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Dobroliubov's Critique of *Oblomov*: Polemics and Psychology

N. A. Dobroliubov's critical essays on Goncharov, Turgenev, Ostrovsky, and Dostoevsky, written in the brief period of two years preceding his death in 1861, established a reputation and influence second only to Belinsky's in the history of Russian literary criticism. Of these essays "What Is Oblomovism?" holds particular interest. Published in the May 1859 issue of Nekrasov's *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*), it was Dobroliubov's first major review and possibly his best. It is a central document in the history of the conflict between the liberals of the 1840s and the radicals of the 1860s, or, in the phrasing of Turgenev's title, between "fathers and sons." It also offers a glimpse into the psychological and polemical strategies employed by Dobroliubov in his criticism. The essay—devoted to Goncharov's classic study of indolence and passivity, *Oblomov*—has become something of a classic itself, at least in the Soviet Union where critics would not dare to discuss either Goncharov or *Oblomov* without leaning heavily and admiringly on Dobroliubov. Goncharov himself had nothing but praise for Dobroliubov. "I think," Goncharov wrote his friend Pavel Annenkov at the end of May 1859, "that concerning Oblomovism, that is, what it consists of, nothing more can be said. He probably foresaw this and hurried to publish his article before anyone else. . . . After this essay the critics, if they are not to repeat themselves, must either feign disagreement or talk about the women. Such sympathy and aesthetic analysis I did not expect from him, imagining him much drier. However, I am perhaps prejudiced in his favor since his essay is very much in mine."[1] And well he might be biased. By lending Goncharov's classic a social significance indispensable, at least in the sixties, for recognition and success, Dobroliubov's essay turned a cool public reception of the novel into resounding acclamation.

This paper has four objectives. First, it attempts to place Dobroliubov's essay in a contemporary polemical context. Second, it examines the role of French utopian ideas in Dobroliubov's analysis of Oblomov. It then examines Dobroliubov's disagreement with Herzen over the "superfluous man." Finally, it investigates, insofar as the evidence allows, certain resemblances between Dobroliubov and the Oblomov-type described in his essay.

1. I. A. Goncharov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8 vols. (Moscow, 1952–55), 8: 323.

https://doi.org/10.2307/2493445 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Dobroliubov usually began his longer reviews with discussions of a theoretical bent. "What Is Oblomovism?" was no exception. Dobroliubov's topic was the creative process, and Goncharov was much impressed by what he had to say. "He amazed me," Goncharov wrote in the letter cited in the opening paragraph, "with his understanding of what goes on in the mind of an artist. How can he know this, not being an artist himself? These sparks scattered here and there are very reminiscent of the fire that burned in Belinsky." Goncharov singled out two passages of the essay for special attention. They bear citing in full, if only because they are so uncharacteristic of Dobroliubov's critical style and thought. The first passage concerns Goncharov's creative process: "His talent does not yield to impressions. He will not burst into song on seeing a rose or a nightingale; he will be struck by these things, he will stop, look, listen, and meditate for a long time. . . . What goes on in his soul at such times we can never completely understand. . . . But he begins to draw something. . . . You look coldly upon the as yet indistinct features. . . . They become clearer, clearer, more beautiful . . . and suddenly, as if by some miracle, a rose and nightingale appear in all their beauty and charm." The second passage concerns the way Goncharov reflects reality: "Everything that lives and moves around him, everything that enriches society and nature, all this 'Somehow miraculously lives in the depths of his soul.' In him, as if in a magic mirror, are reflected at any given moment all phenomena of life which he stops and transforms into firm, immobile images."[2] Nightingales, roses, miracles, magic mirrors, beauty, charm—such words surprise when they come from Dobroliubov, supposedly the champion of a rigid utilitarianism in literature. It is hard to believe that these statements, with their accent on the aesthetic and the irrational, are meant to be taken with complete seriousness. For one thing, they shed little light on Goncharov's creative method. For another, Dobroliubov's ideas are commonplaces of romantic literary theory that are easily found in Belinsky's and, significantly, Goncharov's literary criticism. He did have his reasons for presenting Goncharov in such terms, but these reasons were not strictly literary. As we shall see shortly, his emphasis on the magical and irrational qualities of Goncharov's art was a tactical maneuver aimed at justifying his own sociological commentary on the novel while disarming the critical opposition.

A logical outgrowth of Dobroliubov's view of Goncharov as a miraculous mirror of reality was his insistence on Goncharov's objectivity. Dobroliubov considered him far superior to satirical and didactic writers, but also far more difficult to understand: "The life depicted by him serves not as a pretext for abstract philosophy, but as a direct object in itself. He does not care about the reader and the deductions you draw from the novel. That is your business.

2. N. A. Dobroliubov, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 9 vols. (Moscow, 1961–64), 4:313. Subsequent references in the text will be to this edition.

https://doi.org/10.2307/2493445 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If you make a mistake, blame your own shortsightedness, not the author" (4:309). In a similar vein Dobroliubov added: "His objective art is not disturbed by any theoretical prejudices or preconceived ideas, it does not yield to any one set of sympathies to the exclusion of others. It is calm, sober, dispassionate" (4:313). It is precisely because of such detachment that Dobroliubov found his role as a critic to be of crucial importance in interpreting Goncharov for the public.

