

Reviews in History

Published on: *Reviews in History* (<https://reviews.history.ac.uk>)

This Meager Nature. Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia

Review Number: 337
Publish Date: Thursday, 1 May, 2003
Author: Christopher Ely
ISBN: 9780875803036
Date of Publication: 2002
Price: £31.95
Pages: 278pp.
Publisher: Northern Illinois University Press
Publisher URL: <http://www.niupress.niu.edu/niupress/scripts/book/bookResults.asp?ID=131>
Place of Publication: DeKalb, IL
Reviewer: Cathy A. Frierson

The genesis of this fine monograph occurred in a moment of confounding cultural confrontation when Christopher Ely first viewed Russian landscape painting of the nineteenth century. Perplexed, he jotted down a question for himself. Why, he asked, were these works so 'consciously unbeautiful'? Gazing at one dreary canvas after another, he wondered, 'What was this fascination with mud?' (p. ix) Not only a young American graduate student in the late twentieth century found these works curious; a century earlier, the Itinerant painter Ivan Kramskoi reported that Russian viewers at a major exhibition stood before Fedor Vasil'ev's 'Wet Meadow' with 'the expression of crushed peas; they were stupefied about how to treat this phenomenon.' (p. 185) Ely's study explains both the source of that stupefaction and the meaning of Vasil'ev's and other similarly 'unprepossessing' landscapes - they were the culmination of a century-long search for images of the Russian land that the Russian public, poets, prose authors, and artists could embrace as essential statements of a positive national identity. By 1872, when Vasil'ev's image of weeds in mud under a leaden sky provoked 'comic distress', Russians were well on their way to loving their country's 'meager nature.'

Ely's title, *This Meager Nature*, comes from Fedor Tiutchev's poem of 1859, 'These Poor Villages':

These poor villages,

This meager nature:

Long-suffering native land,

Land of the Russian people!

Proud foreign eyes

Will not notice nor grasp

The light that shines through

Your humble barrenness.

Worn by the weight of the cross,

The Heavenly King in the guise of a slave

Has passed through all of you,

Native land, blessing you. (quoted on p. 139)

These lines capture much of the process Ely describes, as he examines the development of Russian landscape painting, poetry, and prose from the late eighteenth century through to the end of the nineteenth century. Drawing on poetry, novels, painting, travel literature and literary and art criticism, Ely argues that the articulation of a specifically Russian landscape in art and literature contributed to the construction of Russian national identity. Further, he argues that this process entailed learning both to view Russia without European aesthetic filters and to love the very features of Russian land and nature that seemed impoverished by comparison with European landscape conventions. 'Proud foreign eyes', so important in the late eighteenth-century approaches to Russian landscape imagery, would cease to hold authority by the end of the nineteenth. At the turn of the twentieth century, Russia's 'meager nature' and 'humble barrenness' were no longer dull and tedious for Russian viewers, but highly valued, even a 'blessing'. The meagre, humble, barren and suffering land gave birth to the special strengths, endurance, and soul of the 'Russian people'. 'This meager nature' thus became a font of national celebration. As Ely states in his 'Introduction':

That the Russian landscape was inherently bleak and unattractive, many Russians with the leisure to care did not doubt in the early nineteenth century. By the latter third of the century, few were not convinced that Russia's landscape possessed merits unmatched in any other land.(p. 25)

Ely employs a straightforward methodology to develop this argument. He structures the study along two lines: chronological and thematic. Within the basic chronological framework, he organises each chapter around a predominant approach or school of landscape painting or writing in each period. He examines both 'brilliant' and 'mundane' works that depicted the Russian land. A key criterion in his selection is whether the work in question 'aestheticized' the natural setting. With a nod to culture studies (mercifully brief and devoid of esoteric, benumbing jargon), Ely reminds his readers that 'human perception of nature is not direct and unmediated; it is not 'natural' . perceptions of the natural world are culturally constructed' .(p. 9) In choosing which authors, painters, and works to analyse, he excludes those which did not employ pictorial language to describe the Russian land or to frame it into a scene or view. Gleb Uspenskii's *Vlast' zemli* is the most obvious example of this principle of exclusion. The resulting body of works constitutes a broad and deep survey of Russian writers' and painters' Russian landscapes. Students of Russian art, literature, and philosophy will find much that is familiar here, from Karamzin's *Poor Liza* to Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer* and Isaak Levitan's *At the Pool*.

