Translating Chris Ware’s Lint Into Russian

Matthew Davis, Oberlin College Honors Project, May 2013

In an attempt to combine all my interests (of which there are two: comics and Russian) gracefully into one project, I decided to translate Chris Ware’s *Acme Novelty Library #20: Lint* (hereafter abbreviated as *Lint*) into Russian. I thought it was time Ware came to Russia’s nascent comics scene, given that a number of his American and European colleagues and predecessors have recently been translated into Russian and published there. Not only that, but I felt that the Russian audience would be able to connect to Jordan Lint, the protagonist of *Lint*, and his existential plight(s). I also hoped to gain a better understanding of the way Ware’s language and comics syntax works through translating his text.

*A few words on Lint and translation process*

*Lint* is a “subplot” of Chris Ware’s ongoing *Rusty Brown* storyline. *Lint* follows the life of a bully, Jordan Lint, who appears briefly in the greater *Rusty Brown* story. In *Lint*, Ware presents Jordan Lint’s entire life, from birth to death, dedicating one page to each year of Lint’s life. The pages often deal with a particular moment in Lint’s life – presumably those moments that he finds most important; in a several instances, Ware hints that these episodes might not be happening in the present tense, but are instead memories that are subject to distortion and forgetfulness, though this nuance is never addressed outright. The narrative takes place in something of a qualified first person; Lint's life is rendered in simultaneously a subjective first person, diary entry-esque prose narrative, and a semi-objective visual account. Ware exploits the tie between these two threads in a number of different ways – sometimes they occur simultaneously, other times there is a cognitive or temporal distance between the two, sometimes there is no narration at all.
Lint leads a life that is “most simple and ordinary, and most terrible.” He is a product of a bad childhood who reproduces badness upon the world. He marries, divorces, and remarries three or four times, has a number of children with his different wives, becomes a grandfather, sues his son for writing a “slanderous” book about his [son’s] abusive upbringing, and eventually dies, much to the relief of many readers. Despite Ware’s aesthetically pleasing draftsmanship and innovative use of comics language, I’m hard pressed to say that this book is enjoyable. Nevertheless, there is something deeply American, existential, and real in this book that compels the reader to stay tuned as seed turns to weed – until, of course, it is plucked from the earth.

This type of story is par-for-the-course for Ware, and, even for comics-savvy American readers, some find his work too bleak to consume on a regular basis. It seems that one of Ware’s goals in writing is to give attention to loneliness and all the forms that it can take – Lint’s maximalist self-destruction included. I imagine that, by representing such a simultaneously average and terrible life, that Ware hopes to inspire people to live life a little differently. Still, his modus operandi is pretty abrasive.

As a note, although I, enamored with Ware’s genre-pushing formal flourishes, believed that I was impervious to the rampant bleakness of Ware’s work, I found that after spending over eight months with the damn thing that I am not, and, on a personal level, am very glad to be taking a break from it.

Because I was dealing with a comic book and translating into Russian, which is not my native tongue, the process of translation differed a great deal from a more common foreign-prose-into-native-language translation process. I will briefly outline my translation process here, and I will expand upon it later.
I began by translating the text, removed from the visual elements, into Russian by using a number of resources, most from the Internet: online translation dictionaries, already translated text, and Google and Google Images. From there, I reviewed my text translations with native speakers in Russian House, most often Maia Solovieva, who helped me with grammar, syntax, and making everything sound natural. I then used Adobe Photoshop to insert the translated text onto the page, adhering as closely as possible to the variations in Ware’s lettering: style, size, and weight. Finally, I sent the pages to younger comics fans that I met in Russia to get their opinions on my translations. They usually provided me with both their opinions of the comic as a whole—whether it resonated with them, what felt weird about it, etc., as well as the nuts and bolts of the translation—essentially the same problems that I was working on with Maia, but with the advantage that they had a “completed” page in front of them, and were comics-savvy readers of my own age who might have a better grasp on some of Chris Ware's more complicated stylistic maneuvers.

