

# The Poetry of Theologian Geerhardus Vos

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## Introduction

Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949) is known as the “father of Biblical theology.” As a pioneer in this academic discipline, he influenced many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians. In James Dennison’s words, “Vos eschatologizes revelation. [The] arena in which God himself dwells is the arena from which he speaks. And that speech is intended to reveal that eschatological arena to the living creature.”<sup>1</sup> According to Richard Oudersluys, former New Testament professor at Western Theological Seminary, theologians like Vos and his contemporary Oscar Cullmann offered an alternative to Barthian neo-orthodoxy, which draws a sharp distinction between “supra-history” (*Heilsgeschichte*) and ordinary history (*Historie*). As Vos illustrated in his oft-reprinted book, *The Pauline Eschatology* (1930), for many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians, eschatology is the perspective from which to read and interpret the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Vos, as an exponent of neo-Calvinism, was instrumental in personally introducing Americans to this tradition, especially the theology of Abraham Kuypers (1837-1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854-1921).<sup>3</sup> Vos’ stress on the historical character of revelation bears their stamp and positions him over against modernist theologies. As a Biblical theologian and neo-Calvinist, Vos espoused traditional Reformed theology as it was reshaped by Karl Barth and his followers.

Scholars have paid due attention to these two theological aspects of Vos’ intellectual biography, but few seem to be aware of his extensive poetry writings. He published eight volumes of poetry and several miscellaneous poems, some two hundred in number. Several miscellaneous poems are included in the recent edition of his letters.<sup>4</sup> This poetry reveals hidden aspects of his life, and is all the more valuable because most of his personal papers and books were lost in a 1973 fire that destroyed his summer home in Roaring Branch, Pennsylvania. His poems are a unique avenue to reveal his inner life as an academic

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<sup>1</sup> James T. Dennison, ed., *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing 2005), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Heideman, “Dr. Albertus Pieters, V.D.M.: Biblical Theologian,” in: Jacob E. Nyenhuis, ed., *A Goodly Heritage: Essays in Honor of the Reverend Dr. Elton J. Bruins at Eighty* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), 71-72.

<sup>3</sup> George Harinck, “Geerhardus Vos as introducer of Kuypers in America,” in: Hans Krabbendam & Larry J. Wagenaar, eds., *The Dutch-American Experience: Essays in Honor of Robert P. Swierenga* (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij 2000), 242-262.

<sup>4</sup> Dennison, *Letters of Vos*, 251-57.

theologian and man of letters. Although it is complicated to read poetry as a biographical text, and some academics forbid it, Vos' poems clearly contain important biographical data.

This chapter, part of a larger biography of Geerhardus Vos, touches on the themes, language, and literary style of his poems. My intent here is to turn attention away from Vos as a theologian and focus instead on his poetry. Theology and letters, the Word and rhythm and rhyme, exegetical analysis and lyrical expression, are all essential aspects of his character, and overlooking one of them risks misreading his life. To understand his poetry, however, one must first be aware of his upbringing, education, and teaching career.

## Biography

Geerhardus Vos' life can be divided into four periods, each defined in terms of place: his youth in the Netherlands (1862-81); the twelve years of his *grand tour* through Michigan, New Jersey, The Netherlands, Berlin, Strassburg, and Michigan again (1881-93); the almost four decades in Princeton (1893-1932); and the seventeen years of his retirement in Santa Ana, California and Grand Rapids (1932-49). Dennison structured Vos' biography around his theological output, which well suited his theological theme. But Dennison's periodization led him to label the twenty years 1930 to 1949 Vos' "Era of Non-Productivity." Yet as a poet, these two decades were the Dutchman's most productive years.<sup>5</sup>

Dividing Vos' life into geographical periods has the advantage of covering all the phases without giving preference to any one of them. It also harmonizes with his perception of his life course. In a brief biographical sketch written after his retirement, Vos was very precise about the forty-some places he had lived or worked.<sup>6</sup> His poem, "Winter's death," expresses the same particularity about names and places. Winters' death marks the end of life beyond geography, in "nameless places, where North nor South is known."<sup>7</sup>

Geerhardus Vos was born in 1862 in the Frisian town of Heerenveen in the Netherlands. His parents, Jan Hendrik Vos (1826-1913) and Aaltje Beuker (1829-1910), were both natives of County Bentheim in Germany, just across the Dutch border. His father was a minister of the Seceded church, and between 1858 and 1881 served six Seceder or Christelijke Gereformeerde congregations, one in Germany and five in the Netherlands. In these decades, about 2 percent of Dutch society belonged to this church. Its members mainly lived in the countryside, and stood culturally aloof. J.H. Vos was a village pastor, and never served in a town before immigrating to Grand Rapids in 1881, although during his studies at the Theological Seminary at Kampen, he gained some acquaintance with cultural life. At home,

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 63-64.

