

# The English translations of Willem Elsschot's self-declared masterpiece *Kaas* (1933)

*Las traducciones al español de la autoproclamada obra maestra de Willem Elsschot: Kaas (1933)*

**Dorien DE MAN**

*KU Leuven*

dorien.deman@kuleuven.be

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**Abstract:** Paul Vincent's English translation of the now-canonical novel *Kaas* (*Cheese*), by the Dutch-speaking (Flemish) Belgian Willem Elsschot, was published in 2002, nearly seventy years after the Dutch-language original. However, between 1933 and 1989, three different translators had produced English translations of *Kaas*, none of which reached the market in published form. Surprisingly, these translations have barely been noticed, let alone studied. In this article, I pursue a close analysis of the genesis of these three «forgotten» translations. This history brings to the fore different factors contributing to the non-translation of *Kaas* into English, including the author's choices, relationships between publishers and translators, and deficiencies in the translation policies of the Belgian and Dutch governments in the fifties and sixties.

**Keywords:** Willem Elsschot; literary translation; interwar period; governmental funding; Flemish literature; *Bibliotheca Flandrica*; *Bibliotheca Neerlandica*.

**Resumen:** La traducción al inglés de la novela *Kaas* (*Cheese*) del escritor belga (flamenco) Willem Elsschot, de la mano de Paul Vincent, se publicó en 2002, casi setenta años después de la publicación de la versión original en neerlandés. Sin embargo, entre 1933 y 1989, la novela fue objeto de tres traducciones al inglés —realizadas por tres traductores diferentes— que jamás llegaron a publicarse. Curiosamente, estas versiones han pasado prácticamente desapercibidas y apenas han sido estudiadas. En este artículo examinaré a fondo la génesis de estas tres traducciones «olvidadas», una historia en la que se ponen de manifiesto diferentes factores que han conducido a la no traducción de *Kaas* al inglés. Entre ellos cabe destacar las decisiones del propio autor, la relación entre editores y traductores y la deficiente política en materia de traducción de los gobiernos de Bélgica y Países Bajos en los años cincuenta y sesenta.

**Palabras clave:** Willem Elsschot; traducción literaria; período entreguerras; financiación pública; literatura flamenca; *Bibliotheca Flandrica*; *Bibliotheca Neerlandica*.

## 1. THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORK

Willem Elsschot was born Alphonsus (Fons) Josephus de Ridder in Antwerp in 1882. He was a Belgian, Dutch speaking (called Flemish), fiction writer of comic tragedies. He wrote most of his work during the 1920s and 1930s. *Lijmen* (1924), *Kaas* (1933), *Tsjip* (1934) en *Het Been* (1938) made him famous. During his life —he died in May 1960— only four translations of his work appeared. In 1936 both *Tsjip* and *Kaas* were translated into Czech followed by a translation into German in 1952. After his death, English translations of Elsschot's work were published in 1962 for *Het Dwaallicht* (*Will-o'-the-Wisp*) and in 1965 for *Lijmen* (*Soft Soap*) and *Het Been* (*The Leg*), all three translated by Alex Brotherton. The translations in Russian (1972), Hungarian (1987)<sup>1</sup>, Italian (1992) and Serbo-Croatian (1995) made Elsschot visible on a global scale. In 1992, *Villa des Roses* was translated by Paul Vincent and published in English in the prestigious *Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics*. In this series Elsschot is flanked by noted authors including Miller, Borges, Orwell, Nabokov and Proust. Nooteboom and Mulisch are the only other Dutch-speaking writers to have been published in a Penguin series, namely in the *International Writers Series*.

