

J.A. dèr Mouw  
*‘Full of God and  
tiny pancakes’*

Dutch Modern Classics

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**‘I’m Brahman. But we’re stuck without a maid.  
Around the house I just do what I can:  
throw out my dirty water, fill the can;  
but have no dish-cloth; mess things I’m afraid.’**

**Johan Andreas dèr Mouw** (1863-1919) was a classical scholar, a Sanskrit scholar, philosopher and mathematician. He did not start to write poetry until his 50th year, in 1913. The poetical eruption lasted for six years, until his death. He never got to see the publication of his first collection *Brahman*, although he had corrected the proofs and selected the cloth for the covers (in 'tragic purple', the colour of grief).

Dèr Mouw dedicated most of his years to a quest for a philosophy of life that could interpret the relationship between himself and the world around him in a way he found plausible. His main goal was to lift or solve the duality that brought Western man to his sense of loss and isolation. He ultimately discovered the unity of the self and the world in the Hindu concept of Brahman. In Brahman, all antitheses are resolved, there is a unity between high and low, past and future, fabric and loom.

*Everything* is suitable for the Brahman poetry Dèr Mouw developed: the narrowness of a needle and the broadness of the Milky Way, the Norse saga and Greek mythology, the child and the old man, the grandest and the simplest. 'Full of God and tiny pancakes', 'Orion and a child's tear', 'Sun, Bach, Kant, and her calloused hands'. In Dèr Mouw's universe everything exists next to each

other and intertwined in each other; everything is one woven fabric and is one with the weaver.

Only the straitjacket of the sonnet could help Dèr Mouw to contain his creative energy, to turn chaos into clarity, make the dithyrambic become comprehensible. As a mathematician, Dèr Mouw knew the fascination of form, and as a scholar of Sanskrit the power of number in poetry. You sometimes can't help getting the impression of a childlike-happy: 'Hey, look at what I can do...!'

These expressionistic sonnets are no sloppy, sing-song poems: hop-step-and-jump leaps, inversions, faltering hesitations and breakaways *as if it could only read like that*, bear witness to the charge residing in these accumulators – one by one, suns that can be looked at with the naked eye. Organ music in speech. Wagner symphonies in correspondence style. Though speaking to us from almost a century ago, nothing is old-fashioned about this poetry, everything is as new as on the first day of creation. Perhaps what the most striking thing about them now is: that his poems constantly grow older and younger at one and the same time.

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**'the selfsame burning adoration stands  
for Sun, Bach, Kant, and for her calloused hands'**

## J.A. dèr Mouw

### Sixteen poems

*translated by John Irons*

*Unwilling-willing blind to world's bright dance,  
It's night. I'm on the heath. Nowhere a sound  
Across the church square lies (each lamp in space  
God's said to make the soul divine through pain?  
What will life be like later? he then thought.  
It still lies there, the stone: a year ago  
The shot's report rolls on, a ball of sound,  
Who knows that feeling: it is not distress  
I'm Brahman. But we're stuck without a maid.  
I. The sea flecks up clouds to where cloud banks stack  
II. Longing's lurchings have gashes a mighty rift  
Aquarium  
The sun's translated the whole countryside:  
Honey  
I'm comfortably ensconced in my arm-chair,  
All animals I love – except a dog!*

\*

Unwilling-willing blind to world's bright dance,  
through wildwoods of ideas I grub-like crept:  
through reeking, murky reaches no wind swept  
no beauty pierced, askew, with sun-forged lance;

full-coloured French and German's stringy plants  
with fibres filled my caterpillar maw;  
daunted and tempted, I set out to gnaw:  
Baumgarten, Fichte, Strauss and Rosenkranz.

My autumn stormed upon me; and I spun  
a thick cocoon from endless, drab distress  
to shut the world out. Silently and long

I waited. Till I left the chrysalis  
and flit through nature now and my own song:  
Your yellow swallowtail, Oh Brahman's Sun!

\*

It's night. I'm on the heath. Nowhere a sound.  
Above, like a transparent crystal wall  
round an old mountain god within his hall,  
a hemisphere of silence, all around:

I hear far off a whistle shrill and clear  
boring a tunnel, rock creaks everywhere.  
A bark, there, hacks a hole; a straight and hairline  
crack splits open, till checked by my ear.

I hear live blood, making my temples buzz –  
No: it's the earth's own heart: it quakes, it thuds,  
enough to rouse the god from his deep doze.

