Poems of Guido Gezelle

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The Bruges-born poet-priest Guido Gezelle (1830–1899) is generally considered one of the masters of nineteenth-century European lyric poetry. At the end of his life and in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Gezelle was hailed by the avant-garde as the founder of modern Flemish poetry. His unique voice was belatedly recognised in the Netherlands and often compared with his English contemporary Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889).

In this bilingual anthology, award-winning translator Paul Vincent selects a representative picture of Gezelle’s output, from devotional through narrative, to celebratory and expressionistic. Gezelle’s favourite themes are childhood, the Flemish landscape, friendship, nature, religion and the Flemish vernacular, and his apparently simple poems conceal a sophisticated prosody and a dialogue with spiritual and literary tradition.

However, an important barrier to wider international recognition of his lyric genius up to now has been the absence of translations that do justice to the vigour and musicality of Gezelle’s West Flemish idiom. Two of the translations included here go some way to redressing the balance: ‘The Watter-Scriever’ by Scotland’s national poet Edwin Morgan and ‘A Little Leaf’ by Francis Jones. Both translators make brilliant use of their own vernaculars (Glascwegian and North Yorkshire respectively) to bring Gezelle to life for the non-Dutch-speaking reader.

Paul Vincent is Honorary Senior Lecturer in Dutch at UCL. He became a full-time translator in 1989, after teaching Dutch at the University of London for over twenty years. In 2011, he was awarded the Vondel Dutch Translation Prize for his version of Louis Paul Boon’s My Little War. His translation of a selection of Hermann Gorter’s Poems of 1890 was published by UCL Press in 2015.