



Andrei Moroz. A Review of **Aleksandra Pletneva**, *Lubochnaya Bibliya: Yazyk i tekst* [The Woodcut Bible: Language and Text]. Moscow: Yazyki slavyanskoi kultury, 2013, 392 pp.

### The Language of the Russian Popular Print

The combined print runs of woodcut (*lubok*) editions from the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (the period for which it is possible to count them) comprise many thousands of copies. There is no information for earlier times, but one can judge the popularity of woodcut pictures from the regular references to them in ‘high’ literature either as a notable, expressive and inalienable attribute of peasant and lower middle class life, or as the target of sneers and jibes. Antiokh Kantemir, in his second Epistle ‘To My Verses’, apostrophises his unpublished compositions, stressing that it is better for them to lie in his drawer than to be treated as rubbish with woodcut stories:

*And when, all stained with wax, your time is past,  
Beneath the dust, as food for moths, forgot  
And all rolled up together, left to rot  
With Bevis or with Ruff, then at the last  
(If my prophetic vision’s not too shallow)  
Your fate will be to wrap up caviare, or tallow*  
[Kantemir 1956: 217].

**Andrei Moroz**  
Russian State University  
for the Humanities,  
Moscow, Russia  
abmoroz@yandex.ru

The poet explains in a note: ‘Two most contemptible manuscript stories about Bova Korolevich<sup>1</sup> and Ruff the Fish, which are usually sold on the Spasskii Bridge together with other

<sup>1</sup> The Russian version of *Bevis of Hampton*, a romance adaptation that was extremely popular in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Russia, while (like other chapbook tales) exciting a good deal of disdain among the highly educated. [Eds.].

compositions which are just as bad' [Kantemir 1956: 220]; the Spasskii Bridge was where *lubki* were sold.

One of its earliest forms — woodcut pictures on biblical themes — is of particular interest for research because of the peculiarities of its circulation and because it reflects the history and specific features of so-called 'popular religion'. The woodcut Bible allows us both to trace the ways in which religious notions were formed, and the correlation between different sources of religious knowledge, and the reception and use of Church Slavonic in 'low' culture.

Aleksandra Pletneva's book is in reality an attempt to look at this phenomenon from a completely new viewpoint: not that of an art historian, but that of a linguist and textual critic. That is, the research focuses not on the image so much as the text. However, this does not at all mean that the visual aspect remains beyond the scope of the work. On the contrary, Pletneva makes active use of the visual component to analyse and comment upon the verbal.

Formally, the edition consists of the publication of texts of biblical *lubki*, provided with an extensive reference and critical apparatus, including a large (120 page) 'Introduction to the topic'. It contains the following chapters: 'General Problems of Woodcut Literature', 'The Biblical *Lubok* and its History', '"Old" and "New" Perceptions of Biblical Subjects', 'Church Slavonic Biblical *Lubki*', 'The Russian Biblical *Lubok*', '*Lubki* Based on Literary Poetic Texts' and 'The Biblical *Lubok* and the Popular Oral Tradition'. These headings indicate the most substantial and least well studied problems of woodcut literature. Thus, for example, the question of the language of the *lubok* has from time to time been mentioned in the works of art historians, who find it so 'incorrect' that they declare it simply illiterate and incomprehensible to anyone but the person who wrote it [Sokolov 1999: 105]. Not only that, but, according to the same author, the text on a woodcut is nothing more than a sign that the picture belongs to higher culture, that is, it was not meant to be read, and hardly could have been [Sokolov 1995: 55]. A. I. Reitblat holds a similar theory, though he is more delicate and restrained in expressing it: 'The fact that the text was not entirely clear was a sign of its high merits, wisdom and profundity' [Lubochnaya kniga 1990: 387]. Pletneva has convincingly demonstrated that the 'incorrectness' and apparent incomprehensibility of the language of woodcut pictures cannot be dismissed as indicating that the writers were illiterate and their customers undemanding. Her explanation is more complex and in many ways explains the specific features of the woodcut text, namely that the teaching of reading among the peasants and lower middle classes retained its pre-Petrine features. The first books were the Church Slavonic primer and the Horologion. Moreover, people were taught to read rather than to write. That is,

the complex orthographical rules which had been completely codified in the seventeenth century (the use of alternative letters, the placing of diacritics, the abbreviations and the use of superscript letters, etc.) were not explained. What mattered was to be able to read the text, not to write it. Therefore for those classes who were the main customers for woodcut literature, writing was in Church Slavonic, and Russian was a spoken language. Hence the orientation towards models from old books, and traditionally manuscript, not printed books (and indeed, engravings were cut, and Old Believer *lubki* were drawn, by hand). As for the Church Slavonic manuscript tradition, it typically contains such ‘irregularities’ of language as leaving no space after a preposition, the lack or inconsistent use of capital letters and punctuation, confusion of alternative letters, and so on — everything that seems ‘incorrect’ in the *lubok* (pp. 40–6). An insufficient command of written Church Slavonic, a lack of experience in composing texts in it, and the active use of books (including manuscripts) as models led to the formation of a particular woodcut ‘style’ and system of writing, to which the author of the book devotes her special attention.