To listen better, I shut both eyes tight,  
but I'm prevented by the stars' bright light  
that trickles through a sieve of tiny holes.

\*

Across the church square lies (each lamp in space  
a moon, translucent hemisphere of mist)  
the electric violet; people, shadowless,  
pass – black of body, strangely white of face;

the spire like a finger held up high  
out of low twilight of man-made delusion;  
in all of their rejection and seclusion  
the Middle Ages join the electric light.

Searchingly, thoughts are moving to and fro  
on this tight square of consciousness, all go  
their separate ways, to where truth just might be;

and vast against the background of each soul  
there looms dismissive, waiting, mute and cold,  
the grim dark block of Christianity.

\*

God's said to make the soul divine through pain?  
None but a fool or mocker might so think:  
who uses night to bleach what's black as ink,  
the impure with sticky pitch makes white again?

No, pain ennobles no one: pain turns hard.  
A stinking dung-fly I became that feeds  
on filth and muck, that mockingly misreads,  
defiles what's finest in the human heart.

My yearning eyes hunt misery as food,  
prey hungrily on every face they see

where painful laugh is grimly etched for good  
and I think eagerly: 'Not only me!'

And, flesh-fly now, pain pierces me, for I  
could just as well have been a butterfly.

\*

What will life be like later? he then thought.  
When you're grown up, what then? – And he straightway  
recalled a poem from *The Break of Day*  
in which it stated everything Christ taught

was 'balm and physic for the pain of life  
and all the afflictions that its root do blight';  
and then: 'My yoke is mild, my burden light';  
and: 'Heavenly bliss transcends all earthly strife.'

Grandma had read aloud, and then she'd said:  
You couldn't help but feel it was all true.

And though he'd not yet grasped what she had read,  
the gist was: life was nasty through and through.

Would he, when grown up, out of misery  
also wish to be dead? That could not be.

\*

It still lies there, the stone: a year ago  
I placed it there myself; I call to mind  
the place quite well, right next to that skewed pine  
and the white sand-path to the heath below.

I mused: 'I do as pharaohs did before;  
the dread's the same that asked of me and them:  
all perishes: am I not who I am,  
and was and shall remain for evermore?' –

I'd lain down, with my head close by the stone;  
which, in the gathering dark, seemed to have grown  
a monument, Egyptian – old and great.

A small star high above. I thought: 'It gave  
its light when they were building Ramses' grave.'  
And I felt clearly: we were of one date.

\*

The shot's report rolls on, a ball of sound,  
from mountain wall to wall in loud careen:  
the beast, wounded by what's falsely unseen  
edges to where a slant-lit cave is found;

with shattered bone and heavy limp, he lays  
a narrow trail of red along the ground;  
far from the forest where his food was found  
he dies there in the darkness; and decays.

The real dead-shot with words can sometimes hit  
the youth, setting out through the wilderness  
of strong emotion, where hurt's really bad:

and from this blow, and from the pain of it,  
he flees to his soul's deepest-hid recess,  
and finds he can't re-surface; and goes mad.

\*

Who knows that feeling: it is not distress  
not joy, nor yet a mixture of the two –  
like heathland clouds it hangs round, over you:  
still, high, light, serious – and motionless.

You feel a child yet old; you grasp aright  
what you from God once seemed to separate.  
As if a dot to circle will dilate,  
circle contract to dot, shoot off from sight.

You think: Nothing has changed; to my true Being  
I've long been cured from my mortality.  
You know: Nothing can harm me; I am He.

You rise above your doubt to certain seeing,  
hang as eternal, your whole life beneath:  
you are the high clouds and you are the heath.

\*

I'm Brahman. But we're stuck without a maid.  
Around the house I just do what I can:  
throw out my dirty water, fill the can;  
but have no dish-cloth; mess things I'm afraid.

She says that this is no work for a man.  
And I feel self-reproach and helplessness  
when she spoils my long-spoilt unhandiness  
again with what she's conjured in the pan.

And always I've revered Him, who displays  
magical immanence – world, knowledge, art:

when she hands me my porridge and I gaze  
on fingertips that are all cracked and hard,

the selfsame burning adoration stands  
for Sun, Bach, Kant, and for her calloused hands.

