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CHAPTER II

Icons, eclipses, and stepping off the train *Vladimir Korolenko and the ocherk*

Jane Costlow

Steam boats and locomotives are without doubt quite marvelous means of transportation, but whatever their advantages they have one major drawback: they distort perspective, and while they bring separate points closer together, in general they take us farther from a country . . . But all you have to do is get off the train or the steamboat – and immediately your perspective changes: . . . you're there, and you feel that around you something different is beginning . . . how much there is that's compelling, and of interest . . .¹

– Vladimir Korolenko, "Gone"

Vladimir Korolenko has become a bit like the hamlets and fords he refers to in this passage: someone we are likely to know only in passing, someone we catch a glimpse of on our way elsewhere, to the land of Gorky or Chekhov. It's fairly unlikely that we've stepped down from the train, dusted off our boots, and set out to wander the byways of his diverse and capacious body of work. He is the author of a much-anthologized story, "Makar's Dream" (1883), and a three-volume autobiography that extends the nineteenth-century tradition of writers' memorialization of their lives. He is the great public intellectual of late Imperial Russia: involved in court cases defending the rights of minorities, shipped off to Siberia as a young populist, a hearty, bearded figure who sparred in the last year of his life with the Bolsheviks' Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky. But as a writer he seems consigned to the ranks of lesser lights, someone whose stories get assigned in high school or a survey course and then forgotten, eclipsed by a host of other late Imperial figures: Gorky, Bunin, and Chekhov, to say nothing of the less publicly minded decadents and symbolists.

And yet Korolenko deserves our attention, particularly in the context of this volume, with its discussion of fin-de-siècle realism. In a volume that engages directly with the moods of apocalypticism, spiritual exhaustion, and pessimism of the late Imperial decades, Vladimir Korolenko seems like a bizarrely robust outlier, encountering rural Russia with humor,

generosity, and probing intelligence. The passage quoted above, from a story called “Gone,” is representative. First begun in 1890, the story was published after the author’s death; Sofia Korolenko, the writer’s daughter, introduces it in a volume that extended Korolenko’s memoirs into the period he spent in Nizhnii Novgorod (1888–1896). She suggests that the passage represents a kind of “idiosyncratic philosophy of travel by foot.”² Korolenko’s imaginative trekking off along the dusty pathways of Russia does indeed suggest that something in the physicality and situatedness of experience changes one’s perspective, and that without such immersion we are led into false assumptions. Our vision of things from the train becomes too simple. Korolenko’s words valorize the situated nature of understanding, chipping away at what one thinks one knows from a distance. If it is a philosophy of walking, it is also a statement about what we might call ambulatory or phenomenological realism.

No brief essay can begin to come to terms with the vast legacy of this extraordinary man. What I hope to accomplish here is a consideration of the kind of realism Korolenko practiced during the years he spent in Nizhnii Novgorod, and how the sketches he wrote as he traveled the backroads of the central Volga laid the ground for longer works that are hybrids of documentary and reflective observation. Questions of genre have been key in accounts of Korolenko’s work: while scholars have conventionally organized his output by the categories of journalism, publicistics, and belles lettres, his writing is in fact a complicated map of fiction, non-fiction, and memoir, in which the author’s own subtitles proliferate to dizzying effect: there are sketches and *études*, observations and reminiscences, legends and *esquisses*. “Makar’s Dream,” probably the author’s most famous short story, is subtitled “A Christmas Story”; “Sokolinets” (1885) – an adventure tale about a band of convicts escaping from Sakhalin in the Russian Far East – is subtitled “From the Stories about Vagabonds.” Other stories are described as “from childhood reminiscences” (“In Bad Company,” 1885); “a Polessia legend” (“The Forest Sounds,” 1886); and “a study (*etiud*)” (“The Blind Musician,” 1886). The *ocherk* or sketch forms a key location on this map of literary possibility for Korolenko, sometimes referring to work that is construed by readers, and probably by the author himself, as what we would call non-fiction; sometimes referring to works that are fictional. Many if not most of these *ocherki* were underwritten by the author’s notebooks, journals he began keeping at least as early as his exile in Siberia – journals that contain snippets of observation and dialogue along with pencil drawings that are in their way as astutely observed as his verbal descriptions, evidence of a visual sensibility that is abundantly

manifest throughout his work, but particularly in the *ocherki* of his Nizhnii period.³

