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September 1993

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Radha Balasubramanian

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, rbalasub@unlnotes.unl.edu

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Russian Language and Literature Papers. 3.

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Spatial Form and Character Revelations: Korolenko's Siberian Stories

Vladimir Galaktionovich Korolenko's (1853–1921) short stories unravel spatially rather than temporally—that is, juxtaposition of episodes in a moment of time takes precedence over sequential presentation. Past and present are often “fused in one comprehensive view,” giving them a spatial form.¹ Korolenko's narrator, proceeding along a road, unexpectedly meets interesting individuals and soon witnesses their actions and/or shares with them events from their past that have shaped their present world view through a recollection. It is as though the very volatility of the protagonists' present situation helps disclose a moment of decision from their past. This distinct present is portrayed through landscape conducive to character revelations.

Korolenko is not alone in presenting a conflict or an issue in his characters' minds and uncovering them through a description of the surroundings. Turgenev before him, and Chekhov soon after him, distinguished themselves with their remarkable descriptions of nature to reveal characters. But the difference in their use of landscape is what is crucial to this discussion. A general comparison of their techniques brings out the uniqueness in Korolenko's portrayal of nature which gives his fiction a spatial form—defined by Joseph Frank in his “Spatial Form in Modern Literature”—with regard to his character portrayal.²

Turgenev, like Korolenko, uses colorful landscape descriptions “as a backdrop for characterization or situation.”³ He, the master painter of the

¹ Joseph Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature,” *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963) 59. This is seminal description on what spatial form in literature is through works of famous writers, like Flaubert, Joyce, Barnes, and others. Applying Frank's theory, James Curtis in his “Notes on Spatial Form in Tolstoy,” *The Sewanee Review* 77 (1970): 517–30, and “Spatial Form as the Intrinsic Genre of Dostoevsky's Novels,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 18 (1972): 135–54, describes in a very stimulating study how Tolstoy with his simultaneous descriptions and Dostoevsky with recurring motifs make their novels more spatial than temporal. It should be pointed out, however, that the term “spatial form in literature” does not necessarily mean spaciousness as understood in this paper; it may also refer to experimental prose of the twentieth century in general.

² Frank 3–62.

³ Joseph Conrad, “Turgenev's landscapes: An Overview,” *Russian Language Journal* 16 (1987): 120. The author systematically discusses the functions of Turgenev's landscapes and also compares them to his predecessors, like Lermontov, Pushkin, Gogol', and then shows how Tolstoy and Chekhov used their descriptions.

symbolic beauty of Russian countryside, describes nature for different purposes: to steer the reader, foreshadow the protagonists' thoughts and actions, and set up the stage for the narrator to decipher the consequences.⁴ Chekhov, on the other hand, felt that "descriptions of nature must be very short and *a propos*."⁵ He emphasizes this thought in a letter written to Maksim Gorky: "... beauty and expressiveness in descriptions of nature are attained only through simplicity, by the use of plain phrases as "the sun went down," "it grew dark," "it started to rain."⁶ Korolenko's descriptions are neither as laconic as Chekhov's, nor as lengthy as Turgenev's. If Chekhov's description of the landscape is provided "to create a desired mood, the Chekhovian *nastroenie*,"⁷ Korolenko portrays extensive landscape to reveal characters. He chooses to paint nature on the brink of turmoil, to disclose a conflict or an issue in his hero's mind. He prompts the uncovering of the characters' thoughts through a description of time and space concentrating on certain aspects of weather, landscape, and atmosphere.⁸ Usually the main protagonist is introduced in the back-drop of an imminent snow-storm, or ominous black rain-bearing clouds—Korolenko emphasizes thus the instability of natural conditions. Uncertain weather helps the narrator to elicit crucial information about his characters, which is not always readily apparent. Although the lengthy landscape descriptions in the frame are somewhat similar to Turgenev's vivid painting of nature in *Bezhin lug* (Bezhin Meadow, 1851) and Chekhov's symbolic portrayal in *Kryzhovnik* (Gooseberries, 1898), there are

The article provides a useful bibliography of works on landscape descriptions of major Russian writers.

⁴ Conrad, "Turgenev's landscapes..."125.

