

The Essential Gorter – Volume 1

May

M

Herman Gorter

May

An epic poem about youth

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

A stylized, cursive letter 'M' in black ink, which serves as a logo for Arimei Books.

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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.

Gorter chose to personify the month of May as the main character for his epic poem, quite possibly out of an already nostalgic love for the period of life it represents. Gorter was only 24 when he finished *May*, and as he looks back on his childhood and first love, as for many, the memory of this phase of life is heavy with a colourful melancholy, one that must be captured before it is lost. *May* chronicles childhood and early adolescence: the growing up from a small world of beauty in every detail within arm's reach not seen before, inside the endless sea of the unknown and looming loneliness; the first limitless love for another person – the greatest, unsurpassable love that seems to endow life with purpose and with the ambition to grasp for eternity; and, finally, the unavoidable confrontation with the limits of hope and innocence, the realisation of the unattainability of a perfect world. This is the moment when adolescence turns into grown-up life. Daily duties and city life take over. And that intensity of experience may never come back, may for ever remain the subject of nostalgia.

Melancholy is often simply defined as depression, but in my view, such a limited definition does not do justice to the depth and optimism that melancholy also embodies. Melancholy for me is an unbounded intensity of the senses, which due to the nature of most of reality, can sometimes be taken for depression. It borders on nostalgia perhaps: the realisation of the elusiveness of being, of the past that we struggle to remember, of beauty that we struggle to preserve, and of our feelings that can never be perceived by anyone outside our own body. Yes, in melancholy, emptiness and endlessness are experienced like deep holes

and black voids with at best a few dim lights on the far horizon. But there is also beauty that comes with the brightest of colours. It jumps clawing at the eyes, engraving itself in them, it wants to be remembered and appreciated. It is magical, almost painful. Yet there is a draining sense of loneliness for not being able to share such an experience. This drives, I believe, the rich expressions of many melancholic artists. Indeed, this might be why melancholics can often only be artists. It might be why Gorter wrote his poem so elaborately and full of metaphors. *May* could well reflect a desperation to immortalise and share his feelings about this richest episode in his mental life.

If my personal experience can serve as one example, the realisation of my melancholy, the intensity of my experience of life, and the heaviness of it, came at age nine, when a friend of my father told us hunting stories one summer in the hilly fields of Denmark. We were camping, spending the evening with family and friends in a large tent, with only cloth to separate us from the sky. It may have rained that day, for I remember vividly the smell of soil and leaves, as my father's friend told us of the state of mind of the deer at night. For a deer, every night requires alertness if it is to survive to the next. There is no safety, and the cold or warmth, the wetness or the hungry drought inexorably comes as it comes. The lives of beasts collide, and in the dark, stories are played out between them that the morning doesn't remember. The hunter finds an antler, a dropping, deep footsteps in the mud, some hair on a twig. And suddenly from a silent bush bursts loudly a boar and the hunter becomes part of the story.

I thus learned the meaning of melancholy and to illustrate it, to test it, to nourish it, my father's friend recited to me many an episode from *May*, for he knew it largely by heart. I lived my life with an intensity of experience that sometimes scared me, often absorbed me. Whether I was photographing as many different kinds of mushrooms as I could find in the autumn forest of the Luxemburg Ardennes, climbing a tall, steep rock without my parents' consent, or drawing a poster to raise ecological awareness – father and son covered in oil – these were activities I was dedicated to much more than any external motive would justify: melancholy filled my life with necessity.

My episode of melancholic life ended about 10 years later. I never suspected it would actually end; it felt like an inseparable part of who I was. But when my father suddenly died of cancer when I was 18 years old, I, at the time deeply dedicated to my studies, was thrown into a search for myself. I wondered where my grief lives inside me. What is it that truly drives me? How come I felt so lonely? How do others look at me, how should I behave towards others? I think I lost my innocence, and with it somehow the melancholy; that part of me just evaporated and did not return.

This story is not unique. When adolescence ends, often melancholy wanes with it. Maybe this happened to Gorter as well. At first it feels like a relief, an easing of day-to-day experience in the face of duties, of work, of the pace of modern life. But then one starts to realise that what has replaced it is actually a kind of numbness. And you realise that people who have never known melancholy possibly

have always been numb. It becomes a gentle torture to feel that one is missing out on the sensing of the nature of things that is somewhere out there, in the details. Indeed, in Nature. That flag moving erratically in the wind, undeterred and unaffected by the expectations of the world around it. That tile that does not lie flat, that always wobbles when you walk over it. And when you finally lift it, it bares a microcosmic world of tiny creatures, some of shapes and a manyness of legs you have never seen before, each living its tiny life in that tiny place. It becomes frustrating to find yourself unable to explain to yourself and others what exactly has been lost inside you.

You may want to recover some of that melancholy, search for it, try to revive it somehow. You start to revisit the same places, listen to the same songs, read the same books. You talk to the same people about the same things that submerged you into that absorbing state of mind before. Sometimes it works. But less and less.

Does the parting monologue of Balder, the young god that May so deeply falls in love with, give voice to this very same journey? When May finally finds him, he is searching for his soul, embittered by the loss of his eyesight. He can no longer truly experience all that is May: her elation or her youthful innocence. It is music, poetry, in which Balder still finds most of his former self. But he gets stuck in there, locked *within* himself. And May, heartbroken, disillusioned, cannot deal much better with her own loss. What remains for her is most people's reality: an all-absorbing effort to get by. But that is not her. And she withers.

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

May



I

The spring is new and new the sound it brings¹:
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

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

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.

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

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

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 ground¹¹
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,

She wrapped them in a coloured cloth, he took
Them with him. See how blushing blonde they stand
In a close ring of fair blonde hair, one went:
The sweetest, blondest, yes, the little May.

No thing in the wide space is now as gay
As this earth: Cynthia² while on her seat
In her night-boat, exposes bright white teeth
In laughter and the twin stars halting near
Ask to themselves: will she be passing here?
The air is full of love and all rejoice
Where she has passed and where the gentle noise
Parts from her wings. With flowers left all about
Along her way, little angels call out
In unison her name, how full she was
With wonders. Lying in the thick of grass
That grows in meadows of the heavens, they
Are talking or just dream the day away.

One thing is sad and causes soft complaint
To forever circle earth, a mist so faint
And dim about that body: transiting
From being to not being of each thing,
Flowers and souls are floating to that realm,
A white and quiet place, where death shall dwell.
Because as always happens at year's end,
The migrant birds in clamour leave the land
And drop their voices from the firmament,
The children outside hear the ferment, bend
Their heads up, say: "The summer finally wanes,
The cold is coming" – in the clouds the chains