THE SPATIAL IMAGERY OF OBLOMOVISM

> What was he to do now? Go forward or stay where he was? This Oblomovian question was deeper for him than Hamlet's. To go forward meant to suddenly throw the wide dressing-gown not only off his shoulders but off his very mind and soul; to sweep the dust and cobwebs from his eyes as well as from the walls and to recover his sight!

As many critics have noted, beginning with Dobroljubov,[1] the protagonist's dressing-gown in Gončarov's *Oblomov* is a conspicuous image that expresses his "oblomovism," whether that be described as aristocratic superfluousness, Asiatic indolence, romantic dreaminess, infantilism, or Gončarov's own provincialism and paranoia.[2] What needs to be emphasized is that the dressing-gown is at the center of a whole cluster of enclosure images – both literal and figurative – that illuminate Oblomov's attitude toward himself and the world and Gončarov's own ambivalent judgement upon this attitude.

Oblomov's self-image resembles a set of Russian nesting dolls. Unable to find a balanced, mature relationship between himself and the world, Oblomov creates a series of concentric enclosures around himself that serve simultaneously as self-protections and self-extensions. He expands his sphere of passive selfhood through a series of buffer zones that he hopes will defend him against the risks and challenges of relationship with the world at large.[3] The layers he constructs around himself are all additional "Oblomovs." He constantly seeks a "nest" and is constantly preoccupied with boundaries. Never having really explored the Other in order to test himself and thereby define himself, he remains anxious about this outside world and extremely vulnerable. [4]

Whether Gončarov himself felt such anxiety (it seems likely that he did), the characterization of Oblomov in the novel is at once sympathetic and ironic, suggesting Gončarov's ambivalence toward his protagonist. He makes Oblomov seriously attractive because of his purity and innocence, and comically attractive because of his eccentricity and exaggeration. This same comic technique detaches us enough from Oblomov to laugh at his folly and thus question his values. The narrator's interpolations, the positive vision of what Oblomov might be in Parts II and III, and the positive foil Štol'c all suggest Gončarov's indictment of Oblomov's attitude for the tragic waste it produces. The spatial imagery runs through all of these methods as an index of Gončarov's mixed feelings.[5]

The dressing-gown is the first layer Oblomov wraps around himself in the adult world portrayed in the expository Part I of the novel. As in his own earlier works, and those of Gogol' and Dostoevskij, the dressing-gown seems to be a symptom of incomplete self-definition. Because so many others have observed the symbolic function of the gown in the plot and characterization,[6] only a few points need to be emphasized. In the

Neophilologus 72 (1988) 321-334

opening description the dressing-gown is totally at one with the man. Its very folds express his mood, and Oblomov likes it because "the body didn't feel its weight; it yielded to the slightest movement of the body like an obedient slave."[7] Because it never resists his movements it is like a second skin. Hence it does not belong to the Other but has become absorbed into Oblomov's self. It functions as an added boundary around him and extends his requisite personal distance. It is so "spacious" that he can "wrap up in it twice," creating a cocoon for himself; and though it has "lost its original freshness, just as Oblomov has lost his, it has kept "the strength of its fabric" to protect him in his vulnerability. (I, i, 8)

At the arrival of the first of a series of bustling visitors from the outside world, Oblomov wraps his dressing-gown around him, literally as protection against the damp air he excessively fears, but also as a general psychological defence against the outside world and as a show of respectability, since he is at times ashamed of his sloth. (In one such rare moment he notes that "'other people' never put on a dressing-gown." – I, viii, 82) Early in Part II Oblomov includes the dressing-gown prominently in describing to Štol'c his utopian vision of life on a country estate. Both Štol'c and Ol'ga associate his dressing-gown with his "oblomovism" – in their eyes a withdrawal from life. Though he casts off the dressing-gown shield when he tries to engage life through Ol'ga, he must put it on again when this attempt fails at the end of Part III. His landlady Pšenicyna is happy to repair it and wrap him up in it safely again. Ironically, soon after, Oblomov has his first stroke, the beginning of the end. The dressing-gown has become for Oblomov a robe like the one which Deianira unwittingly poisoned with Nessus' blood and which killed Heracles, but Oblomov's kills with the subtler poison of comfort.

The dressing-gown thus represents in concentrated form a world which is womb-like. It is closed in from the outside world and is warm and soft. It offers no difficulty, no struggle, no discipline. Clearly Gončarov feels deeply the attractive power of the image, but morally and ideologically he must also reject it. In Gončarov's eyes, the paradoxical corollary of such excessive self-protection is self-annihilation.

