

IVANA KUPKOVÁ: *Cesty k „novej“ ruskej literatúre v slovenských prekladoch po roku 1989* [Paths to “new” Russian literature in Slovak translations after 1989]

Levoča: Modrý Peter, 2023. 196 pp. ISBN 978-80-8245-032-6

DOI: 10.31577/WLS.2025.17.1.16

© Institute of World Literature

Slovak Academy of Sciences

© Alena Ružbaská 2025

Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

The publication *Cesty k „novej“ ruskej literatúre v slovenských prekladoch po roku 1989* by the translator, university lecturer, and translation studies scholar Ivana Kupková examines what is known as “new” Russian literature within the Slovak context since 1989. Kupková refers to the term “new Russian prose” coined by Varlam Shalamov, the essence of which is “the struggle against canonical writing in literary form, the fight for novelty, which is the only criterion of true art” (8; all translations from Slovak by A. R.). Applying Shalamov’s concept of new prose to poetry and drama, Kupková speaks of “new literature, new in content and structure, in this very context, and in three forms: 1) translations of new works by authors who have already appeared in Slovak; 2) translations of mostly postmodern works that were either not allowed to be translated (parallel, postmodern literature) or were written in the late 1990s and beyond; 3) translations in which the translators used new methods and approaches that were not common until then, both in the positive and negative sense” (9). As Kupková states, the aim of the book is to analyze the translators’ work as well as the translation methods and practices they used.

Russian postmodern literature presents a significant challenge for translators. Literary scholar Mark Lipovetsky often describes it as “a dialogue with chaos” (*Russian Postmodern Fiction*, 1999). According to Kupková, this is why it requires “a well-oriented and experienced translator, as well as a courageous and equally well-oriented and

experienced editor” (14). In the first chapter, “Cesty objaviteľov” (Paths of explorers), Kupková introduces three authors: Viktor Yerofeiev, Nikolai Koliada and Andrei Bely, and analyzes the translations of their works. The first of the translations discussed is also the first Slovak translation from Russian postmodern literature. Kupková criticizes Vladimir Čerevka’s translation of Yerofeiev’s novel *Russkaia krasavica* ([Erofejev] *Russian Beauty*, 1980–1982, Slovak trans. *Ruská krásavica*) mainly for its inconsistency at various levels of translation, which, despite some successful translation passages, undermines the overall impression of the translation. This inconsistency is evident, for instance, in the translation of tabooed vocabulary and vulgarisms such as the word “srať” (shit), which in one case is censored, but in another remains uncensored. Another issue with Čerevka’s translation includes overly literal translations, calques of expressions that have established equivalents in Slovak, as well as formal problems such as unmarked direct speech, etc. Kupková considers the other two translations, both of Koliada’s plays, more successful. The first play, *Murlin Murlo* (Murlin Murlo, 1989), was translated by Vladislava Fekete, while the second, *Kurica* (Chicken, 1989; Slovak trans. *Sliepka*), by Jana Juráňová. In general, Kupková considers these translations to be adequate. She points out a few shifts, mainly related to changes in meaning associated with the language of the characters, which is difficult to translate due to the use of “prostorech’e”, a colloquial form

of Russian. In highlighting the translators' functionality and creativity in challenging passages, Kupková's analysis leads her to an important observation regarding the role of theater producers; she points out that in certain cases critics blame inconsistencies (such as unnatural sentence constructions) on translators, although it is often the theatrical producers who should be held responsible. The last translation discussed in this chapter is Eva Maliti-Fraňová's version of Bely's novel *Serebriannyi golub* (*The Silver Dove*, 1909, Slovak trans. *Strieborný holub*, 2018), which Kupková considers mostly exoticizing. Kupková appreciates the fact that a text as thematically and linguistically complex as *The Silver Dove*, is followed by an afterword by the translator explaining her intentions and concept. On the other hand, Kupková finds mistakes that could and should have been avoided given the translator's experience, including the excessive use of the transitive (a common mistake in translations from Russian), as well as the non-functional transfer of elements that lose their function in the translated text (such as diminutives, which have a colloquial meaning in Russian but not in Slovak).

In the second chapter, "Necesty a slepé uličky" (Paths and dead ends), Kupková discusses Slovak translations of works by Alexander Blok, Vladimir Nabokov, and Victor Pelevin. Kupková first presents older Slovak translations of Blok's poems by Janko Jesenský, Ľubomír Feldek or Rudolf Skukálek, comparing them with newer ones by Alojz Nociar and Peter Chorvát. Retranslations often emerge for various reasons, such as their accessibility to a new generation. However, Kupková argues that this was not successfully achieved in this case: "The new Blok in the translations of Alojz Nociar and Peter Chorvát is indeed new, but not because it introduce previously untranslated poems, nor because they offer new, inspiring methods of translating Blok's innovative verse or new, inspiring imagery. What is new is the unprofessional, even careless approach adopted by the translators and the publishers (Vydava-

