

“The Lady of the Russian Woods” As the Estate Symbol of Russia. The Myth of the White Birch in the Literature of Great Britain (19th – 21st Centuries)³⁰

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ABSTRACT

In our article, we will examine how from the 19th till the beginning of the 21st century the British myth about the picturesque white birch – or, if we paraphrase the metaphor by S.T. Coleridge, “the Lady of the Russian woods”, was coming into being. Firstly, we will analyze the strong connection of this tree with the world of the Russian estate – including the lyrical images of birches growing near noble houses. We will especially consider its metaphorical richness. Thus, the birch can act as a “guardian” of the noble house, a part of the memories of a happy estate childhood. It may be a nostalgic image of the native country, so important for a wanderer in a foreign land, and finally, a symbol of “perishing Russia” and the upcoming “kingdom of the Kham”. Arisen in the travelogues of British travelers who had visited Russia in the 19th century (B. Taylor, J.D. Kohl, M.E. Pellew-Smith *et al.*), and associated mainly with the Russian countryside, suburbs and noble estates, it later penetrated the Western world and spread widely among its readers. We will discuss how thanks to these travel notes a new image of Russia has developed – the “white-and-green” country densely planted with silvery quivering birches; this image contributed to the formation of a positive myth about this country (along with the negative myth, which also was actively developing in the 19th – 21st centuries). Finally, we will pay special attention to how this myth is portrayed in modern British literature (scientific research, journalism, fiction *et al.*).

Keywords: birch-tree, picturesque, travel literature, Russian myth, estate.

Travelers who had visited Russia over the centuries played a major role in the mythologizing of Russia in the European, and, in particular, the British consciousness. British nobles – whether they were idle travelers, searchers for “picturesque” effects, or professional historians and geographers – “using a limited range of sources, created their own subjective, generalized image of Russia, which formed the basis for the perception of this country in the West” (Кучумов, 2021, с. 26). Such visitors tried to interpret the “Russian soul” “through descriptions of the vast expanses of the country, the golden domes of its churches, birch groves, harsh climate, bad roads, red shirts of peasants, unusual modes of transport *et al.*” (Кучумов, 2021, с. 26–27). Among the features listed here, the image of the Russian birch has emerged as especially significant as a symbol of Russia.

In recent years, the image of the birch-tree attracts more and more researchers from various fields, from agrobiologists and landscape design masters to linguists, phenomenologists, and

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literary critics. The clearest confirmation of this, for example, is the collective monograph *Birch* (2015), under the general editorship of Nikolai Kazansky and Vladimir Yarmishko. This comprehensive study contains articles presenting a variety of views on the eponymous tree – its reflection in the Indo-European and Slavic culture, its role in medicine since ancient times, in Russian landscape painting, *etc.* (see: Казанский, Ярмишко, 2015).

No less interest in the image of the Russian birch may be seen among modern English researchers. Peter Hayden devoted to this tree a separate chapter of his research *Russian Parks and Gardens* (2005). A detailed analysis of the connection between birch-tree and Russian funeral culture can be found in the monograph by Elizabeth Warner and Svetlana Adonievna *We Remember, We Love, We Grieve: Mortuary and Memorial Practice in Contemporary Russia* (2021). Western fiction-writers also make use of this image. In 2012, the Munich publishing house *Hanser* printed the debut novel by the German writer Olga Gryaznova *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt*; in 2014 its translation was published in England, under the title *All Russians Love Birch Trees*, in which the emphasis was shifted towards the imperative. According to Ursula Merz, a reviewer for *Zeit* magazine, one of the main virtues of this novel by Gryaznova is “an anti-folklore, devoid of tearful sentimentality voice” that “cannot be confused with any other” (Maerz, 2012, (n. p.)).

