

*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

Position of the Poem

it's seated
knees bent
sees the world
sees the wild white clover
sees a red tile roof
sees a square of grey sky
doesn't see the world
it's a world unto itself
it can change place
can get up
could leave the table
could venture into the kitchen
among the honed knives
among the fanged forks
among the scalding pots
cutting a slice of the world
sinking its fine teeth into the world
seeing the world with its fingers
counting the world on a keyboard
writing a score
a score called the world
a score in sol minor
in sky major
in sharpened tiles
in white clover

with bent knees
the keys black
but don't strike the keys
the poem's seated
the poem's now engaged in writing
don't speak to the poem
"do not disturb"
no this isn't English
this poem's writing in French
the keyboard
"made in Germany"
an Adler keyboard
but the poem's French
obvious
from the way it's seated
not on the world
but in its armchair
one sees the armchair
one sees a corner of the world
but also the armchair
especially the armchair
a traditional Picard easy chair
of woven straw
a peasant easy chair
there are no more peasants
those left prefer formica
the statistics do not lie
today's peasants prefer formica

statistics aren't poetry
poetry's a false statistic
statistics are a waiting room
awaiting their turn
statistics in need of a doctor
watch out the poem's about to get up
the statistics undergo treatment
watch out the poem's now getting up
don't get in its way
the poem's now emerged
leaving its armchair behind
in its place one now sees what it was looking at
one sees white clover in flower
one sees a red tile roof
a square of gray sky
one sees the world
one suddenly sees the poem pass by
one sees it pass from its place
from the place where it's seated
it doesn't see us
it doesn't see we're seated in its place
it doesn't see it's seen
the poem's outside
beyond the pane
one doesn't know what it sees
but one will when it returns
the poem's back
it's not going anywhere

no known poem has ever left
for good
for ever
which would create a void
though a total homebody
the poem won't sit still
turns this way and that
turns upon itself
watch out the poem's about to return
here it comes
looking like it's taken the air
inspired
it bends its knees
slumps into its easy chair
the straw bottom creaks
posing its fingers on the keyboard
it presses the blacks the ivories
what a delight
nothing livelier
than the music
struck from keys
come hear

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 1977,