<sup>6</sup> G. Vos, "Autobiographische aantekeningen," *Neerlandia. Maandblad van het Algemeen Nederlandsch Verbond* 37 (Feb. 1933): 10.

<sup>7</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Charis. English verses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931), 18.

he was similarly sheltered, reading mainly the Bible and devotional works, and for relief, the poetry of Willem Bilderdijk and Isaac Da Costa.

Geerhardus Vos completed his primary education (1874-1878), presumably under schoolmaster J. Hoogendam in the Tuinlaan Christian School at Schiedam, across the River Maas from the family home in Pernis.<sup>8</sup> This school had about 165 pupils in the 1870s and was weak academically.<sup>9</sup> Schiedam offered no Christian secondary education, and a small Latin School there had waned since its rector died in 1869.<sup>10</sup> It was 1879 before a classical school, or *gymnasium*, opened under the new Higher Education law of 1876.<sup>11</sup> Thus, his parents sent him for secondary education to the “French school” in Schiedam, and they hired as tutor the Rev. C.J.I. Engelbregt, pastor of a neighboring Christelijke Gereformeerde congregation at Spijkenisse. Engelbregt had worked in South Africa, and was well versed in English and French. This arrangement was helpful, but not entirely satisfying.

In 1877, Vos’ parents sent him to Amsterdam to a *gymnasium*, the entryway into the Dutch university system. The classical curriculum opened a new world for him and for other young men in the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk, such as Herman Bavinck, who in the 1870s first enrolled in Dutch universities. Vos boarded with his uncle, Rev. Henricus Beuker, who like the Vos family, came from Bentheim. Beuker had studied theology under the influence of his older brother-in-law, Geerhardus’ father, and served a Christelijke Gereformeerde congregation in the city from 1873 to 1881. He and his family immigrated to the United States in 1893.<sup>12</sup> Amsterdam in those days was a city of about 265,000 inhabitants and a relatively large Christelijke Gereformeerde community of three congregations with 4,000 members.<sup>13</sup>

The Amsterdam *gymnasium* in 1877 had about two hundred students, housed in an old building on the Singel crying for paint. Here Vos for the first time came under the spell of literature, especially poetry, through the allure of his literary tutor and teacher of Dutch language and literature, Willem Jacobsz. Hofdijk (1816-1888). Hofdijk was a member of the cultural elite and quite a character. Once he met aged King William III, who did not recognize him at once. Against all etiquette, Hofdijk promptly addressed the King directly: “What, does Netherlands’ grey king not recognize Netherlands’ grey poet?”<sup>14</sup> Hofdijk had published a

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<sup>8</sup> H. Snoep, *100 jaar christelijk onderwijs Schiedam. Historisch overzicht* (n.p., n.d.), 4-7.

<sup>9</sup> In the Gemeente Verslag of 1874, the municipal school commission was critical of conditions at the Christian School (*Collectie Abma*, archive nr. 201, Gemeentearchief Schiedam).

<sup>10</sup> ‘Albun discipolorum’, *Archief van de rector van het stedelijk gymnasium (1828) 1979-1971* (archive nr. 514, inv. nr. 19. Gemeentearchief Schiedam).

<sup>11</sup> *Inventaris van het archief van de rector van het stedelijk gymnasium (1828) 1979-1971* (Gemeentearchief Schiedam).

<sup>12</sup> Gerrit Jan Beuker, *Abgeschiedenes Streben nach Einheit. Leben und Wirken Henricus Beukers 1834-1900* (Kampen: Mondiss, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> C. Augustijn (ed.), *Gereformeerde Amsterdam sedert 1835* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1989), 142-43.