⁵ A.P. Chekhov, *Polnoe Sobranie sochinenii i pisem* (Moscow: GIKhL, 1941–51) XIII, 215.

⁶ Chekhov, *Polnoe Sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, XVIII, 11–12.

⁷ Joseph Conrad, "Anton Chekhov's Literary Landscapes," *Chekhov's Art of Writing. A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Paul Debreczeny and Thomas Eekman (Columbus, OH: Slavica Publishers, Inc., 1977) 85.

⁸ For some thoughts on how landscape descriptions help in understanding the different elements in the stories see, M.K. Azadovskii, "Poetika giblogo mesta (Iz istorii peizazha v russkoi literature)," *Stat'i o fol'klоре* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1960) 503–43. The author shows how landscape is in harmony with man's soul. For Studies on landscapes in Korolenko see Victoria Babenko, "Nature Description and their Function in Korolenko's Stories," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 16 (1974): 424–35. She points out that these nature pictures serve to set the scene, to reflect the mood of the characters, to anticipate future events, to retard action, and so on. Also S.M. Gorodetskii in "V.G. Korolenko i ego khudozhestvennyi metod," *Nashi dni* 2 (1922): 333–49. Here the author shows that landscape descriptions in Korolenko reveal characters. My article here looks deeper into the use of time and space and their interrelationship—specifically, the choice of a marked time in a volatile space and how they bring out characters' mental struggles.

significant differences in the presentation, which make them unique giving them a spatial form.

In Korolenko's stories, as in *Bezhin Meadow* and *Gooseberries*, the first-person narrator is on his way to a destination as the day grows darker. The gathering rain clouds (and stormy winds in Korolenko's and Chekhov's stories) halt their movement; in *Bezhin Meadow* the beauty in the nature makes the hunter get lost and go deeper into the forest. Soon Turgenev's narrator becomes a silent companion and witness to a group of peasant boys huddled around the fire telling frightening ghost stories. The narrator, who knows the boys, is able to give more information about them than is apparent in the scene (unlike Korolenko's narrator, who usually gets to know his characters along with the reader). So Turgenev's narrator is able to tell his readers that Pavlusha, the boy who was believed to have heard the water-spirit call him when he went to fetch water, died within a year, as if to confirm the superstitious belief that it was indeed his death's call. The framed narration here is about a chance meeting where the narrator is an older person, observing the naive, unsophisticated boys with affection at a distance, while in *Gooseberries* and in many of Korolenko's own stories narrator and characters re-live the recalled incidents—i.e., they are able to identify themselves with the hero in the narrated past.

Chekhov's story is about a clerk, Nikolai, who becomes a landowner and realizes his dream of eating gooseberries from his own yard and enjoys them, even though they turn out to be sour. This ironic story is told by Ivan Ivanovich (Nikolai's brother) at the insistence of his companions, who have been waiting to learn about the transformation of a timid clerk into a wealthy gentleman. Such retellings, when they occur in Korolenko's works, happen almost spontaneously without prior warning or prompting, as in Chekhov's, when the narrator and characters—strangers—are brought together by unexpected circumstances at a specific time in a specific place.

For Korolenko it is the magic of the moment in a charged situation which sparks a common chord in the sub-consciousness of those present which prompts them to talk, narrate or recall without inhibition the issues or questions that surface in their minds. Specifically, time and space—normally used conventionally as location and background—become the main constructive elements. They are meshed together complementing and interacting with each other, as they stimulate conversation or action which enlightens the narrator, and consequently the reader, about the characters' mental anguish. It is as though time stands still and dynamic nature becomes a frame for the action. Everything is comprehended simultaneously, locked in a timeless unity accentuating surface differences and eliminating sequence, giving the narration a spatial quality.

A closer look at the structure of some well-known works of the group of stories about Siberia and its people (written in two cycles from 1880 to 1888 and 1891 to 1904) reveals the fundamental principle that Korolenko used in the presentation of his short stories.⁹ The narrator is often first-person (or first-person-like), like the narrators in *Chudnaia* (The Strange One, 1880), *Iashka* (Yashka, 1880), and others. A few of his third-person narratives are like the first-person ones, since the narrator in them describes the scene from the character's perspective as a close witness, very similar to his first-person narrations, as he does in *Son Makara* (Makar's Dream, 1883). Or, the third-person narrator chooses a character-witness in the story as a surrogate for himself, who as a close witness records the thoughts and actions, as Simonov does in *Fedor Bospriutnyi* (Fedor the Homeless, 1886).