The content of Elsschot's work is as international as the author tries to be. Elsschot's stories have an urban and universal framework. Moreover, he uses standard Dutch (very close but not exactly the same language that is used by the Dutch-speaking people in Belgium) in his work and had it published in the Netherlands (not in Belgium). Still, despite his best efforts, his work was not as widely circulated as the chief export of Flemish

1. This translation was published in the Netherlands and was not distributed in Hungary. A new translation in 2008 did result in the circulation of *Kaas* in Hungary.

literature at the time; that is, the regionalist and rural stories of his contemporaries Felix Timmermans, Stijn Streuvels and Ernest Claes. In their plea for the transnationalization of Dutch studies, Verstraeten and De Geest (2010, 80) indicate how this *heimat* literature, which carefully propagated a local and national tradition, had a remarkable international circulation. Especially during the interwar period, Flemish regional novels were avidly translated, bought and read abroad. In former days, literary critic Paul De Man already expressed his disapproval of this situation. In his «Note sur Willem Elsschot» he argues that it would be appropriate in an international context —he refers more specifically to the French public— to abandon regionalism and to present a work that has no ties with the nation and the people. In particular, he insists upon translating *Lijmen*, stating that Willem Elsschot is «one of the most attractive Flemish writers of the moment and one of those who will be received best by the French public» (De Man, n.d.)<sup>2</sup>. In a conference proceeding following the translation of *Kaas* into English, Meylaerts (2002) concludes that, paradoxically, Elsschot's non-regionalistic and non-local profile was precisely what was preventing the international distribution of his work.

## 2. THE NOVEL KAAS

The central themes in Willem Elsschot's work are business and family life. *Kaas*, Elsschot's self-declared masterpiece (see Van de Reijt 2011, 100) was published in 1933 and tells the story of Frans Laarmans's doomed cheese business GAFPA (which stands for *General Antwerp Feeding Products Association*). Laarmans, a former clerk at the Antwerp *General Marine and Shipbuilding Company*, tries to climb up the social ladder by becoming a distributor of full fat Edammer cheese. He becomes so entranced by his new duties as a merchant (designing stationary, hiring sale agents, furnishing his home office) that he forgets to actually sell his goods. Moreover, he appears to be quite a poor salesman. The shipments of cheese wheels continue to accumulate while Laarmans tries to keep up with his new way of life. His family suffers from his quirkiness but his children are trying to support him and even manage to sell more cheese than Laarmans himself. Eventually, he abandons his new post and goes back to the *General Marine and Shipbuilding Company*.

2. The original text states: «L'incompréhension qui peut exister entre une oeuvre littéraire germanique et le public français n'a aucun risque de se manifester en ce cas. Après *Houtekiet*, *Le soldat Johan* et, dans une certaine mesure, *Moi*, *Philomène*, il est tout indiqué d'abandonner le régionalisme et de présenter une oeuvre qui n'a aucune attache avec le terroir et le peuple. Je tiens à insister tout particulièrement pour qu'on traduise *Lijmen* de Willem Elsschot: c'est un des écrivains flamands les plus attrayants de l'heure et un de ceux qui peuvent avoir le meilleur accueil du côté du public français». (De Man, n.d.). This text is not dated but was written during World War II.

### 3. TRANSLATION AND RECEPTION OF KAAS

Remarkably, as early as April 1934, an anonymous laudatory review of the book appeared in *The Times* stating «as a tragi-comedy this unpretentious story [...] is extraordinarily moving». The timing of this review hints at an interesting translation and reception history of the novel in the Anglophone sphere. As it happens, between 1933 and 1989 three English translations of *Kaas* were produced by three different translators. All three were translated directly from the original Dutch version, but none were published. These translations have barely been mentioned in the literature, let alone studied.

In 2002, almost seventy years after its first publication, the English translation *Cheese* arrived on the market, «devilishly well timed» (Williams 2002). Rightly so or not, protagonist Frans Laarmans's doomed cheese business GAFFPA and the bursting of the dot-com bubble, which at the time had reached its climax in the Enron debacle, became a popular comparison in almost every newspaper or magazine review in the Anglosphere. In its series called «1000 novels everyone must read», *The Guardian* remarks how this «understated fable of capitalist folly is as relevant and wryly amusing today as it was in the 1930s» (Cate 2009, 8). *The Seattle Times* presents *Cheese* as a cautionary tale (Upchurch 2002), and *The Daily Telegraph* reads Elsschot's work as a parable: «Pop a dot and a com on the end of GAFFPA, and the message becomes all too clear» (Clements 2002, 5). Notwithstanding these connections to the Anglophone economy, the sudden explosion of attention more than half a century after the publication of Elsschot's novel remains remarkable. In an interview after the arrival of *Kaas* in the United Kingdom, Maria Vlaar from the Dutch Literary Production and Translation Fund (now Dutch Foundation for Literature, *Nederlands Letterenfonds*) makes an interesting point. She explains that the late publication of *Kaas* in the UK is not that surprising since «the attention that contemporary Dutch writers like Harry Mulisch, Tessa de Loo and Cees Nooteboom received abroad played a preparatory role for the attention to their classical counterparts» (Trouw 2002).

