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Salient scholars. Michel Bréal and his Dutch connections

Jan Noordegraaf

1. Introduction

‘Il devient assez général de s’intéresser à Bréal’, Sylvain Auroux once remarked in 1991, when referring to the publication of a growing number of books and articles dealing with the life and works of the distinguished French linguist. He was definitely right, for recent decades have seen a continuing interest in the life and works of Michel Bréal (1832-1915), whose Essai de Sémantique (1897) ranks today among the classics in linguistics. Thus, on this celebratory occasion, I would like to join the international discussion by introducing some aspects of the relationships that existed between Michel Bréal and the Dutch world of learning. As far as I know, it is a topic that has not yet been explored to any extent. It is apparent, however, that Bréal was acquainted with Dutch linguistic work at an early stage in his career. For instance, in his Paris ‘thèse complémentaire’, De Percisis nominibus apud scriptores graecos (1863), he mentioned not only an eighteenth-century work by the Utrecht orientalist Adrianus Reland (1676-1718), but also referred several times to a 1855 Leiden doctoral dissertation, an ‘opus laudatum’ on a related topic, to wit Specimen historicum exhibens scriptores graecos de rebus persicis achaemenidarum monumentis collatos, composed by the young and brilliant Henri Kern (1833-1917). Forty years later, Bréal was to contribute to a Festschrift for this Leiden mahaguru.

Moreover, from the introduction to his 1866 French translation of the second edition (1857-1861) of Bopp’s principal work, his Vergleichende Grammatik des Sanskrit, Zend, Griechischen, Lateinischen, Lithauischen, Gotischen und [622] Deutschen, we understand that Bréal was also acquainted with the works of the renowned eighteenth-century school of Dutch Graecists, represented by Tiberius Hemsterhuis (1685-1766), Lodewijk Caspar Valkenaeer (1715-1785), Johannes Daniel van Lennep (1724-1771), and Everardus Scheidius (1742-1794). According to Bréal, this Schola Hemsterhusiana had not long before – ‘il n’y avait longtemps’– sought to renew the study of Greek by applying the methods of Semitic grammar and by dividing Greek roots into biliteral, triliteral and quadriliteral roots. ‘On ne doit pas s’étonner si une pareille tentative ne produisit que des erreurs’, Bréal comments. Bopp’s method, however, had produced superior results: ‘Pour la première fois, dans le livre de M. Bopp, on voit figurer de vraies racines grecques et la tines’ (Bréal 1866: xxix).

In defence of my compatriots I would like to emphasize that Bopp could realize the boundaries of the compositional elements correctly thanks to comparison with Sanskrit, a language the Dutchmen were not acquainted with at the time. ‘But was there such a difference between his approach and that of the Dutch?’, Verburg (1998: 453) rightfully asks, and concludes that ‘Bréal, at least, appears not to think there was’. If that were indeed the case, then early nineteenth-century German comparative linguistics has more in common with the Dutch Graecists than scholars such as Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) and Theodor Benfey (1809-1881) were willing to recognize. Unfortunately, Verburg does not go into this matter any further.

However interesting this problem may be, in this paper I refrain from discussing Bréal as a
With reference to some articles by Auroux, I would rather make some brief remarks on the impact that the *Essai de Sémantique* had upon contemporary Dutch linguists (and non-linguists). Thus, I have selected two topics. First, I focus on the reception of this work in the Netherlands, both among linguists and the adherents of the Dutch ‘significs movement’, who, in the wake of the English Lady Victoria Welby (1837-1912), were engaged in her idiosyncratic approach to the study of signs, language and meaning, for which she had coined the term ‘significs’.¹ The second topic is Bréal’s 1891 essay ‘Le langage et les nationalités’, partially reprinted in a later edition of the *Sémantique*, and which, at several points, exhibits interesting parallels with a critical Dutch treatise on language and nationalism, dating from 1925 and written by a sharp-witted woman. [623]

### 2. On the reception of the *Essai*

#### Linguistics

The positive attitude towards Bréal and his works in recent years should not allow us to ignore the fact that the seminal *Essai de Sémantique* was not received without some reservations in early twentieth-century Holland. For instance, in 1912, the linguist Jac. van Ginneken (1877-1945) put forward the opinion that Bréal’s *Essai* was in fact ‘not so very special’ as was generally thought (van Ginneken 1912: 42). Several years later, the Amsterdam classical scholar J.A. Schröeder (1888-1968) remarked that the content of this work of the ‘well-known French philologist’ was new solely ‘as a whole’. After all, among modern and older philologists various observations were already classified under the name of ‘semasiologie’ (S. 1918).

