



# When the Same Isn't Similar: Herménégilde Chiasson in English

## Lorsque le même n'est pas pareil : Herménégilde Chiasson en anglais

Glen Nichols

Volume 22, numéro 2, 2e semestre 2009

Littérature comparée et traductologie littéraire : convergences et divergences  
Comparative Literature and Literary Translation Studies: Points of Convergence and Divergence

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/044824ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/044824ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN

0835-8443 (imprimé)  
1708-2188 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Nichols, G. (2009). When the Same Isn't Similar: Herménégilde Chiasson in English. *TTR*, 22(2), 63–92. <https://doi.org/10.7202/044824ar>

Résumé de l'article

Malgré la production littéraire abondante de Herménégilde Chiasson, seulement sept de ses oeuvres ont été traduites en anglais. Bien que ces traductions soient très conservatrices et s'accordent pour reproduire les textes sources avec « précision », une étude plus poussée révèle les limites de cette approche quant à la compréhension des originaux ou de leurs implications culturelles. Exception faite des erreurs ou des compromis mineurs, les traductions restent « fidèles », sur le plan linguistique, aux textes sources. Mais le critère de la fidélité au texte source n'est guère significatif ou suffisant, sinon qu'il consolide les clichés concernant le soi-disant nationalisme binaire du Canada. Cependant, la présence de ces textes dans différents systèmes littéraires, leurs présentations paratextuelles, la sélection de ces oeuvres plutôt que d'autres qui font partie du corpus de Chiasson et la réception critique traditionnelle, tous ces éléments font apparaître la construction d'un auteur acadien très différent, plus passif et « universel » en anglais. L'approche « multipolaire », empruntée à la littérature comparée et à la traductologie, avance que ces différences peuvent être révélées, expliquées et comprises, même si les conclusions risquent d'aller à l'encontre de la vision confortable de la société canadienne. Résister à l'effacement de la différence est une responsabilité que doivent assumer nos disciplines afin de former des lecteurs plus ouverts à la différence et à la multiplicité de la production culturelle.

# When the Same Isn't Similar: Herménégilde Chiasson in English

**Glen Nichols**

We are fortunate to inhabit a multipolar profession; the times make it a contrarian model.

-Haun Saussy, 2006

*Je dors maintenant et je rêve d'un pays où les êtres s'accomplissent dans leurs différences, ayant fui toutes les comparaisons et aboli toutes les similitudes. Un pays où il ne reste plus qu'à inventer la pluie.*

-Herménégilde Chiasson, 2000

## **Introduction**

Haun Saussy's extensive introduction to his 2006 collective survey of Comparative Literature argues for the importance of the field in light of increasing US unilateralism in the name of globalization that "seems to be the practical opposite of multiculturalism" (p. 25). His is not simply a cry "against hypocrisy and short-sightedness," but rather a reminder of the important role comparative literary study can have in "shap[ing] the readers and their experience of reading" (*ibid.*, p. 27):

Books from far away or long ago are precisely the works that more people in the North American mainstream need to know intimately. [...] we need to develop those readers; and as comparatists, we need to link readers and reading strategies together to fashion ever wider and deeper collaborations of reading. (*ibid.*, p. 26)

As Canada experiences its own version of the use of crisis and fear to promote an agenda of neocolonial retrenchment, it is important that scholars, particularly coming from interdisciplinary and “multipolar” fields like Comparative Literature and Translation Studies, maximize our potential to counteract the “unipolarity forces” around us (*ibid.*, p. 27). However, the disciplinary/territorial squabbles within and between Comparative Literature and Translation Studies serve as a counter-productive diversion from the real issues, an exhaustion that leaves us less able to serve/inform the society around us and thus more open to neo-conservative charges that fields like ours are not “useful” and therefore not worthy of public interest. The stakes are very high, and academics can take a critical role in the public debate, but only if we remain “mindful of the temptation of thinking [our] ‘space of comparison’ to be a realm of pure contemplation above the grubby, interested dealings of the nation. Not just multiple ‘subject positions’ are at issue, but multiple ways of coming to and through those positions” (*ibid.*).

Out of Herménégilde Chiasson’s many French publications, only seven are available in English translation. While these translations are very conservative and consistent in their attempt to transcribe the source texts “accurately,” a closer study reveals the fallacy of these assumptions in terms of understanding either the texts or their implications for the receiving cultures. Other than generally minor errors or compromises, the translations appear “faithful” to the sources, textually, but this is hardly significant or sufficient, other than in reinforcing clichés about Canadian binary nationalism. However, examining how the texts participate in different literary systems, their paratextual presentations, the particular selection for translation of certain works over others in Chiasson’s corpus, and the dominance of traditional critical reactions reveal not equivalence but the construction of a very different, more passive and “universalized” Acadian author in English. A “multipolar” approach, borrowed from Comparative Literature and Translation Studies, means these differences can be revealed, explained, and understood, even though the results may not suit a comfortable binary view of Canadian society; resistance to the erasure of difference is an

important role for our disciplines in training better readers, more open to difference and multiplicity in cultural production.

### **Comparative Literature versus Translation Studies**

From where I sit, there are more commonalities than differences between the methodologies of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies, and the evolutions of both fields tie closely to changing views of the Canadian national imaginary. In their (relatively) recent beginnings, both fields stressed binary and universalist approaches to literature. One might be tempted to think of these as traditional or passé; however, as originary in both fields and dominant in popular discourse on translation and literary criticism, these tenets remain complicated but not erased by further conceptual frames, both within and beyond the disciplinary frontiers.