Classic accounts of the *ocherk* have often involved historical considerations, including the genre's indebtedness to writers like Balzac, the essentially urban and characterological focus of 1840s physiological sketches, and the genre's transformation by radical writers of the 1860s and 1870s into what the authors of the *Soviet Literary Encyclopedia* call the "enlightenment sketch," suggesting an essentially didactic or educational function.⁴ Critics and historians have also pointed to more intrinsic and stylistic aspects of the genre, often including a consideration of how a *sketch* might differ from a *story*. These include a focus on description of individuals that maintains an eye to a given character's "typicality," the relative unimportance of plot, the presence of the author as someone who enters into the course of events, a relatively free "grouping of material," the extent to which material is based on actual events or "made up," and the potential inclusion of "scientific" or statistical material.⁵ One recent account argues for the genre's enormous importance for Russian literature, and in particular for understandings of realism and the real. The form has lent itself to a huge range of instantiations, and can be seen as an essentially intermediate genre, straddling the worlds of artistic literature and publicistics; it is best considered less in terms of one mega-genre (the *ocherk*) than in terms of prefixed subgenres: the portrait sketch, the sketch of daily life, the problem sketch, the travel sketch.⁶ Finally, we might consider the sketch as something like an essay, modulating authorial voice so as to engage the reader in an essentially free-form exploration.⁷ Each of these considerations points to the *ocherk's* originating and organizing impulse – observation of personality and of place, improvisation of an idea and its associative potential, instruction, and voice – the last being key to the reader's experience and engagement. In the *ocherk* a sense of reality and observation trump the set of anticipations, anxieties, and resolutions associated with action and plot.

The sketches Korolenko wrote in the years he lived in Nizhnii Novgorod have been variously categorized sometimes as fiction, sometimes not,⁸ – but they are by and large all excellent examples of the kind of undertaking the writer envisions in the passage from "Gone." Georgy Bialyi, writing in the late 1940s, links much of Korolenko's writing in Nizhnii to "practical struggle," but specific politics and struggles against corruption only account for some of what Korolenko wrote in these years; the *ocherki*, taken as a group, are intentionally open-ended and wandering, experimenting with ways of writing about locale and local lives. In their open-endedness Korolenko's sketches become vehicles not of resolution,

but ways to leave questions unanswered: they are narratives that school the reader in the kind of open-hearted, non-judgmental, non-ideological curiosity that the author/narrator exemplifies. We step with him “off the train” to get a different perspective on Russia and the people of Russia’s backroads. Just how he does this is what I will try to show below, based on examples from the sketches Korolenko wrote in the years 1887–1893.

Bialyi gives a careful accounting of the range and variety of writing that Korolenko did in his Nizhnii Novgorod years, from journalistic reporting on corruption to a rich array of narratives informed by his treks throughout the central Volga regions. Bialyi emphasizes, on the one hand, an immersion in the “minutiae” of provincial life that the Soviet literary scholar for some reason finds surprising; he redeems Korolenko’s attention to “petty” details of everyday life as examples of his ongoing interest in “popular worldview.”⁹ Beyond the journalistic reporting of these years, Korolenko produced a range of works that Bialyi places on a continuum from “publicistics” to “belles lettres,” much if not all of it inspired by his wanderings. In June of 1887 Korolenko followed the traditional pilgrimage route to the Oranki Monastery some fifty kilometers south of Nizhnii Novgorod; by September a story based on the trip had appeared in *Severnyi vestnik*. The same summer, August found Korolenko traveling up the Volga to Iurevets in the Kostroma region to observe a full solar eclipse; his account of the eclipse was published in October in *Russkie vedomosti*.

Both “After the Icon” (“Za ikonoi,” 1887) and “At the Eclipse” (“Na zatmnienii,” 1887) describe encounters with back-country Russia, and while both have strong ethnographic elements – dialogue rendered in local vernacular, detailed descriptions of crowds and striking individuals – they are much more than *just* descriptions. “After the Icon” takes the path of the pilgrimage as its structuring dynamic, lacing together conversations, incidents both harrowing and comic, evocative description, and moments of rumination on faith. At one point Korolenko inserts an account of the building of the monastery and the monks’ relationship to the local indigenous people, the Mordva. The story’s final section involves a lengthy and obscure disputation between two different groups of pilgrims on matters of faith and authority. “At the Eclipse” on the other hand limits itself to a brief time frame, using the cycle of the eclipse along with the village’s topography to present a study in contrasts, between foreign astronomers assembled with their telescopes on the heights, and village folk alternately cowering and threatening to destroy both “astro-namers” and their heretical contraptions.¹⁰ Here as in the earlier sketch Korolenko alternates passages of dialogue with descriptions of place and deeply atmospheric accounts of

