

Herman Gorter

May

An epic poem about youth

After *Mei* by Herman Gorter, 1889, edition *Verzamelde werken*
Deel 1 (eds. Jenne Clinge Doorenbos and Garnt Stuiveling),
Amsterdam 1948.

M

ISBN 978-90-831336-21

Hardcover, illustrated bilingual edition. Numbered verses.

© 2020, 2021. Second edition. Translated by M. Kruijff.

For Hein Ouwersloot †, Anne Mei & Arina.

May is Volume 1 of *The Essential Gorter* by Arimei Books.

Read also Volume 2 : *Selected Poems*. Translated by Lloyd Haft.

Cover illustration & design : © 2020 Eva Polakovičová (evapola.com).

Illustrations : Cisca Baars.

Redacted by : Myrte Leffring, Vicky Francken and Anne Walter.

Published by Arimei Books.

www.ArimeiBooks.com - www.TheMayProject.org

Contents

Foreword.....	7
Introduction: The melancholy in my May.....	11
May	19
I	23
II.....	113
III.....	273
Herman Gorter (1864-1927)	327
Acknowledgments.....	328
Notes to the text	329

Foreword

When I was choosing my angle to write this foreword for M. Kruijff's translation of Gorter's *May*, what crossed my mind was the American poet Robert Frost's famous one-liner definition of poetry: 'Poetry is what gets lost in translation.' As one who for decades taught Chinese poetry via translations, I can testify to the lamentably widespread truth of it.

Yet, I can also affirm that it is but a partial truth. Translations of poetry can themselves be poetry. I was more or less 'converted to' Chinese poetry by A. C. Graham's *Poems of the Late T'ang* (Penguin, 1965). Somehow the evocative elegance of Graham's phrasing in English, together with his commentaries which assured me that he really did know what the originals meant, gave me the feeling that I was missing nothing by not (at that time) being able to read the originals. Rather, I was gaining a new rich source of poetic enjoyment. Since then, as a scholar I have learned to read Chinese. But I have never lost a secret preference for poetry that has been brought within the easeful and matchlessly adequate milieu of my native language. To me the 'real' meaning of a text is in the words I would use in retelling it to myself.

After I arrived in Holland as a graduate student in 1968, I learned Dutch pretty quickly and by three years later was already trying my hand at translating poetry. I soon discovered Herman Gorter via his wildly experimental 'sensitivist' *Verses* (Verzen, 1890) – just about the most difficult thing with which to begin. I knew that Gorter was at least equally famous for a slightly earlier work, the epic

May (Mei, 1889). But *May* was written in regular meter and rhymed couplets, and for me at that time, this was reason enough not to read it. In the modern American poetry to which I was accustomed, it was considered slightly ridiculous to write in traditional forms – or, for that matter, to translate into them. One of my favourite poets, Robert Lowell, wrote in the introduction to his translations collected in *Imitations* (1958): ‘Strict metrical translators still exist...but they are taxidermists, not poets...’ So, to me for half a century Herman Gorter remained the poet of *Verses* but not of *May*.

Just a couple of months ago, in early 2021, I had an experience which confirmed me in the notion that poetry in a foreign language has perhaps the most depth for me when I can ‘acquire’ it in the language of my earliest childhood. I happened to come across M. Kruijff’s new English rendering of *May*. Once I started reading it, I could hardly put it down – this ‘despite’ the fact that it is written in a slightly liberalised but still recognizable variant of Gorter’s pentameter couplets. The English of Kruijff’s version is certainly not everyday English whether British or American. Nor is it the flattened, cautiously academic English of so many translations. As I perceive it, it harks back to a somewhat earlier stage at which Dutch and English were still more obviously sister languages, both rooted in an older stratum of Germanic words, rhythms, and myths which was one of Gorter’s own fountainheads while he wrote *May*. If the English sounds somewhat archaic, so does the original. For me, this strangely appropriate uncommon voice or tone makes the narration a delight to read.

Would Robert Frost have approved? I think so. Besides the wry quip on poetry and translation that I have quoted above, there is another statement by Frost, much less well known, that reads: 'Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.' It is clear from Kruijff's introduction and acknowledgments that his own process of translation began from a powerful emotion, proceeded through a years-long process of thought, and finally 'found words.' The words, time and time again, are as surprising as they are memorable. In other words, this is a poetic translation of a poetic original. It is with pleasure that I heartily recommend it.