These stories "concentrate on portraying the Siberian inhabitants and their lifestyles" and uncover "their strengths and weaknesses"¹⁰ by looking into the past and future from the well-established, distinctive present shared by the narrator and the characters. The narrative has a distinctive beginning in all of the stories to "allow us to see everything at once instead of in succession".¹¹ Thus, it is important to establish this present with respect to time and place, and underline its significance for the action that follows.

Using exact time indications at the beginning, Korolenko places the reader into a sense of reality, subtly paving the way for his further character disclosures. The eventual stories abound with opening statements revealing that the following action takes place at a particular time of day, occasionally referring to the date, month, season, year or decade. For example, in *Iskushenie* (Temptation, 1891), the narrator is brought to the Tobol'sk prison, on August 15, 1881 around six o'clock in the evening.¹² Certain other biographical and historical details about the narrator and the country prepare us for a believable experience of a political prisoner in exile.

⁹ Korolenko's *Sobranie sochinenii* (M: GIKhL, 1953-56) 10 vols. Volume I has all the Siberian stories in it. Unless otherwise stated, translations from Russian of primary and secondary sources are my own.

¹⁰ Radha Balasubramanian, "Harmonious Compositions: Korolenko's Siberian Stories," *Rocky Mountain Review* 44 (1990): 202. Here I concentrate on how the characters' inner moral conflicts and the outer turbulent surroundings in Korolenko's Siberian stories are harmonized and do not go deeper into the issue of time and space and their roles in revealing characters' moral dilemma.

¹¹ Ivo Vidan, "Time Sequence in Spatial Fiction," *Spatial Form in Narrative*, eds. Jeffrey R. Smitten and Ann Daghistany (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981) 150. Joseph Frank's principle has been further elaborated here.

¹² Korolenko, *Sobranie sochinenii* I: 240. Hereafter volume and page numbers will be provided in the text after the quotation from the texts.

Korolenko uses the references to time and place not only for setting a realistic stage, but also for a deeper, almost psychological purpose where the surroundings affect one's normal composure. Then the narrator prefers to specify at the beginning the setting or rising of the sun or the moon, or the time of day with respect to himself or the action. Often he is heading to a destination or has halted briefly in a wayside inn. We are often told the time on the clock. The stories begin with typical phrases such as:

"It is getting colder, the evening is settling." (*The Strange One*, I: 3)

I was engulfed by the silence and gloom as the short northern day was extinguishing and a cold wintry storm was approaching. (*Sokolinets* [The Man from Sakhalin, 1885], I: 131)

Significantly, the time of day, if specified, is most often 6:00 or 12:00, which for Russians, demarcates the changes between morning (6 a.m. to 12 p.m.), day (12 p.m. to 6 p.m.), evening (6 p.m. to 12 a.m.) and night (12 a.m. to 6 a.m.). These are times of transition when illusion blurs reality and are associated with the end of one period and the beginning of another.¹³ According to Felix Oinas, "In nature, these are turning points of the day and night" and at such times one may expect something extraordinary to happen, because these are "critical moments both in nature and in man's life that are felt to be dangerous."¹⁴ Then the narrator and the characters appear to be poised for being taken over by external natural forces or internal gushing emotions.

At these vulnerable moments, time is suspended and attention diverted to the characters' mental state in the context of the present surroundings. The narrator concentrates on describing the helpless plight of both man and nature threatened by a crisis. Often the strength and fury of cloudy, stormy conditions of the road seem to threaten the rising or setting sun. Human qualities are often attributed to the interaction of trees and gathering rain clouds or snowstorms during the transition; for example, in *The Strange One* the evening is described: "wintry winds—northerly cold winds—howl in the dark forest, fir trees extend their branches to the narrow forest path and shake sadly as the early evening sets in" (I: 3). The branches seem to be eager to protect those caught in the midst of chilly northerly winds while on their way along the gloomy, lonely path. The fir tree branches "shake sadly" as if to show their realization that they have succumbed to the powerful winds and understand the futility of their instinct to help in the bleak conditions. This opening scene predicts the outcome of the

¹³ Felix Oinas, "Poludnica: the Russian midday spirit," *International Folklore Review* 2 (1982): 132. The author states that the spirit *Poludnica* in Slavic folklore makes its presence felt at midday, which is usually the transitional time of the day.

