

Jacques Darras

John Scotus Eriugena at Laon  
& Other Poems

*Translation and Afterword by  
Richard Sieburth*

WORLD POETRY BOOKS



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## Vincent Van Gogh Reworks Fran Hals's Portrait of Descartes

I walked around all morning  
canvas hat upon my head  
your small book  
*Metaphysical Meditations*  
in my pocket  
the reach of the sun is elastic  
its reach is that of light  
Descartes have you grasped this?  
its reach is the extension of light  
Scotus Eriugena the Irishman was right  
there is the light that casts light  
and then there is the light that lights up from within  
I undress landscapes  
I strip them down to their kernel of sun  
see how the grass twists and turns  
see how the peaches on the trees  
twist and turn around themselves  
see how the atoms are yellow  
focus on this glassful of light  
swallow down your solar gulp of light  
swallow it for my sake  
the spleen of Harlingen whales  
cannot reproduce the translucence of the olive  
nor can Sweden's cod oil offer an ersatz

Descartes let me make you a denizen of the Camargue  
I shall show you Galilee turning sunwise  
within the wheel of the sun  
the mistral wind is picking up  
I shall attach my painter's stool  
to the umbrella pine  
I shall strap myself to my stool  
Ulysses now singing with the sirens  
listen to how the waves unfurl  
listen to how the raft and the canvas  
kick up a racket amid a sea of glass  
tie yourself to the mast  
let me show you the ultimate forge  
what you call the vortex  
the funnel of the light the syphon  
follow me old mariner  
fear not  
matter is but a denser shape of mind  
that cleaves to the further reach of thought  
look at the afterlife of your little book  
a heavy ingot of solar sweat  
unstick its pages each from each  
I've no idea what it is you said  
that the substances are two in number  
my dear alchemist light is everywhere  
light is the sieve of matter  
by day we are smattered by light  
by night we are charcoaled by light

our solar bodies are toasted by light  
and at the boiling point of death  
we eventually evaporate  
cooked in that great cuisine  
which we season with thyme  
gods of time  
painting is the music of matter  
painting is the song of matter  
its turpentine derived from northern pine  
its northern linseed oil fixing  
the floods of southern sun  
René come down from your Frisia  
come run with me into the blindness of the light  
come listen with me to the very first blast of the motor  
of the world



## I Maye

Not a day goes by without the image of a river crossing my mind. Whether it be in the middle of a Parisian crowd or sitting alone in front of my computer writing, a river occurs to me, unannounced. At the pace of the Meuse or the Escaut. Sometimes the river is the young Rhine trickling forth from the Appenzell, coursing along its rocky bed. It's rarely the Loire, and almost never the Rhône. Sometimes it so happens that the Rhine turns up again, with its stretches of well-tended vineyards dropping waterward at an angle of almost ninety degrees, near Bacharach. An hour later, a brief greeting to the bust of Victor Hugo, hidden behind a privet hedge at Bingen. I walk down Paris's rue de Lille, parallel to the Seine, and now it is the little Aa, the Maye, or the Authie that pass before me without anybody noticing. Which doesn't bother me in the least. And apparently it doesn't bother the Seine either. One could even say that, sensing my presence from the other side of the apartment buildings that line the quai Voltaire and that bear the mark of such eminently and contradictory Parisian wits as Baudelaire and Voltaire, the Seine has delegated its younger sisters to me—distant vassals whose job it is to reassure me in my Northernness.

I have often written of my deep leanings—my tropisms—towards the rivers of the North. As for other rivers, its only at their mouths that I'm eager to rejoin them. Take the Tagus, for example: I'll seek it out in Lisbon, rather than in Toledo. As for

the Dordogne, which I have never followed in its prehistoric course, I'll always see its deep green waters between the red and yellow houses of Bergerac. My rivers attach me to the North. They're the liquid *laisses* of ancient French epics; they're women who have been released from the small drudgeries of femininity. Free to seduce or not to seduce, they experience as much pleasure from distancing themselves from men as they do from setting out to the open sea. They have my vote as an aristocrat of democracy. There's nothing that might force them to remain within the confines of domesticity; to win them over involves accompanying them in all their twists and turns. Including the head-spinning smell of meadowsweet, the most captivating of scents in all of nature. So, whether it be the rue de Lille or the rue de Beaune (notice that I am never fully abandoning the old duchy of Burgundy), I never vacillate when a river crosses my path. The image of the street in all its depth is never blurred by the sudden transparency that descends upon it for a split second at most. She caresses me, I caress her, she bathes me, I swim her, and this brief amorous encounter disappears in a flash. This is the deep secret of rivers: they cross through us only inasmuch as they flow in the direction of our lives. They're time turned to water, sometimes slipping ahead of us like a materialization of the soul. They require no particular mood. To gather them in merely requires us to accept things as they come.

