the first part of the novel. He is visited, almost ritualistically, by a womaniser, a fraudulent fixer, a budding writer, and former work colleagues. All of them, each with their own existential and ideological perspective, try to 'save' Oblomov, to 'redeem' him, to get him to leave the lethargy that grips him in order to be reintroduced to that which, according to everyone else, is active everyday life without too many worries or fundamental questions. But between naps he awaits Stolz's arrival, the only one who understands him and who can help him deal with a number of practical problems, such as writing a letter to the starosta at Oblomovka or managing the impending eviction. This is how the second part of the book begins, with the arrival of his fraternal friend, as beloved by Ilya Ilyich as he is different from him. Even Stolz wants to save Oblomov from the indolence that afflicts him but, unlike the 'others' who act out of social inertia, he does so from a precise ideological position that the novel posits as entirely antithetical to Ilya Ilyich.

Everything about Stolz seems to be opposite to Oblomov: Russian on his mother's side, a German father, Andrei Stolz was educated in the ways of work and industriousness from a young age in the village of Verchlyovo, where his father, a general administrator, ran a kind of school for boys in the area. The same age, he and Oblomov attended the same class, but whilst Andrei "raided birds' nests with the other birds" (Goncharov, 2006, p. 171) once lessons were over, Ilya Ilyich went back to doing nothing in the soft belly of Oblomovka. Having both found themselves in St Petersburg, the two men pursued different careers. Oblomov was employed for a few years, before retiring eternally to his sofa. Stolz was in a permanent state of activity, both in the field of work (which often took him abroad) and in his social life (for which he soon became a regular in the city's

finest salons). He is, in short, an energetic type, active, full of common sense and with nerves of steel, very little interest in the abstract and a fierce hatred of imagination and dreams. Even his physical description is the exact opposite of Oblomov:

He did not have an ounce of surplus flesh on his body, nothing but bone, muscle and sinew. He was built like an English thoroughbred. He was lean and his skin was drawn tightly over his cheeks and there was not a trace of fatty tissue to round out the skin and bone. His complexion was even and on the sallow side without a trace of pink, and his eyes were greenish but expressive. (Goncharov, 2006, p. 181)

In essence, he is a perfect man, suited to the times, beloved of the ladies of high society and surrounded by young women.

Stolz and Oblomov could not be more different, they are in fact opposites, and the novel articulates this on all levels: personal, emotional, social, geographical and anthropological. Laziness is opposed with enterprise, meditative and accepted lethargy with impulsive activity, a love for the countryside with love for the city, feudalism with capitalism, the land-owning aristocracy in decline with the trading middle classes in ascent, imagination with pragmatism, Russia with German, Asia with Europe, Nature with Culture. The list goes on. The winner, or rather, the one who seems provisionally to be victorious, is Stolz, the perfect animal of his time. Not only will he marry Olga, but he will be the one to take Oblomovka in hand and will take care of Oblomov's son (also named Andrei) after his friend's death. But in the long term the novel seems to prove Oblomov right, firm in his philosophy of life in which laziness becomes a positive value and a political critique of the frenetic society of time, and, if we look closely, of hard work in general as an end in itself.

4.6 A Departure

One scene that is important in the book and fundamental in the film demonstrates this very well. In order to fully understand it, we need only invert our perspective, and rethink Oblomov's story not from the protagonist's point of view, but from that of Stolz. This is a scene in which he, now an adult, leaves his parents' house in search of his fortune, alone, in St Petersburg. Whereas Oblomov's own moment of farewell with his own parents (to whom we know he was morbidly attached) is mysteriously omitted in the book, that of Stolz's departure is recounted in its most intricate, moving, painful details over four pages. We will briefly summarise them.

Having finished university, where he had been sent "quite simply" to continue the family tradition, Stolz returns to his father and the house in

Verchlyovo. His mother has died a while ago, and with her the affection and values of Russian culture. But after just three months his father sends him away to the capital to seek his fortune.