The most substantial Dutch review of the *Essai*, rarely noted in international literature, appeared in January 1898, when Albert Kluyver (1858-1938), at the time editor-in-chief of the Leiden multi-volume *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (WNT, ‘Dictionary of the Dutch language’, 1854-1998) and later to become professor of Dutch language at the University of Groningen, gave a careful and critical assessment of Bréal’s book. While Kluyver, a seasoned lexicographer, had extensive practical experience in dealing with semantic problems, he was also interested in theoretical questions (cf. his 1917 and 1923 reviews of Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale*). Reviewing Bréal’s *Essai*, Kluyver deemed the author to be ‘a most civilized person, and at the same time a most experienced scholar’, whose argument could only be read with much pleasure. Nevertheless, Kluyver asked whether this book ‘was to advance linguistic science very much indeed’. Many examples were already well-known and the explanations were usually ‘beyond all doubt’. Be that as it may, the lucid style in which it was written, gave the book ‘a value that is often lacking in similar books’. The subject matter of this work as a whole, remarked the Dutch reviewer, could be summarized as follows: ‘the activity of the mind, revealing itself in language’.

Note that in this review the Dutch word ‘semantiek’ was used as a translation of ‘semanitique’, without any further discussion, just as Kluyver’s co-editor J.W. Muller (1858-1945) would do in the same year when giving a paper at the very first Dutch congress of philologists. In 1912, the Groningen professor of Dutch language, W.L. van Helten (1849-1917), however, still used the word ‘semasiologie’, although he was aware of ‘the technical term proposed by Bréal’. At any rate, the lemma ‘semantiek’ was included in the fifth edition

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¹ Welby’s ideas have had more impact in the Netherlands than elsewhere (cf. Schmitz 1990). For an extensive overview of the signific movement in general, see Petrilli 2009.
of *Van Dale’s groot woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*, an authoritative Dutch dictionary, in 1914. [624]

**Significs**

In the weekly *De Amsterdammer*, Dr Frederik van Eeden (1860-1932) characterized Bréal’s ‘Essay [sic] de Sémantique’ in 1918 as one of the important works ‘by thinkers, who without using the word Significa [significs], were engaged in language criticism’ (van Eeden 1918: 7). In 1897, van Eeden, a psychiatrist and a celebrated literary author, who is generally considered to be the founding father of the significs movement in the Netherlands, had published his *Redekunstige grondslag van verstandhouding* (‘The logical basis of mutual understanding’), the first Dutch significs treatise. In 1904, Jac. van Ginneken, later to become a member of the Dutch significs circle, had deemed van Eeden’s essay a ‘treatise worth reading’ and, on a certain point, definitely superior to Bréal’s *Sémantique* (van Ginneken 1904-1905: 207; cf. Noordegraaf 2006). It was van Eeden who knew how to interest his younger friend Jacob Israël de Haan (1881-1924) in Lady Welby and her works on significs. ‘Mr. De Haan is the most marvellous conquest you have made’, van Eeden wrote in February 1912 to his dear friend Lady Welby (Petrilli 2009: 796).

Jacob Israël de Haan was one of thirteen children of a strict Jewish-orthodox gazzan. A primary school teacher first, he also read law in Amsterdam. In 1916, he defended his doctoral thesis entitled *Rechtskundige significa*. This study dealt with ‘legal significs’, which he applied to the concepts ‘liable’, ‘responsible’, and ‘accountable’. The same year saw his admission as a *privaat-docent* (unsalaried external lecturer) for legal significs at the Municipal University of Amsterdam. In 1917, however, he was passed over when the chair of criminal law was vacant. A multi-talented personality, but a complicated and ambitious character, de Haan was also a literary author and most consciously a Jewish poet. In 1904, he had published the first openly homosexual Dutch novel. From a socialist turned into a Zionist, he left for Palestine in January 1919, ‘anxious to work at the rebuilding of Land, People and Language’, as he wrote to the Zionist leader, Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952). Ultimately, de Haan was assassinated in Jerusalem in 1924 – the first political murder in Palestine.²