light and darkness. Both sketches can be read as studies of popular religious faith, seen as credulous and primitive but also oddly, undeniably powerful. As sketches these narratives stand alone, but they can also seem like steps toward the more complex narratives that Korolenko would publish in 1890 and 1893. *In the Wild and Empty Places* (*V pustynnykh mestakh*, 1890) takes a more extended kind of journey, both pilgrimage and river trek into the forests north of the Volga, including one of the great sacred sites of Old Belief – Svetloiar, site of the hidden city of Kitezh; *In the Famine Year* (*V golodnyi god*, 1893), an explicitly investigative journey to the district of Lukoianov in the Nizhnii region, shows Korolenko applying all of his skills as a writer to uncover and elucidate just what “famine” looks like. Korolenko also calls *In the Famine Year* “sketches” – attributing to himself a series of roles, from “accidental observer-belletrist” to “correspondent” and undertaker of “observations and practical work.”¹¹ *In the Wild and Empty Places* similarly conjoins various kinds of narrative, including inserted stories that function almost as separate tales (and are in fact sometimes published on their own).¹² We might then either read the two earlier sketches as staging grounds for the later, more complex works – or, the better option seems to be that we might see in all these narratives an intentional effort to capture the fragmentary, the fleeting, the episodic, aiming quite explicitly not at conclusion but at impression and the open-ended question. As a group they are characterized by an improvisational or fluid quality,¹³ by particular shapings of character and voice including the narrator-author’s, and by remarkably resonant endings – which often seem to spurn closure intentionally.

If we take the two sketches from summer 1887 together, we are struck by how they contrast two very different rituals of watching, icon veneration and observation of solar phenomena, which seem to encapsulate an almost clichéd juxtaposition of tradition and modernity, faith and science. But the situation in Korolenko’s hands is more complex, and opens up a meandering set of considerations about what and how we see. His interest in icons might seem to be occasioned in obvious ways by their cultural importance, and by icons’ role as visual stimuli for powerful emotion. Korolenko’s interest in icons and images in relation to his own talents as an artist is also worth considering, however. The *sketches* in Korolenko’s notebooks are visual as well as verbal. His notebooks from the late 1880s include a series of simple and nicely rendered Volga scenes – small boats, some at anchor and others under sail, high banks with a church and bell tower – and others of the chapel and lake at Svetloiar, rendered in what looks like a mixture of pencil and water color (Figure 1).¹⁴ A more than capable artist, Korolenko

Figure 1. The Chapel at Svetloiar, 1905. Scanned by Bates College Imaging Center

had used his talents to support himself and his family as a student; while studying at the Technological Institute in St. Petersburg he was hired to color plates for N. Zhivotovsky's botanical atlas, hailed as "one of the most remarkable works in natural science from pre-revolutionary Russia."¹⁵ When Korolenko transferred to the Forest Institute in Moscow, he took Zhivotovsky's recommendation to the botanist Kliment Timiriazev, who went on to employ Korolenko making illustrations for his lectures.¹⁶ All of this – along with Korolenko's critical reviews of contemporary artists – suggests not just serious interest in visual art, but the eye of a practitioner, someone practiced at "sketching" reality in multiple media.¹⁷

The titular icon of the 1887 story is, presumably, the Oranki icon of the Mother of God, whose yearly journey from Nizhnii to the Oranki Monastery commemorates its role in a miraculous cure of plague in the eighteenth century. Korolenko's title may not in fact be referring to that particular icon, however: intriguingly, the story might be less about following after the icon than moving beyond the icon – or considering what

is on the icon's "other side." The Russian preposition "za" allows a variety of different readings, and we could find support for any one of them in Korolenko's text. While the icon's journey from one place to another leads Korolenko and his companion on this trek, the icon itself is not actually described in any particular detail. The closest thing to an actual description of the icon comes in a scene of mass healing and veneration. The passage is worth quoting at length:

The day was really heating up. The icon got going again around ten o'clock. We set out early, but it was hard walking. Our legs didn't want to move, our whole bodies complained. But gradually the tiredness seemed to pass.

