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Ivan Goncharov on Art, Literature, and the Novel

Scattered through Goncharov's correspondence, memoirs, several critical essays, and even his novels are many statements about the nature and purposes of art. They reflect the prejudices as well as the special insights of the practicing artist. Little interested in systematic aesthetic philosophy, Goncharov wrote about art sporadically, sometimes to defend his own work, often in the heat of current controversy. His writings on art were not intended to contribute to a comprehensive theory. Nor were they designed as a program. Goncharov did not formulate an aesthetic position and then seek to demonstrate its validity in artistic compositions. On the contrary, many of his opinions derive from a later period, when he was already an established novelist. Though they remain constant enough to permit us to extract a consistent viewpoint, Goncharov's aesthetics seem to have more bearing on some of his works than on others. Nevertheless, they provide an invaluable (and little studied) guide to the mind of the artist.

Of Goncharov's several aesthetic positions his conviction that unconscious creation is inherently superior to conscious craftsmanship received particular emphasis. In "Better Late than Never" ("Luchshe pozdno, chem nikogda"), the novelist's famous exercise in self-criticism, he quoted approvingly Belinsky's popular dictum, "the artist thinks in images," but immediately added that the really important issue is whether he thinks consciously or unconsciously.¹ Apparently only the artist whose thought processes are unconscious "thinks in images," for "image"—a term that in Goncharov's usage and that of his contemporaries may signify anything from a metaphor to a total artistic representation—is opposed to "idea," "conscious thought," and "intellect." Artists who depend upon their intellects usually turn out inferior work: "The idea is often expressed independently of the image and tendentiousness appears. . . . With such conscious artists the intellect furnishes what the image has left incomplete, and their creations are frequently dry, pale, and imperfect. They speak to the mind of the reader saying little to his imagination and feelings. They persuade, teach, convince, . . . touching us little."²

1. Belinsky's famous phrase reads, "The poet thinks in images. . . ." V. G. Belinsky, *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, ed. F. M. Golovenchenko (Moscow, 1948), 1: 464.

2. I. A. Goncharov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8 vols. (Moscow, 1952-55), 8: 69, 79. All

Goncharov did not usually perceive a middle position in the unconscious-conscious argument. Opposed to conscious artists are those who have an "excess of imagination." In the work of such artists "the image absorbs the meaning and the idea; the portrait speaks for itself. . . ." He unhesitatingly included himself in this second group: "I belong to the latter category, that is, I am primarily carried away (as Belinsky noted about me) 'by my ability to portray.'"³ Occasionally efforts at "conscious thought," he felt, constituted a fault in his fiction. The artist must not allow the judgments of his critical intelligence to intrude into the work of art, but "must speak through images." Intelligence in art is "the ability to create an image," and in art "only the image expresses an idea. . . . The author . . . is an external figure. He only looks at the faces of his heroes (in his imagination), listens to how they speak and what they say—and faithfully transmits it. Such are the conditions of the artist. . . ."⁴

Goncharov found the ways of the unconscious to be unpredictable and elusive. Fond of opposing the terms "to compose" (*sochinit'*) and "to create" (*tvorit'*)—an opposition that echoes the classical distinction between the artist as conscious craftsman (*poeta*) and as inspired genius (*vates*)—Goncharov invariably used "compose" pejoratively, and in a moment of difficulty with his own work defined "creation" as that which comes unbidden and unexpectedly: "I am not creating, but composing, and that is why it is coming out badly, pale, weak. It is impossible to fabricate or compose the beautiful; it comes somehow unexpectedly, on its own, and this quality of the unexpected, that is, poetry, is missing."⁵ Imagination, which is associated with unconscious inspiration, appears adventitiously, takes hold of the artist and turns him into a passive vehicle who but "faithfully transmits" its impressions. It is also the *sine qua non* of the artistic process. "The truth in nature is given to the artist only by means of the imagination!" Art, like science, "shows the truth, but it has other means and devices; these means are feeling and the imagination" (8: 106, 211).

Goncharov's identification of the imagination with unconscious inspiration and even unconscious direction may seem surprising. Criticism has usually placed him at the center of nineteenth-century realism—a tradition whose

references to Goncharov's works (unless otherwise indicated) are to this edition, cited simply by volume and page numbers after quotations.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 70. Goncharov is referring to Belinsky's characterization of him in the essay "Vzgliad na russkuiu literaturu 1847 goda": "Mr. Goncharov draws his figures, characters, scenes before all in order to satisfy his need and enjoy his ability to portray." Belinsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3: 830.

4. Goncharov, *Sobr. soch.*, 8: 79, 107. "Neobyknovennaia istoria." Neizdannnaia rukopis' I. A. Goncharova, *Sbornik rossiskoi publichnoi biblioteki*, vol. 2, no. 1: *Materialy i issledovaniia* (Petrograd, 1924), p. 85. I. A. Goncharov, *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i i pis'ma*, ed. A. P. Rybasov (Leningrad, 1938), p. 315.