Lloyd Haft
Oegstgeest, The Netherlands
October 2021

Introduction:

The melancholy in my May

The epic poem in front of you, *May*, first published in the Dutch language in 1889 as *Mei*, stands out as one of the poetic milestones in Dutch literature. This lyrically rich modern saga brings to life ponderings on many themes: nature and love, the perishable and the eternal, the physical versus the spiritual, youth and melancholy. It is the story of the short but wonder-filled, hopeful, intense, and finally tragic journey of the stunningly unspoiled girl, May: through the Dutch landscape of sea, dunes, and pastures, on an ambitious search within the spiritual world and finally into submission in the face of mundane city life.

It has been argued that there is a *May* for everyone. *May* can be viewed through many different lenses. Much has been written about its sparkling depiction of nature in spring, and about May's attempt and failure to unify the physical and the spiritual. And for good reason, as the first, second and third books of *May* cover these topics marvellously. It is difficult to capture in a single brief review the meaning and motivation behind a great work of art: it is hard to put a formal finger on the spontaneously inspired expression of an all-encompassing emotion – which *May* certainly is an example of. It is my hope that this translation will let you experience the same full spectrum of reflections as the original has done for many people in The Netherlands.

For me personally, *May* resonates with the sweet melancholy of my youth. I have always wanted to share that emotion with those around me but found that nearly impossible. In the end I realised that the best way for me to express it was by preparing and sharing a translation of *May*. Please allow me briefly to describe the melancholy in my *May*. It all starts, and every year again, with a new spring.

The spring as depicted in *May* is decidedly north-western European, with its wind-torn clouds in pale-blue skies over dark foamy waves and sandy beaches, their western flanks tinted pink and orange by the light of sunset in the salty air. Air thick with the scent of ozone. It is the spring that Monet immortalised in his painted impressions.

Yet the emotional association with spring is universal, and so is, more generally, the link between the months of the year and the cycle of life. It is so for many creatures of Nature. The primal response that this life story evokes in many supports the idea that this relationship between the seasons and our own lives is also deeply engraved in mankind.

In Roman times, March was the start of the cycle, the first month, the birth. Life grows, flourishes, explodes, levels, wanes, and finally withers and dies when the last month is reached. But life itself does not disappear – far from it. Every cycle plants the seeds for the next, and this seed magically refreshes and even increases life every new spring. Every new spring brings a new opportunity, a new hope, a new innocence, a new wonder. And in such boundless optimism the poem starts. A new sound.

It may only be back in nature, without the pressures of modern life, that one can remember that original spark. And it may pour into you a sense of gratitude and fulfilment that you have lived without for so long. In the forest, flowery dunescapes or in the mountains: that is where she thrived. You are back into the world of May.

Gorter's people, the Dutch, love the wind. They love to stand on the beach, even in autumn when it is cold, and let the wind blow through their hair, to get their feet back into that primal world, even for a moment. With each grain of sand carried by the wind through the hair, along the skin of the face or hands, some of the pressures of life are drained away. It is easy to appreciate the sun, a white blanket of snow and the silence of the ice. If one can appreciate even the wind, one can stand up to all seasons.

Thus I hope *May* can also impact your life if you let it.

There are more than 4380 lines in *May*. Each line, with its rigid rhyme and the pliable, reassuring regularity of the iambic pentameter, acts like one brush stroke in an Impressionist painting, putting you in a trance that plunges you into the idea that Gorter wants to share with you.

If you are young in mind, still blossoming and full of wonder, I hope this little book will invite you to entrust images and memories to the mind, and cherish the tinting of it by emotion and the filtering lens of retrieval. And if you once were so, but now are seeking the colour of your memories, these blessed abilities to create them, to soak in the light and dark of days gone by, to be that observant again, to open the mind once more to nature and its bare,

beautiful, sometimes brutal reality, I believe that reading *May* could show the way there and lead you back to it.

To stand in the wind, the rain, the sun, the snow, whatever the season, and experience full appreciation and love of every single day. Of life.

M. Kruijff, March 2020



The girl May is born from the Sun and the Moon. She arrives on the shores of Holland and travels through the flowery dunescapes. The sea and all its magical creatures celebrate May's arrival, but at the same time, they mourn her sister April's death. Everywhere May sets foot, springtime comes to life in all its wonder and beauty. May eventually meets a stream lady, who tells May of the coming and going of the seasons. May also meets the poet, but soon she leaves him, for new paths are inviting her.