Of all the rivers, it's the Meuse that suits me best. The Meuse whose humor and motion I'd gladly equal in a poem. A symphony's *andante*, the Meuse, by Schubert or Brahms. I also

love Schumann but feel he'll end up tossing himself into the Rhine, frustrated that his fingers will never manage to articulate those notes that convey man's perfect concordance with water. Schumann suffers from chronic crises of angularity. Having spent his scenes of childhood in foreign lands, he graduated too quickly into the driving forces of industrial energy. Just listen to the splendid second movement of his second symphony. Everything that's curved lies forever out of his reach. Curves, the Meuse. Who's the true musician of the Meuse? I hesitate. Don't remind of the cement factories of Ougrée or Huy. I long made an exception for Huy in my imaginary book of images, feeling a kind of kinship to its resonance. Until the day I made my way to Dinant in Belgium (its name deported from Brittany) where the hammers of the Dinanderies were diverted into scouring up the earth and punching out copperware. I prefer the Meuse when she leaves Namur, as slow as a russet roe in autumn, stopping to dip its neck to graze at the last blades of grass among the yellowed poplar leaves. The Ardennes lying in the distance, a clash of forest cymbals. The Meuse flowing on, dreaming of the winter spates that her tributaries are slowly preparing for her. The breathing of an animal, addressed both to body and eye. Her shores broadening out toward Germany and Holland after the final pass through Liège. She picnics with herself, and this evening, at nightfall, she'll dine at 's-Hertogenbosch, where Hieronymus Bosch will court her with his devilish brotherhood of maskers. The Meuse admits of everything, tolerates everything, is amused by everything, even by the fantastic imagery conjured up by her passage. All the fevers the flesh is heir to, all



## To Augustine: On Paradise

### 1

It's likely that this letter will not reach you, given all the disturbances contributing the current instability of the Empire. From here down to the Mediterranean, the roads are no longer secure. In addition, I'm not certain whether you're living in Carthage or in Numidia at this point.

As for me, I'm a citizen of a distant northern shore of Gaul, where time is told by the clepsydra of the tides. The actual year matters little to me. I have not consulted the calendar in ages, no longer aware of the era in which we live.

Given the heavy flow of nomads crossing the strait that separates us from Britain—every week I see them below my window, urging on all their livestock and all their kin with the downcast resignation of people who no longer exactly know what it is they are fleeing—winters, famines?—I imagine that you too no doubt shall soon be visited by them.

The less adventurous among them make their way no further than our small inland streams—into that territory whose wealthy absentee owners have for years lived in Rome, and where, according to the latest far-traveling rumors, the whole area is now experiencing looting, rape, and slaughter.



## 2

Things here, to tell the truth, are comparatively calm. The share-croppers are gradually accepting their new masters and are adapting well, given what they are now learning about unsuspected methods of husbandry. All these farms were falling into rack and ruin, so it's a good thing that someone is bringing them back to life.

Sometimes I set off from my house—less than a league away from where the cliff rises into a headland of white chalk from which one can survey the large island facing us, as flat as a pancake upon the waters—in order to walk among the inland communities on certain autumn afternoons.

I take great pleasure in hearing the contrasts of consonants that mark the new names with which these people have baptized their settlements. All their rich suffixes—*ham, hem, thun, ghen*—supply the surrounding slopes with a kind of lilt that works well with the whipping wind.

I'm beginning to pick up some of the rudiments of the language spoken by the colonies on the far side of the strait—the Angles, as they call themselves. For a few hours every week, I have been making myself into an Angle, thanks to the services of a lady tutor who is quite amused by my brave attempts to make the tip of my tongue whistle against the cliff of my teeth, in imitation of their wind.

One day I'll perhaps become fluent enough in their meandering grammar to allow my ears to grasp the astonishing poems that this people carries within the scrolls and coffers of its memory. There is one poem I especially like—my tutor provided me with a rough summary of it in my language. It speaks of a monster upon a moor, a dark bloodthirsty beast.

