

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.

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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 defining poetry-works in Dutch literature. A lyrical rhyme that 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 there is a May for everyone. May can be viewed through many different lenses. Much has been written about May's 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 book of May cover these topics marvellously. It is difficult to fully capture into a single review text the meaning and motivation behind a great work of art, because it is so hard to put a formal finger on a spontaneous and 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 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 and found that near impossible. In the end I realised that the best way for me to express it is by preparing and sharing a translation of May. Please allow me some words 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 more in general, 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, where 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 dunes escapes or in the mountains: that is where she thrived. You are back into the world of May.

Gorter's people, the Dutch, they 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 also the wind, one can stand up to all seasons.

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

There are over 4380 lines in May. Each line, with its rigid rhyme at the optimistic carefree beat of the iambic pentameter, acts like one brush stroke in an Impressionist painting, bringing you in a trance that submerges 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 booklet will invite you to entrust images and memories to the mind, and cherish the tinting of it by emotion and the filtering of retrieval. And if you once were so, but now you 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 season and experience full appreciation and love of every single day. Of life.

M. Kruijff, March 2020

May

A watercolor-style illustration of a young girl with long, wavy blonde hair, seen from behind. She is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with puffed sleeves and blue pants tied at the waist with a red ribbon. She is sitting on a grassy hillside, looking out over a vast, cloudy sky. The clouds are light blue and white, with a pinkish-orange glow near the horizon. A large, circular blue frame is positioned in the upper right corner of the image.

I

I

- 1 Een nieuwe lente en een nieuw geluid:¹
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 avondrust.
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 floot.

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 gele vlam

I

The spring is new and new the sound it brings:
I want this song to be like whistling
I heard on summer days before night fell
In an old town along the calm² canal –
Twas dark inside but in the silent road
A gleaning 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, on the board
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
Roeft 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 roodgelakte schelpen, van het strand
45 De bloemen, witte en ghee als room en rood'³
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 kiezels 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 restless⁴ 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, and off the sand
The 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
Vloeid' 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 schaterd 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
With undulating sheets of foam as 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 there was a 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 gale²
Of foam and snow, which floats in every vale
Between two water-mountains, see, he smiled
Nesting 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, it sprayed
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 plooien 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 snuisterijenkramen.
- 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.⁵
- 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 greele boot

Notes to this English translation

In this translation, the usual translation liberties have been applied. I have used a direct translation of each verse as a starting point, and refrained largely from personal interpretation, extrapolations and distinctive additions. In some cases a sentence has been liberally rephrased, where I attempted to maintain the meaning and visual image invoked. Information is rarely added, and if so, mostly as interpolations implied by the context, maintaining the meaning. A representative selection of the more significant deviations the reader will find marked and detailed as notes to the text.

‘Mei’ is a work of the late 19th century. For this translation I have used modern English but tried to avoid words that would not be understood in the times when ‘Mei’ was written.

The translation follows Gorter’s minimalistic punctuation. On occasion, punctuation is added to avoid confusion. Notably, the Dutch language allows for the creation of new words, simply by tying them together. I have in such cases opted for clarity and hyphenated the translated word pairs. This way, *donderkoe* became *rumble-cow*. For readability purposes I have not fully followed Gorter’s somewhat inconsistent use of capitals.

Gorter mixes tense often within a single sentence. Within the elaborate metaphors, Gorter sometimes describes a *usual* situation using present tense, and *actual* happenings

within the storyline using the past tense. For this reason, I have opted to maintain the original choice of tense.

Most of ‘Mei’ follows the iambic pentameter with generally 10 syllables per verse. English is the world’s most compact language, and Dutch, closely related, follows not far behind. This makes it quite possible to fit the same, sometimes very dense, content within the same number of syllables, often with similar wording.

Gorter with some regularity applies 11 syllables per verse, the last unstressed. Gorter generally maintains the stress prescribed by the pentameter, on every even syllable, but with some regularity he deviates within the first four syllables, and in more rare cases, at the end of a verse. In ‘May’, I have tried to stick to this convention of in principle 10, sometimes 11 syllables. Gorter takes some additional liberty (lines with for example 8, 9, 12 syllables can be found), but these occurrences are so rare that I tried to avoid them altogether.ⁱ

On a handful of occasions, to better visualise the rhyme, or to avoid hyphenation, I have moved to the 11th (unstressed) syllable position of a verse the first syllable of the following verse, leaving that following verse with 9 syllables. Gorter takes similar liberties, also rarelyⁱⁱ.

Gorter regularly swallows sounds to fit the number of syllables dictated by the pentameter. I have refrained from that where possible to leave more freedom to the reader.

I try, for readability and flow, to deviate a bit less from the pentametric stress than Gorter allowed himself to.

ⁱ Note that the songs sung by Balder, May and others follow an accentual verse with irregular number of syllables.

ⁱⁱ See for an example in the original endnote 68.

Notes to the text

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

² This word does not appear in the original.

³ Example where the original has 12 syllables.

⁴ Original *woll'ge* (*woolly*), probably chosen for esthetic reasons over *woel'ge* (*restless*).

⁵ Example where the original has 8 syllables.

⁶ Lit. *wijd uithangend* (wide-hanging) rather than *in breezes broadening*.

⁷ *Could they hear her go* does not appear in the original.

⁸ Gorter's use of capitals is somewhat unconventional and inconsistent, closely reproduced in this translation.

⁹ Lit. *duidelijk gespreid op staart en veer* (*clearly spread on tail and feather*) rather than *one clear silhouette that spread its tails and feathers*.

¹⁰ An isolated line without rhyme is also found in the original.

¹¹ Lit. *page* (*servant*), translated through *and makes a bow*.

¹² Liberal translation. Lit. *werd... beweging toen zij gingen* (*turned to movement when they went*) rather than *turned into temporary violence*.

¹³ *Baak* can also mean *lighthouse*.

¹⁴ Liberal translation. Lit. *die ... om en om slaan de armen* (*who sway their arms in turn*) rather than *one by one they recognise him, then they sway their arms*.

¹⁵ Lit. *flauw rooskleurig* (*faint rosy colour*) rather than *rosily*.

¹⁶ Liberal translation. The original speaks of *water*, *dat soms omhoog tot bij haar opliep* (*water that sometimes ran up to her*).

¹⁷ Liberal translation. Original *daar snel een moordenaar het huis uit* (*there a murderer rushes out of a house*) rather than *there wields a murderer his weapon*.

¹⁸ This line is one of two identical occurrences in the poem.

¹⁹ Liberal translation. Original *die daar...zeezoom komen* (*that there in procession come along the edge of sea*).

²⁰ Lit. *oofit* (*fruit*) rather than *peaches*.

²¹ Gorter plays with the final stress here and on other occasions: *honig* (*honey*) really is pronounced *honing*.

²² Original does not mention *seemed to churn*, simply *op* (*on*).

²³ In the original, the line for completion requires a single isolated word on the next line (*is*).

²⁴ Liberal translation. The original only speaks of *geeke nelken* (*yellow harmony*).