

THE ART OF CRUNCHING

AQUARIUM

In schemrig groen stukje van de oceaan
zweeft als een schim het zeedier, transparant;
zich zelf vergetend, ziet door glazen wand
de mensengeest 't ontzaglijk wonder aan,

hoe 't zieltje, dat in elk trillend orgaan,
teer van doorschijnendheid, onzichtbaar brandt,
't vreemd, glazen vogeltje zijn fijn als kant
geweven vleugeltje golvend doet slaan.

Zo drijft mijn vers in mij, zelf deel van God;
en iets, dat met verstand en weten spot,
verbergt zich in kunst'ge doorschijnendheid;

en wie dit leest, voelt, voor één ogenblik
verplaatst buiten de grenzen van zijn Ik,
trillen 't mysterie van zijn eeuwigheid.

This poem by the Dutch poet J.A. Dèr Mouw is so jam-packed syntactically in the octet that my first attempt at translation went astray in line four, where I first thought 'the enormous wonder' was the marine animal itself, which made nonsense of the rest of the octet. So here is, I think, a prose rendition of the sense only:

*In a dim [dusky, vague, blurry] green (small) piece of the ocean
the sea [marine] creature drifts [floats, hovers], transparent, like a ghost
[shade, shadow]
the human spirit, forgetting itself, gazes through a glass wall at the immense
[enormous, huge] wonder//*

*{the wonder of} how the (small) soul – which, frail with translucency, burns
invisibly – causes the small wing (fine as lace) of the strange glass (small)
bird to beat in wavelike fashion.*

*So does my verse drift in me, itself (myself?) a part of God
and something that scoffs at reason and knowledge
conceals itself in ingenious [skilful, clever] translucency;*

*and whoever reads this – transposed for one moment
outside the boundaries of his I –
feels the mystery of his eternity quivering.*

And here is the first accepted draft:

AQUARIUM (1)

In a small scrap of ocean, green and dim,
drifts the transparent creature like some ghost;
through a glass wall the human spirit, lost
to itself, takes th' enormous wonder in,

how, frail with translucency, the small soul
that in each organ burns without a trace,
now makes the slight wing, fine as woven lace,
of the strange glass bird beat with wavelike roll.

So drifts my verse in me, a part of God;
and something that knowledge and reason mocks
hides in ingenious translucency;

and he who reads this, for one moment, feels
quiv'ring, beyond his I's constraining shield,
the mystery of his eternity.

The problems I had noticed, apart from the syntax and the attempt to get some sort of convincing rhyme scheme going in English (something I always start with, one stanza at a time) were the three diminutives of stanza two, the fact that many of the Dutch words were longer in English (e.g. *zeedier* = marine animal); and that I seem to need more articles in English (a/the) and this upsets the stress patterns.

As always, I showed this to a friend. The comments were very much to the point.

- 1) The compressed, crammed-full feeling of *Dèr Mouw* is lost. I have smoothed everything out and thus lost the tone. Exception: last stanza.
- 2) The diminutives convey both vulnerability and the sense of the enormity of the things taking place in this micro-universe
- 3) Line 10 is a syllable too long [in fact not, but it is out of balance and thus appears to be too long]

The criticism that was the most damning was that the translation did not feel like *Dèr Mouw*. So I decided to try and crunch the first eight lines as much as possible.

It didn't work. I had a bad day – something translators ought to own up to more readily than they tend to do.

I was worried about reducing '*zeedier*' to 'creature' or 'being'. 'Marine animal' is a poetic impossibility and sounds biologically clinical. So I tried ending line two with 'creature of the sea', making the human spirit be 'freed/of itself...'.

But that changes two Dutch syllables into five English ones, which is hardly compression, except that the rest of the four lines were crunched into impossible English, and I couldn't find a rhyme for 'drifts', now at the end of line 1. So I shifted this 'creature of the sea' to the end of line 1 and used 'sees' as a rhyme at the end of line 4. This solved nothing, and left me with a lot of verbs too far to the right in clauses, a typical sign of bad translation into English. So I left the poem where it was for the day, and slept on it.

