



Translation, etc.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS CLARKE

Chris Clarke is an SFU alumnus, a PhD candidate in French at the Graduate Center (CUNY), and a translator of French Literature. His publications include work by Raymond Queneau (New Directions) and Pierre Mac Orlan (Wakefield Press), and most recently François Caradec's Dictionary of Gestures (MIT Press). He was awarded a PEN/Heim Translation Fund grant in 2016 for his translation of Marcel Schwob's *Imaginary Lives* (Wakefield Press).

Firstly, who is Chris Clarke? Tell us a bit about yourself.

I was born in Victoria, BC, grew up in the Okanagan Valley, in Vernon, and ended up in Vancouver after high school. After most of a decade managing a bookstore in East Van, I went back to school to study French literature and linguistics, with hopes of learning how to translate literature. Those four years completed, I took a chance and moved to New York City to pursue a Masters in Literary Translation at NYU. Knowing that I still had plenty to learn and wouldn't likely go any further with it if I returned to Vancouver, I accepted a PhD fellowship at The Graduate Center (CUNY), where I've spent the last seven years studying French literature and translation studies. Some of those years were spent in New York, some in Paris, and more recently, I've been living with my wife, first in Princeton, NJ, and currently in Philadelphia, PA.

I want to speak to you a bit about your life in French: where and when did you first start learning and speaking in French? What role has French literature and cinema played a role in your life? How did you prepare yourself (consciously or unconsciously) for a career in translation?

I started learning French quite young—pre-school, and then French immersion through 9th or 10th grade. After high school, I let my French slip for quite some time, as you don't encounter much of it during day to day life in Vancouver. Eventually, I started over, first taking a night course once a week as a refresher, then back to university at Simon Fraser, and on from there. Since SFU, or maybe since my SFU exchange to France in 2009, my passion for French film, literature, arts and culture really took over, and having had the chance to live over there for three or four years out of the past ten has really added to this. As for preparation, curiosity and drive are key: read everything. And learn to live ordinary, tumultuous life in

your second language. That's the easiest advice to aspiring translators: live it, read everything, and while you should read as much in your source language as you can and experience as much of the culture, make sure you don't neglect your target language, as that is for the most part the one you'll be writing in.

How do you think your studies at SFU helped to inspire and/or prepare you for your career in translation?

I think it was an important step for me. The fact that the department is split more or less in half between literature and linguistics worked very well for me. I was able to get a solid grasp of French literary theory and literary history, to feel my way around the French canon, but also to look into language from a variety of different angles—syntax, phonology, morphology, and the history of the French language. These courses deepened my curiosity of language, especially comparative and historical linguistics. Which, of course, plays into translation alongside the literary studies. And, most importantly, those four years managed to transform me from a language-curious student into a rabid Francophile, with the exposure to French literature, cinema, art, history, and culture.

You mentioned that you are a PhD candidate. What are your graduate degrees in? How do you see graduate studies in relation to professional, literary translation? Can you tell us a bit about your current studies?

I'm nearing the end of my PhD program, as the end of my dissertation is in sight. Before that, I completed a Masters in Literary Translation (French to English) at NYU, and I picked up an M. Phil in French along the way. I also lucked into an exchange year at the Sorbonne in Paris, which I got a lot out of. As to how practice and

study are related, while the day-to-day practice and the theory/history of literary translation can seem a bit removed from one another in certain ways, there is also a fair bit of overlap. Most importantly, it has meant that when I'm not translating, my work still has me thinking about it, learning about it, talking about it. And, just as importantly, it keeps me in contact with other people who do the same—other translators, scholars of translation, and some who do both. This is a bonus, because translating can be isolating work. I've also translated four books and many shorter texts during years of my program, so that helps to keep a balance. My dissertation is translation-related, as well—I'm writing on the place of translation in the career of French writer, translator, and publisher Raymond Queneau. A dissertation a long process, and a big commitment, but it's fascinating and I'm enjoying it.

Were you always interested in pursuing a career in academia, or was it something that has materialized along the way? And do you consider yourself a translator first or a scholar first, or does one in your position have to strike a balance between the two?

To be honest, I hadn't really considered it at first. The initial plan was to get the training I needed to translate literature, and then to figure out how to put myself in a position to do so. However, once I got to know some career translators, it became pretty clear that most serious translators still have to do something else on the side to make ends meet. Some are academics, work in publishing, as technical translators, or other professions altogether. The reality is that it's pretty uncommon to make a decent living from literary translation alone. I decided to pursue a PhD as a way to extend my training, at the outset, but I've really learned

to enjoy scholarly research during my years of study. Literary history has always been a fascination for me, and it turns out that I've got a real passion for rooting through archives. So, some weeks I consider myself more one than the other, really just depends on what deadline is up next.

What made you want to become a translator and a writer?

