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IMAGES OF RUINED MEMORY. DISPUTE BETWEEN MEDIEVAL AND MODERN HISTORY IN RUSSIAN ICONOLOGY OF RUINS

Architectural ruins are among the most suitable loci of memory: they both consolidate and dramatically sharpen and traumatise memory. True, in his *Institutio Oratorio* Quintilian recommends not a ruined but a whole, I quote, “spacious building with many rooms” and “well-lit places arranged in strict order” as the ideal mnemonic topos. On the other side, Cicero (well before Quintilian) had mentioned precisely ruins as the ideal mnemotopos. Explaining why the poet Simonides of Ceos is usually regarded the inventor of “the art of memory”, Cicero tells the following story: Simonides was dining at the house of a wealthy nobleman named Scopas of Thessaly when the ceiling of the banquet hall caved in. Simonides survived due to a mysterious and obviously miraculous occurrence (when he was chanting a lyric poem which he had composed in honour of his host and in which he also referred to Castor and Pollux, the sons of Zeus and Leda, he was told that two young men had requested him to come out, and he went out but did not see anybody); then Simonides helped to identify the crushed corpses for separate internment because he remembered the places which each of the guests had occupied at the table. Both examples are from the epoch-making book *The Art of Memory* by Francis Yates.

Anyhow, in medieval theology order usually prevails over chaos and, consequently, architecture over anti-architecture (a conventional name for ruins). According to Thomas Aquinas, *integritas sive perfectio* (note the synonymy!) is one of the paramount properties defining the essence of the beautiful. And whatever is “ruined (or diminuta) is ugly”. Indeed, the so-called fractured, for some reason fatally injured structures, and especially church buildings were not preserved in the Middle Ages, but dismantled

at the first opportunity and rebuilt anew being, inasmuch as the original structures were concerned, a locus of oblivion rather than a locus of memories. Usually of incontestable value were not the buildings themselves but the holy relics kept in them, which were then taken over to a new church. It was those relics that accounted for the main contents of what they called the “throne” in Rus. The decrepit walls and ceilings remaining after the throne had been withdrawn were destroyed, and then a commemorative cross was sometimes (though far from always) erected at the site of the church. This destruction was not even marked by some special prayer, while many other seemingly far less significant affairs were regulated through prayer. It is noteworthy that when Emperor Justinian II of Byzantium decided (at the turn of the 7th century) to extend his palace and pull down the Church of the Theotokos to this end, he asked Patriarch Kallinik to give a blessing to that destruction. The patriarch’s answer was: “We have prayers for the building of churches, but no prayers for their destruction”.

Medieval art, including Russian art, too, preferred not to depict ruins at all or made do with all sorts of palliatives. They became an important and indispensable proscenium only as the gate of hell that Jesus Christ destroyed demonstratively, iconically during his Descent to Hell. As for the scenes of the Apocalypse, buildings in them could remain intact even in the most calamitous situations, and only tongues of flame indicated that they were doomed. Apocalyptic destruction could also be represented as being turned upside down. And finally, a building could be represented twice, intact and as ruins, the latter looking utterly shapeless and viewless. For instance, the Dormition Cathedral in Kolomna, restored in the 14th century, is shown in a miniature of the 2nd volume of the 16th-century Illuminated Chronicle Codex, the so-called Ostermann Codex (in the composition Russian Army Goes to Meet Mamai Khan), precisely two times – after the catastrophe which befell it and in the restored state, with the ruins looking like a heap of hewn stones piled up about the intact building. At times destruction was in general ignored: thus, illuminations in the manuscript *Book on the Election of the Great Sovereign Mikhail Feodorovich to the Highest Throne of the Russian Tsardom* (1673) represent the Kremlin in fair splendour as it was in the 1670s, but not at the time of the 1613 election shortly after having been devastated by the Poles. In fact, the Middle Ages were ashamed of ruins, as much as they were ashamed of death and avoided inordinately detailed pictures of decomposing flesh.