I

1 Een nieuwe lente en een nieuw geluid!
Ik wil dat dit lied klinkt als het gefluit,
Dat ik vaak hoorde voor een zomernacht
In een oud stadje, langs de watergracht –
5 In huis was 't donker, maar de stille straat
Vergaarde schemer, aan de lucht blonk laat
Nog licht, er viel een gouden blanke schijn
Over de gevels in mijn raamkozijn.
Dan blies een jongen als een orgelpijp,
10 De klanken schudden in de lucht zoo rijp
Als jonge kersen, wen een lentewind
In 't boschje opgaat en zijn reis begint.
Hij dwaald' over de bruggen, op den wal
Van 't water, langzaam gaande, overal
15 Als 'n jonge vogel fluitend, onbewust
Van eigen blijheid om de avonddrust.
En menig moe man, die zijn avondmaal
Nam, luisterde, als naar een oud verhaal,
Glimlachend, en een hand die 't venster sloot,
20 Talmde een pooze wijl de jongen float.

Zóó wil ik dat dit lied klinkt, er is één
Die ik wèl wenschte, dat mijn stem bescheen
Met meer dan lachen van haar zachte oog...
Heil, heil, ik voel hier handen en den weeken boog
25 Van haren arm. Een koepel van blind licht,
Mild nevelend, omgeeft mijn aangezicht,
Mijn stem brandt in mij als de geele vlam

I

The spring is new and new the sound it brings²:
I want this song to be like whistling
I heard on summer days before night fell
In an old town along the calm canal –
Twas dark inside but in the silent road
A gleaming gloam, upon the sky still glowed
A light, there shone a blank and golden flame
Over the gables of my window frame.
A boy was blowing like an organ pipe,
The tones were trembling in the air as ripe
As young red cherries, when the wind of spring
Rustles the shrub, its journey there begins.
He wandered across the bridges, by the border
Of water, slowly he went back and forth
Like a young bird that whistles unaware
Its bliss in calmness of the evening glare.
Many a weary man who ate his meal
At night, listened as to a tale, with zeal
And smiled, and while a hand that closed a pane
Still hesitated, the whistling remained.

And so I want this song to sound, but one
There is I wished my voice to shine upon
With more than laughing of her gentle eye...
Hail, hail, I feel her hands, the bow refined
Of her warm arm. A dome of blinded light
Takes my face mildly misting out of sight,
My voice burns in me like the yellow flame

28 Van gas in glazen kooi, een eikestam
Breekt uit in twijgen en jong loover spruit
30 Naar buiten: hoort, er gaat een nieuw geluid:
Een jonge veldheer staat, in 't blauw en goud
Roept aan de holle poort een luid heraut.

Blauw dreef de zee, het water van de zon
Vloot pas en frisscher uit de gouden bron
35 Op woll'ge golven, die zich lieten wasschen
En zalven met zijn licht, uit open plassen
Stonden golven als witte rammen op,
Met trossen schuim en horens op den kop.

Maar in zijn rand verbrak de zee in reven
40 Telkens en telkens weer, er boven dreven
Als gouden bijen wolken bij het blauw,
Duizende volle mondjes bliezen dauw
En zout in ronde droppers op den rand
Van roodgelipte schelpen, van het strand
45 De bloemen, witte en geele als room en rood'
Als kindernagels en gestreepte, lood-
Blauw als een avondlucht bij windgetij.
Kinkhorens murmelden hun melodij
In rust, op 't gonzen van de golf dreef voort
50 Helderder ruischen als in drooger woord
Vochtige klinkers, schelpen rinkelden
In 't glinst'rend water glas en kiezel en
Metalen ringen, en op veeren wiek
Vervoerde waterbellen vol muziek
55 Geladen, lichter wind. Over het duin
Dreven ze door de lucht tot in den tuin

Of gas in a glass cage, boles of oak the same
Burst out in twigs, their sprouting leaves unfold
Outside, outside: a new sound goes, behold:
A general, young, in blue and gold stands out,
Calls at the vaulted gate a herald loud.

Blue drifting sea, and water of the sun,
Refreshing flow from gold, I saw it run
On restless waves which let themselves be cleansed
And soothed by sunlight, ponds lay open whence
The waves like white and fiery rams were born
With foam in bunches, on their heads were horns.