According to Susan Bassnett's depiction, Comparative Literature's post-war evolution in North America was strongly influenced by Paul Van Tieghem's 1930s arguments against historical and more loosely drawn studies, insisting instead that comparisons be strictly limited to two literary texts and these only across/between "national" literatures/languages (cited in Bassnett, 1993, p. 25). Equally important were the deeply universalist tendencies emphasized by Charles Mills Gayley, a founding voice of Comparative Literature in North America. To him, the comparative project is founded on positivist, modernist views of:

[...] literature as a distinct and integral medium of thought, a common institutional expression of humanity; differentiated, to be sure, by the social conditions of the individual, by racial, historical, cultural and linguistic influences, opportunities, and restrictions, but, irrespective of age or guise, prompted by the common needs and aspirations of man [*sic*], sprung from common faculties, psychological and physiological, and obeying common laws of material and mode, of the individual and social humanity. (cited in *ibid.*, p. 3)

The relationship between these concepts and the binary universalist notions of early Canadian Comparative Literature is underscored by Richard Sutherland's 1971 observations in

*Second Image*: “Canada may always have two principal ethnic groups and a variety of other smaller groups, but what all these groups already have in common has in fact created a distinctive, all-embracing Canadian mystique, something independent of and transcending the separate ethnic identities” (p. 58). He even suggests that since his reading of English- and French-Canadian novels reveals “a whole spectrum of common images, attitudes and ideas [...] aside from language, it is quite probable that there are at the moment no fundamental cultural differences between the two major ethnic groups of Canada” (*ibid.*, p. 23).

Things were similar on the Translation Studies side of things. Much ink has been spilled describing how the question/problems of “equivalence” preoccupied foundational Translation Studies for decades. Despite the fact this approach hinges on the early-debunked premise that languages and the societies that produce them are “equivalent” and despite the arrival and development of post-structural inquiries into textual and interpretative instabilities, translation scholars “went on talking about ‘originals’ and ‘accuracy’ and continued to make use of a terminology of negativity, [suggesting how translation] ‘betrays,’ ‘traduces,’ ‘diminishes,’ ‘reduces,’ ‘loses’ parts of the original” (Bassnett, 1993, p. 140).

The application of these concepts to the Canadian context is evidenced by the long tradition of upholding the mythology of Canada as “bicultural/bilingual” and by the related emphasis in Canadian Translation Studies literature on translation between our “two official languages,” most frequently interpreted as belonging to two “national” constructions: “Quebec” and “the rest of Canada,” as if these were both monolithic and exclusive. One of the most oft-repeated clichés to explain the Canadian condition is of course P.J.O. Chauveau’s Château de Chambord metaphor of the winding double staircase, taken up with relish by Philip Stratford, a key early modern translator and writer about translation in Canada (Stratford, 1979, p. 137). The double staircase, representing two founding cultures, separate but equal, mapped an almost exclusive national cultural DNA: inevitable, unchanging, and incontrovertible.

However, influenced by numerous contemporary theories in literary studies, linguistics, and other domains, both Comparative Literature and Translation Studies have moved from (or perhaps more accurately “added to”) the traditional binary/universalist approaches to consider new ways of seeing the objects, methodologies, and results of the discipline.

This shift can be seen at least as early as 1961 when Henry Remak in “Comparative Literature, its Definition and Function” tried to set a course for the field in America by defining Comparative Literature as:

[...] the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand, and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts [...], philosophy, history, the social sciences [...], the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression. (cited in Bassnett, 1993, p. 31)

Resistance to this openness is witnessed by the fact that more than thirty years later the Bernheimer report on the state of the discipline found it necessary to continue the call for broader objectives, seeing a field that encompassed cultural production far beyond literature:

The space of comparison today involves comparisons between artistic productions usually studied by different disciplines; between various cultural constructions of those disciplines; between Western cultural traditions, both high and popular, and those of non-Western cultures; between the pre- and postcolonial cultural productions of colonized peoples; between gender constructions defined as feminine and those defined as masculine, or between sexual orientations defined as straight and those defined as gay; between racial and ethnic modes of signifying; between hermeneutic articulations of meaning and materialist analyses of its modes of production and circulation; and much more. These ways of contextualizing literature in the expanded fields of discourse, culture, ideology, race, and gender are so different from the old models of literary study according to authors, nations, periods, and genres that the term

“literature” may no longer adequately describe our object of study. (cited in Saussy, 2006, p. 18)

Translation Studies experienced a similar development dating especially from Theo Hermans’s *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation* in 1985, which was contemporary with the beginning acceptance of polysystem theory as a model for Translation Studies research. Although, as Bassnett noted above, these took some time to gain traction, the current proliferation of contending theories and competing visions means that there is general acceptance of translation “from being a secondary, marginal activity [to being seen as] a primary shaping force within literary history” (1993, p. 142), from contrastive studies of literature understood as representational to interdisciplinary explorations of literature and other cultural productions within the performative dynamics of a society.

So it is with all this in mind that I suggest the argument is not between Comparative Literature and Translation Studies, but between contending views of literary/cultural study, whether departmentalized as Comparative Literature or as Translation Studies, and the degree to which these studies may be implicated in the (re)construction of a national imaginary. On the one hand is the binary universalist conception of literature as representative of a static and unified “nation” while, on the other hand, the view that our object of study is an element of a cultural polysystem or is otherwise performative of a fluid and contingent national imaginary. Whether examined in the name of the old two-language/two-culture comparative approach of Comparative Literature (inherited from Van Tieghem) or through the formidably resistant “accuracy” and “source/target” thinking of Translation Studies, traditional binary approaches assume a stability of textual meaning to be “transferred” and depend upon a representational, positivist, and artefactual sense of text. Most critically, both are bound up in a traditional binary conceptualization of Canada as a nation: the “bi & bi” myth of Canadian nationalism or alternately a static “heritage” view of “multiculturalism,” both have the effect of erasing communities that do not fit the hegemonic “Quebec” or “English Canada” definitions and of containing cultural diversity into non-

threatening commodities, such as “ethnic” food or music, easily consumed by the majority.<sup>1</sup>

The reconceptualising of both fields, thanks in part to the acceptance and extension of contemporary literary and cultural theories, clears the way to reconceptualise the national imaginary, opening up to the multiplicities of Canadian identity complicated by contingency, difference, and resistance. Whether via Comparative Literature-based inter-media comparisons, for one example, or translation-studies-inspired polysystemic analyses, among a myriad of other new directions based on theoretical elements from either or both fields, a complex view of intertextual study provides a subtler way of seeing/being/performing Canada. The argument between binary and more open formations of our fields is critical to a national discourse that counteracts the cultural erasures resulting from the “bi & bi” mythology<sup>2</sup> or “heritage” multiculturalism.