Here and there the shade of a small wood hid us from the sun's heat, but for the most part on either side there was ripening rye. Sometimes a lane from a neighboring village ran out to meet the road, and village icons stood by small crossroad chapels . . . The icon stopped at each chapel and prayers were said. Then there was a crush around the icon. People shoved forwards to kiss the casing . . . Among these broad fields, by the small chapels, amid scattered and subsiding crowds the icon seemed closer, more accessible. Here it was surrounded by a tight cluster of genuine pilgrims. Tormented, suffering, sickly, and sorrowful folk engulfed the icon like a living wave lifted up by some force. With no mind for the others, heedless of all the shoves, they all looked in one direction . . . The half-extinguished eyes, withered hands, crippled backs, faces disfigured by pain and suffering – all turned toward one center, where a gold raiment shone from glass and frame bindings, and the head of the Mother of God bent like a dark blotch toward the child. The icon was particularly impressive in the depths of its casing. Rays of sunlight penetrated the glass and made soft, shining ripples on the gold of her crown; the crowd's motions moved the icon ever so slightly, the ripples of light ebbed and flared, gliding about, and the bent head seemed to move above the unsettled crowd . . . A kind of breath passed over the faces, smoothing shades of suffering, channeling them into a shared expression of kindness. I watched this picture not without emotion . . . Such a wave of human grief, of human longing and hope! . . . And such a great mass of common spiritual movement, engulfing, removing, erasing each separate suffering, each personal grief, like a drop that has drowned in the ocean! Is it not here, I thought, in this mighty current of human longing, singular faith, and similar hopes – that the source of this healing power lies?¹⁸

At the heart of this remarkable scene of adoration is the "dark blotch" of the Mother of God. What are we to make of Korolenko's phrasing? Is it simply an articulation of sensory limitation, marking what the eye cannot distinguish at a distance? If so, then this is an interesting example of Korolenko's refusal to insert what he knows, the face familiar to all Russians through the ubiquity of icons, for what he sees. Or do we read the

blotch in ideological terms, an intentional denigration of the most holy of images? Surely the first is closer to the spirit of this passage. The real focus of Korolenko's attention here is not the icon but what he calls a *picture*. His prose highlights acts of seeing, acts so allied to the physical motion of bodies here that the object of veneration itself seems to come alive. The icon is represented in this passage at the intersection of the physical thing itself with sun's rays and the mobility of the crowd, in turn both physical and emotional. Everything, including Korolenko's own gaze, is in motion. And part of the passage's mobility, or animation, is the question with which it ends. In posing the question of whether it is faith of a certain sort that animates the icon and becomes the source of healing Korolenko might be said to mark his distance from the proceedings: he asks a question that no one in the crowd of faithful would ask. But the question does not register skepticism. Standing at some distance (but not too much), reminding us of his own aching limbs, open to experiencing some version of the waves of emotion that sweep over the crowd, Korolenko leaves us with no particular judgment about what he sees, but with a question, left unanswered, to be pondered as the pilgrimage moves on. Is the mighty current of human longing itself the source of healing?

An earlier encounter in the narration gives us an intriguing counterpart to this icon and the picture Korolenko creates around it. Here Korolenko describes an elderly pilgrim in considerable detail: "To one side along the footpath an old woman wove her way, leaning on a walking stick, quite bent over. It was obvious that she managed each step with enormous difficulty. Her hunched back shook, her head trembled as it hung low on her neck, her legs had trouble moving. She didn't lift her eyes, concentrating her gaze just ahead, measuring step by step her overwhelming journey."¹⁹ The exchange that Korolenko and his companion Andrei Ivanovich have with this woman is quite brief: Andrei hails her as "mother" (*matushka*), and she responds with an affectionate "sweetie" (*kasatik*). She wants to know how far it is to the place where pilgrims can rest for the night, and they share her incredulity when she cannot believe it is still "so far." As is typical of these exchanges in Korolenko's work, the woman's voice is transcribed in vernacular Russian: "Akh, *batiushki*, it's far! . . . Go along, go along, sweetie. Don't look at me, I'm an old woman . . . Nothing to look at . . . your legs, they're lively, but mine, you see, are just tuckered out . . . You go along, now, dear ones, go along."²⁰ The two men move on, encountering other – more obnoxious – pilgrims, and ultimately reach their night's rest. When they arrive, they are exhausted, and the section ends with a reminiscence that brings the old woman before us again:

I wonder how the old woman's doing? – Andrei Ivanovich sounds preoccupied as we pass through the village, with its illuminated windows where you can see samovars on tables and pilgrims relaxing. In my mind's eye the old, hunched figure appears, still toiling along in the darkness. Now no one will disturb her difficult, voluntary labors with unasked-for sympathy. Only the rye whispers on either side, as the moon looks down from the sky on the old and obsolescent one, exhausted beyond all strength.²¹