In the understanding of modern British literary critics, the image of a birch, mentioned in connection with estate literature, is perceived as something “superficial”, pertaining to a deliberately sentimental reading of Russian classics. Analyzing Brian Friel’s insipid translation of *Fathers and Sons* (2009), subtitled “After Turgenev”, Suzanne Clapp criticizes “the absurd British view of Turgenev’s Russia”:

This is the Russia of the theatrical mind, a place which is so pleasant to look at – its lightness dappled with shades as if touched by the branches of a metaphysical silver birch – that can make frustration and desperation look like graceful melancholy (quoted in: Andrew, Offord, Reid, 2008, p. 231).

Developing this idea, the reviewer concludes:

The birch trees and estates peopled by characters costumed in the subfuscian dress of nineteenth-century English aristocracy is an illusion fostered by the theatre. Its danger is that it turns to dismissible languor or ennui the general despair of the people who inhabit this locus, whether created by Turgenev, Chekhov or any nineteenth-century Russian writer (quoted in: Andrew, Offord, Reid, 2008, p. 231).

Finally, it is worth noting that in recent years new connotations associated with the Russian birch have emerged, along with a renewed awareness of older ones. In the context of the myth of “criminal Russia” (“the myth of Russia as mafia state”), it increasingly appears as a symbol of death, a mournful tree of the graveyards. In the book *Expelled* (2012), a tendentious tale of wandering in the “mafia state”, the journalist from *The Guardian* Luke Harding describes a cemetery near the village of Slyozy (where are buried local people killed by bandits in the 90s): “It is a picturesque spot, up a track to a birch forest and overlooking a frozen lake” (Harding, 2012, p. 151).

Finally, in 2021 the English idea of the Russian birch was summed up by another

British journalist (as well as culturologist and literary critic) Tom Jeffreys, the author of a “picturesque” report *The White Birch: A Russian Reflection*. “A unique collection of journeys that grapples with the riddle of Russianness”, it is a lengthy, figurative discourse (virtually a short poem in prose) about the “surprisingly complicated relationship [of the Russian mentality] with the birch tree”. As Jeffreys rightly has it, birch is not the only sacred tree in Russia: there are also “the oak of ‘Tsar’ – tree <...> associated with Perun, the most powerful of the Slavic gods”, and “the red-berried rowan, <...> a symbol of life associated with luck and happiness”, and “fir trees and maples” which “play [a] significant role” (Jeffreys, 2021, p. 10). And yet, it is exactly the image of the birch-tree which lies “at the heart of bifurcation of Russian culture”, embodying “certain ideas not only of Russianness, but also of femininity, purity and innocence” (Jeffreys, 2021, p. 10), and the amazing vitality of the Russian people. Therefore, the birch trees, which “recolonize neglected estates or abandoned villages across Russia”, provide, according to Jeffreys, a unique key to understanding “what makes Russia intractably unique” (Jeffreys, 2021, p. 12).

Mentioned in Russian literature since the 15th century (*Dvinskaya charter*), white birches have been for two centuries associated with the world of the Russian noble estate. Rooted as a in the sacred-nostalgic image of the native country – not least thanks to Pushkin’s “adhesive leaves” (“*Cold winds are still blowing...*”, 1828) and Lermontov’s “pair of whitening birches” (*Motherland*, 1841), – the image of the birch-tree is constantly found on the pages of Russian country-house novels, in memoirs and correspondence, in the descriptions of the ancient noble estates. In *Letters from the Village* (1872–1887), the Russian writer and agrochemist Alexander Engelhardt (1832–1893) mentions “birch groves, which were always planted near the estates of the landowners” (Энгельгардт, 1999, с. 101); cf. also: “Passing by a country road, if you see a birch grove in the distance, know that there is an estate <...>” (Энгельгардт, 1959, с. 240). Birch-trees are also associated with the interior of the noble house. In the book *Old Estates* (1910), Baron Nikolai Wrangel, brother of the famous White Guard general, writes: “At the word *estate*, we usually draw a white-columned house of Catherine’s or Alexander’s time, a shady garden, temples of ‘love’ and ‘friendship’, Karelian birch or mahogany furniture, etc.” (Врангель, 1910, p. 9).