<sup>14</sup> Aegidius W. Timmerman, *Tim’s herinneringen* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers 1983) 92. Timmerman was a pupil at the Amsterdam *gymnasium* until 1878.

history of Dutch literature (*Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Letterkunde* (1856)), and was a poet, playwright and artist as well. Of all his teachers at the *gymnasium*, Vos kept the most vivid memories of Hofdijk.<sup>15</sup>

Vos' eight classmates, all boys, later became influential leaders in Dutch society and culture. One, Herman Gorter (1864-1927), became one of the most famous poets in modern Dutch literature. This son of an Anabaptist minister was destined to study theology, but forsook this destiny for poetry. Gorter's best friend, Alphons Diepenbrock (1862-1921), after Sweelinck the most important Dutch composer, was two grades ahead of him at the *gymnasium*. Gorter and Diepenbrock belonged to the *Tachtigers* (Eighties Movement), a very influential modern movement in Dutch arts and letters that started in 1885. Its writers, composers, and artists were all born on the brink of the modern era in the Netherlands, between 1855 and 1865. This was also the generation of Geerhardus Vos.

Vos, like Gorter a sensitive young man, absorbed the economic and cultural changes around him and started writing poetry. His poems date from 1877, when he was 15 years old.<sup>16</sup> Herman Gorter started writing poetry at about 1885.<sup>17</sup> Vos developed his literary interest right before the start of the Eighties Movement, and was little affected by its intellectual and artistic atmosphere. There is no evidence he ever mentioned Gorter, Diepenbrock, or any other adherent. When recalling in the 1930s the influences on his poetry, Vos mentioned his first teacher Hofdijk, the poets J.J.L. Ten Kate and Jan Luijken, and literary giants Joost van den Vondel and Willem Bilderdijk.<sup>18</sup>

As poets, Vos and Gorter were both initiated in the genre, by the same teacher, in the same class, and they were rooted in the same literary traditions. Yet, their poetry was strikingly different. Gorter was influenced by the first openly non-Christian Dutch literary great, Multatuli. The Eighties Movement was the first "paganistic" group in Dutch literature, as one of the most important historians of the era described it.<sup>19</sup> They broke with the idea that art was a vehicle for didactic, religious, or philosophical ideas, or a pastime, and embraced it as *l'art pour l'art* [art for art's sake]. For them, art was passion, sound, and image, and their work was in character, non-Christian and cosmopolitan; in form, plastic and rhythmic; and in style, anti-rhetorical.

Vos graduated in July 1881, ready for life among the cultural elite. Earlier that year, however, his father had accepted a call from Spring Street Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Geerhardus returned home and prepared to immigrate to the United States. Here began his *grand tour*, beginning in Michigan. As might be expected,

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<sup>15</sup> See, on Hofdijk, Timmerman, *Tim's herinneringen*, 83-99; Dennison, *Letters of Vos*, 242.

<sup>16</sup> The title of his second collection of poems is *Spiegel der natuur. Verzen 1877-1927* (Princeton: G. Vos, 1927).

<sup>17</sup> De Liagre Böhl, *Herman Gorter*, 43.

<sup>18</sup> Vos, "Autobiographische aantekeningen," 10.

<sup>19</sup> Endt, *Festijn van Tachtig*, 19.

given his family background and *gymnasium* education, Vos decided to enter the ministry. He enrolled at the small Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), where Rev. Gerrit E. Boer was the only teacher for about ten students. Vos was much better educated than his classmates, and after a year became Boer's assistant. After two years, in 1883, Vos enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary, graduating in 1885. He then returned to Europe for doctoral studies in Berlin, funded by a Princeton faculty fellowship for his "penetrating, thorough, balanced" thesis on the origin of the Pentateuch.<sup>20</sup>

Vos was disappointed in theological discipline in Germany and considered the year a loss: "Too little reflective and self-confident," he wrote Bavinck, then a junior professor at Kampen.<sup>21</sup> Vos transferred to the small University of Strassburg in southern Germany, to study Semitic languages (Arabic, Egyptian, Hebrew) under the "extraordinarily gifted" Orientalist, Theodor Nöldeke (1836-1930), mentor of the Dutch Orientalist, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, a friend of Bavinck. Nöldeke was also well versed in Arab, Syrian, and Persian literature.<sup>22</sup> Why Vos chose linguistics over Old Testament studies is not clear. In 1887, he was awarded his doctorate from Kaiser Wilhelm University with a dissertation on the in Arab-language treatise of Al-Makrīzīj.<sup>23</sup> These two years in Europe introduced Vos to the best of European linguistic and Oriental studies, as well as modern German culture.