Oblomov's other clothes express the same purpose in a less emphatic way. He ignores his wrongside-out shirt and mismatched stockings, and loves his long, wide, soft slippers. Though this comfort is treated by Gončarov with comic sympathy, its danger is apparent in Oblomov's sad comparison of himself (his *self*) to an old worn-out coat and in the positive contrast of his neat new clothes and good grooming in Part II. Much is also made of his inability to dress himself. Having been accustomed since childhood to being dressed by a servant, he is incapable of practical self-reliance even in this small matter. Zaxar's valet service to Oblomov's body usurps Oblomov's independence and blurs the boundary between self and servant. (Zaxar's own old grey frock coat is a parallel symbol for Zaxar himself, and for the old days at Oblomovka, when he had a master who provided and a secure and prosperous, indolent but orderly, existence.)

The clothes imagery is parallel to a series of other images which expand in concentric circles outward from Oblomov. First are the quilt that he pulls over himself when he sleeps and the couch in which he lies incredibly for almost all of the first 146 pages.[8] When he covers himself with the quilt in response to Penkin's invitation to the May-Day festivities, he expresses his hypochondria and fear of the outside world. After lecturing Zaxar for comparing him with the "others," he has Zaxar "close him up tightly" by tucking in his quilt firmly (I, viii, 80). As Oblomov covers even his head with it, his thoughts are on escaping his two "misfortunes" – the bailiff's letter and the landlord's eviction notice. He puts his head out again during the honest self-confrontation that follows, but then hides it again as his question "Why am I like this?" passes to apathy and thence to sleep and the pastoral idyl of Oblomovka. The bedcovers and bed are always associated by Oblomov with sleep as a refuge from life's threats, as a world of dreams, and as the essential stasis deeply impressed on him in childhood during those monstrous after-dinner siestas – a "true likeness of death" (I, ix, 95). In sleep the Other disappears. In sleep Oblomov is again in the safe family nest – in fact, in the womb. Such images disappear, of course, when Oblomov comes to life with Ol'ga in Parts II and III. He gets up early and avoids lying down after dinner. In Part IV, as expected, they return in full force.[9] At the Vyborg flat he tells Štol'c that he wishes to lie down and sleep forever because there is no peace in life. Pšenicyna helps grant his wish by making the new quilt that will "warm, pamper, and give repose" (IV, ix, 394). The inevitable result is that Oblomov dies in his sleep, in bed. Gončarov's double attitude is again evident. The bed is both the longed-for nest and the fatal coffin.

Gončarov's descriptions of Oblomov's rooms are more elaborate and show again Oblomov's attempt to erect boundaries around himself that cannot be transgressed from the outside. They serve again as self-extensions through a space he can safely control. They establish personal distance with minimal relationship, a territory with minimal border skirmishes. The Petersburg apartment on Goroxovaja Street is a set of Chinese boxes. Oblomov has reduced the sphere of his activity to one out of his four rooms (the other three remaining a buffer zone), and it is a stuffy, closed-in, disorderly room strewn with cobwebs, dust, and breadcrumbs, with windows one can scarcely see through for the grime. When he wants to withdraw he closes doors, curtains, and blinds; after the disturbing discussion of the "others" he has Zaxar draw the blinds and "cork him up in his study" (I, viii, 80). Štol'c refers to his double windows, kept on even in summer, that prevent him from hearing what is going on outside. When Oblomov daydreams, his eyes typically move over the walls and ceiling; he no longer fears (!) the crack in the ceiling because he has grown used to it – in other words, it has become part of him. The flat itself, from which Oblomov seldom stirs, is located on the fourth floor of "one of those big houses whose population is close to that of a district town" (I, i,

7) situated at the *center* of St. Petersburg. In Part I he steadfastly declines all his visitors' invitations to go out to the holiday festivities in the suburb. The flat is ostensibly a warm and dry refuge from the menacing damp, but it also protects Oblomov from the challenges of social life he consciously contemns but more deeply fears. The threat of eviction from the flat for the purpose of remodeling is an exaggerated misfortune which comically torments Oblomov, but it seriously threatens his self-image as he has spatialized it in his imagination. When resisting the move he claims that his present flat is "central to everything." He cannot conceive of moving, since he imagines insurmountable obstacles and inconveniences; he vividly portrays the upheaval to Zaxar, including the uncertainty of a place to sleep for perhaps three days. Placelessness is an ultimate horror for him. One detail is particularly interesting: he laments that he would not have the same view out the window of a sign and an old woman. Clearly what little he can see out the window has been assimilated, through habit, into the decor of the room itself, and is no longer the Other, but a reflection of self.

The Vyborg flat is an obvious parallel to the one on Goroxovaja, and, like the dressing-gown and bed, it signals Oblomov's relapse. But in its pleasant domesticity under Pšenicyna's hands it approximates more closely the Oblomovka ideal. Less obviously claustral than the one on Goroxovaja, it still represents a refuge from the world outside. From Oblomov's point of view it is a self-sufficient world (since he never does the shopping) like that of the country estate. The yard "big as a *room*" (my emphasis), gardens, and fences all reinforce the image and provide domestic boundaries.[10] As on Goroxovaja Street, the view out the window, *partly blocked by pots*, is always the same – Ivan Matveevič with a package under his arm – and has become assimilated into Oblomov's inner landscape. Insofar as Oblomov in his vulnerability falls victim to Ivan Matveevič's machinations, the room grows claustral; yet Oblomov still clings to it. Ol'ga, though sympathetic, utters a clear judgement: "It isn't nice here: what low rooms! The windows are small, the wallpaper old...where are your other rooms?" (III, vii, 294). When Oblomov's prosperity is restored with the help of Štol'c, the apartment is again characterized as an "ark" of domestic life with great accumulations of goods in its corners (the Biblical allusion again connoting refuge). The final pages that follow, however, adduce far more negative spatial metaphors for life in the Vyborg flat – "mouse-hole," "coffin," and "grave." The author's implied judgement is again mixed.