5. Goncharov to S. A. Nikitenko, June 28, 1860 [Old Style], *Sobr. soch.*, 8: 343.

touchstone was “the objective representation of contemporary social reality.”⁶ Goncharov, however, though he considered himself a realist, generally avoided a narrow and dogmatic understanding of the term. If realism conflicts with the imagination, then the imagination should take precedence:

I am not such an adherent of realism as not to permit deviations from it. To please realism it would be necessary excessively to limit and even completely eliminate the imagination, which means falling into dryness, sometimes into colorlessness, drawing silhouettes instead of living images, sometimes entirely renouncing poetry and all in the name of a seeming truth. But imagination and with it poetry are granted to man by nature and enter into his being, consequently, into his life. Would it be right or real to omit them?
(8: 99–100)

Not only does the novelist permit “deviations” from realism; he even expresses doubts about the essential goals of its aesthetics, as he understands them:

The artist does not portray only his subject but also that tone by which this subject is illuminated in his imagination. Realism, to speak the truth, endeavors to free itself of this, but it has no success. It wishes to achieve some kind of absolute, almost mathematical truth, but in art such a truth does not exist. In art the object itself does not appear save in the reflection of the imagination. . . . The artist does not even paint from the object itself, which no longer exists, but from this reflection. (8: 195)

The relations between art and reality are indirect. The artist does not merely portray the objects of perception but an object that has become “illuminated in his imagination” and has acquired a certain “tone.” It is impossible to duplicate nature, and the attempt can only result in a feeble product:

Nature is too strong and original to take it, so to speak, as a whole, to match one’s strength with it and stand directly before it. It will not give. It has too powerful resources. A pitiful, impotent copy will result from a direct photograph. It permits an approach only by means of the creative imagination.
(8: 107)

Though on occasion Goncharov will employ metaphors of the kind that describe art as a reflector or “mirror held up to nature”—metaphors at least as old as Plato—he is certain to add that the mirror’s reflection is “afterward reworked in [the artist’s] imagination.”⁷ The writer “should write not from the event but from its reflection in his creative imagination, that is, he should create a verisimilitude which would justify the event in his artistic composition. Reality is of little concern to him.”⁸

6. A definition of nineteenth-century realism proposed by René Wellek in *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. (New Haven and London, 1963), pp. 240–41.

7. *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i*, p. 332. *Plato Republic* 10. 596.

8. *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i*, p. 310.

It is a startling sentence, but one that requires qualification. Certainly reality was of concern to Goncharov. He elsewhere stated that nothing had been contrived in his fiction and that he had described "life itself" (8:97). Implicit in his seeming denial of reality is a belief that the order of a work of art is not equivalent to the order of nature. The artist chooses his materials from the actual world (the "object," the "event") but transforms them according to the dictates of his imagination into an autonomous structure with its own laws of necessity and probability ("a verisimilitude" that "justifies" the events of reality in terms of the artistic composition). Art represents nature not as a reflected but as a *refracted* image which has been filtered through the creative mind. What the artist conveys, then, is not "nature" or "reality," for these are too varied and "original" to be taken "as a whole," but an image of life in which the objects of sense perception have been transformed to meet the requirements of an aesthetic structure. Also, the artist is highly selective in choosing his materials from the external world. "You," Goncharov wrote to Dostoevsky in 1874, "know how little artistic truth there is for the most part in *reality* and how . . . the meaning of creation is expressed namely through choosing several traits and indications from nature in order to create a verisimilitude, that is, to achieve artistic truth" (8:459).

The artist's method of refraction and selection, though primarily unconscious, is yet purposeful. It achieves "truth," though not the "mathematical truth" which realism, in Goncharov's view, strives for in the hope of achieving an exact duplicate of nature. Instead, the authentic artist seeks "artistic truth"—a truth inseparable from the "tones" and "illuminations" provided by the eccentric imagination. As a result, "artistic truth and the truth of reality are not one and the same" (8:106).

Goncharov, in rejecting the notion that art is a mirror of reality and in insisting upon the primacy of the unconscious in the act of creation, was repeating ideas which, though stated before, came into currency in the romantic age. The romantics, as M. H. Abrams details in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, with their orientation toward self-expression (Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings") and their interest in the workings of the individual creative genius, frequently either reversed traditional mirror and reflector metaphors describing the creative process and turned the mirror inward from the physical world to the mind and emotions of the artist, or replaced the mirror entirely and conceived the creative mind as a lamp which does not passively reflect reality but emits its own radiance to the objects of sense (cf. Goncharov's use of "illuminated," above). Although belief in an external force that takes possession of the poet and turns him into its instrument is, again, as old as Plato and was implicit even in neoclassical invocations of the muse, it was the romantic age that witnessed "the momentous historical shift from the view that the making of art is a supremely purposeful activity

to the view that its coming-into-being is, basically, a spontaneous process independent of intention, precept, or even consciousness. . . ." The romantics also internalized traditional concepts of divine inspiration or the muse and interpreted them as functions of the mind or the "unconscious."⁹

