

## Herman Gorter (1864-1927): Poet, Lover and Revolutionary

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If Herman Gorter's name (1864-1927) is still familiar to anyone outside the Low Countries, it is more likely to be as a revolutionary propagandist and an opponent of Lenin's strategy at the Third International in 1920<sup>(1)</sup> than as the most gifted Dutch poet of his age. At home he tends to be pigeonholed as the author of the poem *May* (Mei, 1889), the anthem of the Generation of 1880, while his other, and particularly his Socialist, verse is largely neglected.

### Roots

A Mennonite upbringing left its mark on Gorter's social commitment and independence of mind, while in his teenage years he was greatly influenced by the rebellious genius Multatuli (pseudonym of Eduard Douwes Dekker, 1820-1887), author of the great colonial novel *Max Havelaar* (1860). Both Gorter's emotional dependence on his mother and his attachment to, and subsequent detachment from, a succession of mentor/father figures, from the composer Diepenbrock to the German Marxist Karl Kautsky, can perhaps be attributed in part to the loss of his father, also a writer, at the age of sixteen.

The young Herman was the beneficiary of a major reform in Dutch secondary education introduced in 1864, attending a new-style high school, the Higher Civic School (HBS). Ironically, though the syllabus at these institutions was largely science and modern language-based, Gorter's great love was Classical studies, which he went on to study at Amsterdam University, where in 1889 he received his doctorate for a thesis on Aeschylus' use of metaphor (after having a more daring project on poetic inspiration rejected). Shortly afterwards he was appointed to his first post as a Classics teacher and the following year married his fiancée Wies Cnoop Koopmans, despite expressing some last-minute doubts. Those doubts were not unfounded. Though the couple remained together until his wife's death in 1916, it was an 'open' marriage, at least on Gorter's side, and a childless one. The poet's powerful erotic drive sought an outlet in two intense long-term relationships, with Ada Prins and later with Jenne Clinge Doorenbos, of which he made no secret. Jenne, herself a writer, became his editor and collaborator as well as muse ('the Spirit of Music' as the poet dubbed her in Nietzschean style).

Young Herman Gorter in 1884.  
Collection Letterkundig Museum,  
Den Haag.



## Poetic début

In 1889 he also published his first Dutch poetry in the influential magazine *De Nieuwe Gids*, or *New Guide*, which in this period was dominated by the poet Willem Kloos (1859-1938), a radical aesthete who advocated a literature both non-sectarian and non-utilitarian. Poetry, for Kloos, was 'the supremely individual expression of the supremely individual emotion'. Kloos was deeply impressed by Gorter's 1889 début, *May*, an epic poem of some 4,000 lines, mostly in rhyming five-foot iambics (not coincidentally the metre of Keats' 'Endymion'), which soon became an iconic work of the so-called Movement of 1880. (Only fragments of this seminal poem have so far been translated into English.) Generations of Dutch secondary schoolchildren have been able to quote its opening lines:

*A newborn springtime and a newborn sound:  
I want this song like piping to resound  
that oft I heard at summer eventide  
in an old town, along the waterside –  
the house was dark, but down the silent road  
dusk gathered and above the sky still glowed,  
and a late golden, incandescent flame  
shone over gables through my window-frame.  
A boy blew music like an organ pipe,  
the sounds all trembled in the air as ripe  
as new-grown cherries, when a springtime breeze  
arises and then journeys through the trees.*

This short extract immediately exhibits some of the poem's key features: vivid sensory images, a celebration of the Dutch landscape, extended Homeric similes, and the onward impulse of the lines with their frequent enjambements. In all senses the poem came as a breath of fresh air in a literary culture dominated by plodding moralistic verse, often churned out by clergymen-poets. *May*, however, is not all joyful celebration: an underlying melancholy increasingly asserts itself. Its heroine embodies the month of May and her burgeoning prime is destined to be short-lived. Her encounter with the blind Norse god Balder (for whom 'music is the soul's life') poignantly dramatises the unbridgeable dichotomy between mind and body. Whole libraries have been written on the interpretation of the poem's symbolism, debating whether the poem should be read as a variation on Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, whether it conceals Gorter's incipient disaffection from the values of 1880, whether it portrays the incompatibility of the material and the spiritual or on the contrary presents a synthesis between them, etc. The poet himself made light of the ambiguities, declaring that:

*I wanted to make something full of light and beautiful sound, that's all.  
There's a story running through it, and a bit of philosophy, but that's by  
accident, so to speak.*<sup>[2]</sup>

Nevertheless it is hard not to see the poem at least in part as an exercise in 'lyrical autobiography', while others have pointed to the presence of two opposing impulses throughout his work: lyrical compression and epic expansion. One of his earliest efforts was the ambitious 'Lucifer', partly inspired by his reading of Milton. There was some resistance in literary circles to Gorter's expansive mode, as found in his later larger-scale Socialist verse, *A Little Epic* (1906) and *Pan* (1916). At the other extreme is the almost *haiku*-like compression of the late love poems, *Songs* (Liedjes), most of them published posthumously, which form a private lyrical counterpoint to his public political statements:

*All things fade quite  
When you dance into sight.*

Perhaps the distinction should not be seen as an absolute one: 'lyrical expansiveness' in fact characterises some of the poet's best work. As even his sternest critics conceded, Gorter was 'great in jubilation'.

## Icon of a generation

Given the warm reception of *May* by most of his peers and by younger, progressive readers, Gorter might have been expected to continue in this epic vein. Instead, under the influence of the critic and novelist Lodewijk van Deyssel (1864-1952), whose response to *May* was lukewarm, the *Poems of 1890* mark a radical new departure, not only in a Dutch but in a European context. Van Deyssel had called for uncompromising artistic individualism, or 'sensitivism', which was to record fleeting, fragmentary moments of experience with an almost mystical intensity. Gorter's collection, in which there are parallels with Rimbaud's late work, is in part an attempt to realise Van Deyssel's vision.



The result is a series of eighty-seven poems, some of only two lines (for example, 'You're a dusky white lily girl, /You're a butterfly velvet swirl.') and none longer than a few pages, still retaining a thread of rhyme, mostly in full rhyming couplets. (It needs to be stressed in this context that unlike elsewhere, and specifically in the Anglo-Saxon world, poetic modernism in the Low Countries is not synonymous with blank or free verse like that of Eliot or Yeats. Attachment to rhyme persists in such interwar poets as Martinus Nijhoff and after the Second World War in the remarkable work of Gerrit Achterberg.) Set against this are irregular line lengths and syntax, a radical use of neologism, synaesthesia, surging eroticism, a haunting fragmentary musicality and occasional astonishingly simple and direct love poems. Gorter's explosive and sometimes tortured expressionism recalls that of his contemporary Van Gogh. This linguistic extremism is one of the main challenges for the translator.<sup>[3]</sup> Gone is the vaguely Classical and Norse framework of *May*, possible the legacy of Gorter's close

International Meeting of the SDAP (Social Democratic Workers Party, founded in 1894) at Watergraafsmeer (14/8/1904). Gorter (in the centre) was one of the speakers, along with Troelstra and Wijnkoop.

friend, the composer Alphonse Diepenbrock (1862-1921), a keen Wagnerian. This is a celebration of life in a different key but, as in *May*, beneath the energy and assertiveness there lurks a sense of alienation and even despair.