¹⁴ Oinas 132.

brief encounter between the policeman, who like the fir tree branches, extends his hand compassionately to the revolutionary girl. But she, under the sway of her obstinate faith, unflinchingly rebuffs him, leaving him feeling sad.

Like sunset and sunrise, midnight and midday are experienced as times of crises when the characters often will confess their moral stand or exhibit their ethical conviction through their actions. The characters are susceptible to recollecting a past, and to discovering or revealing their moral superiority. "They remember those significant incidents from their pasts when their courage and convictions were tested or when their actions decided the course of their future lives."¹⁵ For example, in *The Man from Sakhalin* night and stormy weather prepare the narrator and the reader to be receptive to the tramp-convict's story of terrible freedom. Here the narrator not only integrates narrative with memory, but also unfolds a "moral discovery" in the portrayal of the strength among the wanderers, as might be expected in spatial stories.¹⁶

Midday marks the end of morning and the beginning of afternoon, while midnight is a struggle between two days. These vulnerable times are preferred for the climax as one is likely to have "a feeling of apprehension at a change, a feeling that time is out of joint."¹⁷ Often nocturnal darkness lends itself to the mysteries of the struggle in nature and humankind better than the day. For example, in the story *Cherkes* (The Circassian, 1888) midnight darkness brings about a new mental awareness in the Circassian with feline quickness and cunning who becomes alert to the danger of entrapment and escapes it.

Similarly, night as a background setting can create an air of mystery about the characters' plight right from the start. The struggle between light and darkness is portrayed in a place where usual natural elements are in constant struggle. Their interaction evokes and intensifies the moral dilemma of a displaced traveller. For example, in *At-Davan* (1892), at the very beginning the narrator and his companion are awakened suddenly at night while sailing down the Lena, and find themselves trapped on ice. The full moon guides them to a nearby station as they follow a small stream, which alone remains unfrozen amidst the thick ice. It is in this place that they decide to stop for the night. But that night they witness unusual activities in the station when news is received of the arrival of the powerful and unscrupulous Arabin, who is feared and revered like God Himself. Arabin demands horses for his coach free of charge from the stationmaster, who, to everyone's surprise, refuses to lend Arabin the horses without appropriate payment. The brief action seems unreal and inappropriate to

¹⁵ Balasubramanian 203.

¹⁶ Vidan 149.

¹⁷ Oinas 132.

the witnesses, since it is not advisable to infuriate Arabin. The moral strength of the little stationmaster in resisting the God-like Arabin attains inordinate dimensions in the darkness of the night when one realizes that Arabin could have overpowered him and escaped with the horses. The night, which normally seems to help the powerful (who then seem more powerful) against the weak (who invariably appear weaker), makes the poor stationmaster's struggle with Arabin look larger than reality. Furthermore, since the stationmaster, prior to Arabin's arrival, recollects a night from his past when he attempted to murder his boss in order to regain his lover's hand, our perception of him as indomitable is strengthened. He does not yield to the power of his enemies, just like the small rivulet at At-Davan. That is, his righteous and courageous stand is reflected in the fierce struggle that the unfrozen stream Lena wages with the ice, with the Lena representing the stationmaster and the ice his enemies—in the present, unscrupulous Arabin, and in the past, the general, his boss and then his rival.