Goncharov also shared the romantics' use of organic analogies to describe the creative process—analogs and metaphors that were a natural corollary of a theory of unconscious inspiration.¹⁰ The artist, he felt, cannot create what "has not grown and ripened" in his mind. The genesis of a work of art, like the blossoming of a flower, depends upon accidental and unforeseeable factors: "[a novel] demands propitious, almost happy circumstances, because the imagination whose participation is as unavoidable in a novel as in a poetic composition, is like a flower; it unfolds and is fragrant beneath the sun's rays, and it develops from the rays of fortune." Artistic creation is conceived as a natural process in which the artist's volition plays a secondary role: "[characters] are given to the artist freely, almost independently of himself; they grow in the soil of his imagination. His labor is only one of cultivation, trimming, grouping." Nor is this ordering into a final form entirely a problem of the intelligence: "A force independent of the author comes to his aid—his artistic instinct. The intelligence lays out the main lines, the situations, like a park or a garden. It invents the contingencies, but the above-mentioned instinct helps, and brings this to fulfillment."¹¹

Though unconscious inspiration is the germinal seed of art and its maturation is analogous to the spontaneous and unwilling growth of a living organism, the role of the conscious intelligence is not discarded. The "intelligence," which "lays out the main lines," or structure, of a novel and which aids in the "cultivation" of the natural growth, performs an essential and demanding task. Goncharov has described

that invisible but gigantic labor which the construction of the entire edifice of a novel demands! The architectonics alone, that is, the construction of the edifice, are enough to swallow up the entire intellectual activity of the author: to conceive, to think out the participation of the characters in the major purpose, their relation to each other, the arrangement and the progression of the events, the role of the characters, and to do all this with constant control and criticism as regards the faithfulness or unfaith-

9. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1953), pp. 47–68, 187. Abrams credits Schelling with making the unconscious "an ineluctable part of the psychology of art" (p. 210). For Plato (or Socrates) on the poet as "inspired and possessed," see *Ion* 533–34.

10. Abrams (pp. 156–225) presents an extensive survey of organic theories.

11. *Sobr. soch.*, 8: 113. *Golos minuvshago*, 1913, no. 12, p. 245. *Sobr. soch.*, 8: 112. Also, the distinction between "composition" and "creation" recalls August W. Schlegel's famous antithesis of mechanical and organic art. See *August Wilhelm von Schlegel's Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Eduard Böcking, 12 vols. (Leipzig, 1846–47), vols. 5–6: *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, 6: 157.

fulness, the shortcomings, the excesses, etc. In a word—C'est une mer à boire!¹² (8: 112)

There is one aspect of Goncharov's view of art which seems peculiar to his own thinking and which had far-reaching consequences for his fiction. It may be related both to the uniqueness of his creation and to its limitations. He felt that it was impossible for literature to treat the contemporaneous. The life and the reality the artist portrays must be settled, stable, and formed over a long period of time:

A serious and strict art cannot portray chaos, disintegration, all the microscopic appearances of life. . . . A true work of art can only portray a life that has settled into some sort of image, into a physiognomy. The very persons [represented in this image] should have been repeated in numerous types under the influence of various principles, customs, and kinds of upbringing. Some definite and permanent image of a form of life should have appeared and its persons should have manifested themselves with well-known principles and habits in a multiplicity of aspects and examples. And for this, of course, time is necessary.

. . . it is difficult, . . . and in my opinion simply impossible, to portray a life that has not yet taken form, where its forms have not settled and characters have not been stratified into types.¹³ (8: 212–13, 101)

It is a position from which Goncharov attacked the "aestheticians of the new generation" of the sixties and seventies "who limit the goal of art to extreme . . . utilitarian ends. . . ." Though he refrained from mentioning any names, it is evident that Chernyshevsky, Pisarev, their radical followers, and the populist writers of those decades were his targets. In an effort to distinguish them from his own generation of realists, he alternately referred to them as "neorealists" or "ultrarealists," and dismissed their work as tendentious and sterile—if for no other reason than that they treated subjects of topical interest: ". . . they are not artists, and their novels, lacking poetry, are not works of art but pamphlets, feuilletons, or journalistic articles representing the 'topical' [*zloba dnia*]" (8: 211–12). Goncharov, it should be added, was evenhanded in his condemnation of the tendentious in art, deploring governmental efforts

12. Boris Raisky in *The Precipice* (*Obryv*) employs the same phrase (*une mer à boire*) in speaking of the novel (5: 43).

