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While dreaming, while writing (excerpt) by Max Alhau

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Patrick Williamson
While dreaming, while writing
(excerpt)

Max Alhau
En rêvant en écrivant

We add tenderness to sail by dead reckoning. The sky is vast, and drives us forward. Weapons buried, fleeces ripped off the flock, we abandon ourselves to incoherence by weaving in the air words which delight us and, in our elation, we squander this friable slice of words between existence and death where sand and waters cover up our footsteps. The gods welcome us when we dawdle on remote roads, and watch over what is no longer. We think we recognize them in spite of everything, the light reminding us of earlier worlds we freed ourselves from, our silence, enclosed in the pit of a world where birth and death no longer have their place.

Commentary

The French poet Max Alhau was born in Paris in 1936. He was a professor of modern literature and *chargé de mission* for poetry at the University of Paris-Nanterre. His discovery of the Alps and its landscapes shaped his writing into a celebration of wide-open spaces and the unity between man and the world. At a certain point in his poetic journey, Alhau banished the “I” from his writing to speak on behalf of all those in whom he recognizes himself. He writes lyrical and humanist poetry and while death is still present; it is seen as one with the universe. Alhau’s poetry is a constant exploration of his metaphysical reflection.

I first met Alhau back in the early 1990s, as we are both members of French translation journal *La Traductière*’s editorial committee. We have worked together on translations of his work over the years, some of which published in *La Traductière* and in an artists’ book for Editions Transignum. In the late 1990s, he asked me to translate *En rêvant en écrivant* [While dreaming, while writing] in order to send it to a publisher in India. The project did not come to fruition. The English poem published here is part of a larger transcreation project.

The main problem with Alhau’s work has always been how to transfer the more abstract aspects into English. I applied a formal equivalence approach at the time of the initial translation, with a certain amount of reformulation and syntax inversion so it read more naturally in the target language. Even so, the verse patterns, line breaks and rhetorical structure of the French was hard to move away from. The language is fairly straightforward, but has allusions that prove difficult to render engagingly. I was not entirely satisfied with my translation, and then became involved in other projects, as well as my work as a financial services translator and a translation trainer. I came across the translation again last year and decided a completely fresh approach, along the lines of transcreation or even expanded translation, which was required to bring out its essence: more impactful vocabulary and a complete changing of syntax, less questioning than in the source text, and more emphasis on the story aspect.

The poem starts: *La rivière n’en finit pas/de descendre presque immobile/et nous de nous interroger/sur le sens de*

cette dérive/alors que nous voyons/le mouvement contrarier/le voyage. I started by moving away from the format of short verses with their specific line breaks, in order to change the pace. My translation became: “The river goes on and on descending/almost motionless and we are forever/asking ourselves about the meaning of/this drift whereas we see the movement/impedes the journey.” This form was serendipity in part as I no longer had the original Word files, and the scanned text emerged as compact sections of block text, or disjointed. I was paradoxically able to see this journey aspect of the poem more clearly, as well as Alhau’s focus on landscapes and open spaces. I then revisited it entirely, discarding sections, and including elements from elsewhere.

I wanted to recount the excerpt from *En rêvant en écrivant* in a situated tale, but one that was not too vague nor too detailed, hence I retained the “flocks” and “weapons,” but not the verse about the wood (*le bois...*). I toyed with keeping his images of houses and harvests elsewhere in the poems, but decided against this, as they would distract. I also wanted to place the reader in a more past time-centric mode, hence my retaining the image of gods watching over the travelers on the roads (*Quels dieux nous accueillent...*). This approach dictated my subsequent selection of verses and pruning, and so the text evolved. The stanza “*Entre l’existence...*” [“between existence and death”] was crucial as it includes key words in Alhau’s work: *mots* [words], *friable* [friable], *sable* [sand] and *eaux* [water], all of which refer to the temporality of our existence, where the “sand and waters cover up our footsteps.” This lies at the heart of the poet’s exploration. My selection of “sand” and “waters” also serves the purpose of emphasizing it is a river journey. However, I did not employ notions related to the desert (a common image in French poetry), as it was extraneous to the atmosphere I was creating, and I was striving for concision. Indeed, “The sky is vast” characterizes the horizons in both desert and river/delta landscapes.

In French writing authors often include questions, rhetorical for the most part. Alhau’s poems are no exception. One of the rules I follow as a translator is to turn these into statements. I thus broke up the questioning here into shorter sentences in order to turn it into affirmation, make the poem more active,

and draw the reader into the journey. The questions also have a sonority in their repetition: *Quels dieux nous accueillent...? Quel goût à la neige...? Qui nous répond...?* and I wanted to reproduce this with the “we,” which also reflects Alhau’s use of *nous* (*nous dilapidons...* [we squander], *quand nous nous atardons...*[when we dawdle], *nous rappelant...*[reminding us]). I thus maintain the pace of such interrogation. Moreover, the poem lends itself very well to extending this into alliteration with “we” (/wɪˈj/) and the /wɛ/ in “weapons,” “welcome” and also in “words,” “world,” and so forth. Lastly, Alhau switches to the *tu* [you] in the last stanza of the French text, but I adjusted the translation of its last two lines to bridge this gap between *tu* to *nous* [we] and make it all-inclusive.

Source text:

En rêvant en écrivant (excerpt)

La rivière n’en finit pas
de descendre presque immobile
et nous de nous interroger
sur le sens de cette dérive
alors que nous voyons
le mouvement contrarier
le voyage.

[...]

Tu passes au crible
les villes et les bosquets.
Tu joins à tes suppliques
ce qu’il faut de tendresse
pour naviguer à l’estime.
Le ciel demeure trop vaste pour toi
la terre bien à l’écart de tes pas.
Toute existence est mésaventure
espace offert à la blancheur.

D’un trait de plume
l’oiseau nomme sa liberté.
[...]

Les armes ont été enterrées
les laines arrachées au troupeau.
Nous nous abandonnons à nos incohérences
en tissant dans l'air
les mots qui nous ravissent
et nous dilapidons dans notre allégresse
le bois qui n'a pas encore été rentré.

Entre l'existence et la mort
se situe cette part friable de mots
où le sable et les eaux
recouvrent nos pas nos rêves.
Quels dieux nous accueillent
quand nous nous attardons
sur des routes à l'écart
afin de surveiller ce qui n'a plus cours
et que nous croyons reconnaître malgré tout?

Quel goût à la neige
pour qui parcourt le désert?
Qui nous répond
lorsque nous parlons de guingois
si ce n'est la lumière
nous rappelant des terres antérieures
que la mémoire s'efforce de renier

Passer au-delà des paroles
se dépouiller jusqu'à effacer sa nudité
cela tu le sais: tu ne renies pas
les peurs les faillites les désespoirs
et tant de maux
mais tu approuves la clémence
de dieux sans cesse traqués.
Tu n'as pas été plus loin que tes perspectives.
Tu as seulement tiré parti
des fleuves des champs des landes.
Tu t'es délivré de ton silence
pour t'enfermer au creux d'un monde
où la naissance et la mort n'ont plus leur place.

[...]