Ely acknowledges in his conclusion that he has also excluded some major works that offered alternative images of the Russian land and departed from the direction he has identified. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* falls within this number. The three competing images of the Russian land he identifies as absent from his study, but worthy of further examination are 'the breadbasket image of

the Russian land'; 'Russia as a land of ice, snow, and tundra'; and Russia as 'a landscape of peoples rather than nature, the image of Russia as a collection of interconnected populations.' (p. 227) These alternative images would make excellent topics for student work in Russian culture courses using Ely's monograph as a common reading. Instructors could also point to Ely's choices and the tight thesis they enable him to present as a model of focused historical writing. For graduate students, his study also serves as an excellent illustration of financial constraints on academic publishing, which necessitate that scholars limit the scope of their research and argument in order to fit into a limited number of pages. Ely's monograph demonstrates that wise choices and effective writing make substantial scholarship possible within fewer than 250 pages.

Ely situates his work at the intersection of comparable studies in European, Chinese and U.S. history and previous studies of national identity, Russian art, and representations of the Russian countryside in Russian history. For the comparative approach, he refers to such works as Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* (Harper Collins; London, 1995), Barbara Novak's *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (Thames and Hudson; London, 1980), and John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1972). Among many other historians of Russia, he draws connections with Hans Rogger's study of national consciousness, James Cracraft's study of Peter the Great's revolution in imagery, Dmitrii Likhachev's analysis of Russian gardens, Elizabeth Valkenier's history of Russian realist painting, and my work on representations of the Russian peasantry. He also identifies the recent work of Mikhail Epshtein, *Nature, the World, the Mystery of the Universe (Priroda, mir, tainik vselennoi* [Moscow, Vysshiaia Shkola, 1990]) as a parallel study of nature imagery in Russian poetry. Finally, he describes Georges Nivat's 'Le paysage russe en tant que mythe' (in *Rossija = Russia: studi e ricerche*, 5 (1988), 7-20) as a 'prototype' for his approach.(p. 20)

One of the signal strengths of this monograph is Ely's careful reconstruction of the pathways of European influence on Russian landscape imagery. He is careful to introduce the European literary and artistic figures who most extensively shaped Russian aesthetic standards, describing their work and identifying the publications and translations into Russian that enabled what one might term 'aesthetic transfer'. Thus one learns of the Swiss landscape painter and poet Solomon Gessner's introduction to Russian readers through translated articles in the *St. Petersburg Herald* from 1778-81. Ely has also tracked the appearance in translation of Rousseau, Laurence Sterne, James Macpherson (Ossian) and Thomas Gray in the thick journals of the early 1800s.

As Cracraft, Lindsay Hughes and others have argued, Peter the Great's revolution included culture. Ely agrees, explaining that Peter the Great's opening of Russia to the West precipitated the 'secular aestheticization of the natural world' and the expression of Arcadian, pastoral visions in Russian painting and writing.(pp. 31-2) Displacing earlier cartographic and Orthodox visions of the land, pastoral conventions borrowed from Western models dominated eighteenth-century Russian landscapes. In Lomonosov's poetry, the English gardens of St Petersburg and environs, and landscape paintings by such figures as Fedor Matveev and Semen Shchedrin, the idioms were neo-classical and dissociated from local reality. Ely includes instructions from a Russian painting manual of 1793 to illustrate this aesthetic: 'embellish it [the landscape] with cascades and pebbles around which playing water flows, and with mountains . presented so that they form a chain, stretching into the distance and disappearing from view.' (quoted on pp. 40-1)

This impulse to improve upon the landscape of central Russia reached its peak in the first half of the nineteenth century, when almost all Russian landscape painters not only travelled to Italy to learn how to paint, but also retained the central features of Italian landscapes when they turned to the depiction of the great Russian plain. What Italy did not offer, Switzerland and Germany did: dramatic mountains, swiftly changing riverine scenes and waterfalls. Painters, critics and patrons expected to find inspiring, transporting views in landscape paintings. They did not expect to find flat

fields - the dominant feature of central Russia. Yet even as Italy and Switzerland continued to dominate the imagination of landscape painters and their canvases, seedlings of an alternative Russian idiom were surfacing.