Here the questions that accompany the image are not just Korolenko's, they are his companion's as well. Just after the encounter with the woman Andrei was driven to exclaim, "Can it all be pointless? . . . Do you think there's really some reward up there? Can't be, it's all rubbish," seeming to wonder at the purpose of the woman's superhuman penance. Andrei's question is the kind of theological murmuring that interests Georgy Bialyi, for example, for the ways it seems to indicate a development in the character's attitude toward the story's central "action," the journey of faith in the wake of the icon.²² But Korolenko as author doesn't dwell on Andrei's emergent crisis of faith, if indeed that is what it is; instead he brings us back to the image of the woman, with deep compassion for a figure who now seems almost mythic in her endless travel and travail. We might think here of the eternal journey of the suffering in "Makar's Dream" – but the impressionistic, fragmentary quality of the woman in "After the Icon" might equally gesture forward, toward a very different aesthetic: one thinks of Andrei Platonov's heart-wrenching juxtaposition of icons and old women in "The Motherland of Electricity" ("Rodina elektrichestva," 1939) – or his woman-bent-down-with-suffering in *Soul (Dusha)*, 1935).²³ Korolenko does not match Platonov's more expressionist, even grotesque, rendering of human suffering but asks us to hold an image of the woman in our mind, not in the service of ideology, but as a memento of deep suffering and forbearance.

In both these scenes the passage of description, with vividly rendered images at its center, creates a kind of enigmatic pause within the longer narrative. It is the kind of pause Korolenko also uses to great effect in describing the landscape of their journey. One particular example intersects nicely with one of Korolenko's drawings from this period, one of a boat under sail on the Volga, while the account in "After the Icon" takes place on the Oka – as though the artist's sketch has surfaced in the writer's narrative (Figure 2). On the first day of their journey, Korolenko witnesses a different crowd scene as a suffering peasant woman is brought out to the icon to be healed. This healing of a woman "possessed" – a *klikusha* – occasions sharp disagreement among the pilgrims, some of whom think she's "faking it."

Figure 2. Small sailboat on the Volga, 1887. Scanned by Bates College Imaging Center

Following this dramatic event, Korolenko's companion decides to go for a swim. They descend to the river, and Korolenko gives us a kind of verbal miniature, a landscape that closes part two of the *ocherk*:

A quiet bank. The crest of the bluff has hidden the crowd with its talk and movement. Now and then colorful figures appear up there, alone and in pairs, but they're fewer and farther between. The river laps against the rocky shore. To the right, about ten versts away, the buildings and churches of Kanavin are visible beyond the clearing mist. On our side, smoking from its high stacks, the factory labors away, soundlessly. After the bustling river traffic of the Volga her neighbor Oka makes a strange impression. How quiet it is here! Far away on the other side a sailboat slips along the sands. Beneath the bluff (a "yar" as they call them here) a dark splotch moves along the shore. It's haulers, who you almost never see anymore along the Volga, dragging a small barge. The smudge seems to stand in one spot, and it's only after long intervals that you see that they're getting smaller, moving away and up river. A miserable Oka steamboat is running from Nizhnii, its wheels making a hollow, slapping sound against the empty banks. You can't see anybody on deck; even on the ladder it's empty. The only thing visible is the lonely figure of the pilot, almost imperceptible by the wheel.²⁴

Compared with the icon scene's intense emotions, this one is remarkable for its emptiness and quiet. We are tempted to say it is less emotional, since

Korolenko dispenses with the rolling waves of adjectives, paring the syntax down to a spare minimum. But in reality, the emotion here is just muted, embedded in landscape rather than human form: there is an extraordinary and uncanny power in the juxtaposition of visual images – the factory, the barge haulers, the “lonely figure of the pilot” on an almost empty boat. We come down from the bluff, with its melodrama and strife, only to find the absence of sound and a blurry image. Again Korolenko refers to that *dark splotch*, referring here to the haulers rather than the Mother of God. Just what we are seeing here is not quite clear, either to Korolenko or to us, and not just because the barge haulers are little more than a “spot” on the river; precisely what is happening is unclear in a deeper sense. Beyond whether or not that smudge depicts haulers lies the question implicit in the description itself: the river is simultaneously a place for a cooling swim, a site of factory smokestacks, and a landscape with (vanishing) brutal labor. There is an almost cubist assemblage of visual elements here, icons in another sense of nature–industry–labor, assembled in an enigmatic vision of “Russia.”

