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De Amsterdamse jaren van Willem Kloos: Deel II (1888-1900)

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Summary

The poet Willem Kloos (1859-1938) has often been seen as a man who created his own myth, and who in doing so, was occasionally economical with the truth. He has also been considered as a man who was driven by homo-erotic stimuli and who was absolutely a-political. Later in life, after a lonely and deprived childhood, Willem Kloos fled from his petit-bourgeois social setting and found, in spite of his inclination to isolate himself, a circle of like minds. After a loveless childhood, he soon began to suffer from a fear of separation, which is nowadays known to be one of the symptoms of borderline syndrome.

At an early age, he was already a sharp and witty critic and his sonnets were highly acclaimed in Dutch literature.

This study gives not only an outline of the relatively well-known story of his life and work up to 1900, but also attempts to look anew at the stereotype image of the man and the poet, Willem Kloos.

A biographical outline

On 7th May 1859, Johannes Kloos, 32 years old, and a tailor by profession, reports to the registrar of the city of Amsterdam that on the previous day at the Botermarkt his son Willem Johannes Theodorus was born. Soon after that day, the young family moves from the Rembrandtplein, as the Botermarkt is called now, to Singel 521. This address turns out to be a place of tragedy.

When Willem is only one year old, his mother Anna Cornelia Amelse dies of tuberculosis at the age of 28 and just four weeks after this, his infant brother, only three months old, also dies. Now Johannes Kloos is alone with toddler Willem. This situation soon alters because in November 1861, he marries 36 year old Sophia Petronella van Beresteijn, widow of shopkeeper H.J.de Roever. She brings with her a stepbrother for Willem, the ten year old Hendrik. Decades later, Kloos describes his father's wife as a wicked stepmother who hardly feeds little Willem and who frequently punishes him.

Because of his weak physical condition it takes Willem longer to finish primary school, so he is already 14 years old when he starts at the HBS on the Keizersgracht. However, he is allowed to start in the second grade, and here he soon becomes friends with Herman Dieperink and Jan Beckering. On their afternoons off, they often discuss subjects like life, death and immortality.

When Willem gets his HBS certificate in 1877, there are problems as well as rejoicing. His father insists that he should study engineering and that if his son wants to study classical literature he will have to pay for everything himself. As Willem inherited a small legacy of FL 5200 from his great-aunt, he was, in fact, able to finance his studies himself.

In May 1880, Kloos meets Jacques Perk, a former school friend, who also writes poems. When he reads Perk's coronet of sonnets 'Mathilde' he is immediately convinced of his friend's talent. From that moment on the two poets are inseparable. They send each other passionate sonnets of friendship. However, less than a year later, they go their separate ways, but when Kloos learns that Perk is seriously ill, he visits him nearly every day on the Keizersgracht, where Perk is being nursed at his parental home.

In November 1881, when his young friend has died, Kloos commemorates him in an 'In memoriam' in *De Nederlandsche Spectator*. In this article he describes Perk as the most important poet of the new generation and in so doing, he shows himself to be an impressive critic.

Fearing that the work might fall into the 'wrong' hands, Kloos takes care of Perk's literary inheritance and arranges the publication of *Gedichten* (1882) by Jacques Perk.

Between July 1882 and January 1883, Kloos alternates between Amsterdam and Brussels. In the summer months of 1882, in Brussels, he has an affair with Martha Doorenbos, one of the daughters of his tutor, Willem Doorenbos. She is not his first love, he assures his new friend, Albert Verwey, in an open-hearted letter.

But Amsterdam continues to beckon. He has met some like-minded friends at the literary society *Flanor*.

However, after his Bachelor examination, he travels to Brussels again because, as a 25-year-old, he wants to avoid being enlisted by the civic guard of his home town.

Before he sets off he stops his contributions to the weekly *De Amsterdammer* and once in Brussels he breaks off his connections with his mentor, Vosmaer, of *De Nederlandsche Spectator*.

Kloos is angry that one of his articles for the magazine is criticised instead of merely being placed without any comment.

On Christmas Day 1884, Lodewijk van Deysse, Frederik van Eeden, Frank van der Goes, Willem Kloos en Willem Paap get together at Mr. Binger's publishing-office in Amsterdam, to negotiate the publishing of a new magazine. They think it is time to create a stage of their own so that they can give this new generation an opportunity to express its ideas.

