Russian Transformations: Literature, Thought, Culture

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The Ruler in the Garden

Politics and Landscape Design in Imperial Russia

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Introduction

Gardens are in fashion, especially in Russia. After the long Soviet years, in which those who were lucky were given the infamous 'six hundredths', that is 600 square meters of land in a garden allotment, on which they cultivated mostly cabbage and potatoes for the sake of subsistence (or because the seeds for other plants were unavailable), the longing for private property and for the freedom to design one's own surroundings has come back with a vengeance. Matters of taste, it turns out, are more than mere icing on the cake. Instead they help to express, and even to construct, one's identity. The development of a culture of suburban living among New Russians in Moscow and St. Petersburg, along with the endurance of more traditional forms of country-trekking, such as weekend visits to the dacha, have led to a boom in all kinds of businesses catering to avid and hurried gardeners, from book-publishing, to flower shows, to firms specializing in landscape design.[1] A visit to the gardening section of any bookstore in Moscow will confirm it to be the most crowded one, far beyond what pulp fiction could attract, whether in Russian or translation. The high-culture version of this horticultural fad has taken a historical turn and prompted interest in the gardens of yore, in particular in those of the nobility's eighteenth and nineteenth-century country estates. Here, too, a cottage industry has arisen, with the publication of numerous books, journals and even guidebooks to lost imperial estate culture. Politicians and media personalities have thought it wise to align themselves with this trend, some explicitly displaying their concern for 'saving what can be saved' and their involvement 'with our cultural roots'.[2]

The assumption that the garden, or, more broadly speaking, the country estate, encapsulates the essence of Russian culture deserves

1 For a recent analysis of the dacha, see Stephen Lovell, *Summerfolk: A History of the Dacha, 1710–2000* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

2 Boris Fedorov, from the jacket of A.B. Chizhkov, *Podmoskovnye usad'by segodnia: putevoditel' s kartoi-skhemoi* (Moscow: Pal'mir, 2002).

critical attention. The current discourse about the country estate partakes of a broad attempt to construct or revive a national ideology. Country estates serve this purpose partly because they evoke the 'golden age' of Russian culture. Their scholarly reconstruction establishes a cultural continuity between the imperial period (specifically the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) and present times, a line of succession that is nostalgic, but nonetheless gestures at an underlying analogy, rather than a dissimilarity, between the two periods. Indeed, in this antiquarian mindset, a revived contemporary 'spiritual culture', revealed through various forms of religious expression, claims credentials as the deserving heir to estate culture.[3] Such a move elides all the intervening developments of history, not only the Soviet revolution and its aftermath, but also the social and cultural changes brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and modernity. It also betrays rather obvious social blind spots, since it celebrates as the quintessence of Russianness the lifestyle of an elite minority of a minority social estate, the aristocracy. The reification of the country estate implies then a particular narrative of Russian history, in which the contemporary period amounts to a return home to the essence of Russian national identity, as embedded in aristocratic culture. Historical ironies, for example the fact that this very same aristocracy was thoroughly westernized, seem of little consequence.

Interest in the country estate as a social institution also reveals a profound desire to affirm the existence in Russian history of autonomous individuality in the liberal sense. Most contemporary scholars of the country estate glorify it as a hotbed of personal freedom and artistic creativity, as if the demands of the tsarist government and pressure from social peers stopped at the gates to the grounds. Even the otherwise very thorough, richly documented, and balanced collective social history of the country estate put together by collaborators of the Institute of Russian History at the Academy of Sciences could not help but maintain that:

> Away from any kind of regulation from the court and from polite society the all-around educated, well-bred person was able to develop and manifest his 'I' in all spheres: in the design of the mansion and the park, in the rational management of

3 T.P. Kazhdan, *Khudozhestvennyi mir russkoi usad'by* (Moscow: Traditsiia, 1997), 7.

the estate economy, in the education of children, and in the pursuit of his favourite activity, whether it be hunting, reading, playing music, or collecting.[4]

While there is no denying that many an estate owner aspired to unfettered self-realization, neither the imperial court, nor polite society left them entirely alone. Nor did they succeed, as this study will demonstrate, in ignoring the pressures brought to bear upon them in all sorts of ways, from economic necessity, to the rule of fashion, to the need to incarnate status and entertain. Recent scholarly accounts of estate culture seem wedded to an ahistorical notion of the individual self. The afterword to this book will seek to analyse the complex reasons for the current moral and financial investment in landscape design and nostalgia for the country estate as an expression of liberal individuality.