Reactions and cultural barriers

To dive into what happened, it’s easiest to begin at the end. I generally sent each of my Russian correspondents a file containing 10-15 translated pages of the book. At first, I sent them only the Russian translations, but soon, for practicality’s sake, I began including the original English. In sending the translation, I asked for two things: first, that they correct or suggest better alternatives to my rendering of the pages in Russian. These readers were generally young and comics savvy.

Their responses fell into three categories, which also neatly divided the problems of translation. First, there were always grammatical, spelling, and word choice problems. There were a number of instances when things simply did not make sense—though the readers were
usually able to suggest an alternative to fix the problem, even without the English reference. Second, people reported problems with the page layout: something went wrong when I edited my text in: either I screwed up the word order trying to adhere too strictly to Ware’s page design or I split up words that should not have been split up—or a slew of other things that often had to do with a lack of proofreading. Finally, and most consistently, the readers reported an inability to connect to the protagonist and the story. “It felt alien,” said one, summarizing the opinions of just about all the rest. I will start from this broad reaction and move deductively to talk about the reasons why these problems might have arose.

Ware spins a decidedly American yarn, tying in the pursuit of the American dream, the life of the individual, high capitalism, and a (very bleak) American sense of humor, all communicated through touchstones like well-known American products, songs, books, and situations that a foreign audience might be unfamiliar with.

My Russian readers generally reported that they had a difficult-to-impossible time connecting with the less-than-loveable protagonist. Lint is extremely selfish and self-motivated. Almost every action beyond his early childhood seems to be motivated by self-gain, except for occasional pleas to his deceased mother. This attitude, of course, should strike a chord in most Americans—we are all familiar with how the American dream can warp people and lives, whether from literature or from media coverage of current events. Although Russians are familiar with such attitudes—many younger Russians have read American classics, and the entire world is aware of America, for better or worse, as a political and cultural superpower—it is unsurprising that the interior life of an American who has fallen victim to such life choices would be, at the least, not particularly compelling.
There were several moments so steeped in the particularities of American culture that they completed defied my attempts to render them into Russian. For instance, although Russians are familiar with the game of football, they lack the vocabulary to represent the game. In a scene where Lint is watching a game of football on his computer, an announcer says “…on the line of scrimmage…. but they’ve gotta use this down to pick up yardage… You can’t clock the ball here…” (55). I considered changing the lexicon to more familiar soccer terminology, but realized that would make little sense given the images of football on the page. I see nothing here to do besides literal translation and footnotes.

Of course, many other events, despite being American, might not require footnoting. The meaning and relevance of songs like the Rolling Stones’ “Under My Thumb” or events like 9/11 are so widely known that even a footnote is unnecessary. There are some instances where the material Ware references might be even more familiar with a Russian readership than an American one—for instance, when Mr. Lint consults the self-help book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. I was unfamiliar with this particular text, but many of my Russian readers actually knew about it and were able to recognize the references to it. The book has been translated into Russian, and in fact most Russians assume that it is a text that almost every American has read. Nevertheless, no matter how well known certain events or cultural objects are, there is a degree of weirdness to reading Russian words alongside American images—particularly situations like the scene that takes place on 9/11 (45).

There are also several additional complicating factors that might unfairly inform this consensus on Lint’s character: first, most readers were only given a section of the book, and therefore lacked the context of Lint’s life provided at the beginning of the book—abuse, dead
mother, etc.—and thus, perhaps, the possibility of empathizing or at least understanding the deep-seated motivating factors in his life.

Second, there is the language barrier: it’s possible that Russian readers have trouble connecting to the characters because they cannot see the subconscious undercurrent of Lint that Ware represents through wordplay.

Finally, the Russian criticism of Ware’s character is not limited to Russian readership. Ware is frequently criticized for creating unlikable, selfish, and often times inert characters whom the reader simply cannot identify with, and for the austerity and alien quality of his clinical art style. It is sometimes hard to comprehend just who exactly Chris Ware’s audience is. So one might say that this response is in some way an indication of a job well done.