If Dobroliubov's description of Goncharov's creative method is unexpected, so is his defense of the novel's artistic integrity. Although he is generally considered indifferent and even hostile to literary values, in "What Is Oblomovism?" careful attention is given to the literary side of *Oblomov.* The term "artistic" appears again and again in the discussion. At the very outset Dobroliubov suggests that the crucial factor in overcoming an initially unfavorable public response was the novel's "artistic truth" (4:308). He then stresses the close connection between the novel's social significance and its literary merit: "The secret of such success, it seems to us, lies as much in the power of the author's artistic talent as it does in the unusual richness of the novel's content." Although some readers are bored by *Oblomov*'s length and excessive detail, Dobroliubov finds such supposed defects to be the novel's main virtues, arguing that it could not have been shortened without destroying its "artistic significance." In particular, Dobroliubov defends the length of the novel in terms of Goncharov's intention: "He did not want to by-pass the phenomenon he had seen without following it to the end, without discovering its causes, without understanding its connection with all other surrounding phenomena. He wanted to elevate into a type an accidental image that had flitted before him and to give it a generic and permanent significance." Dobroliubov justifies Goncharov's meticulously detailed descriptions on the grounds that they "greatly enhance the artistic excellence" of the work. He even argues that the abundant detail is aesthetically pleasing in itself: "There is so much charm in all these details with which the author fills his narrative and which, in the opinion of some, *drag out* the novel" (4:311–12).

It is impossible to read Dobroliubov's analysis without seriously revising the view that he was a social critic lacking a literary sensibility, interested only in the social relevance of art, and anxious to dictate what writers should write about. His apparent concern for creative freedom and literary excellence has led Evgeny Lampert, a perceptive and informed historian of Russian radical thought, to praise the essay highly: "No other critical work by Dobrolyubov gives the impression of such mastery of his theme and sense of discrimination; and, despite the all too apparent partiality, it shows him at his intellectually and aesthetically least restricted."[3] This claim is, at best, misleading, for it

3. E. Lampert, *Sons Against Fathers: Studies in Russian Radicalism and Revolution* (Oxford, 1965), p. 270.

https://doi.org/10.2307/2493445 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ignores the context and function of Dobroliubov's remarks. To begin with, Dobroliubov's critique is entirely unoriginal. Belinsky said basically the same thing twelve years earlier when he reviewed Goncharov's first novel, *The Usual Story*.[4] Following Belinsky, Dobroliubov even suggested that Goncharov's objective method might represent "the highest ideal of artistic creativity" (4:312). Despite this debt we should not think that Dobroliubov was guilty of plagiarism or incapable of independent thought. The important issue here is the function of his borrowings. It was the custom then for radical and nonradical critics alike to appeal to Belinsky's authority in order to establish their own. Both camps were contending for the right to be considered his legitimate successor. Dobroliubov's remarks thus had the very practical purpose of asserting his claim to Belinsky's crown.

Dobroliubov's criticism should not be discussed outside its polemical context. In this instance his stress on Goncharov's objectivity was a jab at nonradical critics, especially A. V. Druzhinin. Writing in *Sovremennik* in January 1856, Druzhinin characterized Goncharov's talent as "independent, autonomous, positive, poetical" and advised him to avoid adopting a tendentious, critical attitude toward reality.[5] At the end of 1856 in two essays on the Gogolian period of Russian literature Druzhinin took Belinsky to task for supposedly popularizing a "gloomy didacticism" among Russian writers. He went on to distinguish two irreconcilable theories of art. He called one theory "didactic," the other "artistic." According to Druzhinin, "artistic" literature is concerned with eternal ideas of goodness, truth, and beauty. "Didactic" literature, on the other hand, deals with transient social issues and attempts to influence the thoughts and actions of men through direct instruction.[6] Such socially oriented writing, since it does not dwell in the sphere of the good and the beautiful, contravenes, in Druzhinin's phrase, "the eternal and immutable laws of art" (Druzhinin, p. 215). In other words, he believed that social involvement and artistic excellence were incompatible.

By stressing Goncharov's impartiality and the literary excellence of his novel Dobroliubov tacitly but emphatically rejected the notion that good writing cannot be useful writing. At times Dobroliubov seems *plus royaliste que le roi.* He conceded his opponent's major points about art, creative method, and autonomy in order to "turn the tables" on him and discredit his distinction between didactic and artistic literature. Goncharov emerges from Dobroliubov's estimate as a perfect example of an "artistic" writer who nevertheless wrote a

4. V. G. Belinsky, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 3 vols. (Moscow, 1948), 3: 813.

5. A. V. Druzhinin, "Russkie v Iaponii v kontse 1853 i v nachale 1854 godov," *Sovremennik,* no. 1, 1856, p. 10.

6. A. V. Druzhinin, *Sobranie sochinenii,* 8 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1865–67), 7: 214–15. Subsequent references in the text will be to this volume.

https://doi.org/10.2307/2493445 Published online by Cambridge University Press

novel of immense social significance. Most, if not all, of Dobroliubov's remarks on strictly literary topics have a similar functional or strategic orientation. He chose his theoretical and critical comments on the basis of their polemical efficacy. Consequently, it would be a step in the wrong direction, and many Soviet critics have taken it, to marshal Dobroliubov's diverse and often contradictory statements about art into a coherent theory of literature.

