

Flemish Master of the Small Canvas

In Praise of Willem Elsschot

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[PAUL VINCENT]

Willem Elsschot's (1882-1960) eleven novellas, with their irony, sardonic humour and stylistic sophistication, are as vibrant today as when they were written.

Five works have so far been translated into English. In 1963 the great trio of stories, *Soft Soap*, *The Leg* and *Will 'o the Wisp* appeared in one volume translated by Alex Brotherton, introducing us to the recurring figures of the disillusioned idealist Frans Laarmans and the Svengali-like business guru Boorman. Sadly, the impact of the book was muted somewhat by its academic, non-commercial publishing context.

In 1992, I translated Elsschot's brilliant, haunting debut, *Villa des Roses* (republished in 2003). On its reissue the novel benefited from a lively, prize-winning English film version by Frank Van Passel with a largely English cast including Timothy West and Harriet Walter. Press comment on the book was unanimously favourable: 'Absorbing' (Good Book Guide), 'His precise, considered prose... is a joy' (The Tablet), 'Black certainly, but brilliantly comic as well' (Hampstead and Highgate Express).

2002 saw the publication of the most successful Elsschot work in English so far, *Cheese*. Reviewers were quick to appreciate both its literary quality and its contemporary relevance. The book about a disastrous business venture was presented by the publishers as 'Edam's great moment in world literature' and drew such widespread plaudits as: '... a little gem' (Deborah Moggach), 'It has a wonderful Keatonesque pacing which is total bliss. I adored it' (Glen Baxter), '... a surprisingly humane farce of ambition gone haywire and Edam gone bad' (New York Times). Its topical resonance was stressed: 'Pop a dot and a com on the end of Gafpa and the message becomes all too clear' (Daily Telegraph), and 'Perhaps the publishers would also be so kind as to send some copies to the board of Enron?' (The Times). The novel was featured on the prestigious BBC radio series *Book at Bedtime*, where it was read by Richard Griffiths, whose 'absurdly comic élan' was praised. However, although a Dutch film version of *Cheese* appeared under the direction of Orlow Seunke, the chance of a full tie-in was lost when a planned UK production fell through.

In 2016, when the Low Countries will again be in focus as a *Schwerpunkt* at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the time would seem ripe to make the case for a Complete Willem Elsschot in English, either as an omnibus or as separate volumes.



Kik Zeiler, *Fallen asleep*, 1989,
Oil on canvas, 44.5 x 61.5 cm,
Private collection

He is an undisputed classic in the Dutch-speaking world and in my view, given the right exposure, has the potential to become a European and world classic. Elsschot remains a flagship author for the Flemish Foundation for Literature (VFL), the relevant funding body.

Here, as a taster, is a passage from *Soft Soap*, where the zealous Boorman communicates his business creed to his young apostle (the translation is by Alex Brotherton):

'Vanity, that's the cause of it all, de Mattos. Everyone wants to be Number One, or at least wants to make everyone else think so. But there aren't many who get beyond trying to make everyone else think so. And Jesus Christ, who went round spouting as if he had cornered the wisdom of all the ages, didn't change anything. There are more fools in the world than there are

grains of sand in a desert and that's what the smart lads reckon on. They pick out a spot, put up a signboard as bright as a rainbow, and then comes the advertising like a gramophone turned full on. Everything is shiny and new, everything is better than anywhere else. Now and then one of them goes under, but he's up again with a flick of his tail, as long as there's a flick left in it. It's these smart lads that I'm after. I drop in on them, one after the other, as the colossal director of the colossal *World Review*. Some of them don't even listen, they're too busy with figures and schemes of their own.