The contrast with the work of his first mentor Kloos is striking. While Kloos' solipsism ('Deep in my inmost thoughts a god I tower') is expressed in conventional forms like the sonnet and is autumnal and elegiac in mood, while Gorter's energy is life-affirming – he was a keen sportsman and outdoor enthusiast – and 'his' season is unquestionably spring. The following poem evokes the parallel approach of spring and of the beloved:

*The spring comes from afar, I hear it come hither  
and the trees hear too, the tall trees that shiver,  
and the tall skies, the heavenly skies,  
the tingle-light skies, the blue-and-white skies,  
shiver skies.*

*Oh I hear her come,  
oh I feel her come  
and I'm filled with fright  
at trembling desires, all bright,  
just about to break...*

However, exaltation alternates with a perplexed alienation that can assume almost surreal form:

*... Across the world's face  
things were probably alike,  
the world and the human race  
are scarcely alive.*

*I walked and watched the scene  
scared and content,  
below, ever loyal and keen,  
my footsteps bent.*

## Changing course

The sense of a disintegrating world and an increasingly isolated self became so strong in Gorter that after 1890 he began, like a number of his contemporaries, to look inwards in search of a unifying philosophical framework. He found this briefly in Spinozan thought, which stressed the oneness of all being, but still felt disconnected from the huge social and political struggles then convulsing Europe that were to culminate in the First World War and the Russian Revolution. A collection of 1895 (*School of Poetry II*, 2) ends with a cry of anguish:

*Oh God! The side I'm standing on is wrong.  
I'm going under.  
My love has come to naught.*

In 1897 he resolved to act and joined the fledgling Social Democratic Workers' party (SDAP), and his poetry now extolled the triumph of the revolution, sometimes in a naïve mode that provoked mockery from his former literary allies:

*The working class dances a great round  
along the shore of the world's Ocean...*

His inspiration was henceforth the glorious future rather than the elusive, vanishing present; whereas the bourgeois individual was isolated, the Socialist individual will be one with his fellow men. Formally, Gorter's verse becomes noticeably more regular, often reverting to the sonnet form, and his imagery more conventional.



In 1909, tiring of the SDAP's constitutional gradualism, he left to form the splinter SDP (the nucleus of the later Dutch Communist Party). In 1920, having travelled secretly to Moscow for the Third International, after an epic six-week journey, partly hidden in the hold of a ship repatriating Russian prisoners-of-war, he addressed a critical Open Letter to Lenin – in response to Lenin's earlier scathing attack on 'Leftists' in his *Teething Troubles of Communism* (1920). Gorter argued for a different revolutionary strategy in Western Europe from that adopted in Russia (where, for example, the status of the peasantry was very different), an end to the opportunistic use of parliamentary and union structures, and an intelligentsia-led campaign of direct action. Gorter's 'bottom-up' proposals were laughed out of court, especially by Trotsky.

Gorter's propagandist skills had been acknowledged by Lenin before their clash <sup>(4)</sup> and a steady stream of articles, pamphlets and books continued to flow from his pen, appearing at home and abroad in such publications as Sylvia

Gorter sailing with Jeanne Clinge Doorenbos (Loosdrecht/Kaag, 1919).



Gorter, standing on the left,  
with his Cricket Club,  
ca. 1880.

Pankhurst's *The Workers' Dreadnought*, where he proposed a Fourth Workers' International to oppose the centralism of Moscow (1921). Most influential was undoubtedly his widely translated *Historical Materialism Explained for Workers* (1908). While conceding that truths are historically determined, this work reveals Gorter's belief in a core of dynamic individualism that was anathema to the Bolshevik leadership but inspired free spirits in the Marxist movement. 'We do not make history of our own free will. But... we do make it... not through blind fate, but through living society.'

Interestingly, the book's greatest and most lasting impact may have been in China, where his committed translator, Li Da, used the German and Japanese translations to produce his version and wrote extensively to promote Gorter's reservations about economic determinism. One possible convert, direct or indirect, to the cause may have been the young Mao Zedong.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Distantiation from the Movement of 1880

In literature, Gorter disowned the individualism of his former allies in the *New Guide* group in his 'Critique of 1880' (1897-1900) and in a series of critical essays in *The Great Poets* (collected posthumously in 1935), he extolled figures like Aeschylus, Shakespeare and especially Shelley, who combined sensibility with revolutionary fervour. It is in this work that he gives his striking, if simplified, definition of the unconscious – he had dismissed Freud's explorations as a bourgeois distraction:

*The unconscious is not, as bourgeois writers believe, an unknowable, mysterious power. It is perfectly knowable, and consists of three forces: the urge to self-preservation or love of self, the sexual urge or love for woman, and the social urge or love for the community.*

## Are poetry and politics compatible?

Gorter's principal poetic work after his conversion to Marxism is the epic *Pan* (1912, rev. ed. 1916). In it Gorter unfolds a Utopian vision of a post-revolutionary world, generally playing down the necessary intervening violence and bloodshed, though the second expanded edition of 1916 does allude to the pointless slaughter of the international working class on the battlefields of the First World War:

*... Choked in the gases, slaughtered by  
Bullets, torn asunder by mines  
The Workers lay strewn on the earth.  
Sacrificed by their rulers and omnipotent  
Capital, to bring them Possession  
Of the Earth the Workers lay  
Dead and dismembered all across the Earth  
The earth was full in the glorious light of May  
And the glittering sea was full of their floating  
Corpses, millions and millions,  
Such as the world had never seen...*

The sincerity of Gorter's compassion, anger and sense of waste is patent, but compared to, say, the raw immediacy of a Wilfred Owen, these lines seem distant and generalised – as a Socialist in the neutral Netherlands Gorter saw the war as a capitalist-orchestrated distraction from the rising tide of revolution.

Gorter was accused by some of having quit literature for the simplifications of dialectical materialism, but he himself saw his work as a continuum. In his socialist poems we hear the voice of a benign revolutionary anxious to share his joy in the world with all classes. His epic *Pan* ends with a moving renewed commitment to the art of poetry:





*With my heart's blood I've lived for you,  
Dear poetry, and, now death comes closer by,  
Now I want to tell you one last time.  
From childhood on I felt you, poetry,  
I can remember nothing of which you weren't  
Part. The reflection of my thoughts,  
That I sensed in all things, was you.  
The sweet murmur of the sea, my Mother's voice,  
The gait of my comrades, the light  
Of the world. People walking. The night.  
They all mattered only for your sake. –  
It was for your sake too that I loved. –  
Love itself meant nothing but for your sake.  
The body's deepest joy meant nothing to me.  
Women's dark womb meant nothing to me.  
The oblivious self-giving meant nothing,  
Except that I found deep in their womb,  
Deep in the infinite obscurity  
Nothing but you – you, you, dear poetry.*

Gorter was a formative influence on his contemporary Jan Hendrik Leopold (1865-1925), and on the post-Second World War generation of 1950s poets, especially Lucebert (pseudonym of Lubertus Jacobus Swaanswijk, 1924-1994), who defiantly borrows the name of one of Gorter's collections, 'School of Poetry', for his own didactic 'little revolution' in literature. Gorter remains one of the greatest love poets in Dutch; it is no accident that in both his very first preserved poem and in the one he finished just before he died, love is central. Indeed, 'Liefde/love' is the very last word he wrote as a poet, recalling the final line of the masterpiece of his beloved Dante: '*l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*'. ■

## NOTES

1. H. Gorter, 'Offener Brief an den Genossen Lenin', *Kommunistische Arbeiter-Zeitung* (Berlin, August-September 1920).
2. To his uncle K. Gorter, 23 March 1889.
3. The English critic Edmund Gosse, whose background essay 'The Dutch Sensitivists' prefaced both the English translation of Louis Couperus' novel *Noodlot* (*Footsteps of Fate*, 1891) and the US edition of Couperus' *Eline Vere* (1892), derived most of his information from the young writer Frederik van Eeden (1860-1932), very much a literary insider. However, Gosse made one spectacularly erroneous claim: '... the Dutch seem ... to leave their mother-tongue unassailed, and to be as intelligible as their inspiration allows them to be.' Even the most cursory reading of *Poems of 1890* would have corrected that misapprehension.
4. Letter of 5 May, 1915, Lenin, *Collected Works* 43, Moscow, 1977, pp. 453-454a.
5. N. Knight, 'Herman Gorter and the Origins of Marxism in China', *China Information* 2005, 19, 381-412.