Gardens in Russia developed first and foremost around palaces. Attuned to the importance given by western rulers to well-tended gardens and manicured lawns, especially for the purposes of a choreography of power, the likes of Peter the Great, Elizabeth and Catherine II took it upon themselves to instigate the creation of ambitious gardens in their palace grounds and to inculcate in their subjects the art of appreciating landscape design and understanding its meaning. In the early decades of the eighteenth century, following such imperial examples, grandees to whom Peter the Great had offered the use of estates in the vicinity of St. Petersburg and Moscow proceeded not only to erect mansions, but also to fashion gardens meant to testify to their good taste and to their proper western cultural orientation. If their initial stylistic references pointed to Dutch and French models – with straight alleys, trimmed hedges, and abundant use of statuary – by the mid-1760s Catherine had initiated a turn to English landscaping principles, which resulted in a quick dissemination of the fashion for the open vistas, undulating lines, and pleasing variety propagated by Lancelot Capability Brown and others in England. As always in Russia, the assimilation of incompatible aesthetic movements in quick order produced unique and interesting results, which this study will discuss in detail.

4 *Dvorianskaia i kupecheskaia sel'skaia usad'ba v Rossii XVI–XXvv.* (Moscow: URSS, 2000), 7. See the afterword to this book for a more detailed discussion of the current mythologizing of the estate in Russia.

During the reign of Catherine II, the taste for landscaping spread beyond the aristocracy and took root also among the middle gentry – landowners presiding over an estate and fields tilled by a approximately 100–500 serfs. Several factors enabled the quick development of a garden culture. The Edict on the Emancipation of the Nobility promulgated in 1762 by Peter III during his short reign allowed the nobles who so desired to resign from state service and assume direct management of their estates. The Charter of the Nobility, which Catherine granted in 1785, gave landowners legal title to their lands, which strengthened their attachment to their estates. Yet possibly the most important factor in the development of a garden culture was the availability of free manpower in the form of serfs who could be made to work in the garden in addition to their obligations in the fields. Indeed, since the social position of the nobility rested to a large extent on the number of serfs it owned, the garden could showcase the results of serf labour, indicating both the availability of serfs and the landowner's success at managing them.

The enserfment of the Russian peasantry had gathered pace over the course of the eighteenth century, supported by various government policies. The introduction of the soul tax in 1724 meant that all peasants were to be categorized as serfs, state peasants, or soldiers. Various decrees facilitated the conversion of free labourers into serfs. A law promulgated in 1763 severely limited freedom of movement, as serfs were required to obtain the authorization of their masters before they could travel. Thus by the second half of the eighteenth century more peasants had been forced into serfdom than ever before, and they were working under conditions that had become markedly more oppressive. Albeit rendered illegal by a decree of 1771, the trade in serfs continued uninterruptedly, fostered by incentives tied to the conscription demands of the army. Even Alexander I's attempts to prohibit the sale of serfs were less than successful. In addition the government retreated from overseeing life on the estate, and landowners were given extensive judicial and police powers over their peasants, including the right to banish offenders to Siberia. Masters were of course bound by a duty of care for their serfs, but restrictions against ill treatment were legally toothless until well into the reign of Nicholas I, when prosecution of abusive landowners became more frequent. Only moral considerations

mitigated their nearly unchecked power.[5] In short, the expansion of serfdom and the worsening conditions in which the serfs themselves lived resulted in a greater availability of manpower, which allowed ambitious garden developments to be undertaken at little cost, although in the long run serfdom also raised intractable moral issues that the nobility struggled with throughout the nineteenth century.

