The Essential Gorter - Volume 2

Selected Poems

Herman Gorter

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Translated by Lloyd Haft

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Also read Volume 1 : *May, an epic poem about youth.*

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Foreword

The Netherlands has not done a good job of preserving its literary heritage: poets from bygone eras tend to drift quickly into oblivion. But Herman Gorter (1864-1927) is a prominent exception; some of his works are still widely read and admired. Aside from the epic *May* (1889), it is especially his lyric verse – a genre that he continued to pursue throughout his stormy life – that is popular. Less well known, for no good reason, is the impressive epic *Pan* (two versions, 1912 and 1916), which sings the heroic struggle of the labor movement.

Gorter, a specialist in classical languages who wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the metaphors of Aeschylus, is renowned for his sensual language and subtle rhythmic effects. Since Gorter distorts the Dutch language and adjusts it to what he wants to say, sometimes using words that can't be found in any dictionary, translating his poetry demands the utmost from the translator.

May has been translated into German, French, Frisian, Russian, and (recently) English, but a really extensive translation of his other works into a world language did not yet exist.

The sinologist and poet Lloyd Haft (1946), whose earlier work includes a rewriting of the *Psalms* (2003), has had the courage to translate a wide selection of Gorter's work into English. 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. No other Dutch poet's work is as exciting as Gorter's, so

much so that you sometimes downright fall in love with it. For readers of English it will be a feast to be able to make his acquaintance via this translation.

Piet Gerbrandy

Introduction

Herman Gorter (1864-1927) is one of the all-time great Dutch poets. Most Netherlanders, even if they seldom or never read poetry, are familiar with Gorter's often-quoted line *Een nieuwe lente en een nieuw geluid*, literally 'A new springtime and a new sound.' They may or may not know that this is the opening line of *May* (Mei, 1899), a long story poem with which Gorter instantly became famous when he was only twenty-four. An epic of youth and passion against a background of vibrant nature imagery, *May* is written in traditional rhymed couplets. Thematically as well as in form, at times it shows influence of Keats' *Endymion* or of the drama and diction of Old Norse mythology. In subsequent books, starting with *Verses* (Verzen, 1890), Gorter wrote in a radically new style which combined experimentally intense lyricism with a freewheeling approach to language. Changing the spelling or even the sound of words to make them rhyme, inventing his own words, using words in an archaic or dialect sense – all these devices went into Gorter's own brand of Dutch, making it a rich but challenging brew for reader and translator alike. Tastes differ; Gorter's linguistic fireworks seem brash to some readers, brilliant to others. Even highly educated Dutch speakers are not always sure just what a given phrase means, or which of its alternative possibilities is most likely to apply.

As Gorter's career evolved, the creative oddity of his language was one thing which alienated a certain proportion of readers; another was his emerging ultra-Leftist political stance. Gorter believed that every human

being is motivated by three fundamental drives: self-preservation or self-love, the sex instinct or love for the opposite sex, and the communal instinct or love for the community. This last factor he personally identified, to the dismay of many readers, with the ideals of socialism and communism. Difficult as it might seem to see these three forms of love simultaneously embodied in an idealized female 'other' who could be addressed in poetry, Gorter tried to do so.

When Gorter first broke into prominence with *May* in the late 1880s, he was associated with the literary movement called in Dutch the *Tachtigers*, literally the Eightiers. Rebelling against the stodgy, moralistic writings of many Dutch writers of their day, the Eightiers strove for a poetry of hyper-individualistic emotional expression. Their ideals were more aesthetic than social. When *May* came out in early 1889, it was immediately hailed as a pinnacle of the new movement.

By autumn of the following year, when Gorter's *Verses* appeared, it was clear that he had undergone a transformation. No longer treading in the recognizable footsteps of his Dutch or English Romantic forebears, he was now writing literally 'verses' in which it seemed every new moment of experience was autonomous, demanding its own spontaneous configuration of sound and image. These poems were unlike anything in the tradition. They seemed to call for an ongoing celebration of the cutting edge of consciousness. *Verses* has been called 'the Sergeant Pepper of Dutch poetry,' and the effect on many, especially young readers must indeed have been almost psychedelic. The eminent writer Lodewijk van Deyssel, reviewing the

poems in the Eightiers' magazine *De nieuwe gids*, wrote that Gorter had 'seen behind the perceptible into timelessness... There is no adjective for it. It reaches the ultimate boundary of what is thinkable.' In what became a standard scholarly study of the Eightiers (1934), Garmt Stuiveling praised the *Verses* for their 'comprehensiveness of feeling' and 'visionary lucidity.' In a later article, Victor van Vriesland said Gorter had realized 'the utmost psychic possibilities of Dutch words.'