tel'stvo Spolku slovenských spisovateľov and Torden), which allows for translational arbitrariness and personal ambitions, something unprecedented in the Slovak translation tradition since at least the 1960s and entirely unacceptable within it" (93). In Kupková's analysis of Adriena Matejovová-Richterová's translation of Nabokov's novel *Pnin* (1957; Slovak trans. 1991), she noticed that, despite the claim that the novel was translated from the Russian version of the English original, it is evident that the translator used the original English version as the source text, and she present evidence to support her claims (a literal translation from English or the translation of cultural references that align with the English version of the text). In the subchapter "Nelyrická odbočka" (A non-lyric digression), she focuses on a documentary about Nabokov from the series "Great Writers of the 20th Century", dedicated to his life and work, that aired on Slovak public television. The documentary was translated by an unknown author. As she demonstrates with ample material, the documentary serves as an example of a translator's irresponsible approach to their work. One particularly striking example is the translator's arbitrary and incorrect rendering of the titles of Nabokov's works, despite the fact that these had already been translated into Slovak. Moreover, in some cases, the translator inconsistently translates the same novel under different titles in various parts of the documentary. If the translator was unable to find the existing translated titles, it raises questions about the reliability of the translations of the quoted passages from these novels. Kupková presents these translations and supplements them with her own versions for comparison, highlighting where significant shifts in meaning occur.

The third chapter, "Cesty nádeje" (Paths of hope), is devoted to the student as a translator, which Kupková also evaluates from her own experience as a university lecturer of literary translation and editor of the student translation project *Môj pes má rád džez* (My dog likes jazz, 2008). In this

chapter, the author expresses her hope for a strong new generation of translators from Russian, analyzing the *Antologie ruských povídek* (Anthology of Russian short stories, 2007) translated by students from Masaryk University in Brno and published by Větrné mlýny, *Otĕr Stories* (2013) translated by students from Comenius University in Bratislava and published by Porta Danubiana, and finally *Nostalgia* (2021), an anthology of contemporary Russian writers, first published online by the student project “Samyzdat” then by the publisher Literárna bašta. Kupková considers these students’ efforts as a promising path that translations of fiction could take (162).

The last chapter, “Cesta ciest” (Paths of journeys), returns to the writer Victor Yerofeiev, but this time it focuses on his translation by another translator, Ján Štrasser. This chapter also serves as a kind of optimistic ending to the publication and to Slovak translations of Russian literature, embodied in the figure of Štrasser, whom Kupková considers as the ideal prototype of a translator whose work is both readable and marked by great talent.

Each of the chapters in this monograph is constructed in a similar manner, maintaining a logical sequence. Kupková introduces the authors and the context in which their works were created, then she discusses the text itself, and finally, she focuses on the analysis of specific translations, demonstrating how translators think, or should think during the translation process. Particularly interesting is her view on the translation challenges posed by “new” Russian literature, which often draws on the discontinued tradition of Russian modernism and the avant-garde (e.g. translation of colloquial speech, the so-called “prostorech’e”, allusions, connection with Russia, etc.), and the various methods chosen by translators. Kupková evaluates individual translations in detail and assesses their adequacy, functionality, and contribution to the Slovak culture.

One of the main issues Kupková points out is the absence of a systematic approach to translation, which leads to distortions

of the original text, at times resulting in complete nonsensical translations. This problem shows the inadequate intercultural competence of the translators which results in their inability “to receive and interpret signals from the source culture and transfer them into the signal system of the target culture” (Jana Rakšányiová: *Transkultúrne prvky v preklade* [Transcultural elements in translation], 2005, 122). The book presents specific examples of incorrect or inadequate translations of writers’ works, while pointing out the risks that this entails for the reader, and discusses complicated translation strategies that require a deeper understanding of the text and the author’s intentions. While praising some strategies (functionality, creativity), she criticizes others (inconsistency, negative shifts), stressing that quality translations are most usually the result of collaboration between translators, editors, proofreaders, and theatrical producers.

Ivana Kupková’s monograph *Cesty k „novej“ ruskej literatúre v slovenských prekladoch po roku 1989* offers a critical perspective on the importance of translation in shaping the knowledge of foreign literatures in Slovakia. Kupková presents well-structured arguments supported by a rich theoretical foundation that allows the reader to grasp the complexities involved in translating fiction, particularly “new” Russian literature. The book serves as both an overview of specific translations of this literature and a practical guide for translators, providing insights into translation criticism and the translation process itself. Additionally, it can serve as a guide for readers seeking quality Slovak translations from Russian, helping them avoid low-quality translations that could discourage them from engaging with contemporary Russian writing.

ALENA RUŽBASKÁ
Institute of World Literature
Slovak Academy of Sciences
Bratislava
Slovak Republic
alena.ruzbaska@savba.sk
ORCID: 0000-0002-2000-6675