Vos spurned an offer from the Free University of Abraham Kuyper in favor of an appointment as the third professor at the CRC Theological School, to teach dogmatics, historical philosophy, and New Testament Greek. Synod stipulated that Vos, a teacher gifted in both western and middle eastern languages, would teach the Dutch-speaking students English and give all his lectures in that language.<sup>24</sup> Vos continued to lecture in English for the next forty-four years, until his retirement in 1932.

Vos began life as a cultural outsider, because of his Seceder background, but his studies in Princeton, Amsterdam, Berlin, and Strassburg placed him among the intellectual elite. He returned to Grand Rapids reluctantly, under pressure from his parents: "I am going to America with the feeling that my place is not there. And I leave the Netherlands with the knowledge that even if my work be insignificant, I could do it there with joy and sympathy."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Semi-Centennial Volume. Theological School and Calvin College, 1876-1926* (Grand Rapids: 1926), 13-14; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (ed.), *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation. The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1980) ix; Geerhardus Vos, *The Mosaic Origin of the Pentateuchal Codes* (New York: A.C. Armstrong & Son, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1886).

<sup>21</sup> *Dagboek*, 24-30 July 1886; *H. Bavinck Papers* (Historical Documentation Center for Dutch Protestantism, VU University Amsterdam (HDC)); G. Vos to H. Bavinck, 16 June 1887, in Dennison, *Letters of Vos*, 124.

<sup>22</sup> Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje to Herman Bavinck, Strassburg, 14 Mar. 1881, in J. De Bruijn and G. Harinck (eds.), *Een Leidse vriendschap. De briefwisseling tussen Herman Bavinck en Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, 1875-1921* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1999), 83.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28; Vos, *Die Kämpfe und Streitigkeiten zwischen den Banū 'Umajja und den Banū Hāšim*. Vos published his dissertation in 1888 with E.J. Brill at Leiden.

<sup>24</sup> *Semi-Centennial Volume*, 15, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Vos to Bavinck, 16 June 1887, in Dennison, *Letters of Vos*, 125

This may be the ultimate tragedy of his life. His parents gave him a first rate education, but he now had to lead a poorly educated people. Perhaps, his parents had asked too much of him. In Christian Reformed circles, Vos was always a loner. His international education and wide travels in Europe marked him as different, even superior, to the lowly Dutch-American immigrants. In a sense, his fate was shared by many European immigrants who came with advanced academic degrees that Americans did not esteem and often could not even evaluate.

Vos did not use his academic degrees to claim a leading role in his circles or speak out on public matters. By nature, he was a scholar, not a leader. Even his fellow academics expected more from his bright mind. "I don't hear or see anything of Dr. Vos," Hope College professor Nicholas Steffens (1839-1912), a fellow Bentheimer, wrote Abraham Kuyper.<sup>26</sup> Maybe Vos did not like to socialize. This was the impression of Steffens' colleague, Henry Dosker (1855-1926), a Dutch-American. "I don't hear anything from Vos. He is very dry and seems to become a bookworm more and more."<sup>27</sup> Already in the first months of Vos' stay in Grand Rapids, Steffens sensed that he did not feel at ease. "I don't know if he is in the right place. Real science is not appreciated in Dutch American circles."

In a letter to Kuyper in 1891 Dosker continued this theme:

Dr. Vos lives in a more conservative environment than I do; but he is not understood in his own circles, because his people are well meaning, but unmannerly and narrow-minded. Nowadays he is constantly attacked in *De Wachter* because of supralapsarian views. Rev. [Lammert J.] Hulst certainly does not contest conclusions with him but with you. The "initiated" understand that the attack is aimed at him. It is a pity, that this young man wastes his talents in these circles. He would be of much more use in the Netherlands, if I am not mistaken. I agree, he is not a leader in public affairs, but he is a scrupulous scholar and a meticulous worker. And there is nothing to be said against his principles. I love him.<sup>28</sup>

Vos gave his inaugural address at the Theological School in 1888, but his grand tour was not yet finished. He would return to Europe, although Steffens was afraid his parents would not let him go.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, when in 1892 Bavinck suggested that Vos transfer to Kampen Theological Seminary for position in Old Testament studies, he declined:

I am well acquainted with civic and social life in America, but I cannot say that of ecclesiastical and religious life. Lately, I have concluded that in the long run I do not want to stay in my present position. Then the question arises: What then? More than once I have been approached how I feel about accepting a chair in a seminary of the Presbyterian Church. Lately, I like the idea more than before. However, there is much

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<sup>26</sup> N.M. Steffens to A. Kuyper, 1 Dec. 1888, *A. Kuyper Papers*, HDC. Translation by the author.