‘In recent times too, publications appeared in print that we would count as significs [...]. Michel Bréal’s *Essai de sémantique* I have already quoted many times’, de Haan (1919a: 42) once noted. It is indeed not difficult to discover that Bréal’s studies are regularly referred to in the theoretical section of de Haan’s 1916 dissertation. A prolific writer, de Haan referred to works by Bréal in many articles (cf. van den Bergh 1994: passim). For example, in an article on [625] ‘Hebrew significs’, written in Jerusalem in July 1919 on behalf of the Dutch daily the *Handelsblad*, he did not fail to mention the *Essai*.³

It is safe to say that while de Haan was an ardent admirer of Lady Welby’s significs, Bréal’s *Essai* was among his set references. To de Haan (1916: 2), semantics was identical with significs: ‘l’étude des sens’, thus ‘sémantique’, jointly with ‘l’étude des sons ou phonétique’, constituted ‘l’étude de toute langue’, he argued with reference to Albert Dauzat’s

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² The German writer Arnold Zweig (1887-1968) loosely based his novel *De Vriendt kehrt heim* (1932) on the life of de Haan and his tragic end.

³ As early as 1913, de Haan had characterized the *Essai* (1911)³ as kindred to Welby’s writings. However, he deemed it to be a historical-linguistic work rather than a philosophical one (cf. van den Bergh 1994: 5 n. 1).
La vie du langage (1910).\footnote{Cf. the opinion of the Utrecht professor of general linguistics, P. Gerlach Royen (1880-1955), who, in 1934, considered that the Dutch words ‘semantiek’ and ‘signifiek’ had the same meaning. Note that de Haan’s ‘legal significs’ seems to precede developments in German Wortfeldforschung (van den Bergh 1996: 90).} Later on, de Haan’s studies on significs were subjected to a critical review by a professional linguist.

C.G.N. de Vooy's on semantics and significs

The respected Utrecht professor of Dutch from the inter-war period, Cornelis G.N de Vooy\'s (1873-1955), was also very positive with regard to the Essai. Its author was hailed as one of the scholars who had lead the study of word meaning in a new direction. Although Bréal had not provided a completely new system, he had provided many observations that would become fruitful when elaborated (de Vooy 1933: 4). Thus, de Vooy disputed the comment made by his Nijmegen colleague Jos. Schrijnen (1869-1938), who was of the opinion that Bréal’s work was truly ‘antiquated’. That is only partly true, de Vooy (1938: 66) argued, claiming that Bréal’s work was still recommendable and it remained very relevant to our times ‘when advancing new ideas that have not yet generally been recognized’.

It is interesting to observe how de Vooy (1938: 10-12), an all-round scholar of Dutch, but not first and foremost a theoretician, expressly takes into account the ‘significance of the situation’ and the ‘context’ when concisely discussing the sentence. He does so explicitly in the wake of Bréal, who had no difficulty with the given ‘multiplicité des sens’ or with the vagueness of word meaning. Bréal (1897: 315) had argued that ‘Il suffit de tomber à l’improviste dans une conversation commencée, pour voir que les mots sont un guide peu sûr par eux-mêmes, et qu’ils ont besoin de cet ensemble de circonstances, lequel, comme la clé en musique, fixe la valeur des signes’. De Vooy (1938: 11) endorses this statement without any reservation, concluding that in most cases, context and situation make any misunderstanding ‘almost impossible’ (1938: 12).

It appears that de Vooy did not think much of significs, presenting his opinion on this field of research several times, mainly in relation to de Haan’s doctoral dissertation Rechtskundige significa, a study that was strongly inspired by Welby’s writings. ‘[S]ignifics, from Welby’s school’ is seen by de Vooy as ‘a sort of semantics which overrates the value of etymology and logic for word meaning’ (de Vooy 1925: 408). He also found that the novel ‘doctrine’ had not produced any elucidation (de Vooy 1938: 67). Both of the books written by Lady Welby (What is meaning? (1903) and Significs and language (1911) ‘were hailed in this country by Fr. van Eeden and Jacob Israël de Haan; however, later scientific researchers did not appreciate them very much’ (de Vooy 1933: 5-6; italics added). As a matter of fact, many years before, Father Jacques van Ginneken (1912: 44) had characterized these books as ‘interesting’, but ‘rather of a philosophical and pedagogical character than of a linguistic nature’.