In addition to such objective conditions, more subjective factors of a symbolic nature undoubtedly also played a role in the development of a garden culture. Following the initial impulse given by Peter the Great, the nobility over the course of the eighteenth century acquired an emphatically western identity, which expressed itself in many aspects of its daily life, from the language it spoke (French more than Russian), to the books it read, the clothes it wore, the foods it consumed, and the houses it inhabited. The Russian landscape as a whole proved more resistant to cultural transformation, although many, tsars included, thought that a programme of forestation, drainage, or irrigation could go a long way toward changing Russia's harsh climate. If one could not easily reclaim the boundless expanse of the taiga or the steppe aesthetically, at least one could spruce up the immediate surroundings so as to make them resemble Western European sites admired on a journey or imagined from one's armchair.

This urge to invest space with meaning, to utilize it as the setting for the display of one's western aesthetic pedigree, betrays a theatrical dimension. Indeed, gardening bears a distinct relation with the theatrical tenor of Russian nobility culture, which the semiotician Iurii Lotman was the first to describe.[6] Forced by Peter the Great to speak in western

5 For a detailed discussion of the relations between master and serf, see Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 414–41. For a balanced treatment of the issue, see also *Dvorianskaia i kupecheskaia sel'skaia usad'ba v Rossii XVI–XXvv.*, 343–60.

6 Ju.M. Lotman, 'The Theater and Theatricality as Components of Early Nineteenth-Century Culture', in Ju.M. Lotman and B.A. Uspenskij, *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. by Ann Shukman (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Contributions, no.11, 1984), 141–64 and Iurii Lotman, 'The Decembrist in Daily Life (Everyday Behavior as a Historical-Psychological Category)', in Iurii M. Lotman *et al.*, *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, ed. by Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 95–149.

languages, to adopt western forms of behaviour, and to wear German dress, the nobility found itself enacting a different lifestyle in public than it would normally do in its private quarters. In due course, this coerced westernization created an upper class conversant and comfortable with the practices of its peers in England, France and Germany. Yet it also brought about a cultural divide within Russia, not only between the peasantry and nobility, but also in terms of the settings of the nobility's existence. Fissures appeared between public and private venues, city and country, as well as between the languages the noble elite spoke. Even on a more intimate level, facets of identity became fractured. The inherent plurality of this lifestyle resulted in a mechanism of psychological distancing. Indeed, required to perform various roles in accordance with different situations, the nobility found itself unable to identify fully with any of them. Thus there arose the sense that it lived on a stage and enacted discontinuous scripts, alternating between them with more or less ease.[7] While theatricality characterized court life in many absolutist countries, the phenomenon in Russia was compounded and deepened by the requirement to imitate western modes of behaviour.[8] More than a style, what a nobleman needed to acquire was a whole new language. Everyday life lost its self-evident simplicity. It became a problem to solve, a realm of competing projects, which required deliberate choices to be made. These projects, in turn, were hardly innocuous, for in the absence of a commonly shared understanding of the nobility's role in the state, let alone of a broadly accepted definition of Russia's identity

7 In a recent article, Michelle Marrese calls into question Lotman's stark binary opposition between the nobility's 'natural' Russian and 'artificial' western styles of behaviour. The evidence she marshals on bilingualism, in particular among noble women, highlights the chaotic and sometimes macaronic coexistence of French and Russian and the fluid, yet self-conscious ways in which the nobility switched between them. See Michelle Lamarche Marrese, '"The Poetics of Everyday Behavior" Revisited: Lotman, Gender, and the Evolution of Russian Noble Identity', unpublished manuscript.