But why was it necessary for him to go to St Petersburg, why couldn't he have simply stayed in Verchlyovo and helped his father to run the estate? This was a question that it never occurred to his father to ask himself. All he knew was that when he had completed his studies his own father had sent him away. So what he did with his son was simply what they did in Germany. (Goncharov, 2006, p. 178)

He gives him a horse, some money, some clothes in a sack and then sends him away, alone and lost, into the snowy steppe towards far-off St Petersburg. "From then on it's up to you. [...] You've had a good education and you can take your pick of careers: government service, trade, writing, anything. I've no idea what you'll choose" (Goncharov, 2006, p. 178). The son struggles to respond, finding nothing to object to and therefore accepting the will of his brutal father. "So!" said the father. "So!" said the son. "That's it then?" asked the father. "Yes. That's it," the son replied. They looked at one another in silence, searchingly and with deep intensity" (Goncharov, 2006, p. 179).

This mute dialogue, a kind of fiduciary pact based on paternal authority, and so therefore on a *having-to-do* whose only motivation is itself, is countered by a "throng of curious neighbours" who "watched open-mouthed as the manager of the estate sent his son off into the unknown" (Goncharov, 2006, p. 179). These external observers, old Russian inhabitants of the village, disgustedly criticise what the father ("what kind of Christian is that?") is doing to the boy, "Throwing him out into the street like that, like he was a kitten", without so much as a hug or a tear. And speechless, they watch the umpteenth demonstration of this stereotypically German lack of affection. As Andrei mounts the horse and spurs the animal on, the old man shouts for him to stop. The small crowd that has gathered rejoices for a moment ("Ah, now his feelings have got the better of him!", Goncharov, 2006, p. 180). Hardly. The belt on the saddle has come loose, it needs to be secured. However, Andrei does not want to stop and he reassures his father: he will deal with it at the first viable stop, right now he must go, as soon as possible before darkness falls. This moment of useless hope renders the emotional coloratura of the scene even more intense: "That's the way dogs behave, like complete strangers!". An elderly woman begins to cry, she calls out to Andrei, who comes down from his horse to hug her tightly. He too bursts into tears, whilst the woman kisses him insistently ("you poor darling!"). The embrace reminds Andrei of his dead mother, and he sobs even more. Then he dries his tears, jumps on his horse and disappears into the distance.

As we know, in typical Russian magic tales the Hero leaves for no clear reason, gloriously and enchantingly crossing the frozen steppe, invited by the king to go to that Other kingdom where the Antagonist who must be defeated resides. Here in Goncharov's novel the same scene is inverted. Here it is a moment of desperation, of silent anxiety that finds no good reason in this Departure that has no aim other than an impulsive respect of particular centuries-old habits; a tradition that is not actually Russian, but German, perceived by the characters involved (and with them the reader) as external, outside, foreign, 'other'. The roles are clearly marked out. On one side we have the old administrator who "in typically German fashion" abandons his son to the cold of steppe. On the other, we have the small crowd of villagers who watch this senseless Departure gobsmacked and tearful. In the middle is young Andrei. He shows himself to be tough in front of his father, silent and respectful of a custom that is only half his, but he allows himself to dissolve into tears as he embraces the old woman from the village who metaphorically substitutes his dead mother, giving the boy all of her desperate affection. It is fairly clear where the novel's value judgment (which is only partially implicit) falls: it endorses the side of Old Mother Russia, the one the external observers bring to counteract the German's hardness, and the universe of affection and warmth that their culture bestowed upon them.

It is for these reasons that we can interpret this scene as a critical inversion, a kind of systematic deconstruction, of the ideology typical of Russian magic fairy tales and fantastical storytelling in general. Whereas such ideology is configured as a peremptory invitation to act (whether it is charged with duty or will doesn't matter), here there are no reasons for the Departure, it is not corroborated by a value system equipped with sufficient value. The presumable fear felt by the boy who is about to face the unknown of the steppe after being sent away from home, is not expressed using words but is made entirely clear through his embrace with the old woman, and in his quickly repressed sobs. The most topical moment of the folkloric tale, that of the Hero who departs, is described as a brutal Germanic imposition (or rather, of the European bourgeoisie in ascendance) going against the infinite affection shown by the Russian (or even better, Asian) social group. The moment his innocent gaze reveals his boyhood, the ethical and political perspective is inverted: Oblomov goes from being negative to positive, and Stolz goes from positive to negative. The axiological oscillation is the secret that cements the intimate connection between the two.

4.7 Looking through the misted glass

The film by Nikita Michalkov makes this scene even more powerful, more intense, more moving. If in the textual dispositive of the novel we have the absence of any kind of dialogue between father and son, in the cinematographic dispositive this task is delegated to the images, the music, to the entire soundtrack, and the editing. The ideological criticism is thus reinforced. The scene lasts seven, incredibly powerful and effective minutes and is positioned exactly halfway through the story, preceded by another ten minutes in which we find Oblomov and Stolz – in a total invention by the director – sitting in a sauna chatting, arguing, discussing.