13. Wellek, in *Concepts of Criticism*, pp. 242–46, gives a brief history of the concept of "type" from its romantic "sense of a great universal figure of mythical proportion"—what we might call today "archetypal pattern"—to its usage by the realists to denote a socially representative (or ideal) character—that is, "social type." Goncharov, though he never specified exactly what he meant by "type," employed the term to describe a great literary character (Don Quixote, Lear, Hamlet, Don Juan, Tartuffe) who is able to give birth to "entire generations of related semblances in the creation of later talents . . ." (8: 104–5)—a view closer to the romantic usage.

to enlist writers in its support and the use of literature as polemics by conservatives as well.¹⁴

However, it was not merely the tendentious that Goncharov opposed but the very effort to deal with the topical. Even writers whom he generally admired were brought to task for their attempts to depict the contemporaneous and the momentary. In 1873 he informed Pisemsky that his recent play, *Baal*, was not altogether successful, not through any fault of the author, but “because of the novelty of the subject among us. . . . the artist should wait a long time until everything takes form in typical traits of characters and life. . . . It is impossible to put contemporary, current life in such a solid and serious form as the drama . . . ” (8: 451–52). The following year, while editing a literary anthology, Goncharov received a short story from Dostoevsky, lampooning the nihilists. He could not refrain from chastising his great colleague, and in the process explained his own conception of a literary type and literary creation:

If it is in the process of birth, then it is not yet a *type*. . . . a type is composed of many and lengthy repetitions or stratifications of occurrences and characters, where the likenesses of one and the other become frequent in the course of time and finally settle, congeal, and become familiar to the observer. Creation . . . can appear only . . . when life has settled; it does not manage with a new life which is coming into being. . . . As types I understand something very rooted, having settled over an extremely long period of time and sometimes encompassing a series of generations.¹⁵

(8: 457, 460)

In view of the frequency and conviction with which Goncharov reiterated his belief concerning the writer's proper subject, it would be shortsighted to dismiss it as merely a polemical attitude assumed in opposition to the radical critics and their demand for an immediate, socially and politically relevant literature. Far from being a contrivance for polemics, Goncharov's theory lies at the heart of his psychology of art. N. I. Prutskov, the most sensitive of Goncharov's Soviet critics, has perceived his view of a literary type as one that “penetrates the artistic thought of the novelist, his novelistic system and aesthetics, and guides his craft.”¹⁶ And what a curious theory it is! Goncharov, like all the Russian realists, dealt with what was more or less contemporary nineteenth-century reality. Yet the argument demands that experience be pushed into the past, that the processes of human life which interest the artist should have already “settled” and “congealed” through time into a “permanent

14. *Sbornik*, pp. 149–51.

15. The anthology was entitled simply *A Collection (Skladchina)* and was published in St. Petersburg in 1874. The Dostoevsky contribution was “Small Sketches” (“Malen'kie kartinki”).

16. Prutskov, *Masterstvo Goncharova-romanista* (Moscow, 1962), p. 221.

image." It is almost as if life should stop, hold still, petrify into a "stratum" of a geological formation before the artist can hold it up for inspection.

Such a view carries several implications for the artistic process. If experience must derive from or be projected into the past, then the literary act becomes of necessity an act of recall, of reminiscence, a *recherche du temps perdu*. A large measure of artistic distance and detachment can be expected from an aesthetic position that refuses to admit the uncertainties and "chaos" of life and demands that the artist be remote from the objects of his perception. It is more than coincidental that in the midst of expounding his views to Dostoevsky, Goncharov chided his fellow novelist for not portraying his character *sine ira*, a phrase that he elsewhere took up as the motto of the artist and raised to a "law of objective creation."¹⁷ What is crucial, however, is his view of character as extremely fixed and stable—what has "settled" and "congealed." Goncharov rejects characters subject to violent upheavals, to "chaos and disintegration," and perhaps even those capable of growth and becoming—"if it is in the process of birth, then it is not yet a type." He would include only "very rooted" types in his fiction, characters who are the final *results* of processes that took place "over an extremely long period of time, sometimes encompassing . . . generations." Such a view apparently precludes dynamic and strongly dramatic literary modes, for dramatic conflict and tension usually depend upon an instability and incompleteness of character—a split within the self that leaves open the possibility of alternatives of action or being. Instead we would expect Goncharov's theory to result in a static kind of literature. Certainly the pictorial interest of his fiction, his frequently praised exercises in "genre painting," as well as the so-called "plotless" character of *Oblomov*, can be related to this preference for portraying the physiognomy of a life that has "settled" and "congealed" in time.¹⁸

17. *Sobr. soch.*, 8: 457, 94. *Sbornik*, p. 144.

18. The comparison of Goncharov with the Flemish genre painters originated with Druzhinin and is almost universal in Russian criticism. See A. V. Druzhinin, "Oblomov, roman I. A. Goncharova," *I. A. Goncharov v russkoi kritike: Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 1958), p. 168. The review appeared originally in *Biblioteka dlia chteniia*, 158, no. 12 (1859): 1-25. The "plotless" character of *Oblomov*, another commonplace of Goncharov criticism employed to describe the paucity of action and drama in the novel, was implicit in Dobroliubov's famous essay, "Chto takoe oblomovshchina," though he did not use the term: "No external events, no obstacles . . . , no extraneous circumstances intrude into the novel." *Izbrannye sochineniia*, ed. A. Lavretsky (Moscow and Leningrad, 1947), p. 77. See also Dobroliubov's description of the static quality of *Oblomov*, which reads as though the critic knew the novelist's views concerning the kind of life suitable for representation in art, which of course he had no way of knowing: "He [Goncharov] reflects every phenomenon of life like a magic mirror; at any given moment, and in obedience to his will, they halt, congeal, and are molded into rigid immobile forms. He can, it seems, halt life itself, fix its most elusive moment forever, and place it before us so that we may eternally gaze upon it for our instruction or enjoyment" (*ibid.*, p. 78). Dobroliubov's essay first appeared in the *Sovremennik*, 1859, no. 5, pp. 307-43. The static