Moreover, the book links up with the Anglo-American world in more ways than only its economic troubles. Various English readers mention Elsschot's «crisp writing style» and connect it to «the dry, understated wit of British humor» (Amazon 2015). For that matter, the very first reviews of *Kaas* focus on its humour as well. On the occasion of its publication in 1933, the influential Dutch critic Menno ter Braak indicated its «observer's cool humour» (Ter Braak 1949, 33)<sup>3</sup> which indeed is often, in the past as much as today, associated with British «stiff upper lip» humour (Eyskens 2015). It was Elsschot's objective «to avoid all verbosity» (Elsschot 2003, 4) and even in translation, Elsschot's dry and eminently readable style keeps this work fresh. In this respect, the

3. «[...] den koelen humor van den waarnemer» (Ter Braak 1949, 33).

novel has been compared to *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) by Jerome K. Jerome, George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). On the back of the 2002 translation, we find a comment of British cartoonist Glen Baxter hinting at American actor and director of silent films Buster Keaton: «[Elsschot's little book] is brilliant. It has a wonderful Keatonesque comic pacing which is total bliss» (Elsschot 2002, 132). According to his daughter Ida De Ridder, Elsschot watched and appreciated this kind of films (Verbeeck 2005, 19). It is this property of the book that awakened an interest in actor and producer Helen Baxendale of Shooting Pictures to produce a film version of *Cheese*. For Baxendale «*Cheese* is not at all dated. In fact, the themes of the piece are timeless and apply to everyone, rich or poor, young or old, male or female» (Baxendale 2015)<sup>4</sup>. *Cheese* has matured well. Interestingly, a new English translation of *Kaas* by Alma Books will appear in the UK in 2016. Penguin USA is interested in reproducing this translation in the United States.

In what follows, I pursue a close analysis of the genesis of all four translations —three unpublished and one published. First, I examine Elsschot's own comments on the translation and the (un)translatability of his dry tone, since the author played an important role in the translation process. Subsequently, I will elaborate on the four translators: Anthony Gishford, Mr A. J. Van Riemsdijk, Vernon Pearce and Paul Vincent. The exploration of the translation history of the novel will bring to the fore a connection between the author, the translators, the publishers and the Belgian and Dutch governments. But before going into the translations of *Kaas*, it is interesting to consider Elsschot's views on translation, especially given his role in the translation process.

#### 4. ELSSCHOT'S VIEW ON TRANSLATION

In the introduction to the published translation of *Cheese* Elsschot states: «Actually, it is more a matter of style than of what happens» (Elsschot 2002, 132). In fact, the author was not pleased at all with the translation of his work. In a meeting with the Dutch writer Simon Carmiggelt, Elsschot declared that «the style disappears, only the story remains, and that is not enough» (Carmiggelt 1975, 10). In his opinion, the novel should not be translated but re-written «with other images», as he did with the French translation of another of his novels, *Lijmen*, which he himself made (Carmiggelt 1975, 10). As various comments on the translation of *Tsjiip* into French prove, Elsschot was never satisfied with the results of a translation. «I am afraid that the French version [of *Tsjiip*] proves to be disappointing. It struck me as unpleasant», he writes to his

4. Nevertheless, until now this project has not seen the light of day.

literary agent Jan Greshoff (Elsschot 1993, 212)<sup>5</sup>. In another letter Elsschot continues: «I personally feel that much is lost [in translation]. I've tried it myself but I find it very difficult to translate» (Elsschot 1993, 229)<sup>6</sup>. He also felt an aversion to adaptations of his work for theatre, film and television. When the playwright E. Schmidt was busy editing *Cheese* into a play for example, Elsschot commented to Greshoff on 