Ely describes Karamzin as the first major figure to challenge the Russian-cum-Europe landscape tradition in Russian artistic production. *Poor Liza* (1792), however beholden to European sentimentalism in its message and motifs, brought an identifiable Russian locale into the landscape setting, a real monastery outside Moscow and a real pond. Sentimental travelogues by Karamzin and others would also bring Russian settings into the public eye as worthy sources of emotional stimulation. And Gavril Derzhavin's poetry offered evocative descriptions of 'specific Russian locales', however magnified to recall 'the sublime and gloomy settings of Ossian'.(p. 57) Even with these stirrings at the end of the eighteenth century, Karamzin was still struggling to define a laudable Russian landscape in 1802 when he wrote in 'On Love of the Fatherland and National Pride', asserting that Russia lacked a pleasant climate and natural beauty, but that it was still worthy of affection.(p. 30)

Ely characterizes the history of the Russian landscape in the first three decades of the nineteenth century as 'The Search for a Picturesque Russia'. In poetry, Petr Viazemskii celebrated the Volga 'as a marker of nationality' and wrote an 'enraptured' description of rural Russia in winter (pp. 68-9), Nikolai Gnedich set his idyll 'The Fisherman' clearly on the outskirts of St Petersburg, and Pushkin challenged conventional landscape imagery in order to provoke his readers to think hard about what the vision of Russia's landscape should be. In painting, Aleksei Venetsianov produced his idyllic images of peasants at work, in a landscape where 'the sun is always shining, and the harvest abounds'.(p. 71) The tradition of domestic travel writing also took hold, with its primary vehicle, *Notes of the Fatherland*, becoming 'a sort of running picturesque guidebook to provincial Russia' under the editorship of Pavel Svinin.(p. 73) By the 1830s, a picturesque Russian landscape had emerged; it may have still found expression in the vocabulary of European landscape traditions, but distinctively Russian locations and natural features had been deemed as appealing as their European counterparts.

In Ely's analysis, Annenkov's 'Remarkable Decade' turns out to have been as remarkable in the generation of national landscape idioms as we know it to have been in other areas of intellectual history. Chapters 3 and 4 of *This Meager Nature* discuss written representations of the Russian landscape in competing positive (Chapter 3) and gloomy (Chapter 4) visions. Chapter 3 focuses first on the association between Russia's extended open spaces in the steppe and fields of Ukraine and Russia with freedom and expansiveness drawn by Nikolai Gogol, Mikhail Lermontov, and Aleksei Koltsov. The open fields that had earlier seemed so lacking in the drama and variety expected of landscapes of the European type now were understood not as tedious and depressing, but vast and boundless, indicators of Russia's future greatness. Ely pinpoints 1841 as a 'turning point in Russian landscape aesthetics' engendered by Gogol's *Dead Souls* and Lermontov's 'Native Land', both published in that year. Through their representation, 'The open countryside was coming to be considered one of Russia's important and characteristic national features'.(p. 118)

Sergei Aksakov's *Notes on Fishing* (1847) and Ivan Turgenev's *Notes of a Hunter* (1852) added vignettes of the pleasures of the countryside. Equally important in the elaboration of positive associations with the Russian landscape were the nostalgic rural idylls that Aksakov and Leo Tolstoy constructed in memoirs of their childhoods. With Ivan Goncharov's similar characterization of an idyllic rural childhood in *Obломov* (1858), a new tradition had emerged of seeing the land and nature on and around gentry estates as the vital link between the noble adult and his native Russia. Bezhin Meadow and Bagrovo entered the Russian literary canon and lodged in cultural memory as the sites of true Russia, the Russia of living meadows and open spaces. By 1848, Ivan Aksakov was able to assert, 'No nature can be as good as ours'.(p. 133)