But *Verses*, too, for Gorter was but one stage in an ongoing development. He could not long remain satisfied with a kind of writing that seemed unconcerned with larger social issues. During the 1890s he grew increasingly critical of an individualist focus in the arts. In a seemingly retrograde move, he wrote sonnets – though, typically for him, they were anti-traditional in both rhythm and vocabulary – and in 1897 he came out with a frequently-quoted critique of the Eightiers movement. In the same year he began studying Karl Marx.

By the early twentieth century Gorter was increasingly focused on social and socialist ideals. In 1909 he joined the Social Democratic Party, which would later become the Communist Party of the Netherlands. He continued writing poetry but was also taken up with turbulent personal affairs. Two young women who had come to him for private lessons in classics eventually became his lovers. He kept each secret from the other and they did not meet until both attended his funeral in 1927. One of them, Jenne Clinge Doorenbos (1887-1973), became the real-life muse of his many love lyrics; she was also a very active sounding board in Gorter's poetry writing and editing. Eventually she was

also co-editor (with Garmt Stuiveling) of the eight-volume set of his *Collected Works* (Verzamelde werken, 1948-1952).

In 1912, Gorter again turned to writing an epic. This time it was *Pan*, in which Pan, as god of nature, falls in love with a 'golden girl' who is the Spirit of the New Humanity. Prophetically, it described a coming great war to be followed by world revolution. A much expanded version was published in 1916.

True to his independence of mind, in *Pan* Gorter reversed the genders traditionally associated with physical and spiritual life. In *Pan*, the representative of earthly instinct is the male god Pan; it is the woman or 'maiden' who personifies the spirit. Their story is a long one, occupying some 400 pages as published in the *Collected Works*. But the scenic decors of their love (and lovemaking) include some of Gorter's most impressive nature poetry. One almost wonders how Gorter found time to write long narrative poems like *May* and *Pan*; he would seem to have needed countless hours of his life just to observe and remember nature as minutely as he did. How a rainstorm develops, beginning with faint 'silken' inklings, continuing through a heavier phase of pounding 'diamonds,' then 'softening its streaming' as clouds of fragrance arise, until finally 'the pliant rain settles into the forest' – this we find noted in passing as if it were an effortlessly sketched backdrop. Gorter's descriptions are not just rhetorical pile-ups of words found in dictionaries. We feel that he really has seen the 'shone-through vague rough bigness' of trees in a forest, the ocean waves 'falling over the top and forward...crashing full bouldering swaying striped dark-faceted water.' Perhaps it is no wonder that Gorter

identified with Pan, god of nature, considering that nature is the setting and the inspiration of so much of his poetry.

In most introductions to Gorter's life and work, *Pan* is mentioned as an important work, perhaps even his only notable effort after *May* and *Verses*. Much less attention is paid to the very impressive long lyric sequence, posthumously published, called *Lyrics* (Liedjes, literally 'little songs,' 1930). Gorter worked on these poems from 1910 to 1924 – partly at least in the same period that he was working on *Pan*. Certain passages from *Pan* show up in *Lyrics* as well. An example is the following poem from *Pan*, addressed ostensibly to the Spirit:

O Golden Spirit
of Freedom,
I'm thrusting higher now,
thrusting into ever brighter, whiter, golder
Joy,
into your golden Body.

O Chalice
heaven-seeming!
Into your deep teeming
may all someday rise –

Goal!
that the drift eternal
hot and cool
is driving to.

Longing
ever greater
as the womb climbs
higher above it.

Womb,
depth without end,
ever farther
as the longing lengthens.

Joy. Woman. Humanity.
Longing that never ends
O! because the rising of humanity
is nowhere bounded.

In *Lyrics*, the first strophe appears as a separate poem, the second is deleted, and the third through sixth are a continuous sequence of separate poems.

In the starkly minimalized stage settings of *Lyrics*, the imagery becomes almost alchemical. Rather than a description, it is a transmutation of nature. The fire and water elements originally seen in sun and sea reappear as interacting energies:

My Beloved
as water pure
came into the fire
of love.

...
...

Deep into the fount
the sun finally fell.
And the fount
rose to heaven.