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1 Canadian multiculturalism is most often manifested as “ethnic” festivals, historic sites, and memorials to past material cultures. The tensions and confusion between living culture and preserved heritage at the core of debates on contemporary multicultural constructions of Canada are aptly outlined by Alan Clarke: “When culture is studied within an area, what is revealed is a multifaceted and multidimensional set of cultures which interact and overlay one another. [...] This cannot be read as heritage, despite the attempts of some commentators to use this term interchangeably with culture. The focus on heritage emphasises the fixed and given remnants of previous civilisations and previous lives. It directs our attention to the relics and remnants of those social orders” (2000, p. 32).

2 As a striking example of this I cite the frightening erasures of diversity as a result of Richard Sutherland’s particular anxiety to find the “unifying and transcendent themes and patterns” in his very binary sense of Canadian literary culture (Sutherland, 1971, p. iii). One presumes he is being ironic when he writes about how “relatively well” race relations have gone in Canada compared to in the US: “There are not enough Negroes [*sic*] to create a real disturbance, and the most prominent are generally great athletes or football stars who seem satisfied to function as idols in a nation of the under-exercised. Outside of the occasional claim on real estate in downtown Brantford, Ontario, or the contention that old treaties entitle them to all the amenities of



It may be tempting, in a French/English Canadian Comparative Literature context, to resist openness to translation. After all, should not all Canadianists be bilingual in the two “official” languages of the country? And living in Moncton, in New Brunswick, the heart of modern urban Acadian culture and the only “officially bilingual” province of Canada, this seems to make eminently good sense. However, one does not have to travel very far to see that this is neither a reality, nor very sensible. One quickly returns to the need for translation not only to give access to materials in the “other” language, but also to explore the power of translation “failure” to reveal the gaps between the multiple cultures of the nation.

The fallacy of the Canadian “two-official-languages” mythos is also quickly undermined as one deconstructs the binary implicit in the “bilingual/bicultural” national construction. Canada is not and has never been such a binary. As John Ralston Saul has argued, there is at least a third founding member: that of the many First Nations, and their influence on our identity and social institutions is profound. Their absence from the nationalist discourse (until recently) of course is the most obvious erasure in the “bi & bi” form of nationalism. Were we more honest, but just as inaccurate, we might have constructed a trilingual/tricultural mythology, which Saul considers in his 1998 collection of essays, *The Unconscious Civilisation*, and then develops more fully in his more recent *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada* (2008). That at least has the benefit of beginning to reveal the fallacy of this national construction: the third member, the First Nations, multiple in languages and cultures, cannot (despite the best efforts of the Department of Indian Affairs and racist policies of the Canadian government) be subsumed into a single group,

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modern medicine, or slight misunderstandings about what constitutes a murder, Canadian Indians and Eskimos [*sic*] have come up with very little that the R.C.M.P. could not handle” (*ibid.*, p. 30). However, the subsequent chapter belies his apparent irony when he proceeds to contain racism in Canadian letters entirely within the French/English binary, excluding any presence of First Nations for example, even in his discussion of Moodie’s *Roughing it in the Bush*, where the depiction of local aboriginals is at least as caricatured and stereotyped as that of the French that Sutherland is so wholly concerned about.

so even a “tri & tri” nationalism would be equally a strategy of erasing difference.

And once scratched, this scab quickly comes loose. The other two purported founding nations cannot be so homogenized either, at least not without erasing significant differences between/within groups. A hegemonic view of any kind of unified “English Canada” can only be conceived by subsuming the diversity of cultural communities from outport Newfoundland to urban Toronto, and beyond. There are several French-speaking areas with very different views, different origins and histories, and, indeed, differing languages, all neatly but unhappily erased when one subsumes these into the single “French-Canadian,” or more common today and perhaps even more grievous “Quebec,” label. Located as it is on a number of margins, national, linguistic, and geographic, Acadie (one of those French groups so effectively “othered” and made invisible by the appellation “francophones hors Québec”) shares colonial histories with both the Quebec and the English hegemonies inside and outside of Canada. Therefore Acadie is a provocative antidote to many of the residual “truths” about Canada. So, as a case study, let me offer a brief analysis of the English translations of a few of the works of Acadian writer and multivalent artist (and former Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick) Herménégilde Chiasson.

### **Herménégilde Chiasson: “All Things Being Equal...”**

Born in St. Simon, northern New Brunswick, Herménégilde Chiasson has become one of the leading artists of modern Acadie. He holds several degrees, including a doctorate from the Sorbonne and a Master’s of Fine Arts from the University of New York. He has taught at the Université de Moncton and worked as a researcher, journalist, and producer for Radio-Canada before trying his hand at film production in 1985. In 2003 he was installed as New Brunswick’s 29<sup>th</sup> Lieutenant Governor.<sup>3</sup> In the theatre he is the author of nearly thirty plays including *Cap Enragé*, *l’Exil d’Alexa*, *La vie est un rêve*, *Aliénor*, and *Laurie, ou la vie de galerie*. His work as a playwright has been closely associated

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3 His mandate ended in September 2009.

with Théâtre l'Escaouette, the Moncton-based company that has produced his plays. He began to publish poetry in the early 1970s and, among his many books of poetry, *Conversations* won a Governor General's award in 1999. He has directed numerous films including *Toutes les photos finissent par se ressembler*, *Le Grand Jack*, *Robichaud*, *Épopée*, *Photographies* and *Ceux qui attendent*. In the visual arts, Chiasson's works have been featured in twenty-five individual exhibitions, and he has participated in close to a hundred other group exhibitions.