Polemics aside, Dobroliubov's assessment of the contemporary literary scene also influenced his critique of *Oblomov*. On the one hand, he was second to none in demanding that writers meet their social responsibilities; on the other, he continually expressed his dissatisfaction with the shallowness and cowardice of current social satire. "Now let us recall," he wrote early in 1859 in an essay entitled "Literary Trifles of the Past Year," "the general direction of the denunciatory literature of recent times. It has completely immersed itself in the unmasking of minor governmental functionaries. . . . But still every author speaks as if all the evil in Russia derives from the fact that police officers are dishonest and mayors are rude!" (4:105). Instead of confronting the major evil of the system itself, as Dobroliubov would have wished, "denunciatory" writers were content to expose minor vice and corruption within the system. In a word, they lacked seriousness. At one point in his essay Dobroliubov observed that *Oblomov* had "much more social significance than all of our denunciatory literature put together" (4:314). By offering *Oblomov* as an alternative model of the socially relevant novel, he may well have intended his admiring review as a logical extension of his campaign against denunciatory literature.

It should be clear by now that Dobroliubov's criticism of *Oblomov* had multiple functions, none of which were strictly literary. The novel served to illustrate his notion of truly significant social commentary. His praise for the novel's "artistic" quality wards off attack at his most vulnerable point, his supposed lack of interest in literary matters. Moreover, simply by discussing the novel as a novel he controverts the frequent charge that he wrote about literature only to air his own progressive theories. Dobroliubov thus paraded his own objectivity by praising Goncharov's. He seems to say: "I come to this novel without any preconceived notions even though it was written by a man with whom I do not sympathize. Nevertheless, I approve of Goncharov's method and admire his brilliance." Dobroliubov could then demonstrate that *Oblomov*, written by a member of the liberal intelligentsia, was an indictment of that very group. The entire essay, in fact, is an attack from within whereby Dobroliubov used weapons provided him by his enemies. So, if we are at all justified in applying the epithet "brilliant" to Dobroliubov, we should be fully aware that his brilliance was not literary but polemical. His great talent, and by no means do I wish to belittle it, was putting ideas to good use.

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Moving from the novelist to the novel, Dobroliubov focused first on Goncharov's protagonist, Ilia Ilich Oblomov. Dobroliubov's analysis is psychological, and his psychology is based on certain utopian socialist notions about human nature. One is the Fourierist distinction between man's authentic nature and the deformities engendered in it by an unhealthy environment. "It must not be imagined," Dobroliubov wrote, "that Ilia Ilich belongs to some special breed in which inertness constitutes an essential and fundamental feature. It would be unjust to think that nature has deprived him of the ability to move of his own volition" (4:317). In confirmation Dobroliubov cites evidence showing that Oblomov was a healthy, energetic child who wanted to run and play like other children. But his gentry position prevented him from following his natural inclinations: "The disgusting habit of getting his wishes satisfied not by his own efforts but by the efforts of others developed in him an apathetic inertness and placed him in a pitiful position of moral slavery" (4:318). Dobroliubov also suggests, in terms recalling Fourier's "return of the passions," that Oblomov's repressed desire for activity found a distorted avenue of expression in fantastic daydreams in which he imagined that he was Napoleon or someone else equally illustrious. Oblomov, in Dobroliubov's opinion, was a healthy child ruined by the environment of his gentry class.

Dobroliubov's faith in the power of reason and education to change men's lives, a faith probably derived from Robert Owen, also informed his description of Oblomov. As Dobroliubov saw it, Oblomov would have been a different human being if he had only understood his relation to society: "He might even have begun to work if he had found a cause to his liking: but for that to happen, of course, he would have had to develop under conditions different from the ones he developed under. In his present situation he could not find himself a cause to his liking because in general he did not understand the meaning of life and could not reach a rational view of his relations to others" (4:320). The optimistic implication that Oblomov's psychological problems would vanish if he would think more about life and society epitomizes the psychological naïveté so much a part of the radical view of human nature.

The other two main characters in the novel, Olga and Stolz, occupied less of Dobroliubov's attention. He was certain that men like Stolz, the energetic entrepreneur of German extraction, would not lead Russia out of the Oblomovian swamp of lethargy and social indifference. First of all, Dobroliubov argued, Stolz was a figment of Goncharov's imagination; such men do not yet exist in real life. Second, Dobroliubov could not tolerate Stolz's bourgeois values, particularly his complacent self-indulgence: "We do not understand how he could be satisfied with his position and rest content in his solitary, isolated, exclusive existence" (4:341). Stolz is thus disqualified on historical as well as moral grounds as a force for positive social change.

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Dobroliubov was always on the lookout for fictional characters who could serve as models for the creation of progressive personality-types in real life. He found such a model in Olga. She is the first of three young women (Elena in Turgenev's *On the Eve* and Katerina in Ostrovsky's *The Storm* are the other two) whom he would invoke in ascending order as paragons of his ideal personality. Conveniently overlooking Olga's resemblance to the traditional romantic heroine who is anxiously searching for a life of exaltation and sacrifice, Dobroliubov predicted that she would never be happy, as were Oblomov and Stolz, with an exclusively personal existence. Her persistent longing for something better than life, together with her determined effort to rehabilitate Oblomov, convinced Dobroliubov that she embodied "the highest ideal which a Russian artist now can evoke from contemporary Russian life" (4:341).

The ideological center of "What Is Oblomovism?" is not the discussion of Oblomov, Olga, or Stolz. It is Dobroliubov's moral autopsy of a group of literary heroes he calls "our basic, national type" (4:314). It would be difficult to imagine a more diverse group than the one he has assembled—Pushkin's Onegin, Lermontov's Pechorin, Herzen's Beltov, Pisemsky's Shamilov, Turgenev's Rudin, and, of course, Goncharov's Oblomov. These fictional protagonists, then as now commonly referred to as the "superfluous men" of Russian literature, combined in Dobroliubov's mind to form a national myth of weakness, cowardice, and failure, and he subjected them to a scathing examination. His ultimate concern, however, was not with the fictional heroes, but rather with the generation they were understood to represent—the idealistic liberals who dominated Russian intellectual life in the 1830s and 1840s.