Lyrics is more loosely structured than *Pan*; it does not form a narrative but is like a slide show of mini-episodes. It is like an etherealized, more private version of *Pan*, still set against the background of a longed-for 'new humankind' represented by a woman, but with a crucial change – the male protagonist of the erotic scenes is usually no longer the god Pan but 'I.' *Lyrics* represents Gorter's ultimate effort to combine the love for a woman with love for humanity as he conceived it within his communist political ideals. Here, the beautiful 'Lady' or 'Maiden' stands both for herself and for the 'new humankind' that Gorter hoped the Revolution would bring into being. In the coda-like fourth section of Book Three, after the initially despondent tone of 'The Defeat of the Revolution,' Gorter comes back to reassert his concept of the three basic loves. In a magnificent sequence of three similarly worded sonnets, he again sees visions of the beloved woman, himself, and humanity against a heavenly background.

Gorter perhaps did not see fit to, in any event did not, publish the *Lyrics* sequence during his lifetime. He had it privately printed in three copies, one for himself and one for each of his two lovers. It was published for all the world to see in 1930, three years after Gorter's decease.

Gorter is not 'difficult' to translate; he is impossible... unless the translation is a labor of both love and luck and can convey to the reader at least some glint of the impulse which inspired the original poems. To begin with, the words on the page. How to translate a language (Dutch) in which one and the same word (*schoot*) can mean 'lap,' 'bosom,' or 'womb'? And this in poems by a man who was

straining to achieve a join between the beauty of a woman's anatomy and the beauty of her...ah yes, her what? considering that the same word (*geest*) can mean 'mind' but also 'spirit.' Are we to admire her wise thoughts (mind), or her passionate ideals and hopes (spirit)? Examples of both can be found in the poems.

Again, *leest* often suggests the 'form' or 'figure' of a person's body rather than the body as such, yet in a poem on Spinoza's philosophy, Gorter unmistakably uses the rhyme-pair *geest* and *leest* to refer to the opposing poles of 'spirit' and 'body.' In the first strophe of the poem from *Pan* which I have translated above, I read them to be used in the same senses.

So far I have only mentioned the 'legitimate' or 'dictionary' meanings of words. But Gorter is the supreme player on words, their sounds, their possible and perhaps-barely-possible associations. In a short poem from *Verses*,

> Her eyes glimmering chalices,
> her hand silent red,
> her body a calyx
> welling from her womb.

in the first line of the original, the 'chalices' are *kelken*, plural, with the normal plural suffix *-en*. In the third line, the 'calyx' in the original is *kelke*, a word you will not find in any dictionary. No matter, obviously it is *kelk* with an extra *-e* to give it an added syllable and make it rhyme with *kelken*. The translation is problematical. *Kelk* can mean 'chalice' but also 'calyx.' Is her 'body' a veritable flower? Very plausible. But in the original it is described as *wèlle*, again a non-existent word, which commentators have taken

to mean 'welling up.' So, is a *wèlle kelke uit haren schoot* a 'chalice, welling from her womb' or a 'calyx, stemming from her womb.'? Probably for Gorter it was both, and for the imaginative reader it can be both. But we have to come out with a single translation. I have chosen for the calyx, calling it 'welling' to keep it somewhat chalice-like.

The present book is a companion volume to M. Kruijff's superb translation of Gorter's epic *May*. The poems I have chosen to translate are:

(1) twenty-two poems from *Verses* (1890),
(2) fifteen other short, intense poems from later collections,
(3) nine selected lyrical passages from *Pan* (1916), and
(4) my abridged but substantial version of *Lyrics* (1930), not including all the poems but maintaining the order and overall structure of the original.

The four sections of my book correspond to the main successive stages in Gorter's career after his initial breakthrough with *May* in 1889. concluding with *Lyrics* (1930). Within each section the order of the poems, except in *Lyrics*, is of no particular significance but follows the order in the *Collected Works*. Gorter himself does not seem to have intended the original *Verses* as a structured sequence: in a later republication he changed the order and deleted many of the poems. The poem I translate on page 25 originally appeared in *Verses* as three separate poems; in later editions they were always combined into one, as in my translation.