The lyrical image of the birch is especially firmly rooted in estate poetry. Some authors were turning to it image throughout their creative career. For example, Alexei Zhemchuzhnikov (1821–1908) mentions the birch-tree in his early poem *A Night Date* (1856):

В саду бушует ветер; в аллеях, полных мглы,
Дубы качаются и мечутся березы...

The wind is raging in the garden; in the alleys full of darkness
The oaks sway and the birches rush about... (Жемчужников, 1963, с. 77)

And forty years later he returns to this image in the poetic sketch *The End of Summer* (from the cycle *The Small Forest near Estate*, 1896):

Лесок усадебный — красив.
Береза, клён уж пожелтели;
Но дуб могуч еще доселе,
Убор зеленый сохранив.

The forest near estate is beautiful.
 The birch, the maple have already turned yellow,
 But the oak is still strong,
 The green headdress has been preserved (Жемчужников, 1963, с. 213).

Russian estate literature abounds with the images of birches, which, inextricably linked with the childhood memories, influenced the formation of future writers and poets. For example, the favorite tree of Evgeniy Boratynsky was a white birch growing near the Muranovo estate (this "Nest of poets" in the Tambov province, which Fedor Tyutchev was also "fed") (see: Пальман, 1981, с. 100). One can also recall the birch trees of Count Nikolai Sheremetev, planted near the Ostankino estate and sung by his descendant, Sergei Sheremetev, the last representative of this family:

How good was the Ostankino house on the day of its decoration, June 30, 1868. <...> The lights were reflecting in the water and illuminated the church, and behind the pond stretched a dark wall of a birch grove with a clearing. The peaceful moonlit night poured its quiet light on the surroundings, and the golden dome of Ivan the Great shone clearly through the glade (quoted in: Уханова, Еремина, 2020, с. 22).

No less famous are the birches near Shakhmatovo estate, strongly associated with the biography of Alexander Blok; compare their description in the "picturesque" sketch by Maria Beketova:

On the border of our estate, where the Gulda road runs out into the field, several old birches grew <...>; three hundred paces from us the road forked and turned to the right to the manor, the land of which came close to the Shakhmatovo. <...> From here began "estate someone's and no one's", mentioned in [the poem] "Nemesis" [1910–1911] (Бекетова, 2013, с. 56).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the appearance of birch in estate texts "can be seen as following the literary tradition that was created by writers of the noble origin" (Скороходов, 2020, с. 201) – and at the same time as a sign of the emergence of a fundamentally new image of this tree. In the pre-revolutionary poetry of the 1910s, the birch acts as a symbol of the passing of life, a sad harbinger of imminent changes, as in the poem *They are flying, they are still on the road...* (*Они летят, они еще в дороге...*, 1916) by Anna Akhmatova:

Но скоро там, где жидкие березы
 Прильнувши к окнам, сухо шелестят, —
 Венцом червонным заплетутся розы...

But soon, where the stunted birches
 Clinging to the windows, rustle dryly,
 Roses will be braided with a red crown... (Ахматова, 1976, с. 89)

Birch may also appear in this period as a complicated symbol, a combination of "life", "death" and "rebirth"; see the development of these images in the poem *Spring* by Innokenty Annensky ("*Birch lived in the stunted thickets of the park...*", 1910). And we must not forget the "futuristic" birch trees growing near the phantasmagoric estates in the poetry of Velimir

Khlebnikov (“At night the manor – Genghis Khan! Give voice, resound, you blue birch trees” (1915) *et al.*) (For the full text of translation by G. Kern see: Khlebnikov, 1976, p. 69.)

An extremely broad interpretation of this image is found in the poetry of Sergey Yesenin (1895–1925) – the creator of one of the most famous and recognizable images of the birch tree in Russian literature. In the *Reflections on Yesenin* Sergey Koshechkin draws a mythopoetic image of the motherland as it was for the poet: “This, of course, is not Soviet Russia, it’s just Russia, a dear, quiet estate, a palisade with jasmine, birch and fir in a blue haze, a gate...” (Кочечкин, 1977, с. 197). In the latter words we can see an allusion from the poem *Anna Snegina* (1924):

Теперь я от вас далеко...
В России теперь апрель.
И синюю заволокой
Покрыта береза и ель.