Even more interesting are the references to months and seasons which denote atmospheric changes and consequently recreate climatic conditions of the locales which influence man's moods and thoughts, and sometimes even determine the course of his action. For example, in *Moroz* (Frost, 1900–1901) two goats in sub-zero biting cold, one older and another younger, are stranded on blocks of ice. They carefully orchestrate their jumps and escape the attack of a big shaggy dog. During the ordeal the older goat protects the younger. Sokol'skii, witnessing this event, recollects a similar incident when his friend Ignatovich who, like the older goat, could have accompanied another weaker human being to safety. Instead, he ignored a plea for help from a passer-by in danger of exposure to extreme cold. Contrasting his friend's behavior to that of the older goat protecting the helpless younger one, Sokol'skii says that he is convinced that Ignatovich did not intentionally turn away from the passer-by. According to Sokol'skii, Ignatovich's conscience froze, since one's conscience is likely to freeze as the atmosphere freezes. He substantiates this theory by recalling how Ignatovich, after finding shelter and getting warmer, realized that he actually had left a passer-by to freeze and die. This realization stirs up his conscience so that he impulsively plunges into the cold, never to return. It is as though the freezing weather had numbed Ignatovich's mind so much that it took him a while to warm up and realize that he had ignored another human being's pathetic plight.

Most of the stories describe a short span of time, when a man relives an event in the past through his memories, dreams, or his actions—one of the important features of spatial stories.¹⁸ The scene described is usually enacted during a night or a day when latent thoughts in the subconscious are evoked by

¹⁸ Vidan 148.

outside natural forces. The forces not only mirror a past, but also test the ability of the present to withstand their fury. The fear, desperation, and melancholy arising out of the circumstances remain only for a brief time in the hearts of the characters. For example, the narrator in *The Strange One*, on his way to an exile camp under the protection of two policemen, finds himself completely helpless in the ominous weather conditions. The older policeman wants to befriend the narrator in spite of the fact that he is a political exile. The policeman has retained his humaneness and finds himself caught between duty and emotion, just as the fir trees on their way are caught between the harsh winds and their seeming eagerness to shelter the travellers. Not only is the present reflected in nature, but also the policeman's recollected past, in which he accompanied an exiled revolutionary girl to her destination. Here "sequence is transposed into coexistence."¹⁹ Both present and past show a similar tension between what the hero should be and what he desires to be. Everyone in the present story and in the past recollection is heading towards a new destination when extraneous circumstances intervene to create hardships. Nature also undergoes an unexpected turmoil with a snowstorm. The gloomy and unpredictable atmosphere reflects, influences and anticipates the emotions of the characters and the narrator. Their meaning becomes important, because in Korolenko's stories human life is lived in relation to the life of nature. Everyone and everything is portrayed as susceptible to the dangers of transitions.

This discussion amply confirms that the narrator likes his stories to be read in a particular setting in order to understand the moral dilemmas and the inner strengths of his heroes. The time at which he begins the narration becomes the fictive present. He stops at the present moment to describe it in different ways. A restless apprehension in the characters' minds about the fluctuating present is established. There is a congruency of moods, thoughts, feelings and fears in the narrator's and in the characters' minds. For a brief time their physical proximity encourages them to share an intimacy which under normal circumstances might have been less probable. Under these congenial conditions the narrator freely shows past and present in diverse combinations in order to reveal to himself and to the readers the people he meets. "Time is no longer felt as an objective, causal progression with clearly marked-out differences between periods; now it has become a continuum in which distinction between past and present are wiped out ... Past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity ..."²⁰

¹⁹ Vidan 137. The author comes to this conclusion on the same page by showing "how the actual order in time has been suppressed through the actual juxtaposition of episodes, minor incidents, and analytical recallings." The findings are very relevant to Korolenko's stories.

²⁰ Frank 59.

