

METAMORPHOSES

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REVIEW: HENRI DROGUET, *CLATTERS (BOUCANS)*. Translated from the French by Henri Droguet and Alexander Dickow. Afterword by Alexander Dickow, OHM Editions, 2014, 45 pages.

Henri Droguet is the author of eleven full-length collections of poems, all published, as we learn in the Afterword, by Gallimard, the most prestigious publishing house in France. Yet “Droguet is not as familiar a face in French literature as one might expect,” says the co-translator and presenter of this little volume, Alexander Dickow. He lives in St.-Malo, far from the center of the French literary scene (Paris), and rarely gives public readings. He “inhabits the persona of the ‘outsider’. . . the recluse.” And, Dickow argues, “The fate of a literary loner is to be *misrecognized*.” (32-33.) Hence this book, the first translation of his work into English: let Americans recognize him for the important poet that he is, and the particular *kind* of poet that he is. Rather than trying to present a “representative” sampling of his work, this collection gives us a concentrated poetic effort: the eleven poems in the chapbook *Boucans*, dated from December 8th, 2008 to March 13th, 2009, with a “bonus poem” not in *Boucans* dated October 26th, 2009 and four more bonus poems on the excellent poetry site www.raintaxi.com, the non-profit that sponsors the publisher, OHM editions. With considerable knowledge, insight and authority, in his twelve-page afterword, “Henri Droguet: Rara Avis”, Dickow situates Droguet precisely in the landscape of contemporary French poetry—with interesting comparisons to the great German Paul Celan—and defines, as well as an essay can, the nature of his highly original work. In this short review, however, I will turn to the poems in this book as I read them. The bilingualism of the edition and the collaborative translation invite us to do so in both languages.

The eleven poems in this little collection are not easy. The book requires slow reading and re-reading: it is one of the few, to use Francis Bacon’s famous phrase, “to be chewed and digested.” The motto of its publisher on the title page fits perfectly: “OHM editions. The ohm is a measure of resistance. ‘The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully.’” Hardly the usual maxim of American publishers, whether large or small, and for that OHM deserves the praise and support of people who love poetry. Another unusual—and refreshing—aspect of the book is its frank recognition and description, in Alexander Dickow’s informative Afterword, of the slow, back-and-forth collaborative process engaged in by

the American translator and French poet, here his co-translator.

Droguet has a large vocabulary, even for a poet. He plays with words, often recondite ones, and with their sounds, in a way particularly difficult to render in English. At first reading, I wondered how on earth the translators were going to do the beginning of “*Autres jardins*,” for example. But Dickow-Droguet’s translation makes it look easy. The poem begins: *Pitre bourreau marionette / le parapentiste au parapet / chante l’hysope et l’ysopet / le fromental et l’escourgeon / se tait s’escampe à son plongeon / glorieusement ran tan plan plane. . .*” This reviewer, who rarely uses a dictionary when reading French, guessed the rare verb *escamper* meant to run away (*prendre la poudre d’escampette* is not rare and *foutre le camp* is common slang) but frankly hadn’t a clue about *ysopet*, *fromental* or *escourgeon*, still less as to how the translators could convincingly convey that sound-pattern. Here’s the beginning of Dickow-Droguet’s “Other Gardens”:

Buffoon executioner puppet
 The paraglider at the parapet
 Sings hyssop and ysopet
 Rye grass and autumn barley
 Goes quiet scampers off in a dive
 Gloriously *drum rum rum* glides

The odd words are all there, even if some are far more common in English, the ragged 3-4 beat lines give a rough equivalent of the original strongly-rhythmed irregular *octosyllabes* (line 2 has 9), the rough rhymes are similar, and the English poem *feels* like the French one. Above all, here and in every poem in this volume, the translations all read like poems in English, not like translations—this despite the fact that every one of them is a precise rendering of the French poem, not, as sometimes happens, the translator’s “impression” of the poem or his “version” of it. Nor, as happens more often than translators care to admit or reviewers realize, a faulty rendering due to insufficient knowledge of the source language.

Instead of describing Droguet’s work (as Dickow does so well) and the translations in this volume, it would be more useful, I think, to present the following short poem in full for the reader to appreciate. It may be a bit darker than most of his poems—some have a certain exuberance which is lacking here—but not much, and it has all Droguet’s usual barren, wild strangeness, a strangeness of vocabulary, syntax, image and vision, all of which seem to me equally present in the English and

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French version of the poem.

PASSAGE À L'OBSCUR

*Hors les boucans
du sommeil on courait
les bois mirés mordus des chemins transis
d'averses boréales
quelque animal invisible jouissait
dans une enclave
là-haut la grive philomèle ponctuée
enchaine inlassablement les motifs
un chien déchire un poumon de jument*

*la mémoire plombée
dépourrit dans les langues*

PASSAGE INTO DARKNESS

Far from the clatter
of sleep fleeing
mirrored eroded woods chill paths
by boreal gales
some invisible animal was rutting
in an enclave
high up the spotted mistle thrush
tirelessly weaves its leitmotif
a dog digs out a mare's lung

leaden memory
undecays in tongues

This is strange English: “undecays in tongues,” for example, and strange French, too; *dépourrir* is a neologism. (Actually the French is slightly stranger than the English. At first I thought the translators might even have kept that extreme oddness by simply rendering *ponctuée* as “punctuated,” for example, but that would be incomprehensible and Droguet, somehow, is not.) It's not just the words, though. There is a strange, original poetic mind at work here, a universe away from the refined language, irreproachable sentiments and ultimately banal vision

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that abound in official American poetry. This elegant little chapbook is an excellent introduction to a different world.