Now I’m away from you...
It’s April in Russia now.
And with the blue haze
Are covered both birch and fir (Есенин, 1998, с. 186).

If before the Revolution, in Yesenin’s lyrics the birch often acts as a guardian of the village world (*The Birch-Tree*, 1913) or a slightly eroticized embodiment of Russian nature (“*Green Hairstyle...*”, 1918), then after the events of October, it is increasingly associated for him with loss and death; cf. in the poem “*I am sad to look at you...*” (1923):

Как кладбище, усеян сад
В берез изглоданные кости.

Like a cemetery, a garden is dotted
With the gnawed bones of the birches (Есенин, 1995, с. 196).

The nearly same view we meet in the poetry of his contemporaries, where the falling, cut-down birch was embodying the “murdered Russia” – see, for example, poems “*Birch trees are cut down for the gallows...*” (“*На виселицы срублены березы...*”, 1920) by Sasha Chyorny and *The Toller* (*Звонарь*, 1920s) by Sergey Bechteev:

Рушатся кровли церквей и палат,
Падают в парке березы...

The roofs of churches and estates are collapsing,
Birch trees are falling in the park... (quoted in: Шаргунов, 2001, с. 334)

Nonetheless, the image of the picturesque birch, associated with the world of the old estate, was preserved in the early Soviet years, at the dawn of museumification. Describing the road near the Ivanovskoye estate, Pyotr Pertsov notes: “Of the roads leading to estates near Moscow, this one is undoubtedly the most picturesque. The grove, from the very beginning looking like an estate park, passes into it further – where the birch begins to intersperse with

linden and other trees" (Перцов, 1925, с. 99). Therefore, the birch can also be interpreted as a link between the two worlds separated by the October Revolution.

In Soviet Russia, the image of a birch-tree associated with the estate world, as a rule, arises in the context of the past, the ruins (and not necessarily "noble"): let us recall, for example, the picturesque description of the destroyed station, "hidden" in a birch grove, in the novel *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) by Boris Pasternak. Emigrant and autobiographical literature, on the contrary, is characterized by the association of the birch with the world of childhood (cf. the numerous descriptions of Baturin birches in Bunin's *Life of Arseniev* (1927–1930, transl. – *The Well of Days*, 1933), which was also reflected in post-war literature (for example, in the lyrics by Anatoly Zhitulin). The "elegiac" image of the "cemetery birch" is also developed at this period – in the poems *Birch* (1956) by Alexander Tvardovsky, *Birches* (1957) by Nikolay Rubtsov, etc.

Finally, the strongest connection may be seen between the image of birch and nostalgia – whether a lightsome melancholy or an unbearable longing for the lost homeland. Dating back to the 19th century (found in the letters of Alexander Pushkin), this motif is firmly rooted in the poetry of Sergey Yesenin ("I am the last poet of the village..." (1923), *Anna Snegina* (1924) et al.) as well as in the works of emigrant writers. Images of "memorable" birch trees are found in abundance in Vladimir Nabokov's poetry: from idyllic pictures of the estate world ("*A Simple Song, Simple Sadness...*", 1919) to the image of a ghostly "green-painted house" standing somewhere "between birches and mountain ash" ("*Who will carry me...*", 1920) – and, finally, of a burned estate in the abandoned country,

где моя туманилась весна,
где березы грезили и дятел
по стволу постукивал

where my spring was misty,
where birch trees dreamed and a woodpecker
tapped on the trunk (Набоков, 2002, с. 121)

Having reached its climax, the yearning for the motherland is taking the form of a bitter rhetorical question: "Ask the wind at the ringing night: / do the birches rustle in Russia in the same way?" (*Звонкою ночью у ветра спроси: / так же ль березы шумят на Руси?*) (Набоков, 2002, с. 114). According to the American literary critic A. Popoff, Nabokov, having emigrated to the USA, bought a house in Vermont not without reason – after all, in this state the white birch trees grew quite densely, which reminded the poet of Russia (see: Popoff, 2012).