Goncharov's view of character seems particularly odd when viewed against the backdrop of the nineteenth-century novel, which so often strove to represent man either in the process of growth and change or at least as capable of growing. Not all literary types, however, show that potentiality for character development which the novel has led us to expect from fiction. Allegorical figures and comic caricatures, to cite two examples relevant to Goncharov's case, display a fixity of character compatible with the novelist's aesthetic imperatives. Allegory identifies character with a single and constant moral concept for the purpose of providing an exemplary model for human behavior or an ethical admonishment. Comic caricatures evince a similar compulsive attachment to a single unchanging character trait—what used to be called a comic “humor”—which the comic writer manipulates in order to highlight its ludicrousness.¹⁹ Goncharov of course wrote neither allegories nor comedies limited to a cast of burlesquelike caricatures (though he did write comic novels). But if we recall Andrei Stolz and his single-minded, almost fanatical adherence to an ethos of hard work and practical achievement and Iliia Ilich Oblomov's persistent, sometimes comically grotesque devotion to dressing gown and slippers in the face of the importunities of circumstance and conscience, we can feel a relation, however distant or close, between Goncharov's most famous creations and the unitary constant types of allegory or comic caricature. “An author's aim,” the novelist declared, “is the dominant element of a character . . .” (8: 291), and an examination of Goncharov's fiction will reveal, I think, a tendency to proceed from a single unchanging trait or moral concept—sentimentality and practicality in the case of Alexander and Peter Aduiev, indolence and again practicality in the Oblomov-Stolz confrontation—in the presentation of character.²⁰ How Goncharov overcame the single-leveledness and rigidity implicit in his theory and achieved the complexity that distinguishes *Oblomov* from his other novels is a question that cannot be answered here. It should, however, provide a starting point for a criticism that might yield a better understanding of that undisputed and yet eccentric masterpiece.

quality of much of Goncharov's fiction can be traced to the influence of the “natural school,” which, in Likhachev's description, “attempted to ‘arrest’ fictional time and create ‘daggerreotypes’ . . . by means of ‘physiological sketches.’” D. S. Likhachev, “Time in Russian Folklore,” *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics*, 5 (1962): 79.

19. See Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, 1964). Fletcher argues that “caricature . . . is allegorical in essence, since it strives for the simplification of character in terms of single predominant traits” (pp. 33–34); he also distinguishes “realism of character [which] is related to freedom of choice in action” and which shows people “growing” or at least communicates “the power to change radically” from the hero who “is intended iconographically; in that case he obeys a strict causal necessity” (pp. 66–67).

20. I omitted an illustration from *The Precipice* because the problem there, though analogous, is too complicated to describe in a brief summary.

While rejecting the tendentious and didactic, Goncharov also repudiated the slogan "art for art's sake," which he found "a meaningless phrase" and "a phrase not expressing anything." Art is far from a frivolous and idle exercise. It is a serious affair. One of its basic goals, if not its only one, is "to make men better." The devotees of art for art's sake who only care to exercise their individual art forms are not true artists, because "they create that in which there is neither 'truth' nor 'life.' . . ." *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* are viewed as inseparable. Several times the novelist expressed reservations about Belinsky's critical contribution but readily commended the critic's responsiveness to "the sound of truth and life in art." "*Notre cause commune*," he proclaimed to Annenkov, is "art and truth."²¹ Rejecting the use of literature to further narrow sectarian interests or literature as idle play, Goncharov preferred instead to understand it in very ambitious (and conventionally romantic and very Russian) terms: "[Literature is] *enlightenment* in general, that is, *a written or printed expression of the spirit, mind, imagination, knowledge* of an entire nation. . . . *literature is only the organ, that is the language*, which expresses everything that the nation thinks, that it desires, that it knows, and that it wishes to know and should know . . ." (8: 436).

The conviction that literature should express an intangible (and undefined) "truth" or "life" made Goncharov extremely hostile to naturalism, which he thought offered only a meaningless replica of reality. Zola and Flaubert (whom Goncharov took to be a naturalist) were attacked by him in very much the same terms he had employed to reject the Russian radical writers. To Goncharov they comprised the "extreme-realist" school; they "composed" and did not "create," because they wrote with the intellect alone and not with the "heart"—an odd estimate of Zola, who was in practice, if not in theory, the most passionately committed of artists. The naturalists' impressive technical accomplishments, their ability to render a scene vividly and convincingly, Goncharov acknowledged: "You see before you a room, a garden, a road, a hut, the figure of a man or animal. You hear, it seems, even the intonation of a voice in conversation. . . ." But literature, he added, should offer something more than convincing portraits. The naturalists' descriptions are "without rays of poetry . . . ; there is no idea, . . . no light or warmth!" Technique, though it is acquired only through long practice, "will never hide or fill the absence of ideas, of a serious and profound view of life. . . ."²²

The objection to naturalism, though partly formal (fiction should include a lyrical dimension or "rays of poetry"), is essentially moral: it must offer "a serious and profound view of life." In the course of the same correspondence with P. A. Valuev, from which the above attack upon naturalism is drawn,

21. *Sobr. soch.*, 8: 162, 110. *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i*, p. 329. *Sobr. soch.*, 8: 162, 164, 426.