Other rooms in the novel suggest the same pattern of meaning. The flat of Ivan Gerasimyč, one of Oblomov's nonentity acquaintances, is lovingly described by Oblomov as a safe haven:

> "At his place, you know, you somehow feel properly cozy, at home. The rooms are small, the sofas are so deep that you sink into them and *can't be seen*. The *windows are completely covered* with ivy and cactuses, there are more than a dozen canaries, three dogs, and such

> affectionate ones! Food is never absent from the table. All the *prints on the walls represent family scenes*. You come and you don't want to leave. You sit *without being anxious, without thinking about anything*; you know that near you is a man...not a sage, of course – exchanging ideas with him would be unthinkable – but guileless, kind, cheerful, unpretentious ..." (II, iii, 145; my emphases)

Here again the love-episode interrupts Oblomov's habits, and he stays away from Ivan Gerasimyč's. Appropriately, Gončarov almost completely avoids descriptions of indoor settings *per se* at Oblomov's and Ol'ga's villas. Rooms are no longer important to Oblomov or to us because aside from Ol'ga's singing, the significant action takes place outdoors, in the parks, woods, and hills. Oblomov is making one last effort to risk his vulnerability and move out into the world of challenging relationship.

Like everything else in Oblomov's world-view, the room-nest is rooted in Oblomovka. In Oblomov's dream-memory of his childhood (I, ix) the indoor domesticity is dominant. The father sits by the window all day while the mother supervises food preparations. People come to visit, but the Oblomovs never go out. Oblomov is often forced to stay in because of his parents' overprotectiveness, and he is repeatedly referred to as a "hothouse plant." Particularly vivid in his memory is the large dark room in the evenings, with its yawning silence broken only by his father's empty pacing, the tick of the clock, and the snap of a thread/images which return in different guise in the Vyborg flat. Interestingly, the first thing Oblomov considers in his new but uncompleted estate plan is the layout of the house, and the diagrams of the rooms are all he ever finishes.

Only rarely does Oblomov perceive the dangers of rooms. He protests to Ol'ga that he hates the stuffy Vyborg flat and will leave it, but he forgets as soon as she is out of his sight. He confesses also to Štol'c that the fire of his youthful inspiration has been "shut up" in him without an outlet for twelve years, that it has "burned out its prison" and died down. As long as he can repress the recognition of his tragic waste, however, the room images are all positive for him. Ironically, of course, he is never completely safe: he is still vulnerable to the swindling of Tarant'ev and his companions.[11] As Štol'c demonstrates, one can deal with such dangers only by leaving one's rooms and acquiring experience of the world. Though the emotional appeal of the room tugs powerfully, Gončarov seems to suggest that, rationally, true self-protection comes only after taking the risk of abandoning such artificial shells.

At Oblomovka, to some extent on Goroxovaja Street, and later at the Vyborg house, Oblomov's circles of manageable space also include a "life-support system" of surrounding people. On the estate he was constantly hovered over by people who took care of all his needs – servants, parasitic hangers-on, and family, dominated by the domestic mother figure. The serf-owner mentality is clear here, but more deeply these people provide a spatial frame or buffer zone in Oblomov's fiction of life. Except during the Ol'ga-episode, notable for its privacy, Oblomov continually seeks to be at the center of such a cadre of people; hence the necessity of Zaxar and Anis'ja, the acceptability of Tarant'ev and Alekseev, and the supreme appeal of Pšenicyna. And it is clear that Tarant'ev and Alekseev, for example, are extensions of Oblomov's self:

> Tarant'ev ... shouted and produced a sort of spectacle, saving the slothful master himself from the necessity of speaking and acting. Into the room where sleep and peace reigned, Tarant'ev brought life, movement, and sometimes news from the outside world. Oblomov could listen and watch something animated, in motion, and speaking before him, and not lift a finger ...
>
> ... If he wanted to live in his own way, namely to lie in silence, to doze, or to pace the room, Alekseev was as good as not there: he,too, was silent, dozed, or looked at a book, or examined the pictures and knick-knacks with a lazy yawn to the point of tears ... And if Oblomov was bored from being alone and felt the need to express himself, to talk, read, discuss, to show emotion, then here was always a ready and submissive listener and companion who shared with equal willingness his silence, his conversation, his emotion, and the shape of his thought, whatever it might be. (I, iii, 36-7)

Alekseev offers no more resistance than the dressing-gown. When the civil service fails to fit this pattern of sympathetic and unresisting family and friends deeply ingrained in Oblomov's self-image, he suffers extreme anxiety and withdraws from the bureaucratic career entirely. He can only feel safe at the center of the circle. All of his dreams of the ideal life include being surrounded by people who take care of him, especially a woman serving him food (Militrisa Kirbitevna), and who are never in conflict with each other or with him. The image of such "embracing" solicitude extends even to the landscape at Oblomovka, where the sky comes close to the earth "in order to embrace it more warmly, with love" (I, ix, 85).