The following observations derive from an analysis of the seven of his works that are available in English: the translations were done by three different translators; cover three genres: poetry, anecdote, and theatre; and represent the last twelve years (1996-2007) of Chiasson's work (he first began to publish poetry in 1974).

At first glance, if one is reading for a traditional "equivalence" validation, the translations seem on the whole to be very "good" representations of the originals, accurate and "true to their source." In attempting to read the differences between source and translation texts, one comes up with a relatively limited variety of surface alterations that, whether intentional or accidental, do not add up to much in terms of understanding the relationships between the texts.

There are occasional language shifts that seem problematic, introducing odd structures and misleading meanings. A simple example of this would be from *Climates* where "dans un dépanneur Metro" (Chiasson, 1996b, p. 40), becomes "inside a corner Metro" (Chiasson, 1999, p. 42) which, while the "Metro" chain of stores is becoming more common across Canada, is a phrase that is not commonly used in English. More typical are modifications from the same section of *Climates*, a poem called "Achille devant Shédiac," where the translators attempted to maintain the eight-line verse with ABABCDCD rhyming scheme, sometimes to the detriment of meaning. One sample of these shifts appears in the following lines:

... quand Monckton permettait  
aux femmes d'aller voir leurs maris prisonniers  
et cette légende qu'elles emmenaient  
des vêtements de femmes pour qu'ils puissent s'évader  
(Chiasson, 1996b, p. 40)

... where Monckton allowed  
women to see their captured menfolk for a day  
till in a judicious clothing exchange a crowd  
of them made a last spectacular get-away  
(Chiasson, 1999, pp. 41-42)

The broad strokes are roughly the same in each, but the information and background are altered to suit the rhyme structure; unfortunately the dum-da-dum-da-dum-da-dum scansion does little to suggest the music of the original. More significant is another change in the same poem where the English version, while somewhat defying comprehension, seems to be attempting to soften the satire of the French line referring to the conversion of Memramcook College to a second-language school: “vendu/en vain pour la gloire du français langue seconde” (Chiasson, 1996b, p. 40), becomes “sold/for a second glory of French as a learned tongue” (Chiasson, 1999, p. 42).

Finally, just to be clear that I am not picking on *Climates* (these sorts of apparent blemishes could be exemplified from any of the translations), *Cap Enrage* demonstrates a marked shift in register that, while perhaps more “realistic,” puts into question its equivalence (let alone its usefulness) as a play for teens, which the source text is. While the language of the French version is frequently “non-standard,” making use of oral idioms such as “Farme ta yeule” (Chiasson, 1996a, p. 5), the English version goes well beyond the simply colloquial register. It emphasizes language appropriate to the setting of the action (a jail), including more than a few strong expletives, whereas the French original remains appropriate for the performance location (schools), and so does not introduce any curse words that could be deemed offensive by the intended school-age audience (or more likely by the school authorities that paid for the show).

While the above examples seem either inexplicable or questionable, there are other changes in the translation texts that alter the sense of the original in ways that could be understood as attempts to find what we refer to as “functional equivalences”: the same idea in different words. A major metaphor in *Alienor* is one that Étienne uses to explain his influence on his daughter. The original “souffle” (“Ce sera notre secret, notre musique, notre souffle, le souffle que je t’ai donné pour l’éternité et qui continuera de crier ma rage pour l’éternité, sur la terre comme au ciel” (Chiasson, 1998, p. 48) is hard to capture in English: “the breath/whisper/spirit I give you forever” just does not seem to do it. So the English version replaces it with “song” which, while a very different image, attempts to recreate some of the overlapping connotations of the original: “That will be our secret, our music, our song. The song I give to you forever which will sing of my rage always, on earth as in heaven” (Chiasson, 2003, p. 225).

Similarly in *Available Light*, Wayne Grady makes many provocative choices that develop and extend the French original, making “equivalent” poetry in the English. One example comes from near the middle of the book, at the end of the section entitled, “L’abstraction lyrique,” where:

Remettre le monde en perspective et tâcher de voir l’avenir comme le prolongement improbable du passé. Le genre de conclusions auxquelles on aboutit en se disant que le temps n’est pas de l’ordre de l’*horizontal* mais de l’*immanence*. (Chiasson, 2000, p. 70)

becomes:

Put the world back in perspective and try to see the future as the improbable prolongation of the past. Those are the kinds of conclusions you come to when you say that time is not an *arrow* but a *pulse*. (Chiasson, 2002, p. 92)

Finally, here is an example of how Jo-Anne Elder dealt with a common problem in translating from French to English: the matter of “tu” versus “vous.” In *Lifedream*, Thomas corrects Paul who has just addressed him with “vous”: “On peut se dire ‘tu’” (Chiasson, 2001, p. 44). For the translation Elder substitutes the following:

Paul: I'll go and get one for you, Mister...  
Thomas: Thomas. No one calls me by my last name.  
(Chiasson, 2006, p. 65)

This is a tidy way around the moment and a convenient equivalent for the social convention, although, since Thomas is a priest, one might quibble that Paul addresses him as “Mister” and not “Father.”

Overall the changes revealed through assessing the textual “equivalence” seem to be fairly arbitrary. The typology of “errors” does not produce a useful interpretation other than reinforcing the idea that the translations are meant to be accurate, and in some moments either fail or the differences reveal what may be lost in the translation. This apparent fidelity, and the concomitant belief that the texts are meant to be a true representation of Chiasson’s work, is supported by the contextual comments by the translators and by the critics of the translations who clearly came to these texts with similar preconceptions about the nature of translation.