<sup>27</sup> Henry E. Dosker to Bavinck, 25 Feb. 1893, *Bavinck Papers*. HDC. Translation by the author.

<sup>28</sup> Steffens to Kuyper, 25 Jan. 1891, *Kuyper Papers*. Translation by the author.

<sup>29</sup> Steffens to Kuyper, 25 Apr. 1891.

in those churches that I am uncomfortable with. Looking at the matter from a *theological* point of view, I would say: I would rather work in the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk [in the Netherlands] than in a Presbyterian church here. There are two [opposing] considerations: (1) my parents are here; and (2) there is a certain charm in the American life from which it is hard to withdraw after first having been under the influence of it.<sup>30</sup>

In 1893, twelve years after his emigration to the United States and five years after the start of his academic career in Grand Rapids, at the age 31, Vos accepted a call from the Presbyterian seminary in Philadelphia as professor of Biblical theology. He taught at Princeton Seminary for almost forty years. In Princeton, he had the same reputation as in Grand Rapids; that of a very learned professor who disdained public affairs. Fortunately for him, the larger and culturally advanced academic community at Princeton accepted his reclusive ways and appreciated his facile pen and brilliant lectures. In 1932 Vos entered his retirement years in California and then again in Michigan, where he died in 1949.

## Poetry

It was in Princeton that Geerhardus Vos first revealed himself publicly as a poet. This was nothing special. Academics often publish poems, especially specialists in Arts and Letters, but also scientists like the Dutch-American Leo Vroman. Poetry is part of high culture, and in Vos' days, it was also part of popular culture. Robert Swierenga, in his detailed description of Dutch-American life in Chicago, notes institutions like the Isaac Da Costa Recitation Society and the Christian Recital Association "Advendo."<sup>31</sup> These societies flourished, because the Dutch enjoyed poetry and often at social gatherings and parties, they recited verses. At wedding receptions, family members composed or read verses in honor of the bride and the groom. American periodicals in these days published poetry and poets expressed the feelings of the community, from laborers to white collar workers, from academics to captains of industry.<sup>32</sup>

Vos wrote some verses for the public. For example, he read one of his poems at the Macatawa resort hotel on Lake Michigan at Holland, at a banquet in honor of his friend Bavinck, who visited Michigan in 1892. Vos wrote poetry mostly for himself, to vent personal feelings. As in his theology, so in his literature, he was rooted in the Netherlands, where poetry belonged to high culture.

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<sup>30</sup> Vos to Bavinck, 30 June 1891, Dennison, *Letters*, 159. In brackets are some improvements or clarifications to the translation.

<sup>31</sup> Robert P. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago. A History of the Hollanders in the Windy City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 474-75.

<sup>32</sup> Joan Shelley Rubin, *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America* (Cambridge/London 2007).

Vos wrote poetry all his life, not merely on special occasions. It was more than a hobby. He felt an inner urge to compose verse, and published seven books of poems. His scholarly work and art went hand in hand. His poetry is unique among his people, because there were few highbrow poets in Dutch Reformed communities on either side of the Atlantic. In general, Dutch Calvinists did not appreciate high culture. "Devout Calvinists," Swierenga wrote, "were content with their humble church societies."<sup>33</sup> Vos seldom talked about his literary interests, which he confined largely to the seclusion of his study. He might have turned his back on his Calvinist heritage, as many artistically gifted artists did over the years. But he stayed, and kept his art to himself until after his sixtieth birthday. Thereafter, he increasingly abandoned theology and dedicated himself wholly to poetry.