But, whence, then 'this meager nature' and 'long-suffering native land'? Chapter 4, 'Outer Gloom and Inner Glory', provides the answer. With critical realism on the rise under the influence of Nikolai Chernyshevsky and the peasant question fast approaching emancipation as the only solution to the degradation of serf inhabitants of rural Russia, such idyllic depictions of vast, boundless Russia as the seat of special Russian expansiveness came under assault. Most influentially, Nikolai Nekrasov and Fedor Tiutchev produced what Ely terms 'landscapes of rural hardship'. Tiutchev's 'These Poor Villages' (1859) and Nekrasov's 'Who can be Happy and Free in Russia?' (1876) 'celebrate a special, even virtuous Russian misery.' (p. 135) For the worse the land, and the more miserly nature, the more remarkable the endurance of the Russian peasant, the quintessential Russian. The very triumph of Russia, the largest empire in the world, issued from that unique combination: a gloomy landscape and a prodigious people. Ely quotes the final lines of Nekrasov's 'Who can be Happy .?' to underscore this point:

You are wretched

You are abundant

You are downtrodden

You are all-powerful

Mother Russia. (p. 163)

Fascination with mud could not be far behind.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Ely turns to the painted expressions of a peculiarly Russian landscape. Chapter 5 focuses on such painters as Mikhail Klodt, Fedor Vasil'ev, Ivan Shishkin, and Aleksei Savrasov. Their preferred subject matter varied, but they shared nearly photographic realism, dark tones, and sharply detailed renderings of unremarkable elements in the landscape as their common style. Ely astutely stresses the degree to which these painters situate the viewer down low, taking in weeds, ruts in the road, mud puddles, overgrown forest paths, and bushes at eye-level. This hyper-naturalistic focus on insignificant details served a purpose; through it, these painters 'distinguished Russian *nature* from European *scenery* by the depth and extent of their wilderness.' (p. 188) This grounded perspective is 'close to the earth'. (p. 189) Ely is especially successful in making Shishkin's seemingly impenetrable forests thoroughly comprehensible as statements of Russia's 'simplicity and plainness'. (p. 188) Shishkin's wooded paths into the dark depths of the forests of the Russian north are the very antithesis of the prescribed chains of mountains disappearing from view in the painterly ideals of 1793. Savrasov's depiction of springtime in Russia, 'The Rooks Have Returned', forces the viewer to focus on black birds in barren branches and twigs scattered among the birds' tracks across dirty snow-melt. This painting has always left *me* with an expression of crushed peas at its utterly dreary contrast with my sunny associations with robins as the harbingers of an American springtime. Ely's explication of this visual text has made it understandable, if not any more appealing to my culturally-bound expectations of spring landscapes. For Russians, he explains, to get down and close to that puddle of dirty water under birch trunks was to reconnect with something essential in their native terrain.

In Chapter 6, Ely turns fully to the landscape tradition of the Itinerant painters, Isaak Levitan most famous among them. He asks the question of why landscape paintings should have become the preferred genre for patrons and the viewing public from the 1870s through the end of the century. The answer is rather simple: because the educated public was undergoing a progressive disillusionment with the peasants of rural Russia, in whom so much hope for a national ideal had

rested with emancipation and in populism. This predominantly rural and agricultural society needed to hold onto something positive from its countryside. Ely explains that, '[T]he question of the landscape's Russianness, the desire to celebrate native nature, remained at the top of the agenda for realist landscape painters.'(p. 201) Furthermore, landscape paintings effecting that celebration also had the power to create a Russian land without Russian peasants, who were disappearing from the canvas: 'Landscape, in short, can often serve to distance urban from rural, the viewer from the viewed, the elite from the mass.'(p. 217) Because of 'nostalgic identification', the landscape became 'at once deeply personal and inescapably national', and was 'to be sensed deeply rather than seen clearly, and loved instinctively rather than admired willingly.'(p. 222)

Having traced the course from European conventions as the primary wellspring of landscape aesthetics in the late eighteenth century through Sentimentalist, Romantic, and Realist influences, to the Russian landscape idioms of the late nineteenth century, Ely concludes that 'the humble native landscape had become a mark of national distinctiveness and a point of pride throughout Russian culture.'(p. 223) He has successfully made his case. Moreover, he has done so with such clear, unaffected, and unencumbered writing that his study is as accessible to undergraduate students as it is to specialists. This monograph should reach a wide audience of art historians, students of cultural history, and Russian specialists.

Because of the interactive nature of the review process in *Reviews in History*, I would like to challenge Professor Ely on his decision largely to exclude *Anna Karenina* from his study, and to ask him to comment on a connection to iconography I saw in his description of Russian landscape idioms in their mature form.