These negotiations fail, but fortunately Willem Paap is acquainted with publisher Versluys, who, on 1st October, publishes the first edition of their magazine. It is called *De Nieuwe Gids*, a magazine about literature, art, politics and science, which appears every two months. Several weeks later *Julia, een verhaal van Sicilië* by the poet Guido is published. During his stay in Brussels, Kloos, who is very fond of parodies, has composed this story, a satire of the popular genre of the romantic novel. *Julia* is meant to provoke the official literary critics, whom he expects will take this shoddy piece of work seriously. And they do, most of the critics react enthusiastically. In their *De onbevoegdheid der Hollandsche Literaire Critiek* (1886) Kloos and Verwey attack them vehemently.

His friendship with Albert Verwey is essential for Kloos to be able to carry out his role as secretary to the editorial staff of *De Nieuwe Gids*. Young Albert takes a lot of work off his hands and thus enables him to write. Kloos is becoming deeply attached to Verwey, as he used to be to Perk, until Verwey tells him the inevitable news, that he is getting engaged to Kitty van Vloten. At first Kloos reacts rather restrainedly to his friend's announcement, but after a day or two, he gets quite dramatically jealous.

Driven by fierce emotions he writes a whole cycle of verses in just two days, including ' *Het Boek Van Kind En God. Een Passiespel* ', which he wants to have published in the next edition of *De Nieuwe Gids*.

At this point, Van Eeden, his physician, thinks it advisable for Kloos to go and stay with his friend Willem Witsen, the painter, in London.

Once back in Amsterdam, Kloos goes to stay with Hein Boeken in the Kerkstraat. Meanwhile he does his utmost to get Verwey removed from *De Nieuwe Gids*. On 31st October 1889, Van Eeden, Kloos, Van der Goes and Verwey sign a contract stating that Verwey will leave the editorial staff of *De Nieuwe Gids*. P.L.Tak, a journalist, is his successor.

Shortly after that a debate about socialism begins.

Kloos' '*Verleden, heden en toekomst*' appears in the April edition of 1891. In this article, he criticises the Marxist, Van der Goes, as well as the ethical-socialist, Van Eeden.

He was bewildered by the fact that two of his friends were intoxicated by socialism.

In 1891, Mieb Pijnappel wholeheartedly shows the poet Kloos her affection, but he genuinely does not know how to deal with this and he realises he has never learnt how to behave in the company of women.

When the student Pieter Tideman visits Kloos, the socialist debate is behind him and so is 'De Lieven Nijland affaire'. Under a pseudonym Van Eeden wrote a critical story about himself, as a means to test Kloos' literary integrity.

When, in January 1893, Willem Kloos refuses to involve the poet Herman Gorter with the literary section of the magazine, Tak, Van der Goes and Van Eeden turn against him. To Kloos, who is always short of money, this is too big a (financial) threat.

On 1st November 1893, in the October edition of *De Nieuwe Gids* Kloos publishes several sonnets in which he curses and insults his former friends, whom he now considers to be his enemies. On the cover, the names of Van Eeden, Tak and Van der Goes are missing (without comment) from the list of members of the editorial staff.

The tension increases and the young triumvirate, Boeken, Kloos and Tideman threatens to fall apart. The future of *De Nieuwe Gids* is extremely uncertain. This uncertainty increases when a competitor is announced: the *Tweemaandelijksch Tijdschrift*, edited by Van Deysse and Verwey and supported by a list of more than fifty contributors who used to publish in *De Nieuwe Gids*.

Kloos, who, in spite of all these difficulties, manages to publish his first collected poems *Verzen* in 1894, is becoming more and more isolated. Tideman's wife has given birth to a handicapped child and Tideman leaves the bohemian life. Boeken is avoiding Kloos.

In February of 1895, after a nervous breakdown, Kloos goes to stay at Dr. Jelgersma's sanatorium in Arnhem. At the end of April he flees from there. He lives for a while in a state of neglect in a small room in Amsterdam. Once again a physician takes care of him. Henri Samson, one of Kloos' old acquaintances is called in when Kloos tries to kill himself by cutting his throat with a breadknife on 5th October. Samson gets him admitted to the psychiatric ward of an Amsterdam hospital, Paviljoen 3 of the Wilhelmina Gasthuis. Samson informs his colleagues that Kloos is suffering from delusions and is a danger to himself and to his surroundings. From 9th November 1895, Kloos is nursed at the Krankzinnigengesticht in Utrecht in a second class ward, where he enjoys a relatively high standard of nursing, thanks to the money some of his old friends have collected. He is 36 years old now and in the professional opinion of his doctors he is incurably ill. Their diagnosis is: Vecordia, lunacy. On 8th May he is discharged.

Until 1st October Kloos lives with Van Eeden in Bussum, and after that as a boarder with the Linn family in the same village. There he seems to do nothing much apart from sit in his room and smoke cigarettes.