The collage of impressions and images that Korolenko uses to such effect in scenes like this is connected to the way his own voice both appears and disappears. Sometimes we have a sense of Korolenko as the perceiving subject, the one through whom these impressions coalesce: in the icon scene we receive repeated reminders that Korolenko is the one watching, even if his attitude toward what he sees remains ambiguous. The question at the end of that passage draws the *volneniia* – the turbulent emotion – of the scene into a form of closure that does not draw a conclusion or pass judgment. The collage of images in the river scene above functions similarly, gathering impressions into a kind of question, one the reader must articulate for him or herself: what is this place; what is Russia; what am I to make of this remarkable and contradictory scene?

This same intermingling of description, dialogue, and authorial reserve shapes the *ocherk* Korolenko wrote later that same summer, “At the Eclipse.” Subtitled “A sketch from nature,” the story combines humor, dialogue, and reflection set in descriptive passages that bring us into Iurevets in the middle of a misty night, then take us through the early morning eclipse itself. Korolenko wanders through the village and relays his own fascination with the way the eclipse changes the quality of light – the contours and shadows of the visible world – surprised, finally at how powerfully the sun’s return affects him. The story’s dynamic rests in some sense on the contrast between the foreign “astro-namers” and the villagers, the former wholly engrossed with their instruments, the latter a mixture of terrified superstition and more sanguine curiosity. It would be easy to think of

the story as a simple juxtaposition of superstition and “enlightenment,” but, despite Korolenko’s clear affiliation with those who can predict the planets’ movements,²⁵ the “shadows” that he longs to dispel are more complicated: “And just how soon will the day come in Holy Russia – I thought suddenly . . . the day that disperses illusions, hostility, and mutual misunderstanding between the ones who look through telescopes and study the sky, and the ones who can only fall to the ground, seeing in *study* offense to an angry god?”²⁶ Put this way, the story’s central conflict is not between knowledge and ignorance, but between worlds that do not listen to each other; the “astro-namers” are as guilty of this as the fearsome faithful crouching behind closed doors. After the eclipse, when the crowd grows lively and inquisitive, the astronomers brush off their questions. The “crowd dialogues” that Korolenko relays as unattributed fragments of conversation and observation suggest a diverse array of responses to the event – not just superstition and fear, but curiosity and, once the eclipse is over, delight. Striking in its absence is any attempt on Korolenko’s part – as a character in the story – to explain anything to the various people he comes in contact with. There seems an almost studied effort not to take on the persona of pedagogue; rather than militating for enlightenment or adopting a didactic tone or its obverse, an insistence on the value of popular wisdom, Korolenko uses humor and his own fascination with the proceedings to describe a world in which curiosity and the evidence of the senses hang in the balance with fearsomeness and a scientific elite that has other things on its mind than educating the public.

The longer works that Korolenko went on to write during his years in Nizhnii Novgorod expand the *ocherk* into more comprehensive forms: *In the Wild and Empty Places* is a hybrid of cultural commentary and back-country trek; *In the Famine Year* is an explicitly polemical account of the famines of 1891–1892, in which Korolenko continues to use a “hybrid” genre – mixing dialogue, investigative reporting, statistical analysis, and descriptions of place. Both of those longer works are indebted to the earlier *ocherki*, and not just because the pilgrimage to Oranki or the eclipse at Iurevets helped Korolenko understand the region. Those sketches also helped him work through his thinking about observation and seeing, and the ways in which cultural icons can become vehicles of blindness. At the beginning of *In the Famine Year* he talks at some length about how readers’ expectations of what famine looks like are wrong. Famine is not, he insists, just when “mothers devour their children.” Many of the villages most ravaged by famine would appear to the “unschooled eye” as quite normal. Korolenko imagines readers expecting famine to look a certain way asking

their own puzzled question: “But where’s the famine?”²⁷ Part of his task in this reportage is to challenge an assumed image, and to find ways to replace it with a more complex understanding. Similarly, in his account of Svetloiar, Korolenko makes a bemused observation on the disappointment he felt upon first seeing a lake he had expected to look different. His expectations, he lets us know, had been formed by the mythologizing representations of an earlier author, Pavel Mel’nikov-Pechersky. The Svetloiar Korolenko experiences does not look like Mel’nikov-Pechersky’s. “That’s it?” he asks. But his final impression of what is indeed a tiny lake is not disappointment. On his second visit, Svetloiar proves wholly captivating, and he is reminded, interestingly, of “primitive, ancient icons.”