In the 15th–18th centuries the situation in Western Europe changed dramatically, and the poetics of ruins (to quote Diderot) moved to the forefront, virtually to the proscenium (taking into account their greater role in stage design). The dialogue of the epochs preponderating in the iconology of antique ruins chronologically went hand in hand with diacrisis – the discord between the times – as far as medieval, especially church ruins were concerned. After waves of reformatory iconoclasm that swept over the regions that had adopted Protestantism and especially after the devastating English “dissolution” (abolition of the monasteries), the latter were viewed

as remains of the barbarian “dark ages”. Following historical logic, nothing whatsoever would have remained of them (as nearly nothing has remained of English medieval icon painting or “painting on panels”) if it were not for aesthetic logic. Ruins rose in the eyes of the enlightened connoisseurs as wonderful examples of that category of the painterly which was fundamental both for the Enlightenment and for Romanticism. True, the situation was slightly different in the Catholic countries and devoid of such iconoclastic tenor (that is why the grandiose ruins of the Galgano Abbey in Tuscany, which was not ruined but fell into disrepair and which became famous in the 20th century thanks to Tarkovsky’s *Nostalgia*, look uniquely monumental). The more so everything was different in Russia, with its exceptionally lively Middle Ages and after the explicitly anti-medieval Petrine reforms.

As it was in the Middle Ages, the post-Petrine Russia, too, sought to get rid as far as possible of decrepit churches, never even thinking of enjoying the sight of those remains. “Nowhere else do all signs of recent settlement disappear as fast as they do with us,” the local lore historian Shepping wrote in the late 19th century. “Shortly nothing remains of not only peasant huts, but also of broken down stone churches and landlord chambers, apart from small bricks and holes that become overgrown with willows and weeds.” He goes on to cite the aforementioned custom to mark the “place of the throne” with “wooden crosses”. A graphic example is the Church of the Epiphany in the Ostrozh Castle. At first the idea was, I quote, “to support”, “if possible, the remaining ruins... and to design a new building on the adjacent site”, but then they still decided “to dismantle the ruins... altogether and build a new church on (their) solid foundation” in the same style (the construction project was finished in 1883).

Characteristically, the popular representation of the Kiev-based Church of the Tithes reproduced many times in the form of an overgrown wreckage turned out to be just a picturesque fabrication to adorn album pages. This first Russian stone church ruined in the 13th century during the invasion of the Batu Khan army was rebuilt anew under Metropolitan Peter Mohyla and then drastically reconstructed, in fact built anew, in 1828–42. It was thought for a long time that the drawing published in the art book *A Gallery of Kiev Landmark Sights and Antiquities* indeed pictured, to go by the caption, “A fragment of the southwest wall of the Church of the Tithes”. The ruins (in the drawing) have a romantic aura: crosses askew, tombstones, ivy, moss, thickets..., but in fact the church, with fragments of an earlier building inlaid in its wall as architectural relics, could never have been so neglected; what was more, the Gothic windows look utterly out of place. So, as has been established now, it was nothing but an art book fantasy.

Overall, the ruin iconography developed in Russia belatedly, lagging behind the early modern history by over three centuries, until Peter the Great introduced it in Russia by decree. Geopolitical circumstances, too, were among the reasons: after all, Russia did not have any antique ruins of her own (until she annexed the Crimea). Hence the paramount actual stimulus

to depict them was lacking as well. True, students had to draw ruins as a standard motif as early as the mid-18th century, however, they were not ruins from classical antiquity or the medieval period but foreign “castle ruins” copied from western engravings. Nature drawings were also made initially exclusively with Roman and, later, Crimean ruins, so *A View of Antiques in Staraya Ladoga* by Mikhail Ivanov (1745) seems a rare exception. However, in this case stage set design, including as exemplified by Gonzago, who had brought the experience of Piranesi to Russia, was a significant influence. It was thanks to Gonzago that “ruins overgrown with wild vegetation” (a remark for the opera *Ilya the Hero* by Catarino Cavos, for which he designed the stage sets), happily blended with the Russian scene and no longer looked like foreign exotics. On the whole, however, for a long time Russian churches could be represented in landscapes only in an official or at least neutral way.