Lyrics has never before appeared in English. My version comprises about sixty percent of the original. It is in the interest of maintaining musicality and focus that I have chosen to omit some of the poems that seemed to me ineffectively repetitious, or which I could not get to sound plausible in translation. Stuiveling included a radically short selection from *Lyrics* (about one-sixth of the whole) in the selected volume of Gorter's poems which he edited in 1956. That book has been reprinted many times and is a standard introduction to Gorter. My selection is not only much longer than Stuiveling's but includes some of the more explicitly political poems like the sonnets to Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. But like Stuiveling and like another major Gorter anthologist, J. C. Brandt Corstius whose selection came out in 1946, I could not get myself to include the hero-worshipping sonnet to Lenin.

My translations do not rigidly reproduce the rhyme-schemes of the originals – that would have imposed a too crippling limitation on the available choice of words – but they do, I think, fairly represent the overall sound and texture of Gorter's verse.

For the reader who wishes to consult the Dutch originals, it is easy to access online, and to download free of charge, the texts as they are included in Gorter's *Collected Works*. In the appendix, together with a brief pointer to the relevant links, I list the volume and page in the *Collected Works* where each translated poem begins.

On the completion of this book which I first began to envision some four decades ago, I wish to thank Jan Bouts for introducing me to *Lyrics*, Jan Kuijper for sharing his knowledge of Gorter's vocabulary and poetics, Henk van der Ent for astute comments on difficult passages, and Agnès van Rees for help with nuances in translation.

Lloyd Haft
August 2021

Selected Poems

From *Verses* (1890)

WHEN TIMES WERE LEAF-STILL, LONG GONE BY,
born she was, in autumn hush a bloom
in bleak lightweepings standing pale light –
the clouds cloak her in rains.

Pale she stood her light amidst all drear,
keeping light eyes, blonde hair spreading near her,
tears at many an hour, white of hands –
a poor light girl light-famished.

Bring upon her color of bloomglow,
your blood-red, o new season that is now.

WE BEINGS OF SILVER, LIGHTS OF MIST, GROWTHS
neighboring each other uncertain, wanted light:
in mists of dark our great needs
foreign in shimmering mist, for light –
tender beginning and smiling shine,
lightly rising, shunning to fade,
laughing as sure, shining with joylight,
waving and fleeting, looking back in flight,
willows of light, ribbons of light, whitish silver
waterish light, luring light, scythes of shivering light,
sheaths and bayonets of light – army of light.

Our flesh blooming with light, gorging on light,
hearts swelling with light, breaking light,
eyes gossamer light, crystal crowns of light.

YOU ARE A WHITE AND SILENT SHINING SNOW,
you are a shivering sea of shining sea.

You are a lilymaiden shimmerwhite,
you are a palehood fluttering wide.

You are the open, the white, the willing,
the waiting beaming flaming quivering light.

THE SILENT ROAD
the moonnightlighted road –

the trees
the trees so silently grown old –
the water
contented water stretched out calm.

And far behind, the sunken heaven
crawling with stars.

PALLOR OF GREY,
pitter of rain –
wet are the roofs, the wind
sings its meager lay.

The slow human ruckus
goes on. They call it work:
that sober daily going
without ever knowing.

O, for a lass to bloom this way
in brightish pale,
a lilyhood and bleary
unto me, the warm, the weary.

A CHILD EVER LONGING
as a great bloom's heart, hanging
open, born that way
in the dawning day.

I SAW YOU THEN –
and there was much of light,
the room was a bloom, tight
bud now shining out and open,
buzzed by rings of light.

Nothing that I thought or said.
You looked at me and all my head
came open windblown wide
like burning summer-open over wide, wide land
in country wide and worldly-open –
so, once, was I
within that chamber red and golden-lined
by gas-gold flamelight flown on rowing flapping
wings already beating away
in the fragile air
the trembling air
that flees us as we go –
hear hear, o I hear it,
your tender drythroat voice above me
speaking, speaking lower near me,
I scented your tender flesh,
your shining out, your silent living flesh –
and I was bursting with your eyeing
tingling naked eyeing
from that silent moving gaze,
that trembling and that moving
of your hands your head your feet

as even now it does to me.
If only I could find
that fleet outflowing galaxy,
the river of words: that I could say
this all before I die away
in floating through my life.
But o, the fair, the tingling tint
within the giant doors of light
that is sunsummer's –
all the light's belightedness,
the high and holy eucharist
of all the days
and goldlight evenshine
in the reddened room, that are the things
she was within,
body diaphanous
as glass and lightful – o pray be
pronounced together ever, in me
who saw her once and only
in your red and white and golden day.

Now let me go on trembling,
let me quiver on away
in words, so henceforth not a thing there is
but her belightedness.