I've always been a reader and a writer. When I was a kid, I devoured pretty much anything I could get my hands on, and I remember writing stories on my father's computer back when screens were still monochrome—ours displayed only orange (or amber?). Then it was songs; I wrote songs and played in bands through high school and into my twenties. Growing up bilingual, I think there was always a curiosity about how language works, about how languages fit together (or don't), but it wasn't until much later that I decided to actively follow this curiosity. How I got it into my head that this was what I would do isn't totally clear, but I can remember a few key instances. Perhaps the first time my curiosity about translation really popped was reading an old black-spined Penguin copy of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin, which I have since learned was

translated by Babette Deutsch, and realizing, wait a minute, how is it possible for this 5000+ line poem, written in Russian, to still rhyme in English? Then, when I looked at some of Pushkin's work that he had written in French, I could see the difference right there on the page, I could see the newness of the English poems, their similarities (and differences) when compared to the originals. Then, it was an interview that the CBC ran with Edith Grossman, after her re-translation of Don Quixote; a number of responses she gave stoked that curiosity even further. From then on, I was paying attention, and kept running into the same translators. When I discovered Barbara Wright's work, I was blown away, as the amount of work and creativity that was involved in her translations of writers such as Raymond Queneau, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Alfred Jarry, was mind-boggling.

Can you speak on your strategy for, or general theory of translation?

Not really. I don't believe in a general theory of translation, an all-encompassing how-to doesn't exist. Literature is an art of exceptions—that's what style is, after all, how one writer uses the language just a little bit differently than others. Instead, I believe that each text will dictate to the translator how it must be approached, and close reading generally unlocks the key. After all, a translation is no more than one reader's reading of a text that can be read in an infinite variety of manners; each culture, each reader brings a different take to what is essentially an open text that exists in flux. I just try to be consistent with my choices within each project, and to be conscious of what strikes me as singular about what I'm translating and what it is I'm trying to produce.

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Could you elaborate on that sentiment of the “text... existing in flux”—what’s the translator’s role with respect to that?

We tend to cling to the notion, or the illusion, that if it is effectuated “correctly” or “accurately,” the act of translation can bring a text across the gulf that separates languages. But we have to ask ourselves what an original text is, and in doing so, realize that not only the target text, the product of the translator’s work, will vary depending on the social, cultural, literary, and personal particularities of its author/translator, but that in a way, these particularities also produce variation in the source text. Every reader accesses a text in a way that is exclusive to that reader, and so the source text exists in a multitude of incarnations. This is what we truly mean when we say that all translations are “just a reading.” That is not limited to the results of the translation, the two are intimately bound together.

What does your practice look like? Bring us through a typical day-in-the-life of a translator.

These days it’s translation in the morning, dissertation in the afternoon and evening. That said, even when I’m working full-time on a translation project, it’s hard to give a text the focus it requires for more than about six hours. After that, the work slows down and starts to get sloppy. As to how to do the work itself, again, that depends on the book. Certain texts require a lot of research, some go more quickly than others, some take a while to find the tone or the rhythm, but at the end of all of them is a lot of editing and clean-up.

How do you approach personal style, voice, and creativity in translation? do you believe there is a place for these things in the writing of a translator?

I think translation is a creative act to begin with. Some texts demand (or permit) more personal creativity than others. Constrained writing, of which I’ve translated a bit, tends to demand more: the more out-of-the-ordinary the source text, the more creative one has to be to produce a translation. When it comes to constrained literature, especially “hard constraints” like those employed by Olivier Salon and others, the constraint has to be maintained or replicated in the translation, and often it doesn’t function the same way in English, and so then it becomes a question of substitution, compensation, even re-writing. I try to avoid straying too far when the project doesn’t insist on it; there are other ways to indulge in the creative impulse, such as what we call “creative translation,” which is intentionally using creative or constrained translation methods to produce new texts. Taking part in that sort of creative play helps me to keep my priorities straight, letting me explore my linguistic and creative curiosities in certain contexts, and limiting me to what the project calls for in others.

What are you currently working on?

Right now, I’m focused on my dissertation, but I’m starting a new project soon, an Algerian novel, which I will do in the mornings, and I have a longer, more difficult project lined up for after I defend next spring. Fittingly, a retranslation of a novel by Raymond Queneau that has been out of print for over sixty years. A very tricky text, it should take me through the end of 2020, and it will be released in 2022 by one of my favorite American publishers.

Can you give us a metaphor for the role of a translator with regard to their poet: we have prison; we have marriage; we have traitor; we have ghost and medium... or as your twitter page suggests, taxidermist

Hah, there are so many of them. For some reason, when we speak of translation, it often boils down to metaphors. Jean-Yves Masson, a professor in Comparative Literature at Paris IV, has been compiling a book of them, as they span back to the beginnings of literature. For Cicero, it was the money-changer, which I always liked, although it doesn't function as well with the sort of money we use today. Then, it was equivalent weights: X ounces of gold equaled Y ounces of silver, etc., and the values fluctuated diachronically and geographically. I'm also fond of the metaphor from Don Quixote, which equates a translation to looking at a tapestry from the back side, where the threads are exposed and the colors are inverted. I've been trying to popularize one of my own: the "doner-kebab" (or "gyro") metaphor for translation. You know, where they take the lamb or beef (or both), grind or slice up the meat, and then shape it back into meat, an inverted cone, cook it, and then carve it up all over again to serve it. Surprisingly, I'm not getting much traction on that effort.