For de Haan, who cherished several rather esoteric ideas, the value of a word evidently had a religious background. ‘We need psychology of language, philosophy of language, and above all mysticism of language’, he noted in 1917 (cf. van den Bergh 1994: 111). In his dissertation de Haan (1916: 27 n.5) refers only once to the 1897 significs treatise by his mentor Frederik van Eeden, precisely where the latter propounds: ‘What we need now, is a transcendental, that is a metaphysical Language’. The experienced linguist de Vooy (1925: 415) deemed this desideratum not very relevant linguistically. He curtly broke off his paper and stated:
‘Whoever strives with Mr. de Haan for a merely ‘metaphysical’ language, will arrive at Utopia’. De Vooy’s attitude vis à vis de Haan beautifully reflects the distance that Bréal observed with regard to the ideas of de Haan’s guiding star Lady Victoria Welby (cf. Auroux & Delesalle 1990).

In short, if one looks at the history of science, Auroux & Delesalle (1990: 125) remarked, one perceives a dividing line between empirical and metaphysical theories. ‘The former are restricting, even disappointing from a speculative point of view, because they do not deal in panaceas; the latter know no limits, are all encompassing.’ The authors conclude that Welby’s ‘theory lies on one side of this invisible boundary and Bréal’s on the other’. In other words, Bréal’s semantics and Welby’s signifies belong to two different ‘paradigms’, to use a classical term. Without any doubt, a sober-minded linguist such as de Vooy would have shared this assessment.

Language as a fetish. Towards a ‘sociolinguistique historique’

In the Netherlands, the 1910s saw various vehement discussions with regard to the question whether the national language was the true expression of the [627] soul of the people. In 1916, de Haan was the target of an article by a leading Dutch literary critic, Carel Scharten (1878-1950), entitled ‘The Jews in literature’. Scharten raised the question of the identity of the Jewish writer. The poet, he wrote, ‘who is the singing soul of his people can never be a foreigner, and thus can never be a Jew’. In making a connection between language and people, and subsequently between language and ‘race’, he thus denied de Haan his status as a Dutchman or his status as a poet. De Haan would always remember this verdict. Several years later on, just before his departure for Palestine, he asked himself: ‘Is what Scharten says really true, that the languages of the peoples, among whom the Jews have been living, have remained to the Jewish artists a foreign language? Can my soul understand the Hebrew language better than the Dutch language? I really doubt it. A hereditary disposition to a language has never been proven. A child of Dutch parents raised among Chinese speaks Chinese just like a child of Chinese parents does’ (de Haan 1919b [1981]: 34; cf. Bréal 1891: 629). It is interesting to see that it was de Haan’s sister Carry van Bruggen who sought to destroy the rather dubious grounds on which this type of reasoning had been built. Although she was acquainted with Lady Welby’s views, van Bruggen evidently preferred the approach promoted by a more kindred spirit, Michel Bréal.

Carry van Bruggen, nom de plume of Caroline Lea de Haan (1881-1932), was the elder sister of Jacob Israël de Haan. Starting as a schoolmistress and lacking any academic qualifications she developed into a respected Dutch writer. Like her brother, she was a highly intelligent and versatile personality, and she also was to meet a tragic end. Her works include a number of novels, translations (also from French) and some philosophical treatises. The

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5 In 1916, van Bruggen published an article entitled ‘A remarkable woman’, discussing not only her brother’s Rechtskundige Significa, but first and foremost introducing Victoria Welby and her Significs and Language to a female readership. Van Bruggen expatiated on Welby’s remark that people had the wrong attitude towards language. She argued that although it is an instrument created by ourselves in order to express our finest thoughts, it appears that we treat it as a system formed completely outside us, that we may study it, but cannot change. Cf. Bréal’s (1891: 617) objection to the peculiar idea of language having ‘une existence propre, indépendante de la volonté humaine’.
book I would like to discuss briefly here is van Bruggen’s extended response to Scharten’s article, her 1925 *Hedendaagsch Fetischisme* (‘Contemporary Fetishism’, 244 pages).\(^6\)