It is important to understand that for an Englishman, the image of a birch also contains a rich range of connotations – no less extensive than "cemetery" yews, primroses or willows by the "full-fed" river, glorified by Kenneth Grahame.

We should start with the fact that birches (lat.: *Betula*) are not at all outlandish trees for the British: they grow in abundance in the mountains of Scotland, in Wales, and are found in the English part of the island. William Gilpin wrote about this tree in his *Remarks on Forest Scenery...* (1791):

The birch may have several varieties, with which I am not acquainted. The most common species of it in England, are the black and the white. The former is a native of Canada; the latter of Britain. Of the white birch there is a very beautiful variety, sometimes called the lady birch, or the weeping birch (Gilpin, 1791, p. 66).

The first written mention of birch in English literature dates back to the 8th century: it is found in the *Épinal-Erfurt glossary*, one of the oldest monuments of Anglo-Saxon writing. And at the beginning of the 11th century, birch first appears in English poetry – namely, in *The Rune Poem*, an Anglo-Saxon arrangement from the Old Norse language, made by an unknown translator:

<i>Anglo-Saxon</i>	<i>Modern English</i>
Beorc byþ bleða leas, bereþ efne swa ðeah tanas butan tudder, biþ on telgum wlitig,	The birch bears no fruit; yet without seed it brings forth suckers, for it is generated from its leaves.
heah on helme hrysted fægere,	Splendid are its branches and gloriously adorned
geloden leafum, lyfte getenge	its lofty crown which reaches to the skies.

Table 1. Lines from the “Rune Poem”.

A strong significance of the birch may be traced in the pre-English, Celtic culture. For Celts, this tree was a symbol of growth, initiation, of spiritual and mundane knowledge. Beth (meaning “birch”) was the first letter of *Ogham* – the Celtic alphabet of trees. With the birch trees abounded Tir-na-Nog, the “Land of Eternal Youth” – the Celtic analogue of the Christian paradise, the country of eternal spring (which seemed especially marvelous in the land of endless cold and rain). The birch was also associated with Sidhe – afterlife, located inside the green hills, a sort of Irish Elysium, distinguished by indescribable beauty. The images of this place are found in *The Voyage of Bran* (8th century), as well as in the *The Book of Invasions* (*Lebor Gabála Éirenn*) – a mythical tale about the origin of the Irish people, compiled by an unknown chronicler approximately in the 11th century. In Celtic mythology, birch was associated with Brigid, the healing goddess (cf. the rich range of healing functions of birch in the Russian tradition – from the treatment of scabies and rheumatism to its miraculous help for cancer). The Celts (like the Slavs) believed that in birch trees lived dryads – the spirits of dead girls who came out of the tree and danced to the death of random passers-by. This mythical connection is reflected in the notes of British travelers of the 19th century; compare, for example, in the travelogue by B. Taylor: “<...> delicate, graceful, shivering tree — the scantily-clothed Dryad of the North” (Taylor, 1856, p. 323).

Since the Middle Ages, the birch tree penetrated into the life of the Anglo-Saxon village – mainly as a powerful amulet against the machinations of evil spirits. “In the Middle Ages, English peasants would place green birch above doorways alongside fennel, a reddish-purple wild flower called oprine, white lilies and St. John’s wort in order to ward away devilry and

witchcraft" (Jeffreys, 2021, p. 8). From the soft bark of birches, English peasant women wove cradles, believing that by doing so they were protecting the baby from mischievous fairies. The quivering birch "dancing all the day" in the gusts of the autumn wind, is repeatedly mentioned in the works of the "rural poet" John Clare. Being poor, Clare sometimes wrote his poems on birch bark, using instead of ink "a mix of bruised nut galls, green copper, and stone blue soaked in a pint and a half of rain-water" (Bate, 2004, p. 284).