Depending on his personal mood and the polemical climate, Dobroliubov's opinion of these men vacillated from essay to essay. The January 1859 issue of *Sovremennik* contained the essay "Literary Trifles of the Past Year" in which he presented a more or less sympathetic and understanding portrait of the earlier generation. "Fate dealt with them ruthlessly," he wrote, "turning them upside down with all sorts of ordeals, both public and private; they became convinced that life was false and ridiculous and that only principles were true and lawful. They tried to fight for their principles, but, losing battle after battle, they finally realized that it was impossible to fight any longer." Only Belinsky and Herzen emerged intact and capable of continuing the struggle; all the rest were rendered helpless and harmless by "the influence of circumstances that oppressed their entire generation" (4:71–72).

In his essay on *Oblomov* Dobroliubov was much more severe. There are several reasons for the change. In the earlier, more sympathetic essay he was discussing real people. But when it came to ostensibly analyzing fictional characters he could be more outspoken and uncompromising. Another reason is

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that the "superfluous men" were accorded a sympathetic hearing by most critics of the time. Almost always writing in opposition to something, Dobroliubov carefully avoided the term "superfluous" because of its positive connotations. Using the fictional heroes as a springboard, he launched into a detailed indictment of the earlier generation, describing them as smug, self-satisfied spongers who hid their repugnance for work behind a screen of fatuous talk. Cowards with their women, arrogant with their servants, false with themselves, they all bore "the indelible imprint of indolence, parasitism, and utter uselessness" (4:328). Measuring them against his ultimate moral standard, a willingness to undertake "a fight to the death with the environment," he found both the fictional heroes and their real-life counterparts incapable of turning their high ideals into progressive activities (4:334).

Dobroliubov's attitude toward "denunciatory" literature and the "superfluous men" enraged the most prominent spokesman of the radical movement, Alexander Herzen. Writing in *Kolokol* (*The Bell*) on June 1, 1859, Herzen replied to Dobroliubov's views with a celebrated essay entitled "Very Dangerous!" This quarrel between two leading radicals has naturally drawn much attention from Soviet scholars, and I do not wish to repeat their work.[7] Instead, I will discuss certain aspects of the quarrel that have been overlooked.

Herzen had not read "What Is Oblomovism?" when he wrote his essay. He had in mind Dobroliubov's earlier article, "Literary Trifles of the Past Year." Nevertheless, the most striking quality of Herzen's essay is its uncanny anticipation of "What Is Oblomovism?" It is as though Herzen had been able to read Dobroliubov's mind and foresee what his approach to *Oblomov* would be. As we have noted, Dobroliubov was uncharacteristically enthusiastic about the literary side of *Oblomov*. In "Very Dangerous!" Herzen placed Dobroliubov in the camp of literary aesthetes: "Pure writers, people of sound and form, are bored by the social trend of our literature, they are insulted by the fact that there is so much public discussion and so many stories about bribery and so few Oblomovs. . . ."[8] Later Herzen added: "You are ready to sit down at a microscope and analyze this rot (but not with a pathological goal, that is repugnant to the purity of art, art should be useless, sometimes a little dangerous, but vile utilitarianism kills it)—this excites your nerves" (Herzen, p. 118). He was certainly mistaken to associate Dobroliubov with an anti-utilitarian position, but still he sensed that his dismissal of "denunciatory" literature could result in a purely aesthetic approach to *Oblomov*. Indeed, the opening pages of Dobroliubov's review, if taken seriously rather than polemi-

7. For the fullest account of this quarrel see B. P. Kozmin, "Vystuplenie Gertsena protiv 'Sovremennika' v 1859 godu," *Iz istorii revoliutsionnoi mysli v Rossii* (Moscow, 1961), pp. 606–37.

8. A. I. Gertsen, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Moscow, 1954–65), 14:116. Subsequent references in the text will also be to volume 14.

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cally, do seem to confirm Herzen's fear. Dobroliubov did prefer *Oblomov* to current social satire and he did stress the "artistic" side of the novel. Nevertheless, we still might ask how Herzen could be so wrong about the ultimate purpose of Dobroliubov's criticism of "denunciatory" literature. His confusion stems, it seems to me, from an "either/or" approach to literature. Russian critics in the nineteenth century generally divided imaginative literature, as Druzhinin did, into two mutually exclusive categories, "artistic" and "didactic." If you defended one category, you invariably opposed the other. If Dobroliubov derided "denunciatory" writing, for example, he had to be on the side of "pure" art, or so goes Herzen's reasoning. This brings us to a remarkable but overlooked feature of "What Is Oblomovism?" By stressing that an authentic work of art can have social significance Dobroliubov in effect discarded the basic categories of contemporary criticism and created a third. Since Herzen was still bound by the traditional polarities, he could not help but misunderstand Dobroliubov's position.