This essay, which she in fact began to write during the Great War, clearly demonstrates her vivid interest in matters semantic. First and foremost, however, it deals in a critical and mocking way with contemporary misconceptions concerning language, advanced by professional scholars, literary authors and laypeople. Language has become a true fetish, van Bruggen argues: people worship something they have created themselves, their national language. In short, *Hedendaagsch Fetischisme* comprises a fierce attack on contemporary linguistic nationalism, the cult of the mother tongue. Van Bruggen provides a host of often amusing examples to make it clear to what extent both the linguists and laypeople of her day make language fit into their nationalistic set of ideas. She ridicules the fashion of the time to explain whatever a person was or did, almost automatically in terms of a ‘national character’. There are no superior languages, languages that are more perfect or more beautiful than others, van Bruggen argues. There are no words that are more beautiful than other words, neither in poetry nor in prose. There is neither a connection between a people and its language nor between language and ‘race’. Thus, van Bruggen rigorously cuts the tie between language and national character or race. To her, the statement that ‘only a Greek word [...] can truly express the Greek mind’ (1925 [1980]: 171), is sheer nonsense. Understandably, she also attacks (68-75) the book that in her days had become the new bible for hundreds of thousands of Germans, *Die Grundlagen des 19. Jahrhunderts* (1899\(^1\), 1940\(^2\)) written by Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927), a work with a strongly anti-Semitic character. All in all, van Bruggen strongly reacts against linguistic nationalism and racism, consequences of the ‘Volksgeist’ idea which had been incorporated in current linguistic thought in the early nineteenth-century.\(^7\)

Note that in her argument van Bruggen makes crucial use of the principle of the ‘arbitraire du signe’, stating that the ‘value of words [is] “conventional” in the sense in which for instance a password is “conventional”’, as she wrote in 1922 (cf. Noordegraaf 1983 [2000]: 133). In *Hedendaagsch Fetischisme* we read: ‘One word will serve as well as another as a password in the army, provided that everyone is acquainted with this convention. This is also the case in language’ (149). Language is just a ‘code’, in which each sign ought to have its fixed meaning, if mutual understanding is to become possible.\(^8\)

Obviously, van Bruggen was not the first or the only one to broach the [629] theme of nationalism. A reader who is well-versed in Bréal’s writings, may have noted that there are

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\(^6\) As a self-taught female writer, and, what’s more, a Jewess, van Bruggen was severely criticized by professional scholars: ‘van Bruggen bekrittelt in ihrem verruckten, aber doch kluge Einfälle zeigenden Buche (...) wiederholt alles, was nur einiger maßen nach Rhythmus und Klang aussieht, doch ist ihr Urteil über Sprache und sprachliche Fragen so unreif und unzuständig, daß sich ein Eingehen auf ihre Ansichten erübrigt’. (Gerlach Royen 1929: 780). Elsewhere, *Hedendaagsch Fetischisme* was called ‘rank nonsense’ written by a ‘headstrong, obstinate schoolmistress’.\(^7\)

\(^7\) She refers to ‘current anthropo-psychological opinions’ (76), full of nonsensical ‘talk about a national character’: ‘just idle crap’ (64) and a consequence of nationalism, which is the very basis ‘of anything ‘wrong’ and ‘absurd’ (77). Nationalism has indeed generated ‘beaucoup de mal’, Bréal had already observed (1891: 637).

\(^8\) It is for this reason that several Dutch scholars have postulated a relationship between van Bruggen and Saussure, but I don’t think this is correct. Cf. Noordegraaf 1983 for a more extensive discussion of van Bruggen’s book.
striking parallels between the book by van Bruggen and an essay by Bréal. As is well-known, in 1891 the French scholar had written a pointed rejection of the ideas that had produced linguistic chauvinism and racism which reigned supreme at the time. His ‘très long article [...] pour le public lettré et fort peu théorique’ (Baggioni 2000: 49) was published in the widely-read Revue des deux mondes and was entitled ‘Le langage et les nationalités’. Among other things, Bréal had observed that

la langue en est venue à être présentée comme une sorte de marque de fabrique imposée par la nature aux différents groupes ethniques. Cette manière de voir a, comme on sait, trouvé accueil dans la politique, ou [...] elle a servi de fondement à la théorie des nationalités (1891: 630).