Oblomov and Stolz, in among the heat and sweat, debate animatedly yet lovingly. Stolz lays out his reasons for his activity and pragmatism. Oblomov replies, rejecting high society and his friend's all-embracing desire to do. He does so in such a way that Stolz is almost forced to admit that his friend is right: "You are wise", he tells him, in order to get him to stop talking for a while. At this point a musical theme begins that the spectator cannot help but recognise: it is the same one that accompanies the fragments of Oblomov's dream that are scattered, as we have noted, throughout the film. Stolz stands at the sauna window, naked and over-heated. He looks out through the misted glass and sees the frozen steppe. This is how the flashback to Stolz's childhood begins, with a movie camera that, placed in the reassuring heat of the sauna, frames the outside world, the ice-white cold of the Russian grasslands. Images are accompanied by a voiceover that tells the story of young Stolz. Here we have the old German, Andrei's grimaces, the heavy bags on his shoulders, the embarrassed silences between father and son, the ritual tears of the villagers, the meticulous detail of the saddle strap and everything else. As such, the scene of the heart-wrenching farewell between father and son is observed twice: by the villagers, more stupid and pained than ever, and by Stolz himself, now grown up, who silently watches himself as a young man as he remembers the past, having just agreed with his friend about the uselessness of his active life. It is, we could say, the Stolzian version of Oblomov's dream, rendered more intense by a number of powerful, precise expressive contrasts: chromatic (the half-light of the sauna compared to the blinding light of the steppe), that of temperature (the excessive heat of the closed environment compared to the excessive cold of the snowy plains) and somatic (the sweaty nudity that jars with the trembling bodies wrapped in furs against the freezing cold).

This opposition of temperature in particular is relevant. We already know how important the opposition of warmth against cold is for Ilya Ilyich (who reminds us of the many Cinderellas found in Russian fairy tales): the protective womb-like warmth of the stove against the oppressive iciness of the outside

world. This outside world, which is actually Andrei's childhood, is brought into focus by the internal world of the sauna where the two have taken refuge, which is restricted and protective. The observer once again has an evaluatory role, becoming the carrier of the true value of the values at play, deconstructing the axiology at the heart of folkloric culture.

Why so many vain efforts, so much senseless action, so much desire without an object? Oblomov's conscience repeats it to both himself and to someone else. Even Stolz is forced to agree with him, and the spectacle of his past, observed from that soft, embracing base provided by the sauna shared with his friend, cannot help but confirm his decision. What is Oblomov's laziness as seen from the perspective of this momentarily redeemed Stolz? A banal inability to act? Ineptitude, indolence, sloth, idleness? We already have the answer: not an infantile refusal to work, but the profound awareness of his own uselessness, a troubled inactivity that agitates within every act of impulsive hard work. In this sense, Oblomov does undergo a transformation over the course of the novel, as his is not the story of a man who does not want to grow up, who mourns his lost childhood, but that of an adult who has managed, in a Nietzschean manner, to become a child, to transcend the too human world of hard-working values that, by invading spaces and things, institutions and affections, render humans slaves to themselves. Oblomov is not a superman, his infinite good nature could never bear it. He is someone who, by strenuously preserving his own spaces of happiness, has pointed out the banality of doing. His is an effective laziness, a euphoric melancholy, a nostalgia for the future.

5. Preferring not to

The literary universe is filled with Oblomov's travelling companions, sloths who are atavistic or strategic, biological or historic. Critics have pinpoint many. First we have those from Russian literature who inspired or were inspired by our protagonist, such as Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, Lermontov's Pechorin, Herzen's Belto or Turgenev's Rudin. These are followed by Hamlet and Don Quijote, Christian Buddenbrook and Zeno. Each of them torpid, inept, apathetic, inactive in their own way. To this list we could add Proust's I and, by the same author, the protagonist of the gem that is *The Indifferent One*, a hero with an irrationality heavy with numerous passions. There is also *A Man Asleep* by Georges Perec. As for political sloths, who are as such closer to Oblomov, we must not forget Bartleby the scrivener, the famous protagonist of Herman Melville's short story by the same name, who forever repeats the simple, unchanging formula: "I would prefer not to". Bartleby was born on the other side of the world, on Wall Street, just two years before Oblomov. Whereas the latter (spread over 500 pages by Goncharov) takes laziness seriously, deconstructing

its ideological form, the former (kept to just 45 pages by Melville) takes it to its most extreme consequences. To the point that, strictly speaking, we should not even use this term to describe Bartleby's stubborn lack of action. In Bartleby, as we have said, there is not a real desire not to act (which would imply a precise position with regards to the world around him), but simply a preference, a weak level of will that confers upon his choice (or his non-choice) a hint of stubborn vagueness that such a world, with its rules and contradictions, causes to evaporate entirely.