In "Very Dangerous!" Herzen devoted relatively little attention to Dobroliubov's view of the "superfluous men." Not having read his review of *Oblomov,* Herzen did not know that his attitude had changed considerably since the writing of "Literary Trifles." It is interesting, however, that independently of one another both Herzen and Dobroliubov used *Oblomov* as their point of departure for discussing the earlier generation. Unlike Dobroliubov, Herzen was scandalized by Goncharov's hero. His invective makes Dobroliubov's attack pale in comparison. Herzen complained that the novel was nothing more than "a long Odyssey of some half-dead, petrified personality, told in a drawn-out, languid overflow of meaningless detail" (Herzen, p. 116). He was particularly concerned, and rightfully so as it turned out, that Oblomov might be placed in the same company as the superfluous men of the 1840s. He found it impossible, without boredom and disgust, "to follow the psychological description of certain Nevsky wood-lice who have outlived the heroic period in which their ancestors were the Onegins and Pechorins" (Herzen, p. 118). Herzen's distinction between the "half-dead" Oblomov and the "heroic" representatives of his generation is based on the differences he saw between the reign of Nicholas I and Alexander II. He believed that the intellectuals of the forties were victims of their repressive, leaden society. But he also believed that the reform movement inaugurated by Alexander II offered unprecedented opportunities for social activity: "If someone cannot find work now, he has no one to blame, he is really an *empty* person, a zero or an idler. And thus it is quite natural that Onegins and Pechorins turn into Oblomovs" (Herzen, p. 119). This distinction was not lost on Dobroliubov. In his review of Turgenev's *On the Eve,* "When Will the Real Day Come?" (*Sovremennik,* no. 3, 1860), and his essay on Pleshcheev, "Good Intentions

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and Actions" (*Sovremennik,* no. 7, 1860), Dobroliubov shifted his anger to the men of the sixties who, like their fathers but without their excuses, would not put their principles into practice.

In "Superfluous Men and Men with a Grudge" (*Kolokol,* Oct. 15, 1860) Herzen applauded, not without a certain irony, Dobroliubov's change of target: "It is impossible not to share the healthy, realistic view which recently in one of our best journals has begun to dislodge the narrow, moral point of view in the French manner which looks for personal responsibility in general phenomena" (Herzen, p. 318). Just as Dobroliubov had done in his essay on *Oblomov,* Herzen borrowed one of his opponent's favorite ideas and turned it against him: "And people who assert that the enemy is not bribery or embezzlement but rather the environment which makes bribery a zoological feature of the whole tribe are absolutely right. . . . we would only like to see the superfluous men of Nicholas's time receive the same rights and privileges as those given the embezzlers. They deserve such treatment not only because they were superfluous but also because most of them are now dead. But the bribers and embezzlers are still living, and not only in luxury, but in historical justification" (Herzen, p. 318). Herzen was still far from convinced that Dobroliubov had changed his mind about the earlier generation. The remainder of "Superfluous Men" is devoted to a detailed, impassioned indictment of Dobroliubov's belief that the Onegins and Pechorins were responsible for their inactivity. Herzen implied that by ignoring the historical circumstances oppressing the earlier generation Dobroliubov contradicted his belief that environment determines personality. Had he considered the concrete facts of life under Nicholas I, Herzen suggested, Dobroliubov would not have been so quick in his condemnation. "Doctrinaires alone," he wrote in reference to Dobroliubov's essay on *Oblomov,* "reach such frightening conclusions so easily because they reach them *in effigie,* on paper" (Herzen, p. 320).

At the end of "Superfluous Men" Herzen describes a conversation between himself and a typical "man with a grudge" whom he calls Daniel. E. G. Bushkanets has convincingly demonstrated that this Daniel is none other than Dobroliubov himself and that the conversation is patterned on an actual meeting between Dobroliubov and Herzen in London in the fall of 1860.[9] Dobroliubov-Daniel repeats the charge (familiar to us from "What Is Oblomovism?") that the intellectuals of the forties were "parasites, drones, namby-pambies, and spongers *à la Oneghine*" (Herzen, p. 324). Herzen counters by citing numerous examples of real men who did try to do something and suffered for it. The climax comes when Dobroliubov-Daniel remarks: "I am stating a fact. They were lazy, empty aristocrats who lived

9. E. G. Bushkanets, "Dobroliubov i Gertsen," *Problemy izucheniia Gertsena* (Moscow, 1963), pp. 288–91. For an opposing viewpoint see S. A. Reiser, "Neobosnovannaia gipoteza," *Voprosy literatury,* 1961, no. 2, pp. 56–63.

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comfortably and well, and I see no reason why I should show them sympathy." Herzen replies: "Whether or not they deserve sympathy, each man can decide for himself. Any human suffering, especially when it is unavoidable, brings forth our compassion, and I know of no suffering that does not deserve it" (Herzen, p. 326). Herzen's reply goes to the very core of the disagreement between the two men. It was not only a clash between generations; it was also a clash between two quite different views of the human personality. Herzen believed, above all, in the ideal of man as an end in himself. Dobroliubov believed that men were the means to an end, and he judged them according to their contribution to that end. In short, it was the antihumanistic element in Dobroliubov's thought that Herzen found intolerable.

Herzen's rebuttal also suggests an important truth about Dobroliubov's typology. However useful it might have been in uncovering general truths about man and society, it was plainly deficient in discrimination, compassion, and historical accuracy. When Herzen looked into the past he saw real persons—Chaadaev, Nadezhdin, Ivan Kireevsky, Polevoi—who were far from being the lethargic cowards castigated in "What Is Oblomovism?" Herzen argued that to classify such men as "Oblomovs" was to deny their existence as real, complex, suffering human beings. Paradoxically, Dobroliubov's typological method was basically hostile to the individual, even though he used it to protest against all forces threatening the concrete human being. A "type," after all, is an abstraction of the first order, a dehumanizing category in which individuals, real or fictional, lose their unique identity and become symbols of the group they represent.