As the stories progress into a gloomier time of day the narrator reiterates the worsening weather conditions as if to show that he and the characters have been trapped or imprisoned inside the shelter with no escape. In *The Strange One* the narrator who settles for the night with the accompanying policemen at an inn continues to be troubled by the gusty, noisy wind: "I couldn't sleep. Serious, troublesome thoughts prompted by the noisy storm were circling in my head" (I: 4). Realizing that the older policeman is tossing and turning, the narrator feels that "some thoughts are wandering" (I: 4) in his companion's head, too. The storm outside continues to rage as the thoughts build up to a climax in the policeman's mind and heart, irrepressibly bursting out into a narrative monologue. It concerns a touching event from his past when he, a newly recruited policeman, accompanied a young exiled girl who fell very ill on her way to the exile camp. Her fragile exterior sparked the policeman's instincts to protect her, but their different social standings could not allow him even to express his genuine human concern to her for the fear of being misunderstood. The past situation parallels the present because here, too, he wants to become a friend of the narrator who is from the opposite camp. The difference is that now he has a very sympathetic listener in the narrator who is willing to see the human being in the uniformed bureaucrat. The policeman tells his story about the exiled girl once they settle down at an inn for the night. The noise outside subsides slowly as the story draws to a close. At regular intervals during the pauses in the story, the narrator does not hesitate to record the changes outside. The winds which were howling, beating noisily at the beginning, whisper as the policeman approaches the conclusion. At the end the weakening storm "weeps quietly" (I: 19) as the policeman torments himself remembering the exiled revolutionary. The narrator also finds himself saddened. There is complete harmony between the outside atmosphere and the thoughts, moods, and actions of the characters; Leighton describes them as "elegant, polished, graceful and harmonious compositions."²¹

At times, through the description of time and space the reader may actually be able to experience and visualize the subtle physical movement in the story which also parallels the thoughts and emotions of the narrator. For example, the short story *Ogon'ki* (Flickers, 1900) describes the narrator's boredom as he sails

²¹ Lauren Leighton, "Korolenko's Stories of Siberia," *Slavonic and East European Review* 49 (1971): 201. For further discussion on harmony see above-mentioned articles by Balasubramanian, Gorodeckij, and A.V. Lunacharskii's "Chemu učit Korolenko," *Etiudy. Kritičeskie i polemicheskie* (M: Pravda, 1905) 8-18. All these articles mention how important harmonizing internal and external worlds of the characters is for Korolenko. But none of them put the methods employed by Korolenko in a theoretical concept as done in the present article by applying Joseph Frank's and Ivo Vidan's definition and elaboration of "Spatial form."

down a long Siberian river hoping to find the shore. Against the gloomy, dark, autumn night he suddenly notices a flickering light which appears to him to be bright, strong and near. But the boatman explains that it is just as far as it had seemed before. Opposition between present illusion and past reality continues—the narrator watches the stationary, bright light ahead, which seems near, and believes that the boatman is probably right in saying that it is far. The constant battle between the apparent nearness and the actual distance of the light is emphasized by shifting alternately from one to the other until the narrator becomes reconciled to the fact that the night lights often shine deceptively and lure travellers. He concludes, “it is still near, and it is still far” (I: 379). The regular repetition of the words “far” and “near” underscores the movement from desperation to hope and back to desperation, alluding to the overall life-experience of human beings. The journey back and forth is stressed further by recording the passage of time with such words as “for a long time” and “suddenly,” creating a similar tension in terms of narrator’s experience. The alternating perspectives in the narrative spatially and temporally produce an illusion of sailing for the reader. That is, it reads as if a rapid forward thrust is followed by a slow falling back: the light which appears to be near in the deceptive present stays as far as it was in the actual past. Yet its presence somewhere ahead marks the end of the dreary journey. So the narrator hopefully forges forward as the “poem in prose” concludes with a “stasis of illumination” with the anticipation that the lights are ahead.²²

The main events often end with a suggestion of a release from the troubling changes experienced physically, mentally and emotionally by the characters. Symbolically, a description which starts with nightfall may end with the sun shining or the day breaking. For example, in *Ubivets* (The Murderer, 1882) the main character, a coach driver, remembers the night he was forced to kill bandits to save an innocent woman and her children, but ends on a brighter note with the words, “Do you see, the sun is also rising” (I: 78). Or, the stormy conditions which accompany the action may subside, as in *The Strange One*, along with the completion of the policeman’s story of his past. Sometimes a ray of hope may be noticed, as in *Flickers* when the narrator says, “After all, ahead there are lights!” although he knows they are far (I: 379). Though the short journey through darkness is fraught with gloomy despair, it breaks with a touch of symbolic optimism. The optimism may not always be as explicit as light, hope, sunshine, etc. It may be contained in releasing pent-up agony and sharing it with another human being as in *The Strange One*, or in deciphering another

22 Vidan 149.

intractable human being, like the staunch Old Believer, Iashka, for example, who would rather die than give up his faith in the story of the same name.