Within this charmed circle strangers are forbidden. One of Oblomov's main objections to moving from his flat, as he describes it to Zaxar, is that he must go out among strangers. Such xenophobia is rooted in Oblomovka, where strangers are always blamed for thefts. Two particular occasions in Oblomov's dream stand out. The peasants treat the possibly ill or injured stranger lying in a ditch as if he were a monster and refuse to help him. On the comic side, the Oblomov household is thrown into turmoil when a letter arrives from the outside world. Even when they overcome their fear of disaster and open it four days later to find that it is merely a request for a recipe from a friend, they constantly postpone answering it and apparently never do. Oblomov, too, cannot answer the letters from his bailiff or from his neighbor.

Oblomov's fear of being judged by unsympathetic strangers and of assuming responsibility for himself in the world at large is, according to Labriolle's convincing argument, a central ingredient in his immaturity (Labriolle, pp. 41, 45, 47). This attitude, too, can be translated into spatial terms relative to personaldistance. In addition to Oblomov's trauma at the office, he suffers acutely throughout the Ol'ga-episode from a fear of others' gossip. Ol'ga considers such gossip among servants, relatives, acquaintances, or the anonymous public as perfectly natural, even part of the excitement of their love. She thinks that the private love has a recognized place in the public world because she sees herself as part of that larger world. At the same time she feels free and self-confident enough to disregard some of the conventions of propriety in courtship. The partial loss of privacy is a compromise arrived at in the give-and-take of relationship with society at large. Oblomov, however, finds that merely being seen and talked about is a frightening invasion of his personal distance. He suffers such anxiety over the opinions of anyone not a controlled extension of himself that he betrays Ol'ga's love. *Her* opinion he takes for granted as part of his circle of intimacy; early in their relationship he has fused her with his image of an ideal wife and companion and thus rendered her "safe" (II, vi). Eventually, however, he can no longer endure her judgment and challenge either, and, perceiving her as foreign, he withdraws in fear. His notion of love cannot admit risk or dynamic tension at the borders of the self. In making us feel so powerfully the tragic loss of Ol'ga at this point, Gončarov expresses his clearest judgment against Oblomov's self-enclosure.

In response to still greater outside threats, Oblomov's imagination has created still larger enclosures than rooms, flats, buildings, and coteries of supporters. At Oblomovka, at the Vyborg house, and in Oblomov's dream-paradises, his dwelling is always surrounded by pleasant gardens and avenues of trees, a gently-flowing stream, and a smiling pastoral landscape – a natural environment without resistance. Domestic animals, happy peasants, and gentle sunsets are expansions of the self according to the ownership psychology of the lord of the manor. At Oblomovka, the world is "man's home, *a place made to his measure* and cherishing him almost anthropomorphically, like a great mother" (Mays, p. 145; my emphasis). All the dramatic or menacing elements of nature – storms, precipices, violent predation – discreetly keep their distance. Gončarov's extensive denial of such elements in the introductory description of Oblomovka is not merely a realist's critique of romanticism but an ironic indication of the spatial structure of Oblomov's imagination[12] (it is *his* dream, of course):

> It is true that there is no sea here, no high mountains, no rocks and precipices, no thick forests – nothing at all grandiose, wild, or gloomy.
>
> But for what purpose does the wild and grandiose exist? The sea, for example? Forget it! It only makes a man melancholy: gazing at it, one wants to weep. *The heart quails before the boundless expanse of water*, and there is nothing to rest the gaze exhausted by the endless monotony of the picture.
>
> The roar and the furious rolling of the waves do not soothe one's weak hearing: they repeat a song of their own, the same since the beginning of the world, a gloomy and mysterious song ...
>
> ... the voice of man is nothing, and man himself is *so small and weak, so imperceptibly does he disappear in the minor details of the vast picture.* In this way one grows wretched looking at the sea.
>
> No, forget the sea!...
>
> Mountains and precipices too were not created for man's enjoyment. They are *menacing and terrifying, like the claws and teeth of a wild beast reaching out and clutching him*; they remind us