### **Translators and Critics**

The comments of the translators suggest their desire to produce “accurate” translations, their belief that their task is the transfer of content and their intent that they remain as invisible to the process and product as possible, using very traditional metaphors to describe their work. For example, my comments on my two play translations maintain that despite the necessity for some adaptation to accommodate the particular theatrical needs of play translation the result is intended to be as truthful a representation of the source as possible:

I felt it was important the translations should make a bridge between Acadian dramaturgy and the potentials of English-language performance. I wanted neither “museum piece” academic treatments of Acadian otherness, nor plays with all traces of their origins rewritten out of them. So, the plays have not been “adapted” except superficially [...]; they remain as Acadian in theme, form, and content as possible while being

prepared through performance workshopping as playable English texts. (Nichols, 2003, pp. iii-iv)

Jo-Anne Elder has translated the largest number of Chiasson's works: two collections of poetry and a play, as well as a third collection of poetry (*Conversations*) in collaboration with the late Fred Cogswell. Her deep emotional rapport with the work as well as her conviction that the meaning, as if contained within the words of the source text, can be revealed to the sensitive reader through "close reading," are noted in a newspaper interview where she says, "There's something really special about getting as deep as possible into the words. [...] You're reading more closely than anyone else could possibly read it. You know it better than anyone—every little nuance" (cited in "A Lover of Words," 2008, n.p.). Like Nichols, Elder's objective is the transfer of culture as if it were a contained and neutral element, though for Elder this has evolved into something less definitive and more personal:

Quand j'ai commencé à traduire la poésie acadienne, c'était vraiment pour traduire la culture, je dirais. Puis, de plus en plus, cela a changé. Moi comme lecteur, je lis quelque chose et je me dis que j'aurais aimé écrire ça moi-même, c'est tellement profond en moi et c'est ce genre de choses que je veux traduire. (cited in Mousseau, 2005, n.p.)

While both of these approaches clearly stretch the fallacy of equivalence (I cite the need to adapt for theatrical potential and Elder calls on affective transcendence to guide and justify choices), only Grady, who brought to English the collection of anecdotal essays, *Available Light*, seems to suggest more directly that the translation might go beyond source-target equivalence:

A translation is a collaboration, but not in the literal sense; more in the way this year's Stratford production of *King Lear* is a collaboration between Shakespeare and director Jonathan Miller. A translation depends for its existence on a previous work, but it must also have a life of its own, one sometimes not consciously intended by its progenitor. (Grady, 2002, n.p.)

The critics who reviewed these translations are also guided by similar assumptions about translations as true representations of

originals. Reviews most frequently simply remain silent on the question of translation. Sometimes, as in the case of George Elliot Clarke's review of Grady's *Available Light*, the translator is never even mentioned, the review simply noting that this is Chiasson's "newest work available in English translation" (G. E. Clarke, 2003, n.p.). In most other cases, however, the translator may be named, but otherwise the work is simply considered as if written by Chiasson in English. One particularly curious example of this is Meredith O'Hara's review of *Lifedream* performed in Fredericton in July 2007. She does mention that the play was translated by Elder in 2006, but then focuses on the director, Emma Tibaldo's observation that although the play is performed in English, the cast has been referencing the French version, that "[t]he subtlety of what a playwright is saying in their own language is extremely important [*sic*], so we are constantly going between the English and the French" (cited in O'Hara, 2007, n.p.). The translation/translator is not worth commenting on: the presumption is that the translator has done nothing more than pass along the work which remains an unquestioned representation of the original.

Explicit comments on the translations give voice to the same ideas expressed between the silences above. For example, Devin Crawley credits Cogswell and Elder with capturing "seamlessly" Chiasson's "metaphorical range and depth" in *Climates* (1999, n.p.), while Clarke applauds "the translators for preserving the suppleness of Chiasson's impressive ironics" (1999, n.p.). In neither of these cases, nor any other review making vague comments about the "seamlessness" of the translations, is any evidence supplied from the texts to demonstrate the reviewers actually know the French versions, so it is questionable how much these comments actually have to do with the translations and how much they are simply further laudations for the texts, reflecting assumptions that the linguistic effects present in the translations are transparent renditions of the original texts. As an example, Noel Rieder comments that "*Available Light* is written with the same flourish that won Chiasson a Governor-General's Award for poetry, and there is no lack of passionate feeling in its pages" (Rieder, 2003, n.p.). The book is never described as a translation, nor is Grady mentioned in the review (except in the bibliographic footer after the review), so while the title here,



*“Available Light,”* seems to point to the translation, in fact the reviewer has conflated source and translation, “disappearing” the translator and crediting Chiasson in effect with “writing” the English version of the essays with the same verve as he did his award-winning poetry. Sometimes there are vague suggestions that the translation could have a life of its own, but these remain at best ambiguous. For example, Michael Nowlan suggests that the translators of *Conversations* “are also distinguished individuals whose facility with language gives an important breath to Chiasson’s work” (Nowlan, 2001, n.p.). This “breath” is never described and what contribution the translators made is left to the reader’s imagination.

Behind all these approaches (the “equivalence” search for differences, the motivations of the translators, and the critical positions of the reviewers) is the presupposition that meanings and texts are stable and therefore translation is nothing more than instrumental delivery of meaning packages across equivalent linguistic boundaries (see D’Hulst, 2007, pp. 97-101; Zamora, 2002, p. 3). This is raised as well in the constant worry that “something was lost in translation,” a worry in some cases expressed by reviewers who do not know the original, but who, in having trouble harmonizing a translation with target culture expectations, fret that somehow something must be “wrong” with the new version (see Hopton, 2008; O’Hara, 2007). However, the random “errors” and other changes noted in binary comparisons motivated by these assumptions do not constitute real understanding, neither of the texts in question nor of the process of translation. While such approaches may have a useful role in casual conversation, a convenient shorthand for justifying one’s appreciation of a work read in translation, to really comprehend the process of translation and its effect on the works, one has to look at the interactions between the texts and their contexts. Despite the apparent intentions of the translators, the presentations of the published texts, and the expectations of the critics, the translations are far from “equivalent.” Chiasson in English is not the same as Chiasson in French.