8 On the representational nature of court society, see the standard and inspiring work by Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

between East and West, they all entailed larger social and political ramifications.[9]

Yet this psychological distancing from the forms of everyday life also had its advantages. To put it bluntly, it implied that things did not need to be the way they were, thus opening up a realm of opportunity in the fashioning of the everyday. The ability, indeed the desire, to design one's existence was the upshot. Since it invited the interventions of some designing intelligence, space was up for grabs. It stopped simply being there, in its inert materiality. Instead it came loaded with meaning, always already inscribed with the history of its uses, the embodiment of this or that cultural project, to the extent that it had been designed with a particular purpose in mind. And even in the absence of contrivance, whether seeming or real, it could still appear to be significant, precisely as a place of longed-for wilderness. Both the steppe, unbounded, flat and treeless, and the overgrown garden sometimes functioned in this way, betoking a desire on the part of the nobility to abdicate the voluntarism incumbent upon its unsettled lifestyle.

The nobility, or at least its upper crust, thus identified itself with performance in everyday life. Play here meant both disinterested play, the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure, and role-play, the provisional assumption of an identity for the purposes of self-projection. The ambiguity between these two forms of play, in other words, the hesitation between aesthetics and politics, opened up a realm of freedom for the nobility; for its performances could come forth in quotation marks, that is, without the seal of earnestness that otherwise underpins communication. Nobles were at once actors and spectators, but they also had another sort of audience in mind, the government on one side and commoners on the other. Their theatrical zeal, which the existence of semi-seditious carnivalesque societies such as Arzamas or the Green Lamp best exemplified, served in part to hold government intrusion at bay. Moreover, in the form of fashion and etiquette, theatricality functioned as a social marker, a mechanism to police the boundaries of the nobility as a social estate, to keep out those whose service to the state had enabled them to rise in the

9 For a general discussion of the estate's theatricality, see Priscilla Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate: A Social and Cultural History* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995), 129–53.

Table of Ranks instituted by Peter the Great and thus officially to enter the ranks of the nobility. The ability to put on a requisite performance thus distinguished genuine nobles from aspiring ones, in effect substituting a behavioural definition of identity for the legal, state-sanctioned one.[10]

The nobility asserted its distinctiveness and its prerogatives less by developing totalizing systems of thoughts and ideologies, than by putting on a good show. In this performance-oriented culture, what mattered was the ludic display of taste, rather than the single-minded pursuit of an ideological or philosophical programme. It would therefore be futile to hold the nobility up to high standards of philosophical coherence, for it often tended to pick and choose ideas more for their stage effect than for any inherent truth-value.[11] Philosophically inspired methodologies, whether systemic ones like Structuralism, or anti-systemic ones like Deconstruction, all seem to miss the point, for they presume a degree of consistency, whether achieved or vainly strived for, that the nobility had no interest in pursuing. And the hermeneutics of suspicion that inspires much of contemporary cultural studies – the resolve to uncover the power structures that underpin cultural production of all kinds – also seem too coarse to come to terms with a social class that was at once privileged and oppressed and that found in performance an opportunity to open up alternative worlds, notional spaces of difference that eluded

10 In her *Structures of Society: Imperial Russia's 'People of Various Ranks'* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 1994), Elise Wirtschafter discusses the interaction between legal framework, societal self-definition, and individual self-fashioning in nineteenth-century Russia (18–37, 118–25). She emphasizes the importance of culture, rather than legal status or economic conditions, in the construction of social identity.

11 Here my approach contrasts with the line taken by Ekaterina Dmitrieva and Ol'ga Kuptsova, who draw the portrait of a profoundly meditative, philosophically inclined landlord, who enhances his garden with mythological cues, which he himself understands literally as symbols of his *Weltanschauung*. What gets lost in this reading is the deliberate social gesture – the fashion statement – as well as the potential political edge of garden symbols. Do owners really believe in the mythological layer of their gardens? Do they literally mean to achieve 'a universal principle of cosmic harmony'? The rarest among them, perhaps. See Ekaterina Dmitrieva and Ol'ga Kuptsova, *Zhizn' usadebnogo mifa: Utrachennyi i obretennyi rai* (Moscow: OGI, 2002), 22.

the reification of identity the state sought to impose.[12] This study then will look sympathetically at the ways in which Russian high culture indulged itself in play. I shall take its existential investment in the aesthetic sphere seriously, for it enabled the nobility to distance itself from official roles and to invent much more fluid, nuanced, ambiguous, and creative forms of behaviour, which often implied a degree of political independence, or at least a longing for such.