> too vividly of our frail nature and *hold us in fear and anguish for our lives*. And the sky there, over the rocks and precipices, seems *so far and unattainable, as if it had abandoned humanity*.
>
> Not so was the *peaceful corner* where our hero suddenly found himself.
>
> The sky there, in contrast, seems to press more closely to the earth, but not to fling stronger shafts at it, but merely to *embrace it* more warmly, with love. It *spread as low overhead as a trusted parental roof, in order to protect, it seemed, the select corner from all adversity*. (I, ix, 84-5; my emphases)

In this description the large expanses are seen as anxiety-producing, while Oblomov's home is comfortingly enclosed by nature. A birch copse and a small ravine remain the only menaces at Oblomovka, and they are exaggerated out of all proportion. Oblomov has been frightened away from them by his nurse and his parents with tales of wood demons, carcasses, rabid dogs, monsters, wolves, and robbers (I, ix, 100-1). Oblomov's parents clearly draw a boundary around the boy's physical world and soon stifle his healthy curiosity and spirit of adventure (e.g., the snowfight scene). In contrast, Štol'c's childhood is characterized above all by spatial exploration and physical independence – fights, week-long wanderings, and driving on his father's errands. Oblomov never has the chance to gain the self-knowledge and the normal perception of self-boundaries derived from testing one's self against the outside world.[13]

Thus in his adulthood, as introduced in the opening chapters of the novel, Oblomov continues to erect artificial boundaries to protect himself from distant threats. St. Petersburg as a whole forms his larger cocoon in the face of invitations to Catherine's Palace or urgings to go to his country estate to restore order. When he hears of his runaway peasants, he is utterly unable to conceive why anyone would ever want to leave home. His boundaries extend to all of Russia when he protests the unthinkability of foreign travel in response to the doctor's advice and Štol'c's invitations. He had learned at Oblomovka that foreign countries were peopled by monsters; while his reason now rejects such a notion, his feelings are still under its power. He tells Štol'c that only Englishmen would want to travel as far as America or Egypt, and then only because "the good Lord made them that way; and then, too, *they have no room to live at home*." ("negde im žit'-to u sebja" – II, iii, 140; my emphasis) Oblomov's fear of change is always translated into spatial terms.

The literal settings of the novel, then, provide concentric enclosures for Oblomov's vulnerability – dressing-gown, quilt, bed, room, flat or house, familiar people, neighborhood, city, pastoral countryside, and national territory. Less obvious but perhaps more telling are the numerous spatial metaphors used by Oblomov and by Gončarov's narrator, some of which have already been mentioned in passing.

These metaphors are again rooted in childhood. Oblomov's fears of the outside world come not just from the spoiled inactivity but also from the frightening folk-tales and superstitious omens learned in childhood. The nurse's vivid stories of wood demons and monsters depict nature in the mysterious and dangerous way in which it was viewed by a medieval peasantry, a way that no longer corresponds to reality, as the narrator clearly indicates. For the Oblomov family inanimate objects and details of behavior have power over the individual's future. Though Oblomov grows out of a simple belief in these perils, his imagination has been permanently affected:

> The boy's imagination was peopled with strange apparitions; fear and anguish settled in his soul for a long time, perhaps forever. He looked around him mournfully and saw harm and misfortune everywhere in life...
>
> ... but if the belief in apparitions disappeared, there remained a sort of residue of fear and unaccountable anxiety.
>
> Il'ja Il'ič learned that disasters didn't come from monsters, and what disasters there were he scarcely knew, but at every step he expected something terrible and was afraid. (I, ix, 101)

In his retirement to the Petersburg apartment,

> a sort of childish timidity came back to him, an expectation of danger and evil from everything not encountered *in the sphere of* his everyday life – the result of *losing touch with variegated external occurrences.*
>
> The crack in his bedroom ceiling, for example, did not scare him: he was used to it; it also did not occur to him that the perpetually stuffy atmosphere in his room and constant sitting in seclusion might be more ruinous for his health than the night dampness. (I, v, 52; my emphases)

His vague anxieties produce physical symptoms strikingly similar to the panic attacks described by agoraphobics:

> He was not used to movement, to life, to crowdedness and bustle.
>
> In a thick crowd he felt stifled; he boarded a boat with but a faltering hope of reaching the other side safely; he drove in a carriage expecting the horses to bolt and smash it.
>
> Sometimes a nervous fear attacked him: he took fright from the stillness around him or simply from something he didn't know himself – cold shivers ran down his body. Sometimes he peeked into a dark corner expecting his imagination to play a trick on him and reveal a supernatural apparition. (I, v, 52)

The irrational fear instilled in him emerges repeatedly in his adulthood, as, for example, when he receives the letter from his neighbor at Oblomovka about the things that need to be taken care of: he suddenly feels "surrounded by apparitions. He felt as if he were in a forest at night, when there seemed to be a robber, a corpse, or a wild beast behind every bush and tree." (III, viii,300) He loses heart and feels physical chills and weakness, and his utter failure with Ol'ga is but a step away.