## 3

A certain Alaric, I hear, is said to have sacked Rome for several days. Among all this ground-fog racing toward us like some incoming winter of mankind, among all these rain-bursts breaking over hill and dale, it's a true miracle that I should have come across your book—a blessing for all my days!

As a youth, raised by my direct contact with Nature, I was a pagan. Although I never observed the formal rites or sacrifices of the official cults of the Empire, I long believed in the powers and multiple shapes of the Divine.

A child of the forest, a gobbler of blackberries, a whittler of bows and arrows, a great spotted woodpecker inching his way upward through the sway of branches in adoration of the sky, I was a human tree. But one day the color green no longer sufficed me. I left the selvages of forests behind for the sands where ships go down to the sea.







*Afterword*

in the river  
north of the future  
I cast my net

— *Paul Celan*

JACQUES DARRAS WAS BORN IN 1939 in Bernay-en-Ponthieu, a village near the English Channel not far from the mouth of the Maye—the small river that provides the title for his eight-volume experimental epic, *La Maye*. His first immersion into English came during his graduate studies at the University of Edinburgh, where he wrote his M.A. thesis on the British Poets of the Great War, an apt topic for a young Frenchman who had grown up among the killing fields of Picardy. Returning to Paris, he began work on his doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne, later published in English as *Joseph Conrad and the West: Signs of Empire*. Having acquired the requisite academic qualifications, he was appointed in 1969 to a teaching position in English and American literature at the recently founded “regional” University of Picardy in Amiens, where he would eventually become the dean of its School of Foreign Languages (1984-1999).

At the same time, Darras was establishing himself as one of the most active translators from the English in France. In

pronounce or recite—all valences of Darras’s poetic commerce with his waterways. The riparian relation of river to bank issues in the next group of poems into the littoral margins of sea and strand. Entitled “Sea Choirs of the Maye,” these are songs of the shore, of the coast, of the estuary, of the tidal pulse of wave upon seabord. Here Darras resorts to one of his most characteristic rhetorical figures—anaphora. Its repetitive iteration of the same syntactic or acoustic unit at the outset of each line serves to create a drone-like series of layered chords as trance-inducing as the shimmering monotonies of Philip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach*.

The prose epistle that ensues, “To Augustine: On Paradise,” is spoken by a pagan fifth-century functionary of Roman Gaul who resides on the shores of the Channel during a period in which the Empire has been beset by invasions and migrations. Intellectually curious, he is at once intrigued and repelled by Augustine’s most recent book, *The City of God*—which, as he sees it, is a typical example of a “southron” Christianity (as Bunting would call it) whose well-lit and well-regimented urban paradise leaves no room for the sylvan wildness and darkness of the north. “To Augustine” takes its place in volume three of *La Maye* alongside Darras’s various versions from the English (Shakespeare, Bunting, Mackay Brown, MacDiarmid), here repurposed into a series of dramatic monologues performed at various northern margins (Dover, Calais, Cumbria, the Orkneys, the Shetlands): as in the work of Pound, the boundary between (autobiographical) persona poem and

translation remains porous. This is further illustrated by the following poem, “Reveries” (also known as “Les Oiseuses,” after the lazy stream of the Oise), which is my translation of Darras’s translation into modern French of a thirteenth-century *fratrasie* by Phillipe de Rémi, sieur de Beaumanoir, cited by Eluard as perhaps the first example of surrealist poetry in French. My selection closes with the short (medieval) *ballade*, “The Rustle of the Pages” and with the ludic *envoi*, “Position of the Poem.”

In my translations I have tried to listen for the English that lies latent in Darras’s French. As *La Maye* moves toward its conclusion in volume eight, the poem bursts into a series of quatrains in English celebrating the recent archaeological discoveries of flints and jaws and antler points and arrows in the underwater muck of Doggerland—that area of chalky tundra submerged beneath the North Sea that once connected the peninsula of Great Britain to what are now the shores of the Netherlands and the western coast of Germany. A habitat rich in human habitation during the Mesolithic period, the combined waters of the Rhine, the Scheldt and the Thames all coursed through its Channel River into the Atlantic. Doggerland: a sunken Atlantis—or a Greater Picardy—where the futures of French and English once lay conjoined. Here it is, in Darras’s English:

I can read Doggerland under fathoms of seas  
I can read deer-tongue in lichen greenish waves  
I can uncipher flashes at tiny light-year-houses  
Now I will go Channel-wise to refuel the future

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