By emphasizing the political subtext of landscape design I seek to capture what was at stake in the nobility's uncommon investment in gardening. For my purposes, politics will mean broadly the exercise of authority, the projection of social prestige, and the organization of public life, all considered in actual fact and as imagined or desired eventuality. It is owing to the theatricality of everyday life that the nobility often invoked landscape design as a form of self-presentation. Whether it liked it or not, the nobility was continuously enacting the part of the social estate empowered to rule over the people and was enmeshed in a social structure that magnified the importance of differences in rank. So pervasive was the influence of theatricality that even when it sought a refuge from politics in its gardens, the nobility did in fact perform a political act, the temporary and often ostentatious forbearance from a political role. For gardens were never fully private. Any traveller dressed as a gentleman could call on a country estate and ask to visit the grounds, even if he did not know the landlord and could not present a letter of introduction. Often more open than the drawing room, the gardens of the nobility never lost their representational value since they revealed a noble's fantasies about his or her public role. Behind the bushes we can peek at the landlord's attempts to project a particular identity in response to his de facto function as the representative of autocratic power on the local level.

12 I am inspired in these comments by Caryl Emerson's important discussion of the notions of self advanced by four major twentieth-century Russian scholars who saw in the word an ability to open up new worlds, rather than merely to enshrine ideologically the existing one. See 'Bakhtin, Lotman, Vygotsky, and Lydia Ginzburg on Types of Selves: A Tribute', *Self and Story in Russian History*, ed. by Laura Engelstein and Stephanie Sandler (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 40.

Frequently the Russian country estate emerged as a self-conscious imitation of Western European practices of country life, and successive fashions in landscape design were mostly imported from the West. Yet distinct social and political circumstances inevitably turned the estate into a specific institution unparalleled anywhere else.[13] Estate owners were granted land by the tsars, and despite Catherine's Charter to the Nobility, it was understood that estates could be revoked. As Marc Raeff notes, owing to the corrupt legal system and in the absence of recourse against the arbitrary rule of tsarist officials:

> actual practice [...] did not come up to the requirements of the law. An individual could lose freedom and property quite suddenly, without protection of legal safeguards and orderly judicial procedures [...]. Even when illegal and arbitrary action of a governor or high official caused the loss of liberty or property, it was difficult, if not impossible, to obtain redress [...].[14]

Furthermore, due to the expenses of living in the capitals, the necessity of lavish entertaining, and the low wages gained from government service, not to speak of hereditary laws that led to the dispersal of land among siblings (the absence of primogeniture), the nobility over the course of the nineteenth century sank deeper and deeper into debt. In fact, many wealthy landowners rarely spent much time on their estates, and historians consider this form of 'absentee ownership' a characteristic trait of the Russian nobility.[15] Its hold on the land was therefore more

13 Roosevelt describes the estate as a 'Western oasis' that expresses 'rejection of [the nobility's] native culture' (33) but also emphasizes distinct features in social conditions, architecture and attitudes. Recent Russian scholarship on the estate tends to assume its axiomatic Russianness (see the Afterword to this book). Dmitrieva and Kuptsova represent an exception, as they posit the universalism of the estate's cultural orientation. Only by the 1880s do they notice a desire to outflank Western Europe in matters of landscape, which, however, ignores A.T. Bolotov's calls for the development of a Russian style about a hundred years earlier, as well as N.M. Karamzin's remarks about the distinctiveness of Russian landscaping (see Dmitrieva and Kuptsova, 29).

14 Marc Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 98. See also Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Social Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 1997), 29–30. Wirtschafter emphasizes the ambiguity of the nobility's rights and privileges.

15 Blum, 386–90.

precarious than it appeared, which arguably prompted various kinds of compensatory activity, notably the drive to embed symbolically one's sovereignty in the estate grounds.[16] The pervasive theatricality of the nobility's everyday life therefore unfolded against a background of fairly provisional sets, which acquired all the more signification, the less inalienable they appeared to be. Gardens took on an unprecedented range of meanings, assuming a uniquely intense representational function that deserves to be studied as a phenomenon *sui generis*.

