

## *Texts Worth Editing: Polyperspectival Corpora of Letters*<sup>1</sup>

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What texts are worth editing? In the case of Dutch collections of letters written between 1800 and 1900, the answer to this question can be found in a report compiled in 1996 on the basis of a questionnaire circulated among literary historians (Maas and de Man 1996). Forty-four years earlier, the Rijkscommissie voor Vaderlandse Geschiedenis (National Committee for Dutch History) had pondered the same question (Rijkscommissie voor Vaderlandse Geschiedenis 1952). It is unsurprising that many of the collections listed in the 1952 report should also feature in the 1996 report, for “belangrijke personen en instellingen – en dus ook de bronnen die met hen in betrekking staan – [behouden] over het algemeen hun status te midden van de ‘paradigma-wisselingen’” (Maas and de Man 1996, 7) [“significant individuals and institutions – and thus also the sources connected with them – tend to retain their status amid all the ‘paradigm shifts’”]. Thus, only a small proportion of the goals set in the 1952 report were met in four decades following.

A similar fate may befall the archives mentioned in the 1996 report. The highest priority was here accorded to the correspondences of key figures in the cultural and social life of the nineteenth century whose activities often covered a wide range of disciplines (literature, philosophy, the visual arts, politics and history) (Maas and de Man 1996, 13). These correspondences tend to be extensive. Aware that a thoroughly annotated scholarly edition of letters militated against prompt publication, Maas and de Man pleaded not to annotate the texts, and they also put forward the possibility of using floppy discs or CD-ROMs instead of books (Maas and de Man 1996, 14). What they failed to consider, however, was that preparing a work for publication is less time-consuming than the preparatory editorial work that goes into facilitating access to the sources. And it is precisely in this latter area that, thanks to technological developments, we have made much headway in recent years. The realization, within manageable time-frames, of editions of extensive collections of letters is now within our reach.

One of the central figures whose correspondence was mentioned in both reports is Albert Verwey (1865-1937). Verwey was part of what is known as “De Tachtigers” [the “Eighties

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Movement’], one of the most influential cultural-historical movements in Dutch history. The Eighties Movement is characterized by its interdisciplinary and international nature. Collections of letters dating from around 1900 show that there was a lively national and international exchange not only between the various artistic domains (such as literature, the visual arts, and music), but also with non-artistic domains, such as philosophy, the exact sciences, politics, and several social movements. Verwey considered himself to be chiefly a poet, but he was also an essayist, an editor of several influential journals, a critic and an academic. From 1880 until his death in 1937, he exchanged some 30,000 letters with over 2,000 correspondents, both at home and abroad. His correspondents included not only prominent literary authors but also the leading historians, politicians, philosophers, composers and musicians, architects, visual artists, and scholars of his day, as well as numerous influential intermediaries in literary circles, such as publishers and journal editors. In 1982, a group of researchers launched the “Albert Verwey-Brievenproject” [“Albert Verwey Letters Project”], designed to produce a complete, chronologically ordered edition of the letters written by and to Verwey, with an introduction and annotations. The researchers had ambitious and interesting plans for what they called a “computer edition”, but unfortunately the project had to be abandoned prematurely (Stapert-Eggen 1991). However, the importance of the Eighties Movement and of Verwey’s role within it did not abate, and this undiminished interest prompted the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands to revive the project in 2008. For the moment, the scope of the edition is limited to covering the early years (1880-1895) of the Eighties Movement, during which Verwey exchanged some 3,000 letters with more than 300 correspondents (Kets-Vree 2008). Two thirds of these have not been edited before. The remaining letters appeared in three scholarly editions.<sup>2</sup> The edition of the Huygens Institute is being made with *eLaborate*, a collaborative editing tool developed by the Huygens Institute that enables editors to transcribe and to annotate texts from digital facsimiles that have been uploaded into the programme.<sup>3</sup> **[figure 1]**

The editors of the Huygens project are encouraged – at times forced – to seek collaboration with other individuals and with institutions (archives or libraries) housing the relevant collections, such as the Amsterdam University Library, which holds the archive of Verwey’s private papers, and which digitized them and made available high-quality digital colour

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<sup>2</sup> Van Deyssel and Verwey 1981-1986; Verwey 1995; Kloos and Verwey 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.e-laborate.nl/en/>. [Accessed 18 June 2012].

facsimiles of them. Here, the advantages of partnership are evident: the editors of the Verwey project can produce their transcriptions at any time – on any computer with an internet connection – from faithful copies of the original. Because they enable high magnification, these digital copies are, at points, easier to decipher than the originals. The facsimiles will ultimately form part of the online publication of the edition. The Amsterdam University Library has also compiled a detailed catalogue of the Verwey collection, which is currently available online. For each letter, which has been allocated a unique identifier, the catalogue lists information about the sender, the recipient, the place from which the letter was sent, etc. **[figure 2a and 2b]**.<sup>4</sup> The compilation of this catalogue and the provision of facsimiles fulfill the first steps of the editorial project – to delimit the corpus and to make the originals available.