Chris Ware vs. the Russian existentialist tradition

Chris Ware’s most recent list of his influences (Self-Portrait 3.0-3.3.2) includes the Russian authors Anton Chekhov, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Vladimir Nabokov, Leo Tolstoy, and Ivan Turgenev. As such, it is unsurprising to find echoes of the aforementioned authors’ works in Ware’s, most prominently those of Leo Tolstoy, who Ware often mentions in interviews as one of his favorite authors. I hoped that these influences would shine through in my translation. The following section will explore connections between Lint and Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Ilych, which resemble each other in a number of striking ways.

The Death of Ivan Ilych is a structured recollection of a dying man’s life—a life, like Lint’s, that was “the most simple and ordinary, and most terrible.” The retelling of Ivan’s life begins from his time as a student and continues through his death. Although Lint begins at birth, it is hard to ignore the parallels between the stories’ structure. Both stories also break life into
chunks—Tolstoy perhaps more naturalistically, Ivan’s life and memories accelerating until his death, while Ware renders Lint’s life as something of a monolithic zoetrope.

For Ivan, the strains of a life lived begin internally. We watch him as he acclimates to his professional life and family as he accumulates the pretenses required for his line of work (“commit[ing] acts which had seemed to him of great vileness… but seeing that they were… not considered bad… he forgot all about them and was not troubled in the least by them”), and as he develops himself into the person he needs to be (“…new people were needed… And Ivan Ilyich became this new man”) (48, 49). Things become less tolerable after a hasty marriage, to which he responds by walling himself off (52). This coping mechanism at first seems strange, but it soon becomes the status quo and goes unquestioned. Through an objective narrator, Tolstoy demonstrates how one’s beliefs are constructed and play out for the rest of one’s life.

Soon, the psychological traces find their way into Ivan’s physical experience. Ivan “hurts” himself while hanging up curtains, yielding a strange taste in his mouth and a chronic pain in his side, which haunts him until his death. Of course, this physical discomfort becomes emblematic of his interior dilemmas, and we no longer know where the physical pain stops and the mental pain begins—or which is causing the other—or whether there’s a difference between the two at all.

Ware uses a mental and physical snowball effect to demonstrate the accumulations of life in much the same way as Tolstoy. Lint deteriorates first mentally, and then physically, and then mentally again. We see Lint internalize things like racism, we watch his tastes form (classic rock, etc.), him learn how to raise children, and everything else that gathers and snowballs. Some of these traces exist in Lint’s monologues—mostly verbal ticks (“fucking prick,” “don’t touch me,” “[oh] my God,” “I wish…”), but the majority of them appear as images. Objects and shapes as
simple as circles appear constantly throughout the book—their meaning both static and changing with every iteration. The circle, for instance, generally relates to more essential issues in Lint’s life—sexuality, motherhood, and spirituality, though as the story progresses it becomes clear that the circle contains no absolute symbolic value. Lint, too, loses track of the meaning of the shapes, much like Ivan Ilych loses track of what is conscious and what is unconscious.

This disintegration of meaning goes beyond these concrete traces—the search for and perhaps failure to find meaning in life is the central conflict in both stories. For Tolstoy, the problem is explicitly addressed. As he approaches the end of his life, Ivan becomes aware that something is missing. He longs to return to childhood (and indeed, he finds himself most at peace with the end of his life when nurtured by Gerasim), when everything seemed pure to him (84). Although it seems he arrives at some sort of answer, a solace in his own death, it is unclear to the reader what exactly the solution to life is (and can we really expect such a thing from a story?), though it does seem that Tolstoy advocates, through the character Gerasim, for a more simple, genuine life.

