Poems of Guido Gezelle

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FOREWORD

WHY COMMEMORATE GEZELLE?

PAUL VINCENT

GUIDO GEZELLE

Plant
fountain
shoot that roots
jet that spatters
tempest above all deeps
storm across all plains
wild rosetrees blow
stems of alder catkins bare

Deepest distance
farthest depth

calyx that quivers in the cup of both my palms
and darling as the daisy
As the poppy red
O my wild poppy

Paul van Ostaijen (1896–1928), translated by James Holmes

This acclamation of Gezelle by an Expressionist of a succeeding generation is
typical of the awe with which he has been regarded in his home culture. The
writer August Vermeylen sees his significance for Flemish literature in biblical
terms – that the poet himself would have no doubt found blasphemous: ‘In
the beginning was Gezelle; and Gezelle was the Word ...’
However, amid the polemics and recriminations that seem inescapable accompaniments to literary commemorations nowadays, the Flanders-based Dutch writer Benno Barnard recently sparked controversy by suggesting that Gezelle had little to say to him as a reader at the end of the twentieth century. Invidious comparisons were made between the official funds being lavished on the Gezelle centenary and the less generous subsidy afforded the twentieth anniversary of the death of the ‘worthier’ irreverent modernist Louis-Paul Boon (1912–79). The puzzled outside observer might wonder why it has to be Gezelle or Boon, and why this tiny corner of Europe that produced two extraordinary originals cannot rejoice in its own cultural richness and diversity.

There are more encouraging signs: it is refreshing to see that the commemorative exhibition organised by the poet’s home town of Bruges celebrates not only the pious regionalist and nationalist icon, but also the polyglot cosmopolitan, as reflected in his extensive library.

The English reader without Dutch has no need to grope for a context for much of Gezelle’s work: his love of regional speech and folklore, and his attraction for the minute details of nature that he shares with Robert Burns (1759–96), like Gezelle a gardener’s son. His Franciscan sense of the brotherhood of Nature sometimes suggests the poetry of John Clare (1793–1860), while the devotional dimension and formal experiment (for example, onomatopoeia) suggest the sprung rhythms and spiritual questing of fellow priest Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89). The Anglophile Gezelle visited England several times on church duties, and one can only speculate on the impact Hopkins’s work might have had on Gezelle, had it been published during his lifetime. Kindred spirits, and in the case of Burns a possible partial influence – but Gezelle, great writer that he was, is much more than the sum of influences. It is hard to dissent from Jozef Deleu’s comments in a recent anthology:

There is no poet who has made our language sing in such an incomparable way. The wonder of the poet Gezelle is his gift of wonderment. Childlike and naive, he spends his life in the midst of nature. He has no explanation for all the wonders that strike his eye and ear, but throughout his life they move him to praise the Creator. Gezelle is always uninhibited and unrestrained in his rapture. When he is overwhelmed by solitude and sadness, his language is just as musical as when he is in joyful mood. His poetry is carried by
a Romantic sense of life, but lucidity and simplicity are its most essential features. Gezelle the poet is both a seeker and a finder. Whatever he touches with his word, regains the purity of the first day. That makes him unique.5

In selecting poems for the present anthology, my aim was to give as representative a picture as possible of Gezelle's large poetic output (based on source-language anthologies, critical views and personal preferences), from devotional, through narrative to celebratory and expressionistic. I also wished to include as wide as possible a spectrum of translators in English. It is particularly gratifying to be able to include a number of expert dialect versions, two in Lowland Scots (‘Twa Aivers’ and ‘To...?’) and one Yorkshire-flavoured (‘Farmer Nick’). What this volume cannot, of course, do is do justice to the range and versatility of ‘the at least five Gezelles’ identified by André Lefevere (journalist, linguist, educator, priest, experimental poet).6 I can only offer a window on the last and, arguably, greatest of these: the lyric poet.

The bibliographies appended are intended to assist those wishing to explore the poetry and its translation into English in greater depth. We trust that the poems will retain at least some of their capacity to charm, arrest and move in English versions.

NOTES