There is another reason why Vos, the poet, deserves attention. The language of his poems is Dutch, even though he only lived the first nineteen years of his life in the Netherlands. Vos learned to speak and write English very well, and he published almost all of his hundreds of theological publications in that language. For forty years, he lived in Princeton where almost no one spoke Dutch, and he married an American woman who did not speak his mother tongue. At home, Vos spoke English, Dutch, and German, but he did not teach his children the Dutch language. He was able to write poetry in English and he published several volumes in this language, but the poems were translated. The language of his soul was Dutch. In 1932 he wrote: "I lived in the Netherlands until my nineteenth year. Although I moved into an English-speaking environment year after year; nevertheless, as soon as I took up the pen to 'weave' a song, the Dutch language surfaced."<sup>34</sup>

In 1922, Vos offered his first selection of poetry, *Spiegel der genade* [Mirror of Grace], to the Eerdmans-Sevensma publishing company in Grand Rapids. It was a logical choice, since the firm specialized in Dutch language books. This slim volume included fifteen poems totaling eighty-eight pages. He happily sent copies to all his friends, and signed gift copies can be found in libraries throughout the Netherlands and North America. Readers found no references to immigration, a longing for "the holy land of modern Europe,"<sup>35</sup> or praise of Dutch clouds or rivers. The setting of the poetry is definitely American. Most are religious, and four dealt with Old Testament prophets that were the subject of his early research. The tone in these prophet-poems is distant, as is the tone in most of his poems, except for a few with a more personal focus. He dedicated the volume to his parents, and the first poem tells of the religion of his mother. Another, called "Jesus intimus," reflects the pietistic Seceder mentality he inherited from his parental home. It begins:

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<sup>33</sup> Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 550.

<sup>34</sup> Vos to A. Eekhof, 28 Oct. 1932, A. Eekhof Papers, HDC.

<sup>35</sup> Hans Krabbendam, *Vrijheid in het verschiet. Nederlandse emigratie naar Amerika 1840-1940* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2006), 288.



Visit me in my small room, Jesus!  
But let the house be so sealed  
That no sound or echo of earthly business  
Can reach us through the closed doors.

Later in this poem, he writes:

I know thou art the Savior of millions,  
And still my very own love.  
O, help me to reconcile this!  
Come early to me alone, and stay all day long.<sup>36</sup>

This intimate relationship with God is the essence of Vos' religious poetry. He does not refer to church, community, or friends and acquaintances. His themes are pessimistic, referring often to death and sleepless nights. He suffered from insomnia, and wrote a lot of his poetry at night. A stanza in the poem, "Winter's death," is typical:

In somber indoor musing  
Methinks I might be using  
His stay to close mine own.  
Take leave of life's embraces  
All its delight and graces,  
To seek the nameless places,  
Where North nor South is known.<sup>37</sup>

He really needed Spring or, speaking in religious language, he was in dire need of the Resurrection in order to be able to cope with life.

In 1927, Vos published a second volume, entitled *Spiegel der natuur* [Mirror of Nature], to celebrate his fiftieth year of writing poetry. It counted 136 pages and consisted of nine parts, with Latin titles, such as "domus," "animal," and "lux Christiana." There is one poem in German and one in Latin; all the other sixty-eight are in Dutch. This volume dealt with nature rather than grace. The author was fond of trees and devoted a special section to them, called "*Arboretum parvum*":

The trees of my property are my intimate confidants....  
Your first green in Spring is refreshment for my eyes.  
My favorite slumber place is where your shadows fell....

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<sup>36</sup> Geerhardus Vos, "Jesus intimus," *Spiegel der genade* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma, 1922) 60. Translation by the author.

<sup>37</sup> Vos, *Charis*, 18.

They invite me to rest in sultry summer days.<sup>38</sup>

Vos' love for trees reminds one of Hofdijk, his first teacher, who also adored trees. The schoolboy admired Hofdijk for "his respect, sometimes close to religious adoration, for the world of the trees in the province of North-Holland, above the IJ river."<sup>39</sup> Sometimes his poems offer biographical information. In "Ex arbore navis," he recounts how trees are used to build ships. Here his reminiscences of the Schiedam wharfs show up. In another poem, he gratefully remembers how his parents loved animals:

It was a house where a prayer was said for a sick dog  
And a fallen wounded bird was worth compassion.<sup>40</sup>

Another poem recalls the painful ending of summer at his Roaring Branch home, where he spent the happiest times of his life and was buried in 1949. He laments:

Part of my existence  
Was felt in your rooms, furniture and vessels....  
Yet I have, before I went, wound up the clock,  
Thus, a whispering voice of time would remain as comfort.<sup>41</sup>