Gerard Dou, *Old Woman Reading*, ca.1631-1632,
Oil on panel, 71 x 55.5 cm,
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



One or two might even get annoyed, because they're not fooled by the *World Review*. Some of them are short of funds. But you always find some who'll snap at the bait if only you look long enough. We're only doing what they're doing, they get away with it, why shouldn't we? You keep talking and don't listen to anything they say. We're only interested in their order and not in their tales of woe. If they're ready to sign when we've said our piece, then so much the better, and if they're not, it's just too bad, and it's no good wasting any more time. After all, there's no sense in arguing about money, when the other fellow has it and you want it, because you are both in the right. Beggars know this rule. They ask you for money and you ask them how's their family, and then they ask you for money again, and they'll either get some from you or give-up, once they see you're not going to give them a hand-out. They don't waste any more time on you, they try someone else. You do them more of a favour by saying "no" straight out, than by falling round their necks in tears with excuses. You have to be satisfied with what you get, because every deal is a good deal. A business deal is a business deal, it's a game for two players and one of them has to win. Just how much the winner takes is more a matter of chance than anything else. How much a client bites off depends on how big his mouth is. But always start by talking big and let their vanity do the rest. And never give the impression that you think it's a big deal yourself, they'll only laugh at you. If you talk casually about a large sum as if it was a mere trifle, then they'll go one better without a thought of what God's golden guineas are worth, even though it has to come out of their own pockets. When they take up a pen to sign, don't show you're pleased, act as though you didn't want them to sign. Some of them are even likely to give you an order in the hope that all the work it will involve might kill you.

'Try and believe what you tell them is the truth, then your story sounds all the more convincing. You have to sound convincing. If you are, you can talk a hard-hearted miser into an extravagance that he'll probably shudder at the thought of an hour later. Once I had a bank manager properly warmed up, and I didn't realize it. He had one of those stupid faces that stay blank all the time. Suddenly he reached boiling point. He jumped up, he banged on the table, and he ordered a million copies with an article about his bank. Every family in Belgium must have a copy, he was yelling. He looked like a crusader who'd just caught sight of Jerusalem. But when I hesitated, because I didn't think I could risk a million copies with that piddling little printer of mine, he came out of his trance and had me marched to the door.

'Never be discouraged, even if you have weeks of bad luck. Don't trust in God, de Mattos. Be polite to your clients, because they're your enemies, and don't forget it. They'll only give you what you can wring out of them and not a cent more.'

The following is a brief overview of all six hitherto untranslated fictions.

1. Een ontgoocheling (A Disappointment, 1914)

A doting father, the struggling cigar manufacturer De Keizer (whose first name we are never told), becomes increasingly disillusioned with his good-for-nothing son Karelkje. The opening evokes De Keizer's small, claustrophobic world.

2. De verlossing (Salvation, 1921)

In this novella, his only venture into a 'big' theme in Flemish fiction (the power of the Church, especially in rural areas), Elsschot pits the atheist village grocer Pol van Domburg against the doctrinaire local priest, Pastor Kips. The result is mayhem, murder and (possible) redemption. Irony and understatement rub shoulders with melodrama. The priest's answer to Pol's defiance is a boycott of his shop.



Cornelis Brisé, *Documents Concerning the Treasury of the City of Amsterdam*, 1656, 19.4 x 25 cm, Amsterdam Museum

3. **Tsjip** (Cheep, 1934)

4. **De leeuwentemmer** (The Lion Tamer, 1940)

These two books, which chronicle the writer's daughter's marriage to and subsequent divorce from a Pole and his relationship with his grandson, are at once Elsschot's most directly autobiographical and his most optimistic works. The title 'Cheep' relates to the first sound the grandson produces, which becomes his nickname. 'The Lion Tamer' reverts to the epistolary form first used in 'Cheese'.

5. **Pensioen** (Pension, 1937)

6. **Het tankschip** (The Tanker, 1942)

In these two novellas Elsschot returns to the murky and occasionally surreal world of finance and business. In the first a parent struggles against the odds to obtain an adequate pension for a missing son, while the second sees the final appearance of the naïve Laarmans and the archetypal dodgy businessman Boorman, this time involved in an offer literally too good to be true: a tanker in good order free to a responsible user. The fantasy bubble is bound to burst...

If I – reluctantly – had to choose just one work for (re-)publication, it would be *Soft Soap* and its sequel *The Leg*, closely followed by *The Will-o'-the-Wisp*. Hopefully quality will speak for itself and a Complete Elsschot will at long last become a reality. ■

Samples/complete translations of all works mentioned above can be obtained from paulfrankvincent@gmail.com