## Contexts and Paratexts

The first broader consideration, of course, is the effect of the choices of what has and what has not been made accessible to an English audience. Chiasson has published at least sixteen books of poetry, created nearly thirty theatre pieces (four of which have been published), published a large range of essays, and produced a number of films and gallery expositions. Of all this material, these seven translations are a very limited reflection. Not represented are any of his films, major essays, or other collections and writing, and any sense of him as a visual artist (considered in many ways his “first” art form) is only suggested indirectly and uncritically by the reprints of his paintings used to decorate the published translations; thus, the impression is created of Chiasson as almost exclusively a poet, despite the numerous cover notes about him listing other accomplishments.

In addition to the generic skewing of Chiasson is the rather dramatic temporal effect of the translation selections. Although he has published regularly since 1974, the earliest complete volumes available in translation date only from 1996: *Cap enragé* (produced in 1996 but never published) and *Climats* (published in French in 1996). So, more than twenty years of his earlier works remain hard to find for the English reader in translation.<sup>4</sup> In those earlier years, Chiasson’s work tended to be more political, more disparaging of the Acadian cultural and economic situation. Although aspects of this politicization still come through in the later works (such as several pieces in the poem cycle “Été : Reportages” in *Climats* or “La patrie” and “Les Acadiens de Montréal” in *Brunante*), in terms of form and theme these are more easily read in universal terms, especially within the more limited context of the translations. It is as if the “English” Chiasson appears fully formed, a mature universal poet. As translator of two of the plays here, I can only admit to my complicity in this construction. In choosing which plays to translate for the collection, I retained those that, while “Acadian”

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4 Some individual poems were translated and published in regional and other anthologies before 1996, such as Fred Cogswell and Jo-Anne Elder, trans. and eds. (1990). *Unfinished Dreams: Contemporary Poetry of Acadie*. Fredericton, N.B., Goose Lane.

in flavour, I felt would most easily speak to perceived audiences in English Canada, and this meant plays where Acadianness was geographic or otherwise tamed, poeticized, and accessible. From the evidence of the other translations that have been done, it would seem similar decisions were made by the other translators, leading to a English corpus that constructs a more poetic and more reified Chiasson than that constructed by his French corpus.

The presentation of the published translation texts anticipates how the publishers understand the reception of these works in the target culture and also clearly suggests the manner in which Chiasson is re-constructed in translation. Although there are some particular differences between the dramatic and non-dramatic materials, in general the translations are introduced into the target culture by stressing the works' universality. While noting in most cases (but not all) Chiasson's Acadian origins, the texts attempt to contain any Acadian particularities as merely interesting side notes, a bit of exotic colour.

The translation of the dramatic works is a particular problem for comparison because two of the three chosen for translation (*Cap enragé* and *La vie est un rêve*) have never been published in French. Their vehicle for public reception was of course not print but their theatrical representations in the Acadian professional theatres that staged them. However, and not a little surprisingly, the translations in various ways contribute to an erasure of their theatrical potential, and therefore an erasure of their particularity in favour of a more universal reading reception. This is especially the case in *Lifedream* where virtually all traces of the play's theatre origin or stage potential are eliminated. The work is described on the back cover as a "poetic theatrical piece," and the highly thematic description that follows clearly puts the emphasis on the first adjective. It really comes across here as a poem that is somehow rather "theatrical," not the other way around. The only explicit indication that this work belongs in the theatre is the label "A Play" tucked into the top left corner of the back cover. Inside the book there is no mention of the original French production, as is the usual convention in the publication of plays, nor even a list of characters or a description of the stage setting. One is clearly invited to read *Lifedream* not as a

play for the theatre, the genre that most acutely ties literature to time and place, but perhaps as a companion for the book-length poem *Conversations* which, because of its allusion to speech, is sometimes also described as “theatrical.”

But the translations of the other two plays are not exempt from these erasures; this despite my emphasis on the relevance of these pieces to Acadian theatre (including an introductory essay by the critic David Lonergan who expanded on their theatrical context and history) and my explicit intent to create stage-ready playtexts (Nichols, 2003, p. iii), marked by the use of theatrical workshops and reading performances in the development of the scripts, explicit details about staging history and development, and the marquee publication by Playwrights Canada Press.

However, all these cannot overcome the basic problem of this publication as an anthology of five plays. Presented as a sampling representative of contemporary Acadian theatre (“The first” such sampling: Nichols, 2003, p. iii), the texts are read as more sociological than artistic, as a kind of examination of this “other” culture by way of chosen, edited, and translated examples. So, although the collection is predicated on performance of source and target texts and although actors and workshop-performances were used to develop the translations, their publication in an anthology de-emphasizes their performance potential in favour of a reading public. Even something as simple as having to purchase the entire anthology to produce one play is likely to dissuade potential production or even limit the likelihood of seeing these texts as candidates for theatrical consideration.

The translations of the non-dramatic works provide more obvious comparisons because one can see how the paratextual presentations of the publications differ between the two languages and how these construct a different author and reading.

One of the first things one notices is the frequent claim of Chiasson as part of “Canada’s” literary system, replacing or at best counter-balancing any notice of Acadian identity. For example, where the French biography and description on the back cover of *Conversations* identifies Chiasson as “né en 1946 à Saint-Simon,

en Acadie,” the biography on the back cover of the English translation lauds Chiasson as “one of Canada’s finest poets.” There are only indirect connections of Chiasson to Acadie noted on the cover: the quotation of the Governor’s General Award jury remark that the volume expresses “An Acadian version of the expression of humanity,” the affirmation that he has received the Prix France-Acadie, and the recognition that the translators for this volume also published “the first anthology of Acadian poetry in English” (*Unfinished Dreams* in 1990).