Bréal continued, arguing that it is wrong to see a language as ‘le signe nécessaire et suffisant des nationalités’, for nations are created by matters that are deeper than ‘la ressemblance du vocabulaire. Il importe peu que la langue soit la même si l'esprit est différent: la facilité de communication ne fait alors que mieux accuser la divergence des cœurs’ (632-633). In a fateful way, speakers are pinned to the place destined to them by their language, he claims (633). The conclusion is that ‘Le principe des nationalités a déjà produit beaucoup de bien et beaucoup de mal’ (637). The mistake of this ‘principe ethnique’ is favouring form over substance, words over thought, the envelope over what it contains. Bréal adds:

C’est de la même fabrique d’idées qu’est sorti le mouvement antisémite. Un éminent philologue anglais, M. Sayce, dit justement: ‘The cry of nationalities was really a backward step’ (1891: 636).

It is safe to conclude that Bréal had a keen eye for the social and political implications of certain trends in nineteenth-century linguistics (Aarsleff 1982: 321). Thus, the least we could say about Bréal and van Bruggen is that they were not only both of Jewish descent, but first and foremost kindred spirits. They share a rational (Auroux & Delasalle 1990: 122) and functional (Nerlich 1990: 153) outlook on language.

My thesis is that Hedendaagsch Fetischisme is a ‘literary’ variation on the theme ‘language and nationalism’, and is much more ‘literary’ than Bréal’s article ‘grand public’ – after all, van Bruggen was a litérateur, not a scholar. Note that she mentions the French author a few times in her essay (1925 [1980]: 64, 121), but without providing any precise reference. Nevertheless, I think [630] it is quite possible that van Bruggen was indeed aware of Bréal’s 1891 article, just as she was of the Essai and its supplementary essays.

I would like to add that in her work van Bruggen also deals with other topics, such as opinions on language and the social status that a certain type of language and language use evidently enjoyed at the time: for example, if you were able to read Homer in the original classical Greek, you were considered a well-educated intellectual; but if you could speak Norwegian fluently, you were just a trader in stockfish. Note that these and similar observations on language use are essentially sociolinguistic in character. For example, with regard to the role of the ‘caste’, Bréal (1891: 631) and van Bruggen (1925 [1980]: 81 sqq.) propound identical opinions. Consequently, when discussing the theme ‘langage et

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9 It was added to the third edition (1904) of the Essai, under the title ‘La linguistique est-elle une science naturelle?’. Note that the entire final third of the original article, the part dealing with nationality c.a., has been omitted.
nationalité’ on the occasion of his ‘rélecture’ of Bréal 1891, the late Daniel Baggioni did not hesitate to characterize Bréal’s (and Meillet’s, by the way) ‘project global’ as ‘sociolinguistique historique’. In this respect too, Bréal and van Bruggen participated in a common ‘research programme’.  

Concluding remarks

In general, Bréal’s Essai was well received in the Netherlands, both by linguists and adherents of the Dutch significs movement, most notably Jacob Israël de Haan. The latter sought to fit Bréal’s views into his own approach, but I am not sure he really succeeded in doing so.

It is interesting to see Bréal’s ‘linguistique engagé’, when he addresses the current debate on language and nationality in 1891. The publication of van Bruggen’s 1925 essay shows that in the 1920s this theme was as topical as ever. I think it still is, both in France and in the Netherlands.

References


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10 One may also consider van Bruggen’s analyses as a specimen of ‘folk linguistics’. Cf. Friedrich Polle, *Wie denkt das Volk über die Sprache?* (Leipzig 1889), but I cannot expatiate on that topic here.


van Eeden, Frederik. 1918. ‘Significa’. *De Amsterdammer, weekblad voor Nederland* 31 (2125), 16 March 1918, 7.


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