The theme for this year's issue of The Lyre is (dis)connection, can you speak on how that might resonate with the act of translation?

Well, I'm sure we can tie it to both (dis)connection and the Lyre itself.

It was Orpheus who perfected the lyre, learning to play it from Apollo, and Orpheus has two clear connections to translation: music and poetry, which are intimately connected. His story also has the idea of a carrying across, as he tries to lead Eurydice across the threshold, across a border and out of the Underworld. It has also been suggested that the etymology of his name comes from one Proto-Indo European root that means "orphan, servant, slave," and a second that means "to change ownership, status, or allegiance." We can definitely build a translation metaphor out of those roots. However, in the translation world we tend to lean towards Apollo's brother Hermes, who stole Apollo's cows. Hermes is the God of translators and interpreters, of travel and boundaries. As for (dis)connection, it's an apt description for translation, with the parentheses. After all, a translation is profoundly connected to its source text, it springs forth from it, but it can never be the source text. It is simultaneously and profoundly connected and disconnected to its source. The translator, too, faces this dilemma; she or he can never claim authorship of what they write, and yet she does write it, she does author it. It is her reading of a text she writes, in a way that no one else can read it or write it. She is deeply and personally connected to it, and yet it can never be hers, not entirely.

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And it was Hermes that first build the lyre, giving it to his brother Apollo; so it seems like Hermes is equally implicated in the Orpheus story. Very interesting and fitting, as The Lyre was launched out of and is still very much a part of SFU's World Literature program—where translation is always on our minds.

I only have a couple more questions for you, and I'll keep them simple (but maybe not easy, per se):

First, what's your favourite book; and second, what's your favourite work in translation?

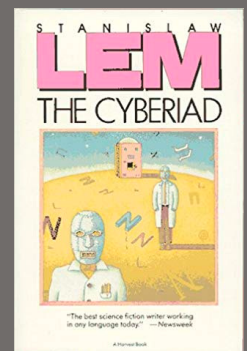
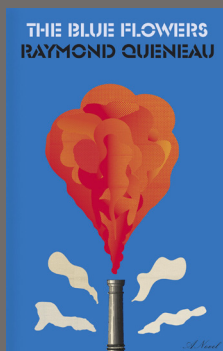
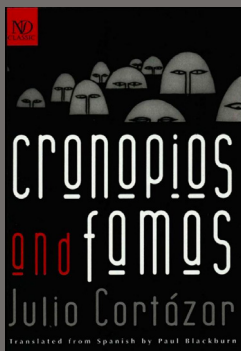
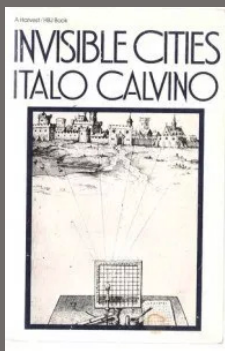
Oh, that's tricky, there are too many that I love and admire. I can list a few that come to mind, but it would likely be a different list the next time I'm asked. And, favorite book vs favorite work in translation is a moot point—I read it in the original if I can, I read it in translation if I can't. And, occupational hazard, often I read both, and sometimes I will read an original and multiple translations if they are available. William Weaver's translation of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* comes to mind as something

I can and do read again and again. Silvina Ocampo's short fiction, a little of which is in print in English in translations by Daniel Balderston, more of which I've read in Spanish or in French translations. Julio Cortázar's *Cronopios and Famas* in Paul Blackburn's translation. Raymond Queneau's *Les Fleurs Bleues* and Barbara Wright's translation *The Blue Flowers* (or *Between Blue and Blue* in the UK). My favorite publication last year was Lara Vergnaud's translation of Ahmed Bouanani's *The Hospital*. And lately I've been rereading Stanislaw Lem, mostly in Michael Kandel's translations. Some more old favorites in English: Kenneth Patchen's *Sleepers Awake*, William Saroyan's *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*, Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlow novels, BpNichol's *The Martyrology*, Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*.

Thanks, Chris, it was a pleasure.



Follow Chris on Twitter: @chrisclarke1



Invisible Cities (1972), contains 55 prose poems describing fictitious cities as narrated by Marco Polo. *Cronopios and Famas* (1962), is a collection of fantastical and absurd micro-fictions on daily life. *The Blue Flowers* (1973), follows two characters who dream of each other: a contemporary Parisien and the 13th century Duke of Auge. *The Hospital* (1989), depicts a narrator in a hospital, experiencing flashes of childhood memories and fantasies of resurrection. *The Cyberiad* (1965), is a series of science-fiction short stories, with characters that are either robots or intelligent machines.