The fluidity of this self-fashioning necessitated malleable space, and it is in this light that gardens acquired all their meanings. Gardens are always a work in progress. They never achieve a final form and always change, whether because of the cycle of seasons or because of layered-over interventions. In their very eternal return, which is also an eternal becoming – the Nietzschean echoes in my terminology are deliberate – they thwart reification. Unlike other works of art, which, once completed, are surrounded by an aura and largely protected from tampering (to the extent that their cultural value has been recognized), gardens invite, indeed require continuous maintenance, if not interference. Consequently, they often assume the form of a palimpsest, encapsulating

16 Seymour Becker discusses the nobility's precarious hold on its lands, a fact which is corroborated by the impressions relayed by nineteenth-century foreign visitors to Russia. The Frenchman Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, who wrote a very thorough description of Russia and its institutions in the manner of de Tocqueville, comments: 'Between the dvorianstvo and the soil there never has been the same bond, the same association as in the West. The nobility is not identified with the soil as [it is] in the rest of Europe, nor with the region in which it resides. The nobles do not bear the name of their estate or their township, as indicated by the French de and the German von [...]. Nothing [in Russia] recalls the proud dwellings of the Western aristocracies, the inheritors of Feudalism; nothing resembles those medieval castles, so solidly squatting on the soil, so haughtily pervaded with the might of the families whose strongholds they were. Russian nature herself seems to repudiate these domestic fortresses, by providing neither the sites nor the materials for them – the rocky steeps whose brow they should crown, the stone of which they should be built. The wooden house, so often burned down, so quickly worm-eaten, so easy to transport or to reconstruct, is a meet emblem of Russian life; the very dwellings aptly represent the precariousness of the aristocracy's destinies'. *L'Empire des tsars et les Russes*, quoted in Seymour Becker, *Nobility and Privilege in Late Imperial Russia* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois Press, 1985), 29–30.

as they do successive layers of design and establishing links between generations. Yet even as they suggest slow growth and seem to span history, they are also uniquely responsive to interventions. Indeed, the landowners who shall preoccupy us prided themselves on the alacrity with which they took up the creation or transformation of a garden. Gardens were thus always provisional, quickly erected, especially in light of the availability of serf labour, but also utterly vulnerable to decay.

The malleable nature of gardens accounts for their suitability as a stage for the performance of a collective choreography. Grand alleys presume a kind of slow and stately parading among signs of opulence and power. Intricate labyrinths seek to create a sense of disorientation, which can be at times playful, gothic, or introspective. Concealed gazebos or hedged alcoves invite flirting and romantic dalliance. Ponds enable boating and fishing, but are also prized for the way they reflect the garden like a mirror, doubling a reality whose specular qualities are thereby laid bare. Benches that provide a vantage point to a carefully constructed view signal the importance of aesthetic contemplation. The view itself, whether it constrains or frees the gaze, can betray something of the garden's relationship to the larger world – its openness or closure – and thus imply a particular need for boundaries. Signs of careful maintenance – raked alleys, manicured lawns, pruned trees – imply the owner's tight control and project an image of his political behaviour. Indeed, tyranny often seems to go hand in hand with polished estate management.[17] In contrast, vegetative overgrowth might point to the owner's more relaxed, restrained, if not reluctant grasp on power. Garden styles, whether French, English, Chinese or other, indicate the cultural orientation of the landlord, but can also convey a sense of his or her politics. A garden faintly reminiscent of Versailles impresses upon the mind a distinct set of political and social connotations, different from the implications of a layout modelled on the park of an English stately home.