But at its edge the seascape broke, it rifted
Again and yet again, above it drifted,
Like golden bees, clouds dangling in the blue,
A thousand puffy little mouths blew dew
And salt in rounded drops on edges and
On rims of red-lipped shells, which in the sand
Seem flowers, white and pale like cream and red
Like children's nails, while some were striped and lead-
Blue like the evening sky in wind and breeze.
Conches were murmuring their melody,
Placid, on whirring of the waves unberthed
More lucid rustling like in drier words
The moistened vowels, shells were rattling
In glistening water, glass and metal rings
And pebbles, and on wings of feather too
Brought bubbles full of music hitherto
A nudge of lighter wind. They farther there
Past dunes were entering Holland's garden where

57 Van Holland, en die schoon en vol was zonk,
En brak in 't zinken wijl muziek weerklonk
Schooner dan stemmen, en van mijmerij
60 Elk duin vreemd opzag verre en van nabij.

En in een waterwieg, achter in zee –
Duizend schuimige spreien deinen mee –
Ontwaakt' een jonge Triton en een lach
Vloed' over zijn gelaat heen, als hij zag
65 De waterheuvels om zich en een toren
Van een wit wolkje boven zich, zijn horen
Lag in zijn blooten arm, verguld in blank.
Hij blies er in, er viel een zacht geklank
Als zomerregen uit den gouden mond,
70 Toen luider lachend wentelde hij rond
En zwom naar boven door den waterval
Van schuim en sneeuw die drijft in ieder dal
Tusschen twee waterbergen, zie, hij ligt
Nest'lend in kroezig water, 'n wiegewicht
75 Door moeder pas gewasschen in haar schoot;
Het drijft van ronde druppels, overrood
Reiken de armpjes, uit het mondje gaat
Gekraai; zoo dreef hij, in het bol gelaat
Tusschen de lippen in, de gouden kelk,
80 Fontein van gouden klanken, een vaas melk-
Wit was hij drijvend met gemengden wijn,
Vurig rood blozend door het porselein.
Nu zetelt hij in 't water, baar na baar
Ziet hij al lachend rijzen na elkaar,
85 Daar schatert hij en spant den blanken arm,
En door het water gaat een luid alarm.

The beautiful, the round and fullest sank,
Descended, burst, the sound of music rang,
More fine than voices, and from reverie
Each dune both far and near looked up to see.

A water-cradle far at sea – a bed
Where undulating sheets of foam were spread –
Is where a young Triton awoke, his face
Flowed over with a smile, this as the grace
Of water-hills around him caught his eyes
And overhead a tower-cloud in white.
His horn lay in his bare arm, gilded fair.
He blew in it, soft noises in the air
Like summer's rain rolled from the golden mouth.
Then laughing louder, he tumbled about,
Swam upwards through the waterfall, a gale
Of foam and snow, which floats in every vale
Between two water-mountains, see, he smiled
Nestling in whirly water, cradle-child
Only just washed by mother in her lap;
It floats in rounded droplets, ruby-wrapped,
Its arms are reaching, cooing goes aloft
From its small mouth; he drifted so, face soft
And round, 'tween lips the golden cup that cast
Fountains of golden tones, a milk-white vase
Alike he floated, wine was mixed within,
A fiery red blush pierced the porcelain.
Now seated in the water, wave on wave
He watches laughing as they swell and cave,
He bursts out more and stretches his fair arm,
And through the water goes a loud alarm.

87 Toen werd de zee wel als een groot zwaar man
Van vroeger eeuw en kleeding, rijker dan
Nu in dit land zijn: bruin fluweel en zij
90 Als zilver en zwart vilt en pelterij
Vèr uit Siberisch Rusland; geel koper
Brandt vele lichtjes in de plooiën der
Hoozen, in knopen en in passement
Van het breed overkleed, wijd uithangend.

95 Was zoo de zee? Neen, neen, een stad geleek
Ze, pleinen en straten in de kermisweek,
Boerinne' en boeren, en muziek en dans
In de herbergen en in lichten krans
Om elke markt de snuisterijenkransen.
100 Of als een koning komt en alle ramen
Zijn licht des avonds en uit ieder dak
Een witte vlag. Zoo was de zee, er stak
Een vlag van alle gevels, achter 't raam
Der golven brandden rijen lichten, saam
105 Liep heel het volk. Meermannen zwommen aan,
Nimfen en elven der zee, en zaten aan
De groene hellingen. Maar Tritons stonden
Oud en gebaard ter zijde, aan de monden
Trompetten, bouwende een lange straat
110 Geluid over het zeegelaat.