There was a sort of strangely attractive, almost magical simplicity about it. I tried to remember where I might have seen something similar before. And then I remembered. Bright little lakes like this, and rounded little hummocks and birches like these, show up on old, old icons of unassuming manner. A monk kneels in a round glade. A green oak wood had approached him on the one side, as if listening in on the words of human prayer; and in the background (if there is a foreground and background in such pictures) within green banks as in a chalice, is a tiny lake just like this. The awkward hand of the pious artist knows only simple, naïvely correct forms: an oval lake, round hills, trees that form a ring, like children for a folk dance. And over it all the air of “mother-pustynya,” the very thing these simple-hearted supplicants were seeking.²⁸

Our understanding of anything – person, place, or country – seemingly cannot dispense entirely with images; but nor should we take the images themselves as final or authoritative representations of phenomena, which, like life itself, are constantly changing. Both realism and reality emerge as dynamic processes, filtered through expectations but also potentially capable of constant revision and reimagination.²⁹

What fascinates in this pair of *ocherki* from 1887 is how they register a perceptive, compassionate intelligence, that of a man of great humor and insight, responding to a Russia that is “endless . . . hard . . . distracted . . . difficult,” but also “compelling and interesting,” with its pilgrims, villages, haulers, and old women, all moving along dusty paths invisible from the highroad. “The work of the imagination,” Korolenko wrote in 1888, “is images and pictures. Therefore we don’t expect clear, purely logical definitions from an artist, but we’re in our rights to expect points of view. Only a well-chosen point of view gives true perspective, in which shadows and light are realistically displayed. That’s when we can see where the light is coming from and where the various hidden paths may

lead.”³⁰ Polemicizing here with Hippolyte Taine and his Russian followers who insisted that literature was solely a “reflector” or mirror of society, Korolenko gropes for language to express in expository fashion what the sketches illustrate so well. That “life is elusive; from the forms of the past it is constantly flowing into the forms of the future, while the present is a kind of fiction, and in our concept of it we grab a bit of the past and a bit from the future, whose interaction and conflict are what we call the contemporary.”³¹ The images Korolenko renders in his narratives seem to capture that elusive “present” but only for a moment. The artist who drew sketches in a notebook turned ultimately not to the visual, with its powerful illusion of stasis, but to narrative, with its resolute, unforgiving, and endlessly compelling movement.

What might this suggest about Korolenko’s practice of realism? Korolenko’s sketches of the late 1880s and early 1890s are open-ended and focused in their observations, grounded in the writer’s peregrinations but also in his artistic practice. They eschew didactic tone and closure, are more likely to raise questions than answer them, and often use a kind of proto-cubist or impressionistic juxtaposition of visual elements. Their overall stance is fundamentally a matter of tone and composition, exploratory and energetic in ways that are related artistically to the author’s physical exploration of the region. The Estonian scholar Lea Pil’d suggested two decades ago that Korolenko was particularly interested in “forms of mental process,” a narrative process she situates in his characters; as she reads him, Korolenko viewed conventionalized thinking and reactions based on “established assumptions” as a major ethical, political, and psychic stumbling block for Russian efforts to move beyond the mentalities of serfdom.³² Something similar might be said about Korolenko’s narrators and the narratives as a whole, along with the process they initiate in the reader: points of view in his sketches are not polemical, but rather phenomenological, designed to get us thinking about established assumptions and how “forms of mental process” become stuck or stagnant, and how they can start to change. Vantage point and voice are key to this project – as is getting off the train, trekking along the dusty road, and striking up conversations. Throughout his life Korolenko was a principled and public advocate – someone arguing passionately for the rights of Russia’s minority populations, someone who labored endlessly to expose corruption and hypocrisy – but his voice in these sketches is neither combative nor judgmental. Instead, he practices a voice of restrained humanity and humor, with lots of time for pondering and questions, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions. In this I think Korolenko engages in a kind of education, but in a manner that

is deeply non-didactic and fundamentally respectful – both of his readers and of the people he encounters along his way.