In addition to institutional collaboration, the establishment of informal working groups also opens up new prospects. Two recent developments in the field of editorial studies have been successfully combined in the Verwey project: “crowd sourcing” and the formation of a “community”. What is special about the Verwey community is that it is operative even in the preliminary phases of the work.<sup>5</sup> Researchers, trained volunteers, and students of various universities collaborate with the editorial team on the transcription of the letters – through seminars, in undergraduate dissertations, or through traineeships.

Working with non-professional editors calls for strict organization. Five detailed instruction manuals have been produced. The first deals with the structure of the online edition (a hierarchical system of folders and subfolders). The second explains how to create folders and how to upload scans. The third focuses on feeding transcriptions and annotations into the *eLaborate* tool. The last two manuals deal with the recording of metadata and the transcription of manuscripts. This systematic approach has greatly facilitated and accelerated transcription. By now all letters written between 1880 and 1894, as well as a considerable number of those from 1895, have been transcribed and checked. Once the defined corpus has

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://opc.uva.nl/>. The inventory is based on the results of the first phase of the “Albert Verwey-Brievenproject”, launched in 1982.

<sup>5</sup> For the possibilities and – where the Dutch language area is concerned – the limitations of the concept of “community”, see Van Raemdonck 2009, 296.

been transcribed, proofed and corrected, the editor responsible for the edition will carry out a final quality check; compare the transcriptions with the scans and, if necessary, with the originals; and adjudicate on conflicting readings (between the transcriber and the proofreader).

Several researchers wishing to make use of our provisional results have joined the Verwey community. Among them are, for instance, the biographers of Verwey and of Willem Kloos (1859-1938, the most important poet of the Tachtigers movement). That our transcriptions are not yet final at this early stage is not really a problem for the researchers can consult the digital facsimiles. Moreover, they need not travel to the relevant archives to consult the original documents; they can peruse the transcriptions at any moment at their desk. They can also search within this voluminous corpus thanks to electronic search functions. Finally, collaboration is advantageous for us editors too: we can benefit from the researchers' feedback.

The approach chosen for the editing of Verwey's correspondence has uncovered fascinating webs of relationships and provides information on other people gravitating around Verwey. One of Verwey's correspondents was Willem Arnold Witsen (1860-1923), a famous Dutch painter, etcher, and photographer. Just as Verwey was at the centre of literary circles, or, as the Dutch expression goes, was like "the spider in the web", Witsen was a key figure in the world of the visual arts. From 1877 until his death in 1923, he exchanged some 2,000 letters with approximately 150 correspondents. These letters have now been edited and published online (Witsen 2007). A collation of Witsen's and Verwey's respective correspondents for the same period shows that they had forty-five correspondents in common. (This number would doubtless increase if one included the letters written by and to Verwey between 1895 and 1923.) In many cases the matters that exercised the great minds of the day are discussed in both Verwey's and Witsen's networks, sometimes from diverging viewpoints – divergences that militate for the grouping together of their respective correspondences.

Even so, the combination can only in part do justice to the whole epistolary network. Other members of the networks to which Verwey and Witsen belonged of course exchanged letters among themselves. There are also letters from individuals who did not belong to either of these networks, but who nonetheless played an important role in the cultural and social life of the day. Some of these letters have already been published in book form or online; others are currently being edited. A rough count yields approximately 20,000 edited letters from members of the Eighties Movement and from their contemporaries. Apart from the painter,

engraver and photographer Willem Witsen (1860-1923), there are letters by the composer Alphons Diepenbrock (1862-1921; Diepenbrock 1962-1998), by the actor Arnold Ising, Jr. (1857-1904; Van Deyssel and Ising 1968), by the author and psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden (1860-1932; Van Eeden and Van Deyssel 1964), and by the painter Jacobus van Looy (1855-1930; Van Looy 1975). Our goal is to combine as many thematically connected sources as possible from c. 1900 within one searchable system to be known as the “Web van Tachtig” [“Eighties Web”]. The expansion of the “Web van Tachtig” will eventuate in a wider and clearer picture of the diversity and spread of the opinions, ideas, and ideals of the social and cultural elite of the time. Grouping these letters together will also enable users to examine the events and developments of this period from various viewpoints. The researchers involved in this project believe that such a “polyperspectival” corpus of letters will constitute an extremely rich research tool:

Een doorzoekbare, digitale brieveneditie waarin verschillende (parallele) correspondenties zijn opgenomen, zou het onderzoek naar “knooppunten” in de literatuurgeschiedenis – de Beweging van Tachtig [. . .] – of centrale figuren op het literaire veld [. . .] krachtig bevorderen. Tegelijkertijd zou zo’n elektronische databank met correspondenties een volledig overzicht geven van de verschillende posities die een schrijver in onderscheiden correspondenties inneemt, en hoe die posities in de loop van de tijd veranderen. (Van de Schoor 2008, 225-226)

[A searchable, digital edition in which a number of parallel collections of letters have been included, would strongly encourage the research on “nodes” in literary history – the Eighties Movement [. . .] – or on the main players in the literary field [. . .]. At the same time such a database of collections of letters would provide a more complete overview of the different roles taken by an author in the various correspondences, and how these roles change in time.]

The nucleus of the “Web van Tachtig” is the edition of Verwey’s letters (1880-1895). The primary audience for this edition (and also for the “Web van Tachtig” is the scholarly community. What matters most, therefore, is not the aesthetic nature of the letters, but their significance for documenting the life and ideas of these figures. The emphasis, therefore, is on accuracy. All hitherto unpublished letters by and to Verwey are to be transcribed diplomatically, with all their peculiarities, inconsistencies, and slips of the pen. This approach differs from that used by the editors of the letters previously published (Van Deyssel and

Verwey 1981-1986; Verwey 1995; Kloos and Verwey 2008),<sup>6</sup> whose editions were intended not only for scholars but also for a broader public, and whose transcriptions were amended with a view to greater “readability”. Moreover, the differing rationales for the establishments of these three digitized editions prompted us to ask ourselves the following question: Should we go back to the sources and edit them again diplomatically, or should we incorporate the transcriptions as presented without changes? We chose the latter option and decided to invest our limited resources into the expansion of the corpus rather than into the emendation of existing editions. Our decision is even more justifiable when it comes to dealing with the “Web van Tachtig”.

The presentation of the metadata of the hitherto digitized editions is also inconsistent. For instance, names and dates are variously represented (sometimes even within a single edition), and the repositories and shelf marks of the documents are not always given. Because the automatic feeding of digital data into *eLaborate* and the linking of metadata, transcriptions, facsimiles and annotations could be done only partially, painstaking and time-consuming input by hand was also necessary. Moreover, additions and adjustments were required to bring the metadata of the three digitized editions in line with that of the born-digital part of the project. **[figure 3]** Such painstaking work is indispensable; without a complete and homogeneous metadata, it is impossible to search within the whole corpus.

To conclude, the above-described ongoing work fulfills and exceeds the goals set in 1952 and 1996. In 1952, the report of the National Committee for Dutch History was focused, in the realms of art and literature, specifically on the archives of Willem Kloos, Willem Witsen, Jacobus van Looy, Albert Verwey, Frederik van Eeden and Alphons Diepenbrock – all members of, or closely connected with, the Eighties Movement (Rijkscommissie voor vaderlandse geschiedenis 1952, 48-49). Forty-four years later, Maas and de Man mentioned many of these names and, in addition, suggested publishing all the correspondences that one could trace within a specific, limited period (Maas and de Man 1996, 13). They thus pleaded *avant la lettre* for a polyperspectival corpus of letters. Recent technological developments allow us to claim that Maas and de Man’s suggestion – repeated by Van de Schoor (Van de Schoor 2008, 225-226) in a digital context – is a realistic goal.

## ***Bibliography***

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<sup>6</sup> These letters have been digitized by the Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse Letteren (Digital Library of Dutch Literature), which is also a partner in the Verwey project.

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Letterkundig Museum en Documentatiecentrum. Repr. Den Haag: DNBL, 2007.