Chiasson is headlined on the back cover of *Climates* as “one of Canada’s most versatile artists.” Only in the second paragraph is there mention of Acadie: a paraphrase/translation of the opening line of the text from the French cover (“*Climats* est imprégné d’une intention d’habiter et d’être habité par un lieu, ici, l’Acadie” becomes “The poems in *Climates* are suffused with the desire to fully inhabit, and be inhabited by, a place: Acadie”). The localisation (“ici”) is deleted, Canada’s claim on the author superseding that of Acadie.

The “Canadianization” of Chiasson is only half the effect, however, as the movement from the specificity of *acadianité* is further achieved by an emphasis on these works as “universal.” The inside cover of *Beatitudes*, like the others noted above, claims Chiasson as “one of the best-known poets of the Acadian renaissance and one of Canada’s most accomplished cultural icons.” Even if one is generous in not interpreting this as subsuming the “Acadian renaissance” within a “Canadian” culture, this singular link of the author to Acadie is substantially countered by what’s on the back cover. A large, full-colour photo of Chiasson is superimposed with a quote from the *Quill & Quire* review: “An artist completely in tune with the spirit and disquiet of his time.” And below this is a description of the work as a “postmodern ‘sermon on the mount’ [...]. A meditation on what it means to be human, *Beatitudes* explores the common bonds of humanity, probing our notions of who we are and who we might become.” The generalization of Chiasson as a poet who speaks to “humanity” is very different from the “affirmation d’une Acadie moderne” that appears on the French cover.

The most striking re-construction of Chiasson in the paratextual features of the non-dramatic translations occurs on the cover of *Available Light*. The French publication features a small blurry black and white photograph of Chiasson (with very long hair: clearly from his pre-Lieutenant Governor days!) and a one-paragraph note written by the author locating his interest in the French reality of his lived Acadian experience:

J'ai toujours vécu en français. J'ai toujours vécu en Acadie. J'ai toujours vécu dans une collectivité en pensant que parler dans cette collectivité était un geste dont il faut constamment mesurer l'infinie grandeur et l'émouvante gravité, dont il faut incessamment refaire le parcours et consolider le mouvement. La langue française fait de nous les porteurs d'une vibration qui s'étend présentement à l'ensemble de la Terre : elle nous permet de voyager dans un immense vaisseau.

This rather poetic, but also very political call to individual agency within a French and, specifically, Acadian collectivity is replaced on the cover of the English version with one line: "Haunting and unforgettable meditations from one of Acadia's best-loved and Governor General's Award-winning poets": in one breath identifying the location of the author as Acadian, but clearly turning the significance of the work away from the specific and towards the universal, containing him and Acadie under the "Canadian" sign of the Governor General award winners. The universalist containment is developed in the extensive description of *Available Light* on the inside front flap. Here the emphasis is clearly on how Chiasson "ranges over an astonishingly wide array of human cultural experience," how the work is "universal in the best sense." While also "local in the deepest sense," this localness is never elaborated, except as something so broad as to be anywhere: "Haunted and haunting the pieces reveal a deep sadness and a feeling of loss, disappointment in love and life and a sustaining passion for literature and art, [reflecting] the human experience."

## **Conclusion**

The "accuracy" approach (considering the stable unified meaning in the source text and a transparent translation process) falls apart

as the two versions in each case perform different Chiassons. The *cri du cœur* of Acadian particularity in the French, becomes a safe and transcendent universalism, performing the text and author as non-threatening, as something more compatible with a pan-Canadian vision of itself. This is not a question of good or bad translation, but of the translation text functioning differently from the source text in their respective systems. If we treat the translations as transparent, “accurate” texts of equals, as the translators, critics, and publishers seemed to have assumed, then the implications on either the target or source cultures as constructed through the texts, or the shifts in Chiasson and the implications for Acadie, are overlooked. It’s not (just) the translator that becomes invisible, but the performance of the translation that recedes from view. What is also invisible in the binary treatment is the crucial hierarchical relationship between the source and target cultures, the universalization of the works effectively containing the political aspirations performed by the original in the source culture.<sup>5</sup>

So how does this case study illuminate my contention that such a disciplinary debate is a red herring? I suggest that the comparative reading of these texts is not significantly differentiated by choosing Translation Studies or Comparative Literature approaches, but rather by pursuing performative systemic potentials rather than traditional binary models.

While I agree with E.D. Blodgett’s worry that geometric metaphors distort and mislead understanding of translation and Comparative Literature (1982, p. 19), I will dare to throw yet another image into the stew. I would reason that the Canadian cultural landscape is not a double winding staircase, separate and untouching, but rather a maze of two-way carnival mirrors: we pretend the glass is clear and transparent; the flashes of the other we catch in the glass are purported to be “true,” but in fact what we are seeing is also a layering of multiple perspectives that distort

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5 See Susan Bassnett (1993, p. 20), where she elaborates on the paradox of “universal” desire in early Comparative Literature studies in particular: while laying claim to unifying national “ideas about the spirit or soul of a nation, comparisons were being made that involved [in effect] evaluating one culture higher than another.”

the image and superimpose our own reflection on the object of study, creating ever-shifting new realities.

Although Comparative Literature's resistance to the use of "translation" is based in part on avoiding the creation of unity where there is none,<sup>6</sup> that is exactly what the Canadian Comparative Literature "centrist" approach (Mohan, 1989, p. 35), using non-translated texts and a set of binary assumptions to study English and French literature, has done. Just as Ibsen is nearly seen as an "English" playwright to English readers because of his dominant presence in translation, the impression that Chiasson becomes an "English" Canadian poet is constructed through the universalization of his works as a result of translations and criticism that erase difference.