In this respect garden and park design significantly outpaced painting and drawing because the western example in this field produced a far more powerful and inspiring impression. Let us focus precisely on temple ruins, the sphere in which the aestheticising process was especially innovative: after all, in this case native things were transformed whereas in antique ruins they just borrowed somebody else’s. When laying a palace park at Bogoroditskoye in the 1780s, Andrei Bolotov created, according to him, “an image of some enormous crumbling marble house or temple” at the foot of the hill, or (another quote) “a portion of an old monastery with little towers and a gate” that “imparted remarkable beauty to this place”; that “image” looked quite real when seen from the Moscow-Tula tract, which ran along the other bank of the park pond. As a later example I can cite the chapel ruins built at Tsarskoye Selo in the 1830s. In both cases there was a certain romantic vagueness about anti-architecture that received a Gothic aura (in Tsarskoye Selo) because the chapel there was decorated with stained glass. Real church ruins, placed à la English style in the park view, were still unthinkable in Russia: medieval inertia was felt for a long time. Even real secular ruins were rarely transformed into a garden caprice. The so-called Romantic Ruins on the Kachanovka Estate in the Chernigov area were of this type. The surviving part of a former Polish castle was used as park décor: the dark corridors and dungeon-like premises with bars in the windows and iron rings in the walls exuded a gloomy charm à la Piranesi and, on the other hand, served as a visual reminder of the vicissitude of historical Fortune that betrayed the Poles, that is, the former owners of those lands. If you wish, the Kachanovka ruins could pass for antique ruins: it was as such that Konstantin Makovsky, who frequently stayed at the estate as a guest, pictured them in his *Spring Bacchanale*.

Let us turn to old writings that always serve as the best iconological commentary and focus on precisely medieval architectural remains. In Karamzin the poetics of ruins goes hand in hand with not only melancholic musing, but also ideological alienation. The old Benedictine monastery in Erfurt is seen by him quite in the spirit of a Gothic novel as, I quote,

“a grim abode of fanaticism” perceived by imagination as “a monster in all its infamy” (I trembled and cold horror spread through my sinews). The ruins of the Tainitsky Palace are likewise pictured by him as grimly Gothic: “Mrs Ratcliff could have written a terrible novel about it” so that “the fearful thunder and dazzling lightning” (which happened when Karamzin visited the place) proved quite appropriate in this “wilderness”. True, Karamzin balances old Moscow landscapes out with patriotic romanticism: for example, the “golden-domed Danilov Monastery” and other “golden domes” look resplendent in *Poor Liza*. However, the same story has “the Gothic towers of the Simonov Monastery lurking”, and “a muffled moan of the times engulfed in the abyss of the past” can be heard from there (a moan that makes the author’s heart “startle and tremble”, when “sad pictures of local monastic life arise in imagination). Thus, in accordance with the Gothic “mystery novel” principle, the old building, which is outwardly quite intact and far from reduced to dust, was mentally ruined. True, it is worth noting that *Poor Liza* was written when the Simonov Monastery, abolished in 1771 (yet back in operation from 1795), could indeed look gloomy because in the early years after its closure it accommodated plague quarantine facilities.

The very notion of the aged in fact increasingly became synonymous with the word “ruins”, irrespective of the extent to which that aged thing had survived. That fact implied that it could only be revived through capital restructuring. That was precisely what Vyazemsky meant in his poem *Byl’* (True Story), written to defend Karamzin from his conservative opponents. In the poem “a young artist” raised a new beautiful palace at the site of “an old church in Gothic style” (the “abode of owls, gloom and silence), in fact, of its ruins, and the owls scatter, “cockily crying fie” upon the architect.

The poet Fyodor Glinka pointed out that romanticist poetry “loves to roam through the ruins of knights’ castles, deserted churches and abolished communities of monks”. In his feature about Moscow he enthusiastically recalls “moss-grown churches” with their “sacred gloom”. Even when eulogizing the capital in his famous poem *Moscow* (1840), triumphantly panoramic in spirit, he does not overlook signs of picturesque decay (“Trees are growing on your ancient churches...”). An enthusiastic *planto-mane*, he dwells especially on garden ruins that graphically demonstrated how “young roots of new kingdoms are born anew” from what has been crushed by the “thunder-god of fate”.