Once more, the protagonist's vicissitudes (though it is somewhat ridiculous to call them that) are referred to us by the story's narrator, a lawyer of advanced age who plays the role of the perplexed antagonist. But if in *Obломov* (despite the external narrator) we know quite a lot about the internal complexity of Ilya Ilyich, Bartleby's soul remains entirely inaccessible to the reader, for the simple reason that Bartleby is structurally mysterious. His stubbornly defeatist attitude, the proverbial formula that he repeats as if it were a refrain, his allowing himself to die, all seem based on a secret that does not, however, exist. He is a mysterious figure with no mystery to hide. This is where his allure comes from, the reason he generates such unease and myriad interpretations.

Allure, unease and interpretations are already present in other characters in the story, and most importantly in the narrator-antagonist. The lawyer, Bartleby's employer, does all he can to find satisfactory explanations for his employee's unfathomable behaviour, and does all he can to maintain a civil and rational manner with him, even when he should fire him on the spot or report him to the police. In him exists that which he himself calls a 'logic of the employee': given certain premises, pre-determined conclusions must be drawn. For example, if Bartleby refuses to work, he must leave the office. On the other hand, Bartleby's attitude is not so much a refusal, more the manifestation of a preference and not an actual will. Bartleby counters the lawyer's lucid rationality, filled with common sense and unquestionable compassion, with a 'logic of preference'. "I would prefer not to", is in fact neither an affirmation nor a negation: it is the suspension of any definitive decision, any responsibility to choose. Bartleby does not refuse, nor does he accept. He avoids both. Thus every attempt give meaning to the senselessness of Bartleby's attitude is met with that same refrain: "I would prefer not to". After which there is nothing left to say. It is enough to send anyone mad. Apart from the lawyer, who resists to the end, opposing general delirium with the patient art of rationality, which is, it must be pointed out, the logic that places profit before everything else. But Bartleby answers once more: "I would prefer not to be a little reasonable". So we have a new political version of laziness: not, as with Lafargue, the declaration of a planned non-work against the alienating work of capitalistic production, nor the sweet inaction of those who couldn't give a damn about working because they

have no need for it, nor the idea of a creative idleness against the mechanical action of modernity. In short, nothing that is radically oppositional. No desire, no counter-desire. Rather, the extreme exasperation of an irrational and obstinate preference, of a progressive pulling away from the things of the world, from its values, from its needs and its pleasures. Isn't this laziness? Probably not. More likely it is simply another desire for sanctity, to be led by angels, the ascent of the ascended, an emulation of Christ. But, deep down, it is very similar to laziness indeed. ●

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📄 Culture et politique de la paresse : des contes de fées à Oblomov et Bartleby

👤 MARRONE, Gianfranco

Résumé: La thèse de cet article est que la paresse n'est pas une propriété psychologique d'un sujet individuel mais un sentiment collectif : c'est une réaction, voire une rébellion, contre ceux qui nous enferment dans une culture qui voit l'activité comme une valeur suprême, souvent comme une fin en soi. La paresse est la réponse à ceux qui nous forcent à faire et à exagérer, à nous donner à nos occupations avec zèle et constance, dévouement total et persévérance aveugle. Donc, il n'est pas vrai qu'une personne paresseuse ne fait rien ; il faut dire plutôt qu'elle fait tout ce qu'elle peut pour ne rien faire. Le paresseux travaille frénétiquement afin de créer les conditions parfaites qui lui permettent d'activer son inertie. Cet article essaie de démontrer cette thèse en analysant certains textes exemplaires tels que *Oblomov* de Gontcharov, et en la reliant, en amont, aux contes de fées russes traditionnels et, en aval, au célèbre conte de Melville *Bartleby*.

Mots-clés: paresse; narrativité; valeurs; devoir faire.

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