The same pursuit of meaning is palpable—though less explicit—in Ware’s work as well. Lint tries the Church, marriage, the private sector, and rock stardom in an attempt to structure something meaningful after a bad childhood. It seems that he, too, is haunted by a bittersweet moment of understanding, regret, and consolation from his childhood, involving his mother and a dead ant. Like Ivan he finds comfort in returning to a childlike state. He often casts his girlfriends as a mother surrogate. He has hallucinations of his dead friend as he himself spirals toward death, and during these hallucinations he insists that he’s been writing new songs; these moments become tangled up with his childhood paranoia about “black people.” Although he ponders death (51), it never haunts him the way it haunts Ivan, though we can tell that it is on his
mind through his slips—when he inappropriately asks the doctor, for instance, “how long [he’s] got” (56).

On the whole, the books converge more than they diverge, and it was my hope that the Russian audience might pick up on this, since Russians tend as a whole to look for literary echoes more than Americans do. The story shares elements of the other Russian authors whom Ware cites in his list of influences: Chekov’s naturalism and depiction of the everyday, Nabokov’s attempt to create something that exists for the sake of itself (a la Pale Fire), and Dostoevsky’s attention to the grotesque. That said, it is also worth mention that none of my Russian readers reported seeing any of these influences when they read the book, but they also only were privy to small segments, nor did I pump them for that sort of information.

In our correspondence, I asked Mr. Ware what works in specific he had read, though I have not yet heard back from him. As he often takes two months to respond to any email, I am unsurprised.

Chris Ware vs. the Russian comics tradition

Chris Ware’s story is deeply informed by the long tradition of American (and European) cartooning—this fact constituting a large part of the appeal of Chris Ware’s comics: they are something of a calculus of what came before. Russian comics, on the other hand, lack the tradition that make such a calculus possible, the Russian readership having only been introduced to comics recently. This helps explain the inability of Russian readers to connect to Lint’s plight, and begins to explain problems of understanding on the second tier—problems related to reading the complicated graphic language of the comic.

Comics were banned in the Soviet Union until the Perestroika reformation movement in the 1980s. Beforehand, comics were thought to be too strong a reminder of the superficial
commercial culture of the West (Alaniz, 79). Even as comics entered the marketplace, so did the pretenses held against comics in exaggerated form. Most Russians considered comics to be a children’s genre, and, at best, “bookified cinema” (Ibid, 81). Around this time, some younger Russians launched comics magazines that dealt with more serious content, but they all failed shortly afterward (Ibid, 97).

Russia experienced a flux of Western comics and cartooning (though, understandably, the American superhero was largely absent) with the fall of the Soviet Union (Ibid, 94). Attitudes toward comics persisted, though by the early 2000s, Russians began seeing their first graphic novels, most notably a “New Russia” rendition of *Anna Karenina*. Jose Alaniz, Russia’s premier comics biographer, reports that this comic adaptation sparked a good deal of controversy due to both its form (comics) and setting (contemporary Russian), which at once served to popularize, as well as further dogmatize, the comic form (166). I have not been able to find any reportage on the comic myself, nor did I see any copies of it Russian—though it might be that I just missed the boat on it, and it is now out of print.

Shortly after the second wave of comics following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian publishers began to import and translate comics from abroad, such as *Epileptic* by David B., *Black Hole* by Charles Burns, *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman, and, most recently, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. Most of these books belong to what I would hesitantly dub the first generation of self-declared art comics. Many of these artists appeared in the 1980s in Spiegelman’s *RAW* magazine, a publication dedicated to validating comics as a medium of fine art through expanded and experimental uses of the comics form, and subsequently found their way to artistic legitimacy in the US and abroad. Manga, the Japanese take on sequential narrative, also found its
way on to shelves due to a growing interest in Asian culture. Web comics, too, became popular among the younger generation.

During my stay in Russia, I spent a good deal of time exploring the Russian comics community and distribution network. There is a significant interest in comics, especially among younger folks (my host mother, a true babushka, had never seen comics before, and was perplexed by—though not disinterested in—my excitement). There is a prominent publisher of alternative or art comics in St. Petersburg, BoomKniga, which publishes both international and native comics for a Russian audience. They also help host a yearly comics festival, BoomFest. Comics are generally sold in specialty stores—children’s bookstores and comics shops, but occasionally find their ways to the shelf of bigger bookstores.