Although Herzen was not aware of it, Dobroliubov's motives for attacking the "superfluous men" were not entirely ideological and moral. They involved a lifelong tendency to analyze himself through fictional characters. Dobroliubov felt a strong affinity to the Oblomov-type long before he wrote his essay on *Oblomov*. The sixteen-year-old seminarian was fascinated by Lermontov's Pechorin. "I have now read *The Hero of Our Time* for the third time," he wrote on February 25, 1852, "and it seems to me that the more I read it, the better I understand Pechorin and the beauties of the novel. Perhaps it is bad that I like such characters, but all the same I love Pechorin and feel that in his place I would have done and felt the same things myself" (8:403). Dobroliubov was well aware of the role he was playing. He wrote in his diary on November 9, 1852: "I have the bitter consolation that I understand my unformed character, my shaky convictions, my apathetic laziness, even my passion to play 'the knight of the sorrowful countenance,' Pechorin. . . . this will pass with time and I will laugh at myself. But this will not happen soon, and until it does nothing will keep me from struggling, suffering, and inwardly imagining myself a hero of our time or at least of a novel" (8:403). Today we would say that Dobroliubov was going through an identity crisis, experimenting with

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various roles in order to find his true self. I think the important point here, however, is his realization that his role-playing was a juvenile affectation. He may well have concluded, using his own experience as a model, that the Pechorins and Onegins could have adopted quite different attitudes toward life if they had so wished. Since he himself had consciously adopted Pechorinesque poses, Dobroliubov may have considered all romantic attitudes counterfeit, hence his contempt for the "superfluous men."

A year later another "superfluous man" replaced Pechorin in Dobroliubov's fictional preoccupations. Now it was Shamilov, the protagonist of Pisemsky's novel *The Rich Husband.* On January 24, 1853, Dobroliubov wrote in his diary: "Shamilov deeply wounded my pride, I was ashamed, and if I did not immediately get down to work, at least I recognized the necessity of work and stopped thinking about getting ahead in society. Little by little I am improving. . . . Reading *The Rich Husband* awoke and defined for me a latent, vaguely understood idea about the necessity of work and showed me all the ugliness and unhappiness of people like Shamilov" (8:447–48). It would be difficult to imagine anyone more industrious than Dobroliubov. Yet throughout his life he was morbidly concerned about what he considered his central failing, laziness. Dobroliubov thus had little in common with Shamilov, a lazy hypocrite who talks much but does nothing. Still, Pisemsky's novel did provide him with an opportunity for one of his favorite pastimes—self-flagellation.

Dobroliubov's tendency to identify himself with heroes of books persisted beyond adolescence. On January 8, 1857, he confided to his diary that he had recognized "a frightening resemblance" between himself and Chulkaturin, the protagonist in Turgenev's famous short story, "The Diary of a Superfluous Man" (8:517): "I was beside myself, reading the story, my heart beat faster, tears came to my eyes, and it seemed to me that sooner or later exactly the same thing would happen to me." Earlier we noted that one reason Dobroliubov avoided the term "superfluous" in his essay on *Oblomov* was because of its positive connotations. Now we can offer a second, psychological reason. The personal implications of the label were disturbing. Unlike the case of Shamilov, Dobroliubov and Chulkaturin did share several rather general traits. Both were lonely men inclined to self-analysis, self-doubt, and self-deprecation. Though they realized their superiority over other men, they also felt incapable of accomplishing anything worth while. Suspicious, tense, and irritable, they both had a strong need for a woman's love. Chulkaturin loses the girl he loves and eventually dies, as did Dobroliubov, unloved and alone. In this sense, Dobroliubov's prediction came true.

Dobroliubov responded to *Oblomov* in the same intimate, personal way. Indeed, his reaction seems to combine his earlier thoughts on Pechorin and Shamilov. First he identifies himself with Oblomov, then he uses the unflat-

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tering resemblance to prod himself toward self-improvement: "You put yourself in the place of the characters and somehow you feel that in their places and in their situations you too would have acted in the same way. . . . you want to ascertain their significance and relations to your own life, your own character and inclinations. Your lethargy and laziness disappear. Enthusiastic ideas and fresh feelings are awakened in you. You are ready to reread many pages, to think and argue about them. That is the way *Oblomov* affected us" (4:312). A central assumption of Dobroliubov's critical method is that literature influences behavior. His criticism derives much of its emotional force from just such a confusion of literature and life, of hero and critic. He wrote about literary protagonists as though he were writing about himself. He thus achieved an emotional immediacy absent in critics who keep their distance from the text. Moreover, he asked writers to create positive heroes that real men could emulate in their quest for a better way of life. Although it is impossible to say for certain if books helped to shape Dobroliubov's personality, it is a fact that the fiction he did read was filled with protagonists of the "superfluous" variety. If he took his critical principles seriously, then the Chulkaturins, Shamilovs, and Pechorins he found in his reading may well have influenced his own development. Dobroliubov's resemblance to the Oblomov-type, which we will examine presently, may be a case of life imitating art.

The first similarity between Dobroliubov and his conception of the "superfluous man" is a common delight in self-abasement.[10] When he says in "What Is Oblomovism?" that "all Oblomovs like to humiliate themselves" (4:327), we cannot but recall his own lifelong tendency to self-derision. His diaries, his letters, and even his essays afford an almost masochistic display of real and imaginary failings—laziness, egotism, timidity, lack of talent, coldness, hypocrisy, and so forth. Two examples should suffice. The first is taken from the conclusion to his "Psychatorium," a scrupulous and depressing confession of sins recorded during the spring of 1853: "A month has passed since I began this good cause—to render an account each evening of how I spent the day. And how lazy I have become, how I have perverted my cause! Instead of sorrow and conscious remorse I limit myself to a cold enumeration of my sins. I worry only about filling a page . . ." (8:453). As our second example indicates, Dobroliubov's early religious scrupulosity grew into a permanent sense of inadequacy. In a letter to a family friend dated July 8, 1858, he complained: "I constantly feel dissatisfied with myself and I am ashamed of my impotence and cowardice. I am convinced (very probably, unjustly) that I should not be a mediocrity and that I cannot pass unnoticed in life without leaving my mark.