One of the main "admirers" of the "picturesque" birch was, without a doubt, S.T. Coleridge. A poet with "a rare capacity for proverbial phrases" (Stafford, 2020: 1), he gave to his compatriots one of the most famous metaphors for this tree – "The Lady of the Woods" – which today is quoted without reference to a specific source in the dictionary articles and encyclopedic entries (see: Dietz, 2022, p. 44).

This famous image appears in Coleridge's poem *The Picture; or, The Lovers Resolution* (1802) – a psychological landscape sketch, a kind of ekphrasis from an unpainted canvas. Making his way to the house of his beloved girl "through weeds and thorn and matted underwood", the narrator, absorbed in his thoughts, enters a picturesque forest with a play of light and shadow and finds himself under the canopy of a birch:

I find myself
Beneath a weeping birch most beautiful
Of forest trees, the Lady of the Woods (Coleridge, 1969, p. 373).

Next to the place where he stands rises a "weedy rock", picturesquely hanging over the waterfall. From there, the young man sees the "picture" itself – "two crescent hills", "a circular vale", "brook and bridge", "grey stone cottages, half hid by rocks and fruit trees" (Coleridge, 1969, p. 373) – which together produce a vivid example of a rural "picturesque".

The image of a birch seems to be haunting Coleridge. A year later, in 1803, the poet left in his notebook the following sketch:

That sweet delicate birch with its tri-prong Root – and the other twissy little creature near it. O Christ, it maddens me that I am not a painter or that Painters are not I! The chapped Bark of the lower part of the Trunk, the bark like a Rhinoceros rolled in mud and exposed to the tropic Heat/ the second Fall to Sheep forced through water and vaulting over each other throwing off the pearly streams from their heave fleeces (cited in: Byatt, 1997, p. 247).

Subsequently, Coleridge refers to the image of the birch again, in the poem *The Knight's Tomb* (1817), but already out of touch with the estate and the picturesque. The poet describes the grave of the knight Arthur O'Kellin, buried on the hill of Helvellin, "under the twigs of a young birch tree" (Coleridge, 1969, p. 432). Oak – a tree that embodied Arthur, a symbol of life – turns out to be broken, "and the birch in its stead is grown" (Coleridge, 1969, p. 432). The birch here acts as a complex symbol of death, rebirth and new life (compare in Annensky's poem in the text above). We should not also forget, that oak and birch were constantly opposed by the theorists of the "picturesque" – for example, by Uvedale Price (see: Clarke, Penny, 1982, p. 85).

As we can see, the image of the birch was already rooted in English literature and had

quite clear connotations. However, it is important not to forget that neither Coleridge nor his compatriots have ever been to Russia: they all celebrated the English or Scottish varieties of this tree. All the more striking is the impression that birch trees made on the British who visited Russia – the travelers looking for “picturesque” and the landscape designers.

According to Peter Hayden, the first birch groves could be seen in Russian estate parks at the beginning of the 17th century (see: Hayden, 2005, p. 130); and starting from the end of the 18th century, the era of the English park “boom” in Russia, the birch tree fully comes into its own. With this tree are associated many types of “Russian” landscape parks: the Birch Gate and the Birch House in Gatchina, the ensemble of Petergof (the English Park and the Lower Garden), the “birch-saddle” in Pushkin’s Trigorskoe, *etc.*

English architects, designers of the estate parks in Russia, being surprised by the beauty of Russian birches, were eager to use this tree in their landscape projects. One of the earliest examples of this fashion is the English park near Petergof, laid out by the Scottish master James Meders (works began in May 1779): by the order of the gardener, in one part of the park were planted birch groves, which hid a pavilion built in the form of a Greek pantheon. Another landscape park of this kind is the White Birch (*Белая Береза*) in Tsarskoye Selo (1792); garden master A. Gonzago (although not an Englishman, but an Italian, who worked in the style of “gardenesque”) created a composition, in which clumps of trees alternate with spacious meadows, called the “Russian landscape park”. We should not also forget the “fragile” birch, supporting the “falling” stone on the edge of the cliff in Mon Repos – this embodiment of a combination of feminine fragility and stability.