[http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/deys001hgmp09\\_01/](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/deys001hgmp09_01/)

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## Figures

Blad 1

401x1182p91

Print View

entire e-Laborate site

fuzzy match

My personal page

berkaging, de die vromen te laten weten  
Je hebt nu nu in de onaangename nood.  
Inzake gebrachte of jon Displaisir  
Te doen of Groesbeek te laten decideeren  
Over al of niet opnemen. Met wat zoo laat en boven de  
10 vel komt, mag ik Groesbeek n.l. volgens ons  
kontrakt niet aankomen, en alles wat ik nu doen kon  
was hem te telegrafeeren dat ik er vóór was, mits hy er  
niet door werd gekontrarieerd.  
Gaat het je goed? Myn vrouw is een paar dagen van  
huis. Groet Anne. En wees een volgende keer op tyd.

me nu in de onaangename noodzakelykheid gebracht of  
jou displaisir te doen of Groesbeek te laten decideeren  
over al of niet opnemen. Met wat zoo laat en boven de  
10 vel komt, mag ik Groesbeek n.l. volgens ons  
kontrakt niet aankomen, en alles wat ik nu doen kon  
was hem te telegrafeeren dat ik er vóór was, mits hy er  
niet door werd gekontrarieerd.  
Gaat het je goed? Myn vrouw is een paar dagen van  
huis. Groet Anne. En wees een volgende keer op tyd.

Annotation on "ik"

ik {verw:typ:ond}

Annotation on "hy"

hy {verw:typ:ond}

Last modified: 02-03-2012 16:34 by anemaris | Created: 05-11-2009 17:22 by audrey\_van\_den\_broek

Figure 1: *eLaborate* working environment for editors, with a separate window for facsimiles, for transcriptions and for annotations.



[Add to E-shelf](#) | [Export](#)

Item 2 out of 5



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<b>From</b>	Verwey, Albert (1865-1937)
<b>To</b>	Veth, Jan (1864-1925)
<b>Place of sending</b>	Noordwijk aan Zee
<b>Date</b>	<b>1894-10-27</b>
<b>Language</b>	dut
<b>Count</b>	1
<b>Note</b>	Betreft: afschrift in kopieboek Ook beschikbaar in microvorm
	<a href="#">Check availability</a>
<b>Location</b>	Bijzondere Collecties
<b>Permalink</b>	<a href="http://permalink.opc.uva.nl/item/001857971">http://permalink.opc.uva.nl/item/001857971</a>





[Back](#)

Author: Verwey, Albert  
Author: Veth, Jan  
Title: Albert Verwey aan Jan Veth Brief



[What's this?](#)

**Call number** OTM: hs. XLI B 2 [p. 91]  
**Former Call Number** OTM: hs. AVarchief Copijboek 2 p. 91  
**Location** Bijzondere Collecties

**Call number** OTM: microfilm 401 / hs. XLI B 2 [p. 91]  
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Description	Availability	Status	Number of holds	Location	Call number	OPAC note
	use within library	on shelf	-	Bijzondere Collecties	OTM: hs. XLI B 2 [p. 91]	
	use within library	on shelf	-	Bijzondere Collecties	OTM: microfilm 401 / hs. XLI B 2 [p. 91]	

[<<](#) [>>](#)

<http://opac.uva.nl/F/H6VK7QH3HF95QM31G/3UJGEIN89CT4KF9AUP4V77D/JM31MHL22H-32085?func=scan-list>

Figures 2a and 2b: Amsterdam University Library Online Publieks Catalogus (Online Public Catalogue).

laborate Virtual Workplace for Social Sciences and Humanities Logout annemarie  
Edit mode Huygens Instituut

Home > Nederlands > Correspondentie Albert Verwey 1880-1895 > Brieven aan Albert Verwey > Israels, Isaac Lazerus > Help

Search

from "1890-03-05"

entire e-Laborate site

fuzzy match

My personal page

### 1890-03-05 Print View

#### Algemene informatie over de brief

Israels, Isaac Lazerus  
aan  
Verwey, Albert.

Plaats: onbekend  
Datum: 1890-03-05

Status Brief: Autograaf

Taal: Nederlands

Bijlage(n):

Overige Opmerkingen:

Signatuur: XLI B 6813

Scan(s):  
Blad 1: UBAHSXLIB6813\_0001  
Blad 2: UBAHSXLIB6813\_0002

Transcriptie  
Naam eerste transcribent: Koelewijn, Mirjam  
Datum voltooiing eerste transcriptie: 2010-11-01

Controle  
Naam controleur: Wieren, Dita van  
Datum voltooiing controle: 2010-11-10

Eindredactie  
Naam eindredacteur:  
Datum voltooiing eindredactie:

Last modified: 05-06-2012 16:50 by annemarie | Created: 08-10-2010 17:48 by mirjam\_koelewijn

Figure 3: Metadata listed per letter in the *eLaborate* working environment for editors.