Toen werd het stiller en een wolk van licht
Begon te drijven op het zeegezicht,
Dichtbij de wolken waar een witte schaar
Van jonge winden zat te lachen. Daar
115 Werd alles zwijgend. En een gele boot

The sea then became like a great stout man
Of ancient day and clothing, richer than
Exists now in this land: the velvet brown,
Silvery silk, black felt and peltry found
Far in Siberian Russia; and yellow
Copper burns tiny lights in plies and folds
Of pants, in buttons and embroidering
Of the wide robe, in breezes broadening.

Was such the sea? No, it would more compare
To city squares and streets during a fair,
The farmers and their wives, music and dance
In the taverns, and in the light garlands
Around the market, stalls of falderals.
Or when a king comes and light shines from all
The evening-windows, each and every roof
Flies its white flag. Such was the sea, flags too
Were placed on all facades, behind the window
Of waves fire-lights were shining in a row,
Together marched the nation. Mermen swam
Over with nymphs and elves, they rested then
On greenish slopes. Some Tritons though stood crumpled
Aside and old with beard, were holding trumpets
At their mouths, built long streets of sound and thence
Those went over the seascape's countenance.

Then it was quieter, a cloud of light
Started drifting nearby on the sea-sight,
Close to the clouds where there was a white crowd
Of young winds sitting and they laughed, first loud,
Then all things hushed. A yellow boat just had

116 Kroop uit den nevel en daarin school rood,
Vooraan en vóór het linnen zeil, een kind...
Wee, wee mij, nu mijn hart mij overwint,
En mijn stem stom slaat nu dit nieuwste woord
120 Geboren werd... er is iets dat bekoort
In ieder ding, en die dat weet, hij gaat
Altijd langs watren, door jong gras, en laat
Zijn nog zijn voeten koel in dauw van wei.
Voor hem is 't nimmer nev'lig, maar een Mei
125 Van kind'ren en een stroom van bloemen waar
Zijn woning is, en zóó is 't ook mij, maar
Dit kind was louter, niets dan lieflijkheid;
Het zat zoo stil te staren, zoo verblijd
Blonken haar oogen in het schaduwlicht
130 Achter het zeil, zoo bloosde haar gezicht,
Zóó mooi, zóó zacht was ze, een rozeblad
Geblazen door den warmen boschwind, dat
De beek afloopt onder den hazelaar,
En dan tusschen de lage weiden, waar
135 Het groen is en de hooge hemel blauw.
Blij en verwonderd of ze nòg niet wou
Gelooven 't water, tot verwond'ring week
Voor veilig lachen en ze beurt'lings keek
Naar schuimfonteinen en de gladde kruin
140 Van golven in dien witgebloemden tuin
Der zee, of naar den Wind, die danste aan
Als 'n jonge kerel op een kermisbaan,
Of naar 'n visch, die roode vinnen uit
Het water stak. Dat alles was een buit
145 Voor jonge oogen. Daar veel verder stond
Hoog op zijn teenen een zeegod, zijn mond

Outcrawled the haze and, sheltered in it red,
Down by the linen sail, a child was seen...
Woe, woe to me, as my heart takes hold of me,
And my voice mutes now that this latest word
Was born... all things and places in the world
Enchant me in some way, and those who grasp
The same will go by waters, through young grass,
Feet fresh in meadow's dew each early day.
To them it's never hazy, but a May
Of children and a flow of flowers that
Surrounds their home, it's so for me too, yet
This child was purely, wholly loveliness;
So silently she stared, with happiness
Her eyes were shining in the shadow's light
Behind the sail, her face blushed in delight,
So pretty and so soft she was, rose leaf
Blown by the warm wind, as the forest breeze
Descends the creek beneath the hazel tree
And then arrives between the lower meads
Into the green and under skies of blue.
Could she, happy and full of wonder too,
Believe the water? Then safe laughs replaced
The wonderment, alternately her face
Turned to fountains of foam and the smooth crests
Of waves that waved in the white-blossomed beds
Of sea, or to the Wind that danced around
Like a young fellow on a grand fairground,
Or to a fish, that let its red fins rise
From the brisk water. All this was a prize
For a young girl's eyes. There far out, on his toes
A sea-god stood, his blowing lips enclosed

147 Bolde op een gouden horen. In het rond
Brak één geluid van water en van lucht,
En alles nieuw voor een die zulk gerucht
150 Nooit hoord'; haar hoofd werd voller en ze deed
De oogten toe en rustte – de boot gleed
Langzamer verder; onbeweeglijk scheen
De zon, de wind liep mee en om haar heen.