Yet these elements of landscape design are all very general in nature and are insufficient to confer individuality on each garden. For more distinctive fashioning, estate owners resorted to inscriptions, statuary,

17 See the depiction of Mikhail Maksimovich Kurolesov in S.T. Aksakov's *Semeinaia khronika, Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Moscow: Pravda, 1966), 103, 112.

monuments and garden architecture, which may articulate more specific political or sentimental projects and convey an image of the garden's owner. Small-scale replicas of well-known buildings or monuments (often hastily erected wooden ones), sculptures of famous people, and poetic inscriptions combined to evoke a set of associations that lent specificity to the garden. Tablets or plates that name individual parts of the garden, say an alley or a grove, are the most basic means of imparting concrete meaning to the landscape.

The garden rests on a sort of semiotic paradox. Considerable investment is made in developing a space that satisfies the aesthetic taste of the landowner. This layout serves as a backdrop that prefigures the actual message, which is inscribed by way of a few none-too-complex devices that exploit the aesthetic sensibility of the recipient. The message is thus embedded in a seemingly natural environment, but only barely so. Semiotically speaking, the country estate presents a faintly motivated, superabundant, somewhat indeterminate form, and it is therefore liable to multiple re-interpretations. Gardens therefore adjust easily to the changing uses they are put to. The Soviets knew this all too well and effortlessly transformed imperial gardens into sites of collective leisure.[18]

Nobles, of course, enjoyed a variety of means of self-projection, and the garden held no exclusivity. Architecture, along with interior design and decoration, similarly contributed to the fashioning of an environment expressive of the landowner's lifestyle, values and politics. But landscape design holds one unique privilege, which is that it can easily conceal traces of intent. It thus affects its audience in altogether more insidious ways, for it can blur the difference between organic growth and human will or else suggest collective or anonymous authorship. The garden, understood in any event as a less codified site than the salon or the church, takes its visitors off guard and insinuates political representations in their unsuspecting mind. It can therefore be particularly effective as means of social engineering, and we shall see how savvy tsars and landowners sought to take advantage of this opportunity.

18 For a discussion of how the imperial 'Neskutchnyi sad' in Moscow became the infamous Soviet Gorky Park, see Andreas Schönle, 'Neskutchnyi sad', *Sites de la mémoire russe*, Georges Nivat and Alexandre Arkhanguelski (eds) (Paris: Fayard, forthcoming).

This study rests on the assumption that by virtue of their provisional nature gardens belong to micro-history.[19] With the exception of this introduction and my conclusion on the social function of the country estate, I shall refrain from generalizing about their meaning and role. Instead, I shall look at very specific instances of design (or the lack thereof) at specific moments in time, seeking to exhume the values and ideas a particular landowner sought to impress upon the landscape. For this purpose I shall look not only at the individual layout of each garden, but also at evidence of its uses and interpretations. Accounts of garden festivities, private letters reflecting garden design and maintenance, representations in paintings or etchings, theoretical statements indicative of the landowner's landscaping philosophy, and even evidence of social relations on the country estate, along, of course, with literary treatments of specific gardens, will all serve to reconstruct the resonance of a particular place. In my analysis of the details of a garden site, I will be more interested in highlighting its individual characteristics, than in working out the general premises it shared with other gardens of its time.

In his *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*, Christopher Ely has convincingly delineated the general features of a Russian myth of landscape that cuts across differing ideological sensibilities and is expressed in various media, from literature to the arts. I shall move in the opposite direction, focusing not on abstract commonalities, but on the concrete biographical, social, economic, and ideological circumstances that shaped the investment of tsars and landowners in their gardens or at least their views on gardening.[20] My goal is certainly not to invalidate Ely's conclusions, but to reconstruct the multiple pressures, desires, and ideas that came into play in a noble's aesthetic elaboration of the living environment.

19 I.M. Pushkareva made a sophisticated case for a microhistorical approach to the estate in her 'Sel'skaia dvorianskaia usad'ba v poreformennoi Rossii (K postanovke problemy)', *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 1999, no.4, 14–31.

20 Ely intentionally centres his attention on the average rather than the specific and the idiosyncratic. Of interest to him are 'the most public and widely disseminated depictions of Russian landscape across a broad spectrum of cultural endeavors', the 'commonplace, even hackneyed and mundane, representations of the Russian countryside'. Christopher Ely, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), 21.