10. To my knowledge T. G. Masaryk was the first to spot Dobroliubov's resemblance to Oblomov. See his *Spirit of Russia*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (London and New York, 1955), 2:24. Recently Fred Weinstein has remarked on the resemblance in his essay, "The Origins of 'Nihilist' Criticism," *Canadian Slavic Studies*, 3, no. 2 (Summer 1969): 165–77.

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But I also feel the total absence of those moral powers necessary for intellectual superiority" (9:307). Dobroliubov's lack of self-confidence created a vicious psychological circle. His sense of inadequacy led to inaction, and the inaction intensified his sense of inadequacy. As we shall see in a moment, he began to think of himself as a "superfluous" type unable to put his ideas into practice. He even came to the conclusion, temporary though it was, that he should abandon his cause and his career.

There is a great similarity between Dobroliubov's and the "superfluous men's" attitude toward women. He wrote in his review of *Oblomov*: "They are not against flirting with a woman . . . or capturing a female heart. . . . But as soon as the affair takes a serious turn, as soon as they begin to suspect that they are dealing not with a doll but with a woman who also can demand respect for her rights, then they immediately flee in the most shameless fashion. The cowardice of these gentlemen is immense!" (4:325). Dobroliubov's love life exhibits a similar pattern. He possessed an intense need to love and be loved, but somehow his hopeless infatuations always ended in his taking flight. In the summer of 1858 he met a young prostitute named Theresa Grünwald and shortly thereafter proposed marriage. But on the advice of Chernyshevsky, who disapproved of the girl, in rather undemocratic fashion, because "she cannot even conduct herself like a chambermaid" (9:336), Dobroliubov broke off the affair. His rationalization would be worthy of Pechorin at his worst: "My relations with Theresa," he wrote to a friend in December 1858, "are becoming more and more painful. . . . I understand now that I never loved her. . . . I could not love her because it is impossible to love a woman when you recognize your complete superiority over her. Love elevates a man because in his eyes the object of his love is elevated far above himself and the rest of the world. 'No beauty can compete with yours' says Byron to his mistress, in Ogarev's translation. I am convinced that if someone does not feel the same way about his girl, then he does not love her" (9:341). One might accept Dobroliubov's implausibly romantic justification for his conduct if it were not that he had a much more concrete reason for leaving Theresa. He had fallen in love with Olga Chernyshevskaia, the wife of his closest friend.

He pursued Olga throughout the first three months of 1859. She was an inveterate flirt, but she soon grew tired of teasing Dobroliubov and turned him over to her younger sister, Anna. Dobroliubov planned a careful campaign to capture Anna's heart. "And what if she really should fall in love and suffer?" Dobroliubov asked rhetorically in a letter of April 22, 1859. "Would it not be better to drop the game at once? Nonsense. Neither of us is like that. Her love will disappear in a day or two if it does not receive nourishment. And if not, so what?" (9:351). He then cites a line from a poem by Lermontov: "Let her cry a little, / It does not mean a thing." Byron, in Ogarev's translation, for Theresa, Lermontov for Anna. The citation reveals, of course,

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that Dobroliubov was playing his favorite role of that romantic scoundrel, Pechorin. This did not escape Chernyshevsky when he commented on Dobroliubov's letter: "Analyzing his feeling, he is carried away by the subtle play of pride found in men accustomed to conquests about whom he had read in books. . . . These Lermontovian analyses of the emotions of society people sated with success make Dobroliubov slander himself. He did not think about the ones he loved like this Pechorin . . ." (9:351–52). It is suggestive that Dobroliubov wrote "What Is Oblomovism?" precisely at the time he was striking Byronic poses in attempting to attract Anna. His efforts were in vain, for she soon married someone else. And fortunately for Dobroliubov, since, as Chernyshevsky tells us, any hint that she might marry him threw him into a panic: "He realized that it was impossible for him to save himself and Anna from an unhappy marriage. When he thought about this he usually found the only way of avoiding marriage was to take flight" (9:360).

Rufus Mathewson has reminded us that if a literary character showed courage in a personal relationship, then Dobroliubov was willing to accept this as proof of an ability to act courageously in more dangerous areas.[11] On the other hand, failure to act boldly and decisively with women, as in the case of the "superfluous men," was symptomatic of a deeper moral illness. Dobroliubov's tendency toward self-doubt can, in part, be traced to disappointments in love. His relations with women more or less followed the traditions of weak-willed romantic heroes. To put it another way, his failures in romance may have suggested that he did not have the makings of a successful revolutionary.

Dobroliubov's central accusation against Pechorin, Oblomov, and the rest is that they had "never converted into flesh and blood the principles with which they were imbued; they have never carried them to their logical conclusions, have never reached the border line where words are transformed into deeds, where principle merges with the inherent requirements of the soul, disappear in it and become the sole spring of a man's conduct" (4:335–36). Conceiving of the ideal human personality as one in which personal and social interests were perfectly integrated, Dobroliubov fell far short of such inner harmony, and he knew it. He wrote to a friend at the end of April 1859 that the affair with Anna demonstrated "how little the actions of men depend on their theoretical ideas which they obtain by use of their reason. Who can reason better than I can, who has more self-awareness and at the same time who can do stupider things?" (9:351). Dobroliubov's public image was that of the archetypal radical—angry, uncompromising, dedicated, militant. But behind this image there was a painfully divided human being who was much

11. Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* (New York, 1958), p. 76.