On the other side of the coin, there is the confidence that Translation Studies has simply gone beyond its need for Comparative Literature except, perhaps as "a valued but subsidiary subject area" (Bassnett, 1993, p. 160). However, Jonathan Culler argues succinctly how that, given the study of literature as a transnational phenomenon,

[t]he intertextual nature of meaning—the fact that meaning lies in the differences between one text or one discourse and another—makes literary study essentially, fundamentally comparative, [producing] a situation in which comparability depends on a cultural system, a general field that underwrites comparison, [...]. Comparative Literature [...] is the right place, especially today, for the study of literature as a discursive practice. (2006, pp. 243 and 246)

Translation Studies also works across, and through, literary boundaries and, as André Lefevere observed even ten years before Culler, "Comparative Literature may engage in a positive

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6 "If texts written in various different languages are read in translation, then one result of this can be reductive, in that they can all be made to appear to be part of the same literary system. [...] This has nothing to do with the quality of a translation; it has everything to do with the way in which readers read, absorbing translated texts into the patterns of familiarity of their own literary system." (Bassnett, 1993, p. 45)



and productive reflection on the intercultural phenomenon of the first magnitude known as translation” (1995, p. 10).

So the postulates that Comparative Literature is poisoned by translation or that Translation Studies does not need Comparative Literature are red herrings because both ignore that the critic, whether reading the comparative texts in different languages or not, with or without awareness of cultural differences, comprehends them with one soul.<sup>7</sup> Whether comparative work is done on “comparable” texts in one or multiple languages, on different versions (rewritings) of the “same” text in the same language, or across translations of a text in multiple languages, upholding the Comparative Literature/Translation Studies debate at the expense of seeing the more systemic issues that are common to both fields is to risk missing the point and lose our time in disciplinary furniture arranging.

Granted there may be departmental and therefore fiduciary and professional costs in resisting the definition and defence of disciplinary frontiers, but whether it is a question of the viability of a department of Translation Studies or Comparative Literature or of a program ensconced in a national-language department or simply of an individual scholar of whatever disciplinary background investigating trans-cultural questions of representation in literature or through other media, the idea is to keep our eye on the real game, on what both Comparative Literature *and* Translation Studies can tell us, can give us in terms of tools and perspectives. The epigraph at the beginning of this paper spoke of the “profession” (singular); Saussy may have been addressing Comparative Literature colleagues in the context of his introduction, but in the context of this Translation Studies journal the immediate readers will read themselves. The misunderstanding is intentional. My point is that our profession should not be limited to one or the other of these disciplinary boxes, but should attempt larger, broader understandings, despite

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7 This is the “problematics of hermeneutics” (Tötösy de Zepetnek, 2003, p. 13), the solution for which Tötösy proposes his particular methodology, the “systemic and empirical approach,” and a reorientation to comparative *cultural* studies.

the fact that these understandings fly in the face of received and comfortable clichés about Canadian cultural constructions.

Indeed as Acadie can be said to have risen beyond territorial angst to create a resourceful post/hyper-national identity, our scholarly work too can be inspired to reach beyond the boundaries of our affiliated disciplines in order to help foster real and dynamic understanding of our country and its diverse peoples by training reviewers, readers and ourselves to see beyond translation as transparent conduits of representational originals.

MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY

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**ABSTRACT: When the Same Isn't Similar: Herménégilde Chiasson in English** — Out of Herménégilde Chiasson's many French publications, only seven are available in English translation. While these translations are very conservative and consistent in their attempt to transcribe "accurately" the source texts, a closer study reveals the fallacy of this approach in terms of understanding either the texts or their implications for the reading of cultures. Other than generally minor errors or compromises, the translations are "faithful" to the sources, textually, but this is hardly significant or sufficient, other than in reinforcing clichés about Canadian binary nationalism. However, the participation

in different literary systems, their paratextual presentations, the particular selectivity of these works over others in Chiasson's corpus, and the traditional critical reactions all point to the construction of a very different, more passive and "universalized" Acadian author in English. A "multipolar" approach, borrowed from Comparative Literature and Translation Studies, means these differences can be revealed, explained, and understood. Even though the results may not suit a comfortable view of Canadian society, the resistance to the erasure of difference is an important role for our disciplines in training better readers, who are more open to difference and multiplicity in cultural production.

**RÉSUMÉ : Lorsque le même n'est pas pareil : Herménégilde Chiasson en anglais** — Malgré la production littéraire abondante de Herménégilde Chiasson, seulement sept de ses œuvres ont été traduites en anglais. Bien que ces traductions soient très conservatrices et s'accordent pour reproduire les textes sources avec « précision », une étude plus poussée révèle les limites de cette approche quant à la compréhension des originaux ou de leurs implications culturelles. Exception faite des erreurs ou des compromis mineurs, les traductions restent « fidèles », sur le plan linguistique, aux textes sources. Mais le critère de la fidélité au texte source n'est guère significatif ou suffisant, sinon qu'il consolide les clichés concernant le soi-disant nationalisme binaire du Canada. Cependant, la présence de ces textes dans différents systèmes littéraires, leurs présentations paratextuelles, la sélection de ces œuvres plutôt que d'autres qui font partie du corpus de Chiasson et la réception critique traditionnelle, tous ces éléments font apparaître la construction d'un auteur acadien très différent, plus passif et « universel » en anglais. L'approche « multipolaire », empruntée à la littérature comparée et à la traductologie, avance que ces différences peuvent être révélées, expliquées et comprises, même si les conclusions risquent d'aller à l'encontre de la vision confortable de la société canadienne. Résister à l'effacement de la différence est une responsabilité que doivent assumer nos disciplines afin de former des lecteurs plus ouverts à la différence et à la multiplicité de la production culturelle.

**Keywords:** Herménégilde Chiasson, Comparative Literature, literary Translation Studies, Canadian national imaginary

GLEN NICHOLS

**Mots-clés** : Herménégilde Chiasson, littérature comparée,  
traductologie littéraire, imaginaire national canadien

**Glen Nichols**  
Mount Allison University  
Drama Studies Program  
151a Main Street  
Sackville (New Brunswick) E4L 1C7 Canada  
[gnichols@mta.ca](mailto:gnichols@mta.ca)