I

The sea flecks up clouds to where cloud banks stack,  
the clouds rain seas into the sea below;  
above the storm, borne on a breezeless flow,  
the albatross drifts on its calm, bright track:

it hears far off the hurricane's wild chase –  
galloping through great troughs that dip and lift –  
of lightning-folk who, keen to spoil this drift,  
around the wave-tops let their torch-dance race;

it glimpses at a cloud-shaft's bottom edge  
the world-sea hammering, a white-green sledge;  
and mainlands snap off at its pitch and toss...

above a double sea of clouds and ocean  
pricked through with dancing torches, in slow motion  
and steady sunlight drifts the albatross.

II

Longing's lurchings have gashed a mighty rift  
in soul's torn surface, normally so smooth;  
emerging from oblivion's grey ooze,  
wreck upon wreck, old memories now drift;

and madness, on whose wave-crests' flexed awryness  
in flickering dance wild fantasies abound,  
its sledge seems to knock crumbling slabs of ground  
loose from a continent of quaking I-ness.

Rising to ecstasy from deep despair  
around the fearful one held captive there  
insistent rings of waves constrict at will...

free Self-Awareness though of Brahman's Being,  
that witnesses its worldly fears unfleeing,  
drifts in triumphant balance, calmly still.



## Aquarium

In one small drop of ocean, greenish, dim,  
the creature drifts, transparent, like some ghost:  
through a glass wall the human spirit, lost  
in rapture, takes the enormous wonder in,

of how the small soul burns invisibly,  
frail with translucence in each trembling organ,  
and how the strange glass bird with wave-like motion  
beats its small wing with lace-fine tracery.

Thus my verse drifts in me, in God contained;  
and something that mocks rhyme and sense conceals  
itself in artfulness, translucency;

and anyone who comes to read it feels,  
one instant by his I no more constrained,  
the mystery of his eternity.

\*

The sun's translated the whole countryside:  
potato fields into if not ornate  
yet solid prose; while cornfields add a spate  
of lyricism, flaming far and wide;

epic in colour, form and sound, the oak  
tells of its sun-hero in epic verse;  
the poplars choose the tragical, the terse:  
how those who strive high, fate fells at one stroke;

perse gravity of green red-kale infers  
humour in what seems droll and quite prosaic;

knowing what's right, and that he never errs,  
the pine nods sagely, genially commends -

From the untranslatable immense descends  
sheer praise upon the literary mosaic.

## Honey

I see, into a crystal-ordered whole  
of liquid-golden colonnades packed tight,  
– on purple heath shines August's midday light –  
an ochre honeycomb in a blue bowl.

And it's as if small shadows half-striated  
through humming, gleaming stillness leave a trace;  
and it's as if, before my mortal face,  
summer stands wholly transsubstantiated.

Glacier of midday gleam, snow-clad with wax,  
the silver twisting of the lamp-light glides

to fragrant vale of green-reflecting rummer  
along the melting steepness of your sides.

Am I a priest? Profaner? – From sweet racks  
I eat divinity of sun and summer.

\*

I'm comfortably ensconced in my arm-chair,  
the sun-drenched red-plush table cloth close by;  
unread I let Planck's quantum theory lie –  
my life's prime scientific aim – and stare:

for I see tulips, see a mighty storm  
of flames both light and dark; before I know it,  
my hand's a hare in silhouette – I show it  
nibbling and munching from the blazing swarm;

and the front oblong of a match-box blurs  
into a patch of hyacinthine blue,

with hazy silver lustres, as if dew  
sifted across the field like fresh spring spray...

I start at this my sudden thought, perverse:  
tulips are red, philosophy is grey.

\*

All animals I love – except a dog!  
Its piercing barking cuts me to the quick.  
Spinelessly faithful, wily, gutless, thick.  
Its fearful stench just makes me gag.  
It pees on all it sees,  
the bag of fleas,  
the pleb with scrawny mane,  
slack decadent with Borzoi for a name.  
And I am vexed that even so it's true  
such a piss-awful beast is Brahman too.

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#### **Text, translation, editing**

Gerrit Komrij, John Irons,  
Thomas Möhlmann

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#### **Photo**

Collectie Letterkundig Museum

**Johan Andreas dèr Mouw** (1863-1919) was a philosopher, mathematician and linguist. During his life only some of his poems were published in literary journals. He didn't live to see his first book, *Brahman I*, come to light. It was published within a few weeks after his death. One year later his second collection, *Brahman II*, was published. In the century that followed, his poems found new audiences time and again. In the Netherlands, each decade at least brings a new Collected or Selected Poems of Dèr Mouw, and piles of articles and studies on his writings. Outside of the Dutch speaking world, his poems can still be considered completely undiscovered gems.



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one instant by his I no more constrained,  
the mystery of his eternity’**