Although Ware’s work was also originally published in *RAW*, he belongs to a younger generation of cartoonists than the ones mentioned above. Although his work cites those artists, he extends the form further. For this reason, he might be difficult for Russians, who have only had a glimpse of the generation prior. His comics are highly diagrammatic, often times subverting the assumed left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading order, and make a number of cognitive leaps that can confound even savvy American readers.

For example, Ware uses several devices that simply have not appeared in the Russian comics sphere—or at least were not familiar to the comic fans who helped me with the translation. The most prominent was Ware’s use of verbs to represent sound—occasionally onomatopoeic, like “clap,” “tap,” and “knock,” but more often simply monosyllabic (or two syllable) verbs with no relation to the sound that might actually be made, like “place,” “brush,” and “walk.” Per the suggestions of my Russian cohorts, I rendered these in the present tense, third person singular, referring to (not explicitly) the person or object instigating the action—or
else with a simple “sound word.” This method has been employed by other comics translators in the past\(^1\). Although functional, this translation device loses the poetry of Ware’s original English: with the English, verbs like “place” assume a semi-intentionality, where the sound exists at once as a result of someone’s action and as something existing entirely outside the characters. It is an abstracted action, augmenting the abstracted world that Ware renders in his panels, which portrays the abstracted world in which Ware believes we live\(^2\). Not only does it lose poetic value, it may also alienate readers who do not understand what it means, and are already put off by Ware’s work.

On the whole, Ware’s use of complicated comic language likely played a large part in why my translation did not universally resonate with Russians. His style is cold and mathematical—a logical step for the American and European art comic tradition, but not for the Russian tradition. Russian comics tend toward sensitive treatments, both in content and art style. And beyond the difficulty of comprehending a Chris Ware page in English is the difficulty of then reproducing it in Russian. In most of his work, but particularly in the case of *Lint*, Ware doubles the complication by subverting not only the order in which we read images, but also the order in which we read text, creating multiple levels of meanings through puns, wordplay, and lettering styles.

\(^1\) One Russian reader pointed me to the Russian webcomic community responsible for translating the webcomic White Ninja Comics into Russian. See: http://ru-wnc.livejournal.com/

\(^2\) “I see the black outlines of cartoons as visual approximations of the way we remember general ideas, and I try to use naturalistic color underneath them to simultaneously suggest a perceptual experience, which I think is more or less the way we actually experience the world as adults; we don't really "see" anymore after a certain age, we spend our time naming and categorizing and identifying and figuring how everything all fits together. Unfortunately, as a result, I guess sometimes readers get a chilled or antiseptic sensation from it, which is certainly not intentional, and is something I admit as a failure, but is also something I can't completely change at the moment.” (Interview; PBS, *Tin Tin & I*)
Translation methodology and problems with words

I have been learning Russian for only three years now, although according to my transcript I've taken four years of academic Russian (this is because I spent two months last summer in a program in Russia—my first and only time there). I consider my spoken Russian to be fairly weak in comparison to my written Russian. Even if I was familiar with the mechanics of Russian, putting Chris Ware's highly idiomatic prose into a language that I was culturally unfamiliar with was extremely difficult. My job was complicated further by the dilemma of translating more than simple prose—Ware arranges his pages like a concrete poet with the sophistication of an artist. I developed a process that relied very heavily on the accuracy of both pre-existing translations and native speakers.