The third volume of Vos' Dutch poetry has a melancholic title, *Spiegel des doods* [Mirror of Death]. It was published in 1932, counts 73 pages and 24 poems. Interesting is the development revealed in the titles of these three volumes: from grace to nature to death. This development fits a remark one of Vos' friends made about him in the 1930s: "I felt for some time that his faith was growing wobbly."<sup>42</sup> He recalls in poems how someone was haunted by dreams that disturbed a pious life, and there is a longing for death:

Don't let me stay longer  
O Lord, in this distress;  
How I long to be taken away  
On the wings of death.<sup>43</sup>

In his poetry on death, there is no strong longing for death, but neither is there a fight for life. Here, too, the accent is on the descriptive:

I am close to my end; all earthly desire  
Has slid down from me like a mantle;

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<sup>38</sup> Vos, *Spiegel der natuur*, 23-36 (eight poems), quoted lines are on 26, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Vos, "Autobiographische aantekeningen," 10.

<sup>40</sup> "Animal particeps domus," *Spiegel der natuur* I, 67.

<sup>41</sup> "solitudo domus," *Spiegel der natuur*, 57.

<sup>42</sup> Dennison, *Letters of Vos*, 72.

<sup>43</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Spiegel des doods* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, n.d. [1932]), 22.

Only to you clings my soul.<sup>44</sup>

Vos wrote of the second coming of Christ as “the end of ‘the night.’”<sup>45</sup> And he thanks his Lord for the Psalms: “In my agony I often trembled, but never I was mute.”<sup>46</sup>

To typify the nature of his poetry I had best quote his own words:

There is no song that travelleth  
The highway between Life and Death,  
But stops twixt night-fall and to-morrow  
At the old inns of Joy and Sorrow.<sup>47</sup>

Why did Vos wait until his sixth decade to begin publishing poetry? Clearly, something changed in his life about 1920. For thirty years, he had been an active reviewer of theological books and wrote more than hundred reviews. Then he abruptly stopped publishing reviews. Just as remarkable, his prolific pen went silent in the scholarly sphere. This was a very turbulent time at Princeton Seminary. In 1920, Benjamin B. Warfield, the leading professor and Vos’ intimate friend, died. This set off a struggle between the faculty and board over the course the seminary would take, to remain ardently Calvinist or turn moderate (liberal). Vos sympathized with J.Gresham Machen and the orthodox Calvinists, but did not participate in the struggle. When Machen left in 1929 to join the newly founded Westminster Seminary faculty, Vos stayed at Princeton. Amid this institutional turmoil, he distanced himself from theology and concentrated on his inner life. Poetry was his escape. It held him close in a Word-centered culture. Yet, the shift in his life work was immense. A Calvinist might abandon any discipline, but to turn away from theology is unthinkable.

## Conclusion

Vos’ poetry did not win high acclaim. Eerdmans released two volumes, but he had to self-publish the other five. He loved writing poetry, but never had a high opinion of its literary significance. Vos’ love for words and language was inspired by Hofdijk, this inspiring teacher of many schoolboys. Yet, while his classmate Herman Gorter renewed Dutch poetry, Vos wrote in a traditional style. His language usage and literary taste were fixed when he emigrated in 1881 as a young adult, and he missed literary developments in his homeland thereafter. His taste was set during his *gymnasium* years by the poetry of Hofdijk, J.J.L. Ten

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<sup>44</sup> “Alternatief,” *Spiegel des doods*, 36.

<sup>45</sup> “Profeten-lied,” *Spiegel des doods*, 56.

<sup>46</sup> “Dankzegging,” *Spiegel des doods*, 47.

<sup>47</sup> Device, *Charis*.

Kate, and Jan Luijken. Only Vondel and Bilderdijk later added to that literature.<sup>48</sup> Vos referred explicitly to Vondel,<sup>49</sup> and the opening lines of “Jesus intimus” are reminiscent of Luijken. Vos held to Bilderdijk and Hofdijk, both steeped in the spirit of romanticism, and he wrote poetry in the 1920s and 1930s in a style that Netherlands artists had abandoned fifty years before. Most readers would agree that Vos’ poetry was not of the first rank, and classify him by Dutch standards as a minor poet. Yet, he is one of the most important poets of the Dutch-American culture. Geerhardus Vos, the renowned theologian, was not only a man of the Word but a man of letters.

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<sup>48</sup> Vos, “Autobiographische aantekeningen,” 10.

<sup>49</sup> “Dageraad,” *Spiegel des doods*, 41.