Great popularity at the end of the 18th century received the so-called “birch houses”. These structures – a “pastoral caprice”, one of the varieties of *trompe-l’oeil* – first appeared in the 1780s, occurring both in regular (famous “Cabin” in the park of Rambouillet) and in landscape gardens. They took a form of a wooden house, which from afar had the “look of stacked firewood”, but in reality turned out to be “a well-cleaned hall with sofas, mirrors, oil-paintings, *etc.*” (Георги, 1996, с. 508). Such, for example, is the birch house by Giacomo Quarenghi *a la* “peasant’s hut” (built in 1780) or the birch house in Gatchina (architect Henry Viollier, mid-1780s) and named after him named Birch Gate. However, not all visitors liked this architectural solution; The Gatchina birch house turned out to be so unsightly (from a distance it looked like a woodpile) that in the 1790s it was hidden behind a “screen” – a stone portal erected under the direction of Vincenzo Brenna.

Colorful memories of the Russian birches were remained with the English travelers of the 19th century. These trees, with their bright green foliage and white trunks, formed for them the colors of the picturesque landscape stretching along the edges of Russian roads. In the *Travels in Greece and Russia* (1856) Bayard Taylor gives a picture of the typical Russian countryside: “<...>from every village rose a picturesque church, white as snow, and crowned with as many bright green domes and spires as its proportions would allow” (Taylor, 1856, p. 320). Taylor describes these churches “gay, graceful structures, towering at intervals above the birchen groves, and sparkling in the sunshine, gave a peculiar charm to the otherwise monotonous landscape” (Taylor, 1856, p. 320). Another traveler, Sir Donald MacKenzie Wallace, who had an undisguised dislike for Russia, also mentions “the big church, with its five pear-shaped cupolas rising out of the bright green roof and its ugly belfry in the

Renaissance style". This belfry, from the traveler's point of view, is "not by any means beautiful", but "when seen from a little distance, especially in the soft evening twilight, the whole might have been made the subject of a very pleasing picture" (MacKenzie Wallace, 1880, p. 36).

A completely different impression was made on the travelers by the birch trees "growing in the wild". B. Taylor enthusiastically writes: "The country may be described in a few words – woods of pine and birch, fields of rye, rape seed and turnips, broad, swampy pastures, and scattering one-story villages, with thatched roofs and white-washed walls" (Taylor, 1856, p. 323). He also mentions the landscape stretching along the edges of the "superb" Russian road: "<...> the silvery birchen forests, and the long swells and slopes of grain" (Taylor, 1856, p. 323).

Birch trees in the landscape parks, relatively unfamiliar to the English (see earlier in the text of the chapter), also tended to be admired. Describing his impressions of Petrovsky Park, B. Taylor recalls "the shade from birch and linden groves", creating a "spectacle exceedingly animated and cheerful" (Taylor, 1856, p. 366). He experiences no less delight at the sight of a birch grove in Tsarskoe Selo: "Entering the park from the western side, we found ourselves in the midst of gently undulating fields, dotted with groves of fir, ash, and birch – an English landscape, were the green a little more dark and juicy" (Taylor, 1856, p. 397). A little further, he writes about Pavlovsk Park:

Its deep, winding dells, threaded by natural streams; its opulent woods of ash, birch, and elm; its sequestered walks, branching away into neglected forest solitudes, and its open, sunny lawns, sweet with the breath of the half-raked hay, speak of genial culture rather than art (Taylor, 1856, p. 402).

Not all travelers, however, shared Taylor's enthusiasm; many of them noted the inept (in their view) "use" of birches in arranging a picturesque park. Thus, the British ethnographer Richard Lester Venables in his book *Domestic Scenes in Russia* (1833) describes his impressions of a trip to the Krasnoe Selo:

The ground slopes down from the house to a large and handsome piece of water, and is laid out in the style of an English garden, with flower beds, trees, shrubs and grass; and at the further extremity is a grove of handsome birch-trees, where the ground is intended to imitate a park. The whole, including the water, is very pretty, but the space is too expensive to be kept in perfect order as dress ground. At the same time, sheep and cattle are never admitted to graze on an English lawn, so that the turf is coarse and bad (Venables, 1856, pp. 22–23).