Professor Ely refers to *Anna Karenina* as one of the sources of the alternative landscape image of the Russian land as fertile breadbasket. Yet, *Anna Karenina* also offers further evidence for Ely's line of argument. It seems to me that a closer analysis of Levin's ecstatic moments in nature would have enabled him to develop further his excellent comments about immersion in nature as a step in the development of a purely Russian landscape. Referring to Tolstoy's *Childhood* chapter, 'The Hunt', he comments that 'Tolstoy's young protagonist seems fully immersed in nature, and the reader experiences his surroundings along with him as a sort of immediate impression.'(p. 127) Ely repeats 'immersion in nature via hunting' as an essential element in pastoral imagery in the works of Aksakov, Goncharov and Tolstoy.(p. 129) Tolstoy returned to this device in Levin's hunting experiences in *Anna Karenina*, and he did so in such a way as to bring the reader down into the bushes, grounding the reader much as Vasil'ev, Savrasov, and Shishkin grounded viewers of their 'close to the earth' paintings. In Part 6, Chapter XII, for example, Tolstoy places Levin and the reader directly in the landscape and includes details worthy of Klodt, Savrasov or Shishkin. One feels 'the dew on the tall, fragrant hemp', which 'wetted Levin's legs and his blouse above the waist.' One hears as 'A bee whizzed past Levin's ear like a bullet.'[\(1\)](#) Surely Tolstoy's devices meet the criterion of 'aestheticization' in the following passage from the same section:

The crescent moon, having lost all its brilliance, showed white like a cloud in the sky; there was no longer a single star to be seen. The marshy patches, silvery with dew earlier, now became golden. The rustiness turned to amber. The blue of the grass changed to yellowish green. Little marsh birds pattered by the brook, in bushes glistening with dew and casting long shadows. A hawk woke up and sat on a haystack, turning its head from side to side, looking with displeasure at the marsh. Jackdaws flew into the fields, and a barefoot boy was already driving the horses towards an old man, who had got up from under his caftan and was scratching himself. Smoke from the shooting, like milk, spread white over the green grass.[\(2\)](#)

Of course, it is to Ely's credit that reading his *This Meager Nature* encouraged me to revisit this and similar scenes in *Anna Karenina* to consider how they fit in the process he has presented.

Finally, I was struck by Ely's explanation quoted above that the late nineteenth-century landscapes were intended by their painters 'to be sensed deeply rather than seen clearly, and loved instinctively rather than admired willingly.' Ely continues, saying that Chekhov described this quality of the Russian landscape in its mature formulation as presenting 'an eternal, unearthly Something' in the rural setting.(p. 222) Was this not the function of traditional icons? Did they not also present a flat affect with the goal of drawing the viewer into meditation and reflection, to penetrate the eternal mysteries and to connect with the abstract Being in a calm, quiescent state? Did they not, as V. Lossky argued, 'impinge on our consciousness by means of the outer senses, presenting to us the same suprasensible reality in 'aesthetic'expressions.'?(3) Could not Ely have argued convincingly that the national landscape idiom that had taken hold by the end of the nineteenth century was not only a conscious rejection of the dramatic conventions of European landscape painting, but also a, perhaps subconscious, return to the principles of iconography as painters presented unpretentious, unprepossessing landscapes which could pull the viewer into a sense of deep communion with Russia's simple and plain nature? Could he not have argued that pausing long enough before a Shishkin forest to follow the trail deep into the towering trees of Rus might invoke in the viewer much the same response as standing before an icon of the Mother of God or Christ Himself and gazing long into their becalming, yet inviting eyes? I believe that he could have done so, tracing many of the painters' early practice of icon-painting. I look forward to his response to this suggestion, which, like my comments about *Anna Karenina*, reflects the degree to which Ely succeeded in engaging my thinking about aesthetics and national identity in nineteenth-century Russia.

Notes

1. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, transl. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Penguin Books; London and New York, 2002), p. 592.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ibid., pp. 594-5.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. L. Ouspensky and V. Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, transl. G. E. H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Boston Book and Art Shop; Boston, MA [printed Olten, Switzerland], 1952), p. 24.[Back to \(3\)](#)

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/337/>

Links:

[\[1\]](#)
<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/reviewed-item/this-meager-nature-landscape-and-national-identity-in-imperial-russia/>