Wie was ze? Van de twalef zusters één,
155 Die op de zon staan, hand in hand, alleen,
Als 't spel van kindren in een kleinen kring.
Om beurten gaat er een en breekt den ring
En laat de andren bedroefd achter, maar
Veel zijn hun tranen niet, het weenen waar
160 Zoo gouden licht is, kan niet durend zijn.
Zoo zijn ze weldra blij weer en hun pijn
Houdt op – toch was hun droefheid nu het meest
Bij deze laatste leegt', er was geweest
Zoo lang gelach met haar, zij was altijd
165 De schoonste en de vreugd van elk, waar nijd
Niet is. Nu was zij heen. De zusterrij
Boog over luistrend, ziende hoe 't getij
Met haar hoog ging. Er mistte een waas geluid
Van brekend schuim en gouden horens uit,
170 Omhoog tot haar. Die kindren keerden om,
En stonden naast elkander, weenend, stom.
Dat zijn de blonde maanden die daar staan,
Gelijk geboren toen de moedermaan
Heel zwaar was in een starr'gen winternacht.
175 Naakt baarde zij ze, maar de zon hield wacht,
Koudrood zoals hij met Aurora kwam,

A golden horn. And all around from there
Sound broke as one from water and from air,
All new for one whom no one yet had bared
Such tunes; her head was fuller now, she closed
Her eyes in rest – the boat still floated most
Slowly ahead; unmoving shone the sun,
The wind walked with her and it walked along.

Who was she? Of twelve sisters she was one,
Hand in hand, alone, they stand on the sun,
Like children playing, standing close around.
In turn one breaks the ring and leaves that ground³
And leaves her friends behind in sadness, yet
Not many are their tears, a weeping met
By such a golden light one can't sustain.
So they are happy soon again, their pain
Will end – but *this* grief they've not felt before:
This latest void, with none there had been more
Laughter and for so long, she'd always be
The fairest, without envy, joy of each,
But now, now she was gone, the sisters' row
Bent over listening for where she'd go
As she was taken by the tide. Hazed sound
Of breaking foam and golden horns rose out
From mist to her. The children turned and stood
Together with their faces tearful, mute.
Those standing there present the fair blonde months,
The mother-moon gave birth to them at once
Heavy and naked in clear winter's night
Of stars, the sun though kept a watchful eye
Deep red and cold, he bore Aurora's look,



Herman Gorter (1864-1927)

Gorter was born in Wormerveer, a rural town in the north-western Netherlands. His father, a pastor, died when he was six years old. Gorter studied classical languages in Amsterdam and became a teacher at a high school.

In 1889, after three years of work on his epic poem *May* (in Dutch: *Mei*), Gorter finally could proclaim “the thing is done.” *May* was published in the contemporary periodical *The New Guide* (*De Nieuwe Gids*). It was a retrospect of Gorter’s youth, borrowing both form and theme from John Keats’ *Endymion* (1818), yet tracing its way through a wide range of impressions: of nature, music, love, the search for the divine, disillusion, transience, and melancholic reflection. Spontaneous and full of vibrant imagery, *May* quickly became a landmark of the 1880s literary movement in The Netherlands, the so-called ‘Eightiers’ (*Tachtigers*), which attempted to reclaim aesthetics for art.

In 1890, the even more innovative *Verses* (*Verzen*) were published, in which Gorter digs further and tries to let his spiritual and sensual emotions express themselves. Always in search of the ultimate form of poetry, Gorter would gradually distance himself from the individualistic ‘Eightiers’ movement. He became increasingly politically engaged and turned to expressing his Marxist ideals through his work, for example in the epic poem *Pan* (1916) and *Lyrics* (*Liedjes*, 1930). Gorter however never gave up his identity as a poet. Love remained a key theme in his work until his death.

Notes to the text

1. The source of the Dutch text is *Verzamelde werken* Deel 1 (eds. Jenne Clinge Doorenbos and Garnt Stuiveling), Amsterdam 1948.