22. *Sbornik*, p. 157. *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i*, p. 327.

Goncharov attempted to explain his own understanding of realism. Again, formal considerations are touched on, but the emphasis remains moral. Valuev, a prominent aristocrat and government official who had sought out the novelist's literary opinions, had, in discussing Pushkin, objected to the great poet's excessive use of concrete details and found only Pushkin's classicism praiseworthy. Goncharov replied that Pushkin's greatness lay precisely in his capacity to adjust to the "realism" of his century and appropriate its recently discovered techniques—that is, the extensive use of concrete and specific detail—while at the same time keeping in touch with his classical heritage, with an older "realism" which avoids "extremes, every kind of coarseness, vulgarity, cynicism, or that dryness which the new belletrists pass off as real truth and which limits itself to a bare replica of reality." Realism, as we have already seen, should permit lyricism and subjective "tones," which make the work of art something more than "a bare replica of reality," but it should also endeavor to render the world in all its concreteness and specificity—as "modern" writers and the naturalists are able to do so convincingly. In addition, it must be, like the classical Pushkin, "sober and rational."²³

Goncharov was certainly not the first to speculate about the nature of art and come up with potentially contradictory positions, though there is nothing to indicate that he was aware of the difficulties. Art, according to Goncharov, has its wellsprings in the unconscious and comes to fruition without premeditation or conscious direction, somewhat like a living plant. Yet it must be "sober and rational." An insistence on both the primacy of the unconscious and the need for rationality is not so contradictory as it may appear, though Goncharov's understanding of rationality, as evinced in his creative work rather than in his theoretical statements, was sometimes extremely narrow and strict. The unconscious and the rational stand at opposite ends of the spectrum of human experience, but there is no reason why the impulses of the unconscious cannot be contained in a rational system. Freud was, if nothing else, a great rationalist. More serious was Goncharov's insistence that art be "sober," that it be understood as "enlightenment," that it express "a serious and profound view of life" which will "make men better." While locating the genesis of art in a free and aimless play of the imagination, Goncharov simultaneously demanded that it be purposive and serve an educative function. Undoubtedly, all the great Russian realists, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and whoever else may come to mind, would have readily agreed on the serious moral purposes of art, but in the case of Goncharov the conviction made his work vulnerable to the very didacticism and tendentiousness he had deplored.

Realism's pre-eminent genre is, of course, the novel. What especially appealed to Goncharov, though, was the potential of the novel for capacious-

23. *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i*, p. 313.

ness and inclusiveness: "Life is a deep and boundless sea; it and art, its true reflection, cannot be exhausted or directed into some narrow channel!" If life is a deep and boundless sea, the only literary genre capable of encompassing its breadth is the novel: "Everything that is included in life pertains to the novel . . ."; "the novel seizes everything." It embraces all the previous literary genres, assumes the moral function they once had, and tends to make them obsolete. With its inclusiveness it achieves a range that allows it to take in the broad expanse of life: "European literatures have come out of their childhood, and now not only do some kind of idyll, sonnet, hymn, sketch, or lyrical outpouring of feelings in verse have no effect on anyone, but even fables have little effect. . . . All this goes into the novel, whose boundaries include large episodes of life, sometimes the whole of life. . . ."24

Contemporary literature, which for Goncharov meant the novel, is viewed as a mixture of genres: "In our age . . . the turnpikes have been removed. Lyrical, dramatic, and epic poetry—like three sisters—are shuffled among themselves. Powerful drama sometimes penetrates into an epic, or a lyrical outburst often breaks the peaceful progression of a narration. Lyrical outpourings are also not a stranger to dramatic effects."25

Several Soviet scholars have taken cognizance of the presence of ideas of romantic origin in Goncharov's aesthetic thought and, in an effort to maintain the general view of the novelist as the most "objective" of realists, have tried to explain them away. The artist's writings have been thoroughly scoured for possible influences. In turn, Johann Winckelmann, the influential eighteenth-century German art critic, Nikolai Nadezhdin, who had taught the young Goncharov aesthetic theory at Moscow University, and the Maikovs, a distinguished family of artists and writers whom the novelist knew intimately, have been made responsible for Goncharov's "romantic" and "idealistic" tendencies.²⁶ On the other hand, Pushkin and Belinsky—particularly Belinsky—are credited with inspiring his "sober . . . critical thought," weaning him from the romantic excesses of his youth and leading him to a proper and correct social realism.²⁷ "Influence" is sometimes seen as tantamount to

24. *Sobr. soch.*, 8: 110. *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i*, p. 308. *Sobr. soch.*, 8: 107, 211.

25. *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i*, p. 348.