Then in July 1898, Willem receives a letter that will change his life.

The 23-year-old Honourable Miss Jeanne Reyneke van Stuwe from The Hague sends the almost 40-year-old chief editor of *De Nieuwe Gids* some of her poems. They start corresponding, later even sending each other passionate letters. This results in an engagement.

When Kloos, as always short of money, gets a small job as a translator, he can afford to come and live in The Hague. On 4th January, 1900, Willem Kloos, dressed in a suit borrowed from Boeken, and Jeanne Reyneke van Stuwe enter into matrimony. Willem Witsen and Hein Boeken are their witnesses. Together with Jeanne, Kloos is able to continue his beloved work on *De Nieuwe Gids* for three more decades.

On 31st March, 1938 the poet and critic Willem Kloos passes away.

His funeral was a national event and he was heaped with posthumous honours.

The other Kloos

On the 6th May 1959, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Kloos, J.C.Brandt Corstius gave a commemorative speech in which he emphasized the poet's importance in the early stages of his career as a poet. In his view, Kloos was a completely new type of artist. On the other hand, Brandt Corstius described Kloos as a man who created his own myth, who changed facts and who did not tell the truth about relationships. In the eyes of some, Kloos became nothing more than a 'petty scribbler'. This image of 'petty scribbler', as he was called in the fifties by Stuiveling and 's Gravesande, became even more pronounced during the decades that followed and from the time of van Eeten's publication, the discussion about Kloos' sexual orientation became an important issue. It would keep literary historians busy for a long time, as we can see in an article Jellema wrote not so long ago.

In this study, we will try to adjust this still dominant image of Kloos, which dates from the fifties and sixties. Indeed, Kloos often made errors when mentioning dates and years, but that does not mean that his accounts and descriptions of events are necessarily untrue.

Where his sexual orientation is concerned: it cannot be denied that Kloos was prone to deep friendships and that he cherished and even adored some particular friends.

Kloos was in love with love and this image stuck to him, whereas it did not stick to Perk or to Verwey.

Hans Hafkamp even wrote in 1985: ' Kloos is (.....) the only one in the circle of " Tachtig " whom we, with some justification, could call " homosexual " .'

In this remark he followed Van Eeten, who suggested the same thing in the 1960s. Some decades later, Kralt, was a lot more cautious. In the newest Kloos-biography, Bart Slijper remained neutral with respect to this issue.

We have attempted to put the, from our point of view, excessive fixation on Kloos' alleged homosexuality into a proper perspective and we take his love for Mieb Pijnappel, Dora Jaspers and Martha Doorenbos seriously.

Apart from the usual literature we have mainly consulted primary sources and occasionally we have been able to correct predecessors such as Michael, Van Eeten, 's Gravesande, Kralt and Prick. We did try not to discuss matters with our predecessors too much, although this some times could not to be avoided. We also wanted to emphasise an aspect of Kloos' early work, which has not merited much attention to date: his sense of humour and his irony. In the numerous quotations this will hopefully become clear. In our attempts to free Kloos from the labels of 'liar' and 'failed homosexual' we came upon some new facts, which indeed shed new light on some things.

In general, we found logical explanations for what until now had been interpreted in a complicated fashion. An important example is Kloos' stay at his aunt's house in Voorburg; until now this was often considered to be the result of his broken relationship with Jan Veth. We attribute it simply to a lack of money and fear of the militia.

In our description of the relationship between Willem Kloos and Jacques Perk we developed a new perspective on the poem '*Iris*' by Perk. This poem made no reference to Joanne Blancke or to Kloos, but rather to the suicide of Eduard Samson, one of the young boarders who stayed with the Perk family.

There is another red thread running through this study. We dispute the fact that Kloos was apolitical. In our point of view, this apolitical stance is only demonstrated in the contents of *De Nieuwe Gids*. For that reason 'his' magazine is given quite a lot of attention by critics.

The years in which Kloos lived and the new emerging ideology, socialism, are described in several pieces of writing from his hand. The collapse of *De Nieuwe Gids* in the 1890s was caused, among other things, by the so-called socialist question.

This study is chiefly about this Willem Kloos: the innovative poet, the forthright critic and the leader of *De Nieuwe Gids*. Of course, his excessiveness, his fear of separation, his mood swings into extreme sadness or explosive anger will not be omitted. Willem Kloos was much more than an alcoholic, self-conceited and depressed poet. He was also a man who could turn the scars left by a joyless childhood and his aching for friendship and love into splendid poetry.