Gorter wanted with *May* to produce something new and filled with light. The opening words of *May* are truly powerful and quickly became standard usage in The Netherlands. They invoke a strong sense of freshness.

2. *May's* famous opening line gently refers to the iconic first words of John Keats' *Endymion: A thing of beauty is a joy for ever*.

Like Keats, Gorter in *May* uses quite strictly iambic pentameter in rhymed couplets, except for the songs sung in Book II, which follow an accentual verse with an irregular number of syllables.

Gorter takes significant liberties both with stress position and use of unconventional rhymes.

The translation follows the Dutch original closely in meaning and form. The iambic pentameter is somewhat liberalized. On a number of occasions, mostly to fit the metre or rhyme, the wording has been allowed to deviate from the original, whilst maintaining the invoked image. Gorter's sometimes rather convoluted language has been simplified slightly.

3. Interestingly, this line occurs identically further in the text, which may underline a certain imperturbability even as significant events unfold.
4. *Cynthia* refers to the moon goddess, also known as Selene.
5. The source text reads *het spring* rather than *het springt*.
6. *Zephyr* is the personified west wind from Greek mythology, a gentle breeze.
7. *Titania* is the Shakespearean fairy queen; *Oberon* is her husband.
8. The source text reads *beeldlaar* rather than *bedlaar*.

9. Certain versions of the original write *tintelen* (tingling) rather than *tinkelen* (tinkling) in this line.
10. A reference to similar lines sung by Cynthia in John Keats' *Endymion: There is not one, / No, no, not one / But thee*. It contrasts Balder's looking inward with Cynthia's love for the mortal Endymion, and may thus be seen as a presage to Balder's later rejection of May.
11. Not that long ago, May arrived on the shores of Holland still a child. It appears in the meantime she has become a desirable young lady.
12. Gorter loved sports himself. The safety bike had only just been invented when Gorter wrote this almost anachronistic passage.
13. *Valkyries* or Walküres are mythical female figures who decided who would live and who would die in battle.
14. The *Asynjur* are the female members of the *Æsir*, the principal pantheon in Norse mythology.
15. *Allfather* refers to Wodan (also known as Odin), the supreme god in Norse mythology.
16. *For all this time was I / deep in you, May...* The poet stays behind, but is able to follow May's entire journey. In a sense, he and May must therefore be one.
17. Gorter may well be describing his own soul-searching in this key passage, that seems to express the desire to make authentic experience eternal.
18. *Tjalk* is a traditional Dutch boat for shallow water with two keels, one mounted on either side of the hull.
19. Indeed, the stream lady makes a reappearance here, like many characters from Book I. She explains her earlier sombre premonition, further strengthening the tragic mirroring between Books I and III.
20. *"You are like him, like him, in your voice as he."* It seems not a big stretch then to interpret both May and Balder as different sides of the poet himself that he seeks to unite. May, Balder and the poet each search, love and lose in their own way. The poetry endures.

Also available from Arimei Books

Herman Gorter: Selected Poems

Translated by Lloyd Haft

Volume 2 of *The Essential Gorter*

This is the most extensive selection in English of poems by one of the all-time great Dutch poets, Herman Gorter (1864-1927). A companion volume to M. Kruijff's translation of the epic *May*, this book welcomes the reader to the rich spectrum of Gorter's lyric verse.

The selection traces the stages of Gorter's career as a poet. It opens with 22 poems from his introverted 'sensitivist' *Verses* (Verzen, 1890) which have been called the beginning of modern Dutch poetry. These are followed by poems from later collections in which Gorter was transitioning to a less self- and more world-focused perspective. In the subsequent passages from the long epic *Pan* (1912/1916), he has clearly become a 'socialist' poet, albeit in a unique visionary sense. He is now pursuing a theme which will obsess him for the rest of his life: how to address the object of his love as both an individual woman and an incarnate summation of all humanity.

The rest of the book comprises the first publication in English of Gorter's little-known last work *Lyrics* (Liedjes, 1930). Haft's judicious abridgment preserves the structure, erotic themes, and lyric high points of this outstanding sequence which originally occupied three volumes.

In Haft's version, Gorter sounds the way he should sound: musical and sensitive, at times groping, at other times jubilant, always sure of himself and amazing... For readers of English it will be a feast to be able to make his acquaintance via this translation. – Piet Gerbrandy, winner of the Herman Gorter Prize for poetry.