26. A. G. Tseitlin identifies Winckelmann and the Maikovs as sources in "Goncharov-kritik," in *Istoriia russkoi kritiki*, ed. B. P. Gorodetsky, 3 vols. (Moscow and Leningrad, 1958-64), 2: 290. For a description of the Maikov family and Goncharov's relation with its members, see E. A. Liatsky, *Roman i zhizn': Razvitie tvorcheskoi lichnosti I. A. Goncharova* (Prague, 1925), pp. 109 ff. A. P. Rybasov gives Nadezhdin as an influence in *I. A. Goncharov* (Moscow, 1962), p. 21.

27. The quotation is from A. Lavretsky, "Literaturno-esteticheskie idei Goncharova," *Literaturnyi kritik*, 1940, no. 5-6, p. 34. The thesis is almost universal in Soviet scholarship. For a more modest assessment of Belinsky's possible influence, one must go back to Soviet scholarship of the twenties. See V. E. Evgeniev-Maksimov, *I. A. Goncharov: Zhizn', lichnost', tvorchestvo* (Moscow, 1925), pp. 51-55.

direction, since Goncharov's novels are read as responses to "*an invitation which Belinsky made to leading Russian writers*" to take up a cudgel against romanticism (italics in the original).²⁸

Not only are such descriptions bad history (Goncharov's recorded opinions remain unchanged throughout his career), they also give an erroneous picture of the great critic. Belinsky, as René Wellek cogently argues, "was a critic soaked in the views of the German [romantic] theorists."²⁹ Every typically romantic belief held by Goncharov, as well as several that may not be romantic in origin, can be traced back to that most influential of Russian critics—a man the novelist both knew and admired. At times even the language in which they express their views is similar. Thus for Belinsky, as well as for Goncharov, the true work of art "was not made, not composed, but created in the soul of the artist as if under the inspiration of a higher, mysterious power. . . ." Though the poet starts out with an idea or purpose, "his activity is *purposeless* and *unconscious*." "The poet is the slave of his subject. . . ." Creation proceeds "freely and independently of the creator" somewhat like "a dream." The artist is concerned with the "facts of reality"—not, however, "the fact copied from nature but [the fact] led through the imagination of the poet." Belinsky likewise employed organic metaphors to express the unconscious and purposeless nature of art. He compared artistic creation to "an organic being *enclosed within itself*" (the example is a plant), which has an internal rather than an external cause (the seed), and which constitutes a natural unity. That central thesis of romantic nationalism which gained such wide currency in Russia, the view that literature is the expression and symbol of the inner life of a nation, was enunciated by the critic at the very beginning of his career. Belinsky, like Goncharov after him, proclaimed the novel "the widest and most universal genre of poetry . . .," for "it unites all the other genres . . . , the lyrical and the dramatic. . . ." In another passage strikingly similar to Goncharov's later critique of naturalism, Belinsky attacked literature that merely represents concrete reality in "portraits" that lack "rational thought" and a "rational goal"—once again, an apparent contradiction of the previously stated "unconscious" and "purposeless" nature of creativity.³⁰

Despite striking similarities, it is nevertheless impossible to ascertain to

28. A. G. Tseitlin, *I. A. Goncharov* (Moscow, 1950), p. 63.

29. René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism*, 4 vols. (New Haven and London, 1955–65), 3: 263.

30. Belinsky, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 127–29, 2: 460, 1: 560–61, 16, 3: 802, and 1: 643. Belinsky of course did not perceive a contradiction in his theory of the unconscious but, following the romantics, thrived on the paradox whereby art could be "purposeless with purpose, unconsciousness with knowledge" (1: 128), since the artist is the unwitting bearer of "an idea." Belinsky's views on the nature of art underwent changes of emphasis which cannot be discussed here; it is merely my purpose to point out that Goncharov's "romantic" views were in complete agreement with opinions expressed by the critic at various stages of his career.

what extent Goncharov took his opinions directly from Belinsky. Though Goncharov's first novel appeared in the forties, his formative years as a writer belong to the previous decade, when Russian thought was dominated by the arguments of German romantic philosophy. Among the young novelist's classmates at Moscow University, where romantic ideas flourished in the thirties, were the students of the famous Stankevich "circle," a group dedicated to the study of Hegel and romantic idealism. Nadezhdin, who was one of Goncharov's favorite professors, knew Schelling and the Schlegels well, and was "Belinsky's most direct 'teacher.'" To cite Wellek again, "the atmosphere was fairly charged with these ideas."³¹