Both the study and the commentary devote much attention to the sources of the texts of the biblical *lubki*. It has not always been possible to identify them, though in a number of instances Pletneva makes the case that the authors of the woodcuts had reworked the relevant verses from the Moscow Bible of 1663, the Elizabethan Bible, liturgical texts, para-biblical texts (such as the Paleya) and a number of translations, retellings of Bible stories for children and even Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. As the book shows, the reworking was quite deliberate, and the authors followed a set of quite clear principles; they did not simply abridge the text, which had to fit into the space for the caption beneath the picture, but arranged it in accordance with their own logic, which did not always coincide with the logic of its biblical model. This is the explanation for the re-ordering of episodes in the story of the creation of the world: ‘The change in the order of the episodes in the woodcut text is probably linked to the construction of the logic of the subject. Since it is the woman who disobeys God’s prohibition, she must appear before the prohibition is issued, that is, she must know about it. This sort of rearrangement of the text is typical of the woodcut biblical narrative with its underlying thematic conception’ (p. 150).

The language of the biblical woodcuts is analysed in detail (above all its morphology and writing system). True, in her efforts to identify various grammatical forms or principles of writing the text, Pletneva seems to have gone too far in her enumeration of different linguistic features, trying to find a system where there need not be any. While affirming that ‘the peculiarities of the woodcut texts are more likely to be marked with a minus sign in relation to standard Church

Slavonic' (p. 81), she still insists that there is a certain system, listing the 'definite positions' in which this minus sign appears. In essence all these positions are determined by the difference between pronunciation and the orthographic norm (or tradition). Wherever there is such a difference, deviations from the norm and tradition are inevitable: whether something is written as one word or two, the use of diacritics, the use of alternative letters, capital letters and allographs, morphological categories lacking in Russian (such as lost tenses) and so on. These are all imitated by the writers of the *lubki* to the extent of their understanding and experience, and it is hardly necessary to try to systematise all these features as the peculiarities of the woodcut text.

All the other remarks that one could make about the book relate not to what it says, but to what it does not say. The very distinctly expressed aim of a serious and far-reaching study is not fully accomplished. One very often gets the impression that as soon as the author starts to consider a serious, albeit secondary topic, she brings herself up short and stops herself from digressing or getting carried away with questions which are not altogether essential. She states the problem, but leaves the reader guessing about its further discussion. The clearest example of this is in the chapter about the relation of the *lubok* to popular culture. Indeed, the content of this section, which occupies four of the book's 390 pages, boils down to the statement that although there are many such similarities and they are obvious, the author is not going to concentrate on them, because the question of which text is primary and which is derivative is not yet answered.

In some cases Pletneva avoids the discussion of more particular problems in much the same way: she dismisses them with phrases such as 'it is well known that...', 'as is known...', citing particular research (or not citing any) — pp. 30, 31, 53, 60, 61 and elsewhere. While in some cases one is willing to believe the author and the works she cites, in others one would still like some more substantial argumentation.

The greater part of the book is taken up by the texts that are edited. Parallel to each text published is the source on which the *lubok* was based, and this is followed by text-critical and linguistic commentaries which indicate other sources, the specifics of how the author worked with them and individual features of morphology and writing. Since the biblical subjects used in woodcut editions are few in number, a considerable number of cross-references naturally arise. This makes the book a little harder to read, but it does avoid repetition. True, the commentary sometimes repeats what has been said in the study, and in places this is superfluous. For example, on pp. 63–8 of the Introduction there is a detailed exposition of the history and dissemination of one detail in the subject of Cain's murder of Abel,

namely the jaw-bone of an ass used as the murder weapon. The same passage is repeated on p. 154 in the commentary to the relevant episode in the *lubok* of the Creation. One could give more such examples. These failings send us back to the composition of the book: what the reader is presented with is not a monograph, but a scholarly edition of texts.

Still, irrespective of the author's intentions, what we have is a short and in certain respects incomplete, but completely valid and profound study of the history of the origins, linguistic peculiarities, sources and variants, and reception and circulation of the woodcut Bible in Russian culture from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

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*Translated by Ralph Cleminson*