I began with the text, taken as literally as possible. Beyond simple sentences which I could translated on my own without concern of whether I was capturing tone, style, or content, I relied heavily on pre-existing translations, presumably done by native speakers. In some situations, Ware made this very easy: song lyrics by popular American songs (for example, The Rolling Stones’ “Under My Thumb” and Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven”), quotations from “literature” (Stephen Covey’s The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People), or common or semi-scripted language (a Catholic wedding, a funeral). In these situations, I located the translated text by either typing the title (in English or translating it in Russian first) into Google appended with «перевод» (perevod, meaning “translation” in Russian) or else translating several keywords and then Googling that. In some instances, the best translation was found through other services, like Wikipedia or YouTube (the Russian Wikipedia page for “Stairway to Heaven” contains translated interviews with Jimmy Page including the song lyrics). Usually, this text was appropriate, though occasionally the tone of what I found did not align with the images, even if
the text was essentially “correct.”

For most text, I relied heavily on Abby Lingvo’s database of translation examples. Entering a phrase or a fragment of a phrase into Lingvo’s Example search yields a list of translations that contain the same phrase or fragment. Occasionally, there would be some consensus on the translation of a particular phrase, in which case my work would be done—or as done as it could be. More often, this would only suggest the vocabulary that would most effectively communicate the idea and tone. From there, I would try piece together the sentence on my own.

In some cases, a word or phrase would entirely stump Abby Lingvo (or I would not feel confident with what Abby Lingvo produced). Generally, these were slang or technical words. In these situations, I used multitrans.ru’s translation database. Multitrans is mostly translations of single words contributed by users, though it also has some translated phrases as well. Multitrans had an entry for almost every word I threw at it (besides the troublesome “tuckpointing,” a technical phrase having to do with brickwork). Unfortunately, multitrans’s database is largely unmoderated, and after a short while it became clear that some of the translations are entirely inaccurate. Essentially, the translations I was looking at relied on Russians' sense of American slang and technical words, which is certainly tenuous at points. Some commonly used pieces of Russian slang are translated into either arcane, antiquated, or head-scratchingly strange English slang.

To gauge the accuracy of a translated word, either from Multitrans or Abby Lingvo, I would run the word through Google—both the English and the proposed Russian translation, and compare the results. Often times, and especially in the case of slang, Google Images was more useful than Google’s text search.
To cite a tame example, I was having trouble with the word “block” in the scene where a young Jordan Lint is fretting over having his red toy block stolen by another small child. Abbyy Lingvo yielded nothing, as the word can be used to mean so many different things. Multitran gave a number of results, ranging from obviously inapplicable (“союз”, “группа”, “площать” - all of which refer to geopolitical or abstract “blocks”) to a number of candidates (“блок”, “кубик”, etc.). From there, I googled the pairs, qualifying the English search with “children” and the Russian with the equivalent, “дети”. When I arrived at roughly similar results (that also matched the image in the book), I knew I found the best word (кубик).

This search could have been conducted entirely with Google’s web search to yield the same result. I would have googled the phrases to find similar results, likely online stores for children’s toys. From there, I could travel to the websites themselves in order to see if an even more accurate word existed—for instance, when search for diminutives of мама (mama) through the word мамочка (mamochka), I found an incredibly instructive discussion on a Russian parenting forum discussing the various diminutives of the word and the feel or application of each.

I also used Google’s web search to confirm the validity of a phrase, expression, or sentence of my own invention. Chris Ware’s language is largely “iconographic”—much of the tone is carried by arrangement of, and the images surrounding, the text. The phrases themselves are fairly “generic.” If results were present, that would lead me to believe, at least on some level, that the translation was possible. On several occasions, it happened that the piece of dialog also happened to be a title of an English language movie or song, and I was able to find pre-existing translation.
Google Images also proved useful in the translation of onomatopoeia, written sounds, and interjections. I would either source them from Russian comics I own or simply guess at the analogous interjection, and then run them through Google Images, to yield either images of the action in question, or, more often, comics or internet memes that contained the expression. Internet memes were also the most frequent result when confirming the exactitude of a slang word or expression.

Because I was essentially using the internet as one large dictionary, I ended up finding myself using a great deal of "criminal language," often times inappropriately, in my translations. This either speaks to the language of the internet being inherently criminal or else simply the difficulty of reading and recreating tone as a non-native speaker, and perhaps the inaccuracy on both my part and the translators who came before me in attempting to translate semi-vulgarities like those used by Lint.