Ultimately, it is important for the narrator to realize his own moral strength and that of his characters to withstand a total onslaught from external forces at vulnerable moments in their lives. In order to discover and bring forth the guiding and individualizing principle in his heroes, which gives them strength to face problems, the narrator creates a congenial atmosphere. He is a traveller, a minor character, and describes his chance meeting with people who have left a lasting impression upon him. They are mostly common folk who at first appear unsuited for heroes as they are so very ordinary, and even incapable of noteworthy action. It is the narrator's intuitive mind and keen eye that notice the presence of moral strength in his travelling companions. The narrator, in spite of his innate curiosity, knows that his own educated, urban background sets him apart from his companions, who very often are untouched by urban culture and sophistication—their lives are governed by rules and laws alien to him. Nevertheless, he strikes up a conversation and investigates a key turning point in the life of his heroes pertaining to ethical and moral issues in their past.²³ It is as though the "narrator is coping with the crisis in another person's life and is speculating about its meaning."²⁴ These issues or critical moments which have decided the future course of their lives are shown through a present ideally suited for recollection. The time and space in the present reflect or evoke the past in the minds of the characters when they made a conscious choice. "The natural sequence of occurrences has been transmuted into the simultaneous existence of the human quandary in which chronological stages and links and continuities lose significance: time has turned into space."²⁵ In that atmosphere, the crucial moment from their past is recollected or mirrored. Then the unpredictable present passes off like a dream and the stories conclude.

Furthermore, the transitional time of day can also be seen as emphasizing a movement in time distinguishing the critical past from the unknown future with the unclear present as a link. Similarly, space changes—usually with a threatening storm stirring up the haziness of the past and the clearness of the

23 A.V. Bakirov, "Poetika rasskazov Korolenko. Traditsii i novatorstvo," *Russkaia literatura poslednei treti XIX veka* (Moscow: 1980) 121–128. The author describes the structure of typical Korolenko's stories and shows the various important repetitive factors in them, like a travelling narrator, characters who are fellow-travellers, their shared situation, and their dialogues. He emphasizes the fact that the narrator likes to show the characters unmediated through realistic dialogues. Their conflicts are unfolded in the present with the narrator re-living the dilemmas with his characters. The emphasis here is on the narrator.

24 Vidan 138.

25 Vidan 138.

future with a cloudy present. The narrator and the characters occupy a transitional place due to their travelling status. They are on their way—away from where they were and towards where they will be. Their life is in motion. It is this very opposition of past and future life with the present as the reference point that the narrator investigates in the characters' lives as he talks to them. In addition, the travelling status affords for a brief time the proximity which is required for an intimate dialogue. The transitoriness of their meeting temporally and spatially makes them less concerned about the lasting consequences of what transpires. The narrator, genuinely interested in others, is able to exploit the intimate situation provided by their temporary meeting as a sympathetic listener or a quiet witness. Thus, he makes the characters talk to him about themselves or to act freely. As a result, Korolenko creates a realistic present where various characters reminisce or recollect about a decisive moment from their past through a close witness. It is apt to say that Korolenko's purpose in these cycles is "to telescope time so that we see everything at once instead of in succession, to convert narration in time into a picture in space."²⁶

Korolenko obviously satisfies most of the main points detailed by Ivo Vidan in characterizing spatial fiction: he (1) makes up a complex unity of narrative strata internally connected through thematic recurrence by juxtaposing and emphasizing similar situations in what is recalled and what is narrated, (2) establishes connection between narrative and memory by recollecting or re-living an event which becomes a part of the present, (3) discloses a moral discovery or has a stasis of illumination afforded usually by the meeting between the narrator and another insignificant individual, and (4) allows us to see everything at once through subtle structural devices using time, space, and nature.²⁷ It is no wonder then that during his life-time Chekhov once remarked that "this is my favorite writer,"²⁸ and later, after more than a century, Leighton says that "his stories of Siberia ... were remarkable for their precise balance between social message and literary achievement."²⁹

²⁶ Vidan 150.

²⁷ Vidan 148–50.

²⁸ Chekhov, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvenadsati tomakh* (Moscow, 1960–64) XI, 184.

²⁹ Leighton 200.