The next day I found solutions for the first stanza that compressed without crunching. I abandoned the 'sea' of line two – what else but a sea creature could be in a scrap of ocean in an aquarium?! – and I found the adjectives at the end of line 1 worked, did not sound unnatural. I was now also able to write 'greenish' instead of 'green', which was truer to the original.

Stanza two was altered by my discovering that 'doorschijnendheid' has two forms in English: 'translucency' and 'translucence'. That helped me, as the stress pattern of line five could now be improved. I replaced 'frail', which sounded like a doddering old man, by 'flimsy', which made me think of early aircraft having 'a flimsy' construction. I was still unhappy about the rhythm of line 8, but inserted a comma (in the original) to try and alter the flow of the line.

Line 10 was changed by removing 'knowledge', which sat there like a stone in a stream. I tried 'sense', but then recalled 'rhyme or reason' as an expression. The 'rhyme' here is ambiguous – it is the Germanic word for reason found in Danish 'rimelig' = 'reasonable', for example, but having just mentioned 'verse' in line 9, it gives a flashback feeling to poetry as well.

Here, then, is draft 3:

AQUARIUM (3)

In merest scrap of ocean, greenish, dim,
a creature drifts, transparent, like some ghost;
through wall of glass the human spirit, lost
to itself, takes th' enormous wonder in,

how, flimsy with translucence, the small soul
that burns within each organ without trace,
now makes the slight wing, fine as woven lace,
of the strange, glass bird beat with wavelike roll.

So drifts my verse in me, a part of God;
and something that both rhyme and reason mocks
hides in ingenious translucency;

and he who reads this, for one moment, feels
quiv'ring, beyond his I's constraining shield,
the mystery of his eternity.

My friend's only comment to this draft was that line 8 still did not seem to work, so I thought about alternatives.

The basic problem is two unstressed syllables followed by four stressed ones, the second of which, 'glass', is perhaps only half-stressed.

There is no way I can see of changing the order of the syntactic components of lines 7-8, which means there must be an 'of' genitive, which in turn means I have to insert the word 'the' after the 'of'.

But Dèr Mouw is no stranger to apostrophes when it comes to the definite article! I have only used this once, in line 4. If I can find a synonym for 'strange' that starts with a vowel and only has one syllable, I will get a better rhythm and also have an extra syllable to play with. This would enable me to change 'now makes' to 'causes' in line 7 and insert 'to' in line 8: 'Causes the slight wing, fine as woven lace,/of th'X glass bird to beat with wavelike roll'.

Much better in terms of stress pattern, but what is X?

I could find no solution. 'Of th'odd glass bird...' sounded just that – odd! And the creature is not 'odd', it is strange, unlike anything seen before.

I then tried omitting 'glass' and changing to 'th'opaque wing' in line 7, but that sounded no better.

The solution I arrived at was to use the word 'alien', which I speak as two syllables as an adjective and three as a noun. The pronouncing dictionary lists both, with the disyllabic pronunciation as the more frequent. I have checked the meanings of 'alien' – 'foreign, from another world' (Collins Essential English Dictionary) seem fine. I also like a meaning listed in the American Heritage Science Dictionary: 'Introduced to a region deliberately or accidentally by humans'. So 'alien' it is.

Here is the final version:

AQUARIUM

In merest scrap of ocean, greenish, dim,
the creature drifts, transparent, like some ghost;
through wall of glass the human spirit, lost
to itself, takes th' enormous wonder in,

how, flimsy with translucence, the small soul
that burns within each organ without trace,
now makes the slight wing, fine as woven lace,
of th'alien glass bird beat with wavelike roll.

So drifts my verse in me, a part of God;
and something that both rhyme and reason mocks
hides in ingenious translucency;

and he who reads this, for one moment, feels
quiv'ring, beyond his I's constraining shield,

the mystery of his eternity.