NOTES

- 1 “Ushel,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1953–1956), 417–418. This volume is hereafter referred to as SS. All translations are my own.
- 2 S. V. Korolenko, *Desiat’ let v provintsii* (Izhevsk: Udmurtia, 1966), 85.
- 3 “Since adolescence I’ve been in the habit of rendering my impressions in words, seeking the best form for them, not content until I’ve found it,” V. G. Korolenko, *Istoriia moego sovremennika*, quoted in the commentary to Korolenko’s Siberian notebooks. *Zapisnye knizhki (1880–1900)* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1935), 417.
- 4 See “Ocherk” entry in *Literaturnaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1929–1939), VIII:381–388. The “enlightenment *ocherk*” of the 1860s and 1870s “gave rich factual material and significantly more correct [when compared with earlier ‘bourgeois’ sketches] renderings of the social situation of the exploited masses.” The editors’ examples of authors of such “enlightenment” *ocherki* are Reshetnikov, Levitov, and N. Uspensky.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See T. A. Kostyleva and S. R. Nemtseva, “Programma elektivnogo kursa ‘Ocherk v russkoi literature: zhanrovaia spetsifika, istoriia razvitiia,’” *Literatura* 14 (2011). <http://festival.iseptember.ru/articles/419022/> (accessed July 27, 2014).
- 7 Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre*, 15–16. Morson quotes the Soviet scholar Zhurbina who in turn quotes Korolenko on the particular qualities of the sketch: “Whatever has flashed before the author in the vague outlines of a future truth, he pursues passionately, not waiting while it is formed by itself in his soul into a clear, self-finished image . . . the reader is forced to live with him through his search, his disappointments, and all his preparatory work, as if apartments were let out when the wood for their construction had not yet been gathered.”
- 8 Georgy Bialyi calls “Za ikonoi” a *rasskaz* but “Na zatmenii” an *ocherk*. See V. G. Korolenko (Moscow and Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1949), 182, 184. Radha Balasubramanian, in the only English-language monograph on Korolenko’s literary work, includes fifteen sketches in her listing of Korolenko’s “stories” – including “During an Eclipse” but not “After the Icon.” See *The Poetics of Korolenko’s Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 24.
- 9 Bialyi, V. G. *Korolenko*, 178.
- 10 “Astronomy” becomes to the locals “ostroumy”: sharp wits instead of namers of stars.
- 11 *V golodnyi god*, SS IX:100–102.
- 12 *V pustynnykh mestakh* is composed of eight sections, several of which are in turn divided into short, numbered sections. The third section of the work,

- "Priemysyl" ("The Adopted Child"), has been frequently published separately. I have contributed to this process of extraction with my translation of section II, "Svetloyar," published in *The Russia Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, edited by Adele Barker and Bruce Grant (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 222–236.
- 13 The first term is my own, the second is one that Korolenko courts with his accounts of rivers and his analogy of literature to a "river pole" in "O naznachanii literatury," in *Vospominaniia. Stati'i. Pis'ma*. (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1988).
 - 14 Reprinted in volume iii of the ten-volume edition from the 1950s. See "illustratsii" segment following *V pustynnykh mestakh*. <http://ruslit.traumlibrary.net/book/korolenko-ss10-03/korolenko-ss10-03.html> (accessed July 27, 2014).
 - 15 Zhivotovskiy's botanical atlas has recently been reissued in a facsimile edition by Belyi Gorod Press. See S. I. Ivanov, *Botanicheskii atlas N. P. Zivotovskii* (Moscow: Belyi Gorod, 2013). <http://www.belygorod.ru/catalog/119324/> (accessed January 16, 2015).
 - 16 An account of this can be found in Korolenko's *Istoriia moego sovremennika*.
 - 17 Korolenko's published writing on art includes several reviews of exhibits in Nizhnii in the late 1880s. See L. A. Gessen and A. G. Ostrovskii, eds., *Russkie pisateli ob izorazitel'nom iskusstve* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1976).
 - 18 "Za ikonoi," SS III:28–29.
 - 19 SS III:23.
 - 20 SS III:13–14.
 - 21 SS III:29.
 - 22 Bialyi, *Russkii realism*, 183–185.
 - 23 For a brief discussion of possible connections between the work of Korolenko and Platonov, see Thomas Seifrid, *Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 233.
 - 24 "Za ikonoi," SS III:13–14.
 - 25 Korolenko has brought with him his own simple observational device, and uses his watch to tell a local when the eclipse will start to pass.
 - 26 "Na zatmenii," SS III:53.
 - 27 *V golodnyi god*, SS III:101.
 - 28 *V pustynnykh mestakh*, SS III:129.
 - 29 I give a more extended reading of *In the Wild and Empty Places* in Chapter 4 of *Heart-Pine Russia: Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).
 - 30 "O naznachanii literatury," 296.
 - 31 Ibid., 294.
 - 32 Lea Pil'd, "Tipy narodnogo soznaniia v proze V. G. Korolenko 1880-x – nach. 1890-x gg," *Trudy po russkoi i slavianskoi filologii* (1994): 146. http://www.ruthenia.ru/reprint/trudy_i/pild.pdf (accessed July 7, 2014).