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closer to the unintegrated Oblomov-type than to the idealized portrait found in most Soviet biographies.

On September 12, 1858, Dobroliubov wrote an extraordinary letter to M. I. Shemanovsky, a former schoolmate. It deserves to be cited at some length if only because Dobroliubov explicitly identifies himself (and his generation) with the "superfluous men" of the 1840s:

> There was a time, and indeed very recently, when we believed in ourselves and our contemporaries; but now this hope has turned out to be unfounded. We are just as listless, feeble, and worthless as our predecessors. We grow weary, perish in laziness and cowardice. Our predecessors who were at odds with society usually surrendered to drink, sometimes they went to the Caucasus or Siberia, became Jesuits, or shot themselves. It seems we are not even able to do that. A total moral debility, a distaste for the struggle, a passion for comfort (if not material, then intellectual and emotional)—all this makes us completely useless sluggards, incapable of any arduous, honest activity. You may think that I write all this with you in mind and that I want to reproach you for being depressed. If you want, take everything I said to heart. I do not exclude you from this characterization of our generation. But believe me when I say that I exclude no one from it, least of all myself. (9:322-23)

Dobroliubov repeated this gloomy appraisal in "When Will the Real Day Come?" (*Sovremennik*, no. 3, 1860), where he described his own spiritual development in order to explain, as he put it, "his present inactivity" (6:130). He tells of the debilitating struggle against the powers of darkness—environment, family, education, religion—that he fought in reaching the conviction that everything in life should center on man and his happiness. He concludes his autobiographical digression by saying: "It seems to us that in this story there are representative features which can serve as general reminders of the obstacles in the way of independent development. Not everyone is tied so tightly to copybook maxims, but no one escapes their influence, and they paralyze everyone. In order to get free, a man must lose a good deal of strength and a good deal of faith in himself in this constant struggle with the ugly chaos of doubts, contradictions, compromises, evasions, and so forth" (6:133). Here we see clearly the "superfluous" side of his personality. The best he could do was to sympathize with the need for positive action; he could not undertake it himself. Like the Onegins and Pechorins he so roundly condemns, he too eventually found it impossible to put his ideals into practice. It is a central thesis of this paper that "What Is Oblomovism?" is an attack from within, not only polemically but also psychologically. Dobroliubov generalized from his own sense of frustration and futility, from the recognition that he had suffered the same fate as the "superfluous men" of the eighteen forties.

When Dobroliubov criticized Oblomov and especially Stolz for selfishly putting their personal happiness before everything else, he could easily have

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been thinking of himself. During the last two years of his life he found it increasingly difficult to stifle his own desire for personal happiness and he became more and more unwilling, as he once put it, "to sacrifice my own personality to the abstract principles I am fighting for" (8:505). In November 1860 he wrote to a friend from Paris where he had gone for reasons of health: "Here I am beginning to look at myself as a man who has the right to make use of his life, and not as a man called to exercise his talents exclusively on behalf of humanity. Here no one sees me as a bitter critic, no one expects me to make cutting remarks, no one imagines that I have the slightest ability to whistle. . . . And I am becoming good-natured, gay, and content" (9:454).[12] With the split between the radical and the man growing wider and wider Dobroliubov traveled to Italy, where he fell in love, as it turned out, for the last time. The girl agreed to marry him on condition that he remain in Italy. Dobroliubov readily agreed, and he wrote Chernyshevsky on June 12, 1861, that he had decided "to stop thinking about great accomplishments in Russian letters, to limit myself to several essays a year until I learn another trade, and to lead a quiet domestic life in an isolated corner of the country" (9:474). This wish never came true; he returned to Russia and died shortly thereafter. It is one of the great ironies of his life that, beginning his career with an impassioned attack on Oblomovism, he eventually sought to exchange his public role for an Oblomov-like world of privacy and peace.

In his essay on Dobroliubov, "Mr. —bov and the Question of Art," Dostoevsky remarked that he was the only critic of the day whom anyone bothered to read.[13] "What Is Oblomovism?" illustrates several basic reasons for his popularity. First of all, the essay was controversial. Dobroliubov was a brilliant polemicist, whether dealing with Goncharov's creative process or with the conflict between generations. The essay was relevant. Dobroliubov focused on a most pressing problem, that of the social hero, and offered one simple but inspiring message, the need for new men of action to replace the passive types of earlier years. Dobroliubov spoke with the authentic voice of a man enraged, and his intense personal involvement was infectious. Although his reading of *Oblomov* may offend our modern literary sensibilities, he did take Goncharov's novel out of the parlor and into the real world. "What Is Oblomovism?" is intensely serious social commentary delivered with a passion and energy that no other critic of the day could command. But it is something more as well. It is a painful, probing essay in self-analysis and self-flagellation. In dissecting the Oblomov-type Dobroliubov was dissecting himself. His final tragedy was that he could not deny or suppress the Oblomovian urges he scorned in others.

12. "Ability to whistle" is a reference to *Svistok* (*The Whistle*), a satirical supplement of *Sovremennik*.

13. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie khudozhestvennykh proizvedenii* (Moscow, 1926–30), 13:73.

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