Given this frame of mind, Oblomov metaphorically conceives of the outside world with its demands and challenges in terms of large and intimidating spaces which, instead of allowing him liberty to expand, threaten to annihilate him. Active life is alternately a "dark forest," an "overgrown path," a "backwoods wilderness," a "battlefield," or a "broad, noisily rushing river, with seething waves," with "rapids, breaking of dikes, and flooding." (III, vi, 284) Any obstacle in life is like a "heavy stone thrown on the narrow and pitiful path of his existence." (I, viii, 82) Passion is like a "rough, hilly, unbearable road where horses stumble and the rider is exhausted." (II, vi, 172) In his bewilderment he conceives the issue of how to behave toward Ol'ga as a Rubicon – a spatial barrier he cannot cross, just as in his later relapse, the literal obstacles of the hills and the freezing Neva are reason enough to avoid seeing Ol'ga.

The image of the "abyss" or "chasm" (*propast'*, *bezdna*) is one of the most persistent ways Oblomov projects his terrors or Gončarov characterizes them for us, particularly in the love-episode with Ol'ga. Although it is a romantic cliché, and Oblomov's exaggerated use of the image makes him comic, it is a spatial image deeply rooted in his imagination from his paradigmatic childhood experience of the forbidden ravine (*ovrag*) at Oblomovka. Between Oblomov's learning and practical life, we are told, "there lies a whole chasm [*bezdna*] which he is unable to bridge." (I, vi, 55) In his renunciatory letter to Ol'ga he sees his passion for her as a sliding or falling into the abyss (II, x, 211). When he thinks he has compromised her and fears public opinion, he sees himself at the bottom of an abyss with Ol'ga there, too, instead of soaring high above him as he had imagined in the letter (II, xi, 232). Proposing to her also seems a chasm "he hadn't the spirit to cross" (II, xii, 238), and in Part IV he confesses to Štol'c that an abyss lies between himself and Ol'ga. Only when he is under the immediate love-inspiration of Olga is he willing to "jump into the abyss" for her; she wisely recognizes that if she were to ask him three days in advance to do it, he couldn't.[14]

Clearly Oblomov fears spaces controlled by others. An anxiety about self-definition vis-à-vis the world creates the feeling of never having enough room; requirements for personal distance can never be satisfied, and nesting becomes obsessive. Oblomov worries that there won't be enough room for him on a carriage seat, so he rejects Volkov's invitation. He won't let his visitors get too close to him. When he gets the landlord's notice he complains that "life touches you, reaches you everywhere" (I, i, 16). After he withdraws from social and official life, he discovers that "the *horizon* of his activity and ongoing life *lay within himself*" (I, vi, 55; my emphasis). Though he sometimes feels a "yearning for something far away," he mostly prefers to "withdraw into himself"; he "prays heaven somehow to avert the threatening storm" (I, vi, 57-8) and dreams of Oblomovka as "a quiet spot *off to the side*." (II, iii, 141; my emphasis) The country estate is always referred to as the "depths of the country" in the positive sense of refuge, or as a "cozy corner" (*ugolok* – see Odincov, p. 41).

In contrast to Oblomov's metaphors, Gončarov uses images of penetration outwards into space in a positive sense for Štol'c and Ol'ga. Ol'ga's goading of Oblomov is repeatedly expressed as a journey "forward, forward!... higher and higher" (III, vii, 297). Near the crisis of their break-up Oblomov recalls that "she expects him to go forward and reach that height, where he will extend a hand to her and take her with him, show her the way!" (III, viii, 300). When Ol'ga must confess to Štol'c her past love for Oblomov, she must "cross over the chasm, to open up to him what had happened to her"; it is like "flinging oneself off a steep bank or rushing into flames at a moment of extreme danger" (IV, iv, 347-8) – and she does it. Štol'c "enters into the labyrinth of her mind" with "the lamp of experience" (IV, iv, 336), instead of stopping short, as Oblomov had. Just as Štol'c easily climbs all the Swiss mountains with Ol'ga while Oblomov labors up the little hills outside Petersburg behind her, never quite able to keep up, so Štol'c and Ol'ga are repeatedly shown as going "boldly forward" on the path of life, "ascending" with Štol'c in the lead, having clear vision into the "boundless distance" lying before them. Once Štol'c imagines Ol'ga "stretching her wings like a strong andvigilant eagle and darting to a high cliff" (IV, viii, 389). Insofar as they do acknowledge "abysses" or "walls," these obstacles are *real* ones, those ultimate mysteries of life inaccessible to human beings:

> He [Štol'c] went toward his goal, bravely stepping over all barriers, and renouncing an object only when a wall arose or an impassable chasm [*bezdna*] opened up on his path.
> But he was not capable of arming himself with that daring with which, eyes shut, he could leap over the chasm or rush headlong at the wall. He measured the chasm or wall, and if there were no sure way of conquering it, he turned back, whatever might be said about him. (II, ii, 139)

Later Štol'c tells Ol'ga,

> "The searchings of a lively, frustrated mind sometimes go beyond life's boundaries, do not find, of course, any answers, and then there is melancholy...a temporary dissatisfaction with life...It's the melancholy of a soul questioning life about its mysteries...
> ... they [doubts and questionings] bring us to an abyss [*bezdna*] from which no answer comes, and they make us look at life with all the more love...They summon our already tested forces to struggle with them seemingly with the purpose of not letting them fall asleep." (IV, viii, 385-6)

These obstacle metaphors include the final barrier between Oblomov and Štol'c: Oblomov's marriage and son are the "abyss" and "wall of stone" that prevent Štol'c and Ol'ga from taking Oblomov to the country at the end, and these images suggest the larger insurmountable mystery of Oblomov's tragedy.

At the beginning of his love for Ol'ga, Oblomov lets his defenses down and seems capable of that ultimate sharing of personal space that takes place in love. As he observes her in his enchantment, he thinks to himself, "'Yes, I am drawing something from her... something from her passes into me,'" and he gazes at her as "one gazes into an endless distance, into a bottomless abyss, with self-forgetfulness, with bliss." (II, v, 168) But the romantic merger of souls, depending on such an open receptivity to beauty and passion as Oblomov musters, is not the whole story of love. Ol'ga insists that love is duty as well, and that it must change one's life. In describing Pšenicyna's love for Oblomov in Part IV, the narrator briefly digresses on the nature of love and clarifies the point: "from one day there develops alifelong devotion, a longing to sacrifice oneself... little by little one's *I* disappears and enters into *him* or into *her*." (IV, i, 319-20; Gončarov's emphasis) While Oblomov may be able to receive Ol'ga into himself, he cannot make the corresponding movement out of himself into her, the commitment of trust in the dynamic process of a growing love. Oblomov's love-ideal from childhood, as described in II, vi, provides a fixed myth that dominates his very *perception* of Ol'ga and the spatial metaphor of their relationship. He deludes himself into thinking that her reality fits his myth, and when he finally senses the gap, he rejects her instead of the myth and loses her.

From the foregoing analysis it should be clear that Gončarov treats Oblomov's tragically stunted development with irony. But it is also apparent that Gončarov makes Oblomov a deeply sympathetic character, not just for the noble qualities that are locked up in him but for his self-enclosure itself as a way of life. Gončarov's ambivalence may result from his double allegiance to two conflicting concepts of self-definition and self-fulfillment: 1) western individualism – an open-ended developmental process of self-assertion through will and energy, through dynamic challenge, testing, and compromise, and 2) an eastern, passive, timeless immersion of the self in the whole, in a secure, closed system that nourishes one and effectively eliminates the whole issue of self-definition by boundaries. This dichotomy is not simply an opposition between the old order and the new or between East and West; it is universal.[15] Many of the spatial images of the book have long been engrained in our languages to express cultural and cross-cultural concepts of identity. Gaston Bachelard has also convincingly reminded us of the profound psychological appeal of literary images of rooms, houses, corners, and nests.[16]

By emotion, temperament, and upbringing Gončarov seems to have been drawn to the second model of identity described above. By western intellectual influences, a sense of Russia's needs in the mid-nineteenth century, and his own literary ambition, he was drawn to the first. Though his novel seems to argue ideologically against Oblomov, the unsatisfactory characterization of Štol'cin Part IV, the possibility that Ol'ga represents still a third, more healthy approach, and the underlying ambivalence in the characterization of Oblomov reveal Gončarov's ultimate uncertainty – an uncertainty whether Oblomov's inertia is a sickness and a distortion of "normal" self-perimeters or a viable alternative self-definition and spatialization. As suggested by his growing paranoia about others' plagiarism of his works, this uncertainty was only temporarily allayed by Gončarov's own process of self-expression, testing, and exposing of his open vulnerability through art.[17]

In the last analysis he has passed the question on to us to decide for ourselves. Interpreters of the work have, in fact, ranged from one extreme to the other on the value of Oblomovism.[18] Modern literature, with its increasing use of spatial imagery to show the damage inflicted on alienated man by modern life (from Baudelaire and Zola through Kafka and expressionism to current experimental fiction), has shown how little our understanding of the self-other issue has brought success to our experience. Modern life reminds us, time after time, just how dramatically we fail at the borderline of self and Other. Gončarov anticipated the modern discussion of the issue with a quiet but very rich work that continues to evoke deep responses from its readers with unabated vitality.

Kent State University LARRY R. ANDREWS

Notes

1. "Čto takoe oblomovščina? – *Oblomov*, roman I. A. Gončarova," *Otečestvennye zapiski*, Nos. 1-4 (1859); rept. *I. A. Gončarov v russkoj kritike: Sbornik statej* (Moscow: Xudožestvennaja literatura, 1958), pp. 53-93.

2. The superb characterization in the recent Soviet film version (with its sadly truncated ending) nevertheless places perhaps too much emphasis on the mother image in Oblomov's childhood.

3. François de Labriolle, in his excellent article, "Oblomov n'est-il qu'un paresseux?" *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, 10 (1969), 38-51, emphasizes Oblomov's inability to find a balance between the self and the other in the normal relationships indispensable to maturation (p. 44).

4. Milton Ehre, in his study, *Oblomov and His Creator: The Life and Art of Ivan Goncharov* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), describes the novel as Oblomov's failed quest "to discover the nature of his self and define his relations with the world – the 'others.'" (p. 167). Labriolle also speaks perceptively of Oblomov's "besoin presque maladif du 'chez soi'" and "incapacité à sortir de soi-même" (pp. 48, 51). Labriolle refers to some of the novel's spatial images and confirms my reading of the anxiety that resides in them and guarantees their power, but he diagnoses Oblomovism as a separation complex where I see a culturally induced perception of space that delimits the self and the world. Neither of us, of course, mean to treat Oblomov as a clinical example.

5. Among others, E. M. Ruttner, in "Lejtmotiv u I. A. Gončarova i paralleli v proizvedenijax Tomasa Manna," *Russian Literature*, No. 6 (1974), 101-19, rehearses the dressing-gown motiv and shares my conviction that Gončarov is ambivalent: "On the one hand he reproaches Oblomov for his idleness and his flight from life, but on the other hand the whole work is imbued with sympathy for Oblomov. He is the favorite of Gončarov, but not the positive hero." (p. 108; my translation)

6. A. F. Zaxarkin (*Roman I. A. Gončarova "Oblomov,"* Moscow: Gos. Učebno-pedagog. Izdat., 1963, pp. 93, 123) and Alexandra and Sverre Lyngstad (*Ivan Goncharov*, New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1971, pp. 85, 92, 154) have continued the tradition of singling out the dressing-gown image as one of the best examples of Gončarov's stylistic technique.

7. I. A. Gončarov, *Sobranie sočinenij v šesti tomax*, t. 4 (Moscow: Gos. izd. xudožestvennoj literatury, 1959), I, i, 8. All quotations from the novel are taken from this edition and appear in my translation, followed by a reference to part, chapter, and page.

8. The soft warmth of the bedding, as Labriolle says, reassures Oblomov and provides a protective barrier against the world: "Dans les draps tièdes il se sent chez lui, il se sent à l'abri." (p. 48)

9. Zaxarkin also points out the contrast between verbs of action and verbs of stasis which characterizes the changes in Oblomov (p. 128). Such verbs show contrasting kinesthetic perceptions of space in relation to the self.

10. Cf. the Lyngstads: the chained dogs, caged birds, and manyfences "reinforce the sense of confinement. Oblomov becomes a captive of his atavistic yearning for Oblomovka." (p. 89)

11. The passive Oblomov types invite evil; they are "easy victims – they attract evil parasites who encroach upon their moral space." (Lyngstads, p. 99) Milton Mays ("Oblomov as Anti-Faust," *The Western Humanities Review*, 21, 1967, 147) shows how the Goroxovaja Street apartment is only an approximation of Oblomovka, a "retreat from what Stolz calls 'real life,' but without the plenitude of Oblomovka" or its security from bullies and cheats.

12. The double irony here is elucidated by V. V. Odincov in "Xudožestvennyj obraz i stil: o romane I. A. Gončarova 'Oblomov,'" *Russkaja Reč*, No. 6 (1973), 41-2. This passage in the novel may sound like Gončarov's own attitudes, but the word "seems" in the last paragraph suggests a loophole of irony.

13. Ehre suggests that "an almost complete identity between subject and object distinguishes Oblomovian life"; that "Oblomovka is a land where the boundaries between nature and man have become blurred, where nature assumes the benevolent aspects projected upon it by the human mind while man submerges himself in the aimless flow of the natural world. It is a mindless and undifferentiated world, an asylum not only from the complexities of modern society, but from consciousness and individuality." (p. 177)

14. The Lyngstads see the recurring "pit" and "bog" images of the novel as an echo of Dante's Styx marsh: "The region of the unknown, and of his undeveloped self, becomes his hell; for both abyss and bog are appropriate images of hell." (p. 111).

15. Ehre finds that the central paradox of oblomovism at the heart of the novel is a profound mixture of "idyll" and "nightmare," "wish" and "anxiety" rooted in an "ambiguous vision of childhood," "concurrently a standard of all value and a source of defeat, a realm of absolute freedom and a confinement of the spirit, a condition one longs for and seeks to escape." (p. 219)

16. *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957). See also Georges Matoré, *L'Espace humain: L'expression de l'espace dans la vie, la pensée et l'art contemporains* (Paris: Editions La Colombe, 1961).

17. Ehre refers also to Gončarov's growing fear of crowds, photographs, and the public in general (p. 55).

18. One interesting but unconvincing argument sees Oblomov as a Christian hero – Yvette Louria and Morton I. Seiden, "Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov*: The Anti-Faust As Christian Hero," *Canadian Slavic Studies*, 2 (1969), 39-68.