The poetry of desolation, or “Russian Gothic” of sorts, attains utmost drama in Gogol’s *Viy*. The funeral service over the dead maiden is held in “the wooden church, black with age and overgrown with green lichen” (Gogol used the word “decorated” with green lichen, which just happened to transform spontaneous chaos into deliberate décor!), the church which adjoined the overgrown garden and as a result of the infernal invasion had a huge mass of monstrous creatures stuck in the door and windows, surrounded impassably by “the woods, roots, weeds” and “wild thorn”. In other texts, not so grotesquely fairytale but cheerfully patriotic or local lore

descriptions, desolation was often largely exaggerated in obvious contrast with historical reality.

For instance, in a letter to his brother N.A. Bestuzhev raves about Veliky Novgorod and rather inordinately compares it with the dead Palmira. And Count Sollogub, speaking about the Monastery of the Caves of Nizhny Novgorod in *The Tarantass*, tells his story in a fairly melancholy – historically not quite adequate – key (“church stairs have already become overgrown with grass”, “everything was wild and gloomy there”, “a strange carcass of a perished aged thing”, “semi-crumbled structures”...), asserting in passing that one could “create the rules of folk architecture and trace its sources” only “by studying and dismantling the remaining monuments”. Thus, the decline, albeit “wild” and “gloomy”, becomes useful and in its own way even offers guidance, taking the aged structure to pieces and thus facilitating its study. However, the “perished aged thing” is such only in the writer’s imagination because the Monastery of the Caves was at that time neither unimportant nor abolished, but continued to exist as a living abode revered by pilgrims. It was only the burnt-out wooden Church of the Intercession and the monastery fence partially damaged by a landslip that lay in ruins there. Judgements of this type inevitably bore witness to the antagonism between the clergy and the secular world, which found expression in the response of Archimandrite Rafail, superior of the St Cyril’s Monastery of Beloozero, to the historian Pogodin’s plea that old paintings at the monastery be preserved: “You historians judge your own way and the devout that of their own, you love decrepitude while the latter attribute it to the priors’ negligence”.

There emerged an insoluble dilemma, in which precisely “decrepitude” became a measure of charm perfectly in tune with the new aesthetic romanticism but ill-matching the old religious disposition. Baratynsky offered an excellent formula for this insolubility (“Prejudice! It is a scrap / of former truth. The church has crumbled, / but its offspring has failed to read the language of its ruins...”). The poet attached special importance to his verse: he translated it in prose into French, thus turning meditation on “esprit de ruines” into a philosophical mini-essay.

The Russian pictorial art of the romanticist trend turned to the motifs of national church relics far less frequently and downright evaded its anti-architecture in the form of remains. Only the ruins of antiquity had long been considered “good” ruins. As far as I know, there appeared no pictorial parallels even to Karamzin’s melancholy landscapes, to say nothing of Viy. In this respect the Wanderers (Bogolyubov, Polenov et al.) stuck to the well-established Graeco-Roman, Egyptian and Middle Eastern motifs, avoiding any plastic address of domestic relics even in battle scenes. Even real-life flooding (as in Savrasov’s *Volga Flood outside Yaroslavl*) seemed not overly disastrous since the relics, although partially inundated and partially on fire, continued to proudly dominate the dissenting elements. Yaroshenko’s *Forgotten Church* (late 19th century) with sheep grazing inside an abandoned church can be regarded as a rare exception. A more detailed version of the

title, “An Early Christian Church on the Zelenchuk River”, reveals that the artist drew a church in the North Caucasus that formed part of the Nizhny Arkhyz complex of the earliest Christian churches on Russian territory from nature. Yaroshenko’s major project in which such an interior scene might have been used was the painting *Judas Tempted by the Pharisees*, allegorically hinting at the “betrayal” (according to Yaroshenko) of a number of leading Wanderers who joined the Academy of Arts.

The iconography of the 1812 Moscow fire offers a significant addition to this theme, the same as the poetics of ruins in Style Moderne and the avant-garde, where the process of destruction-construction, a sort of cata-construction, formed part of not only the story, but the very structure of the image. However, time does not permit an appraisal of all this.