I would then take the translated text to a native speaker. We would go over my translation with reference to the comic. This was most useful in the translation of things going beyond the concrete value of the words—expressions and idioms. I often translated idioms literally, and then was mislead by Google, which yielded results of Russians doing exactly the same. The value of the expression would be lost on someone unfamiliar with the English expression. Conversation with a native speaker was useful for mechanics (grammar, spelling, etc.) and replicating Ware’s conversational tone. We also spent a good deal of time discussing cultural differences between Russia and America relevant to the book.

This process also had its share of difficulties. I worked most with was Maia Solovieva, a highly educated Russian in her late forties. The difficulties in this working arrangement were twofold. First: because she was of an older generation of Russians, she was not particularly

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familiar with comics. Thus for the first few weeks of our meetings, for example, she was under the mistaken impression that *Lint*, as a "comic book," was a comedy. She (quite fairly) could not understand what we found so funny in such tragedy, but nevertheless attempted to find humor in Ware’s bleakness and reproduce it in Russian. Of course, Ware is not without a sense of humor, but it’s a far cry from the “haw-haw” humor that she was expecting. Even after she became more comfortable with the subject matter, there were still a number of instances when I looked back on our collaborative translations and found that she was missing the meaning of the original—either not getting the humor in a passage, not understanding who was speaking, or entirely misinterpreting what was happening.

The second problem had to do with the content of the book. Mr. Ware’s work is fairly explicit in its depiction of sexuality and drug use, as well as unhindered in its use of profanity. Beside the discomfort of reading, rereading, and then explaining a line like “I am going to get so laid,” (14) there were a number of situations where Maia simply refused to help me translate. She was self-aware, and explained that she was of an older generation and it just simply made her too uncomfortable, but younger Russians might have an easier time with the material. Although there was no hard-and-fast rule to what she was willing to translate, it was usually in instances of flagrant sexuality or vulgarity that made her balk. My clumsy translation of a profanity might make Maia uncomfortable, for instance—and less willing to help me find a better translation.

Nevertheless, I gratefully took whatever advice and help I received (occasionally omitting text that I realized later we had misinterpreted) and used Adobe Photoshop to insert the reviewed text into scans of Ware’s original pages. Since Ware’s work is very consciously designed, I took great pains to recreate the original feel of the page. Ware works entirely by hand, but many styles of lettering he uses have typographic equivalents—besides his own all-
caps handwriting, the book is predominated by lettering that closely resembles the Futura font (albeit with elongated capitals). With some searching, I found a Cyrillic equivalent for Futura. I also found a font that approximated his script in Cyrillic, though not perfectly. In an ideal world, I might have Mr. Ware write out his own hand-drawn version of the Cyrillic alphabet so I could turn it into a font. In one situation, where Jason Lint is reading his son’s book, I drew in the text myself—albeit rather clumsily. Given a longer timeframe to work on this, I might have done a bit neater job.

Generally, I was able to insert text without much trouble. Occasionally, I had to elongate or shrink a text box, or rearrange pictures in order to get the words to fit in a comprehensible order. Whenever I could, I matched Ware as he changed between text styles and weights.

In translating Chris Ware’s work a number of difficulties arose involving linguistic and comic “extended technique.” Ware’s character, Jordan Lint, is trapped in a world of ghosts of thoughts past, which Ware represents with what can be summarized as puns—words, sounds, images, and entire page layouts snowball throughout the book, picking up meaning as they plummet and converge toward Mr. Lint’s final moments. Ware’s representation of Lint’s stream-of-consciousness extends to other less concrete, associative devices, such as alliteration, anaphora, and just about every figure of repetition imaginable. For instance, on page 37, Jordan, thinking of his wife, states “I know my [image of mother, now in heaven] meant for me to meet you [sic],” which recalls, besides the statement of selfishness (me, me, me), a moment he believes he shared with his mother before she passed away.