Reading this description, it is difficult not to remember the image from the *Dead Souls* (1842): Manilov's house "alone on the height" (*на юру*) with its clumsily arranged garden – the slope of the hill, "covered with short turf", a spacious lawn on which "with five or six birch-trees rearing their fine-leaved, slender crests", and a "pond, covered with green scum". This scenery, as Gogol has it, is of "no novelty in the English gardens belonging to the Russian landed gentry" (Gogol, 1915, p. 23). (It should be mentioned, however, that this technique – placing a small bunch of birches to decorate a large space – was skillfully used by eminent park masters; compare, for example, the famous "Circle of White Birches", planted

in Pavlovsk according to the project of P. Gonzago.)

The birch also appears in the descriptions of the picturesque suburbs of the Russian capitals. John Reynell Morell mentions at the entrances to St. Petersburg “long valleys shaded by birch and umbrageous willow-trees, with scattered dwellings” (Morell, 1854, p. 145). Mary Ann Pellew-Smith, author of the *Six Years Travels in Russia* (1859), describes the Yemelyanovsky road, which runs in the area of Ekateringof (which she calls the “Russian Vauxhall” – after the “amusing” gardens arranged in London in reign of Charles II):

The road hither from the city runs through a picturesque locale fringed with the drooping foliage of the elegant lady-birch, mingled with those of young firs, elms, lindens, *etc.*, and is altogether one of the prettiest places in the immediate neighbourhood of St. Petersburg (Pellew-Smith, 1859, p. 282).

Finally, many travelers wrote about “domesticated” Russian birch trees planted on the territory of cities – especially in St. Petersburg, which seemed to them, in other respects, “extremely unpicturesque”. In the travel-book *Russia and Russians in 1842*, Johann Georg Kohl writes about St. Petersburg, contrasting it with picturesque, ivy-covered and vine-covered Italy:

The buildings are all smooth and clean, and not a blade of grass grows on any roof in the city. The only exception to be found is a small birch bush which rises on one of the turrets of the Semeonoff Bridge, and which, when green in summer, forms a very picturesque ornament to the cupola (Kohl, 1843, p. 177).

The traveler is so delighted with this birch that he invites Petersburgers to choose it as a “as a suitable symbol of the city” (Kohl, 1843, p. 177).

Discovered by Russian Itinerant artists (Isaak Levitan, Ivan Shishkin, Arkhip Kuindzhi), starting from the 1880s, the “picturesque” birch was strongly associated not only in Russian, but also in English consciousness with their canvases. Their pictures (such as *Birch Grove* (1889) by I. Levitan, *Under Birch-Trees* (1904) by I. Grabar’ *et al.*) inevitably came to the mind when someone tried to imagine the image of the Russian province. Thus, the English writer Ian Fraser (born 1951) in his essay *Komar and Melamid* (dedicated to the activities of Soviet artists, the founders of the “Sots Art”, or “Soviet Pop Art” direction), discussing the history of Russian landscape painting (in particular, the canvases of I.I. Levitan), recalls “the famous picturesque Russian countryside with churches and birch trees” (Fraser, 2003, p. 179).

Conclusion

As we can see, the image of the Russian birch is firmly rooted in British culture. Arisen in the 19th century, in the travel-books, it was initially characterized mainly by positive connotations (association with Russian churches, with freedom and life, *etc.*). Nowadays, this symbol is still developing, but mostly in the negative key (associating with “Criminal Russia”, cemeteries, *etc.*). Precisely thus, it is all the more important not to forget the warmth with which English travelers spoke about the “beauty of Russian forests” – and thanks to

which on English soil, like a green and delicate sprout, germinated the myth of the white Russian birch.

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