We study the aesthetics of most artists, however, not to determine their provenance or to argue their ultimate validity, but with the hope that we may discover a context of thought that will illuminate the works they have created. An approach that limits itself to the implications of ideas is especially appropriate for a writer like Goncharov. Without any interest in systematic philosophy or formal aesthetic theory, he usually wrote about art to explain and sometimes justify his own work, or to describe his creative experiences. His very reminiscences about his student days, from which several scholars have deduced a philosophical lineage, reveal instead an indifference to philosophical thought. Herzen, Stankevich, Belinsky, and Konstantin Aksakov had all been for varying lengths of time his classmates at Moscow University, but he knew none of them (he met Belinsky much later, in 1846) and kept aloof from the university's several philosophical circles. His enthusiasm for Nadezhdin, and probably for Winckelmann as well, seems to have been part of a youthful excitement over a first encounter with classical art and literature, unrelated to any specific ideas he may have found in those thinkers. Thus Nadezhdin impressed him "because of his inspired, ardent language which introduced us into the mysterious distances of the ancient world, transmitting the spirit, way of life, history, and art of Greece and Rome." The popular professor expounded "ideals of beauty, grace, truth, the good, perfection, etc." But when it came to specifying exactly what it was he had learned from Nadezhdin, Goncharov could recall nothing save "a masterful control of language." "It was possible," he remembered, "to acquire a pure and elegant style solely by writing down his lectures" (7:211, 8:472). Likewise, the references to Winckelmann (as well as to Goethe and Schiller) tell us only that the future novelist enjoyed translating selections from their prose works "without any practical goal but simply from an inclination to write. . . ."³² Goncharov's reading during his early years, and there is no evidence that the pattern ever changed, did not include philosophical treatises or aesthetic

31. Wellek, *History of Modern Criticism*, 3:245.

32. *Literaturno-kriticheskie stat'i*, p. 337.

theory but was limited to the standard classics of Russian and world literature, poetry, contemporary French and English fiction, and travel sketches—"everything that acts upon the imagination" (8: 221–22).

The impression Goncharov has left us of his formative years is of a young man excitedly encountering the masterpieces of world literature, assimilating vague notions concerning beauty and truth, and worrying about his prose style. If many of his views of art derive from the romantic atmosphere of the thirties, they in all likelihood originally consisted of indefinite, unarticulated inclinations and sympathies. What crystallized them into the shape of firm conviction was, as is common with artists, the actual experience of creation. *Oblomov*, though begun in the late forties, probably in 1847, was not published until 1859—a hiatus which gave rise to an erroneous impression of slow, painstaking labor and a Flaubert-like quest for *le mot juste*. Actually, the bulk of the novel was written in six weeks in the summer of 1857.³³ Astonished at the force of the creative energy he displayed that summer, Goncharov in two letters to a close friend (I. I. Lkhovskiy), written at the moment of the novel's completion, explained his accomplishment by referring to two of the cardinal principles of his aesthetics—the belief in the natural growth of a work of art and the power of the unconscious:

It will seem strange that almost the entire novel could be written in a month—not only strange, even impossible. But it is necessary to remember that it ripened in my head in the course of many years and almost all that remained was for me to write it down. . . . If there had not been years, nothing would have been written in a month. The fact is that the whole novel had matured up to the smallest scenes and details and all that remained was to write it down. I wrote as if by dictation. And truly, much appeared unconsciously; someone invisible sat next to me and told me what to write. (8: 285, 291)

Goncharov laid such stress upon the role of the unconscious in artistic creation, not because of an abstract ideological commitment, but because he had personally experienced its force.

It is not surprising that Goncharov's experience of gradual gestation and eventual submission to unconscious inspiration—writing "as if by dictation"—should attach itself to his creation of *Oblomov* (Goncharov described nothing quite like it while writing his other novels). As the novelist felt himself dominated by the urges of the unconscious in the creation of *Oblomov*, so the hero of the resulting novel is likewise dominated by dream and hallucination—a circumstance which, though crucial to a proper understanding of the novel, has often been obscured by a criticism proceeding from the assumption

33. For details of the novel's history, see A. D. Alekseev, *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva I. A. Goncharova* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1960).

that literature necessarily provides a mirror image of objective social reality. A closer reading of the novel and especially its dream sequences will disclose, I am convinced, those “tones” and “illuminations” of the subjective imagination as well as the “poetry” or lyricism which Goncharov felt were indispensable to literature—qualities that make the novel the expression of a personal vision at least as much as it is the reflection of a given social milieu. That *Oblomov* also indicates a high degree of sophisticated and self-conscious craftsmanship suggests that Goncharov may have at times exaggerated his belief in unconscious creation in reaction to the positivistic assumptions of contemporary criticism in the post-Belinsky period.

My purpose has been to describe Goncharov’s aesthetic views in relation to his fiction, but they also tempt me to a more general remark. Words possess an inertia of their own. Even when we become aware that they only approximate realities we continue to employ them with the assurance that they describe completely discrete and unequivocal concepts. Surely in the vocabulary of literary criticism there exist few vaguer terms than “romanticism” and “realism,” and though we obviously cannot get on without them, the spectacle of a novelist commonly described (however erroneously) as the most realistic of writers propounding commonplaces of romantic theory in the latter half of the nineteenth century should serve to remind us of the continuities that often survive the apparent cleavages in literary history. Indeed, some of the romantic arguments Goncharov reiterated—the predominance of the unconscious in the act of creation, the organic autonomy of the work of art, its capacity to provide a personal illumination instead of an immediate reflection of reality—are, for better or worse, still with us today, though often in the guise of a changed vocabulary.