Very occasionally, and almost always by coincidence, I recreated some of these linguistic gymnastics. For instance, Ware begins to use the letter “O” as reiteration of the graphic motif of
circles, particularly through simple statements of “O[h] God,” which translate conveniently as
«О Боже», retaining the same shape, and thus, the “pun.” In other situations where it is the mere
presence of a word or sound—for instance, the multiple uses of the word “monster”—that create
a certain effect. In addition, most of these traces remain purely visual, and thus were never
subjected to my uneven hand—the motif of circles, faces looking “out,” birthday cakes, and,
generally, page layouts and colors (red and blue, in particular).

Nevertheless, I found it difficult to impossible to translate most of the text-centered puns.
The most extreme example of this was the last page in the book: Mr. Lint is dying and his
thoughts are racing. The majority of the page pedals off of alliteration on “g” words—“gotta…
get… going… gonna… good… God…”, with each word used in several situations so that its
meaning is modified by its associated panel or the words it's surrounded by. Another instance is
on page 56, when Lint is in the doctor’s office, and he thinks to himself “old wives can tell
[sic],” at once repeating the doctor’s statement that Lint is becoming old, and evoking both
Lint’s many past wives and the expression “old wives’ tale.” Perhaps this is a place where a
footnote would be useful.

Moments where Lint thinks or says something nonsensical produced by either insanity
(as he gets older) or inexperience (in his younger years) were also impossible for me to translate.
I understand that even native speakers have a great deal of trouble trying to create analogously
opaque text.

Ware also employs techniques that allow sections of text, as well as different pages, in
multiple orders—each creating an additional layer of meaning. For example, on page 45, Jordan
Lint frets over how to answer the phone: “lessee… okay… gotta think of something yeah funny
to say…. ‘can’t find mine’ impress him ‘concubine in my castle(?)’ yeah… yeah… that’s it…”
This is not dissimilar from the puns mentioned earlier, but, beyond confounding Russian grammar, also proved to be another roadblock in understanding. One Russian proofreader reported that my translations were unintelligible in these sections, though others seemed to compute it just fine. It might that some readers simply do not expect the jarring and fragmented language—or it might be that I was more successful in some sections than others.

Speaking generally, my Russian readers were able to parse what I meant at any particular moment and were helpful in offering suggestions. We agreed that the wordplay could not be captured given the limited time I had to complete the project and my limited experience with Russian language and culture. We agreed to find translations that focused purely on the primary meaning of the prose, and did not delve into the more complicated layers of meaning.

A brief conclusion

This project still needs a lot of work. Even the pages that I consider “done” could be revised substantially for better effect. Nevertheless, I ended up learning a lot through the repeated failures (and successes!) of this project. As a result of staring at Chris Ware’s work for several hours a day and attempting to parse his meaning (there were many times during my meetings with Maia when she would ask me what something meant in English, and I would have absolutely no idea), I have gained a deep understanding of his style and technique. I appreciated it before, but now I feel as if I have studied it. Manipulating his pages, incidentally, has made me very dexterous with Adobe Photoshop.

More importantly, I have been humbled. I guess I didn’t really consider the full difficulty of translation, thinking that it was a process that stopped at the word, and didn’t encompass every single element of the animal, all the way up to the vessels that contain the words—in the case of Ware, the images, styles of lettering, and their arrangement on the page. I should have taken a
Comparative Literature class. Still, because of this project I have gotten better at trying to arrive at a reasonable translation through the internet—and I have also become very aware of the severe limitations of such an approach. I have learned a lot about Russian culture—the way people read, what is acceptable and what is not, etc. Along with that, developing a process of translation was in and of itself very instructive—especially when working with other people to help me arrive at a passable translation: I figured out how to effectively communicate what I needed, and what information and specifications to give in order to get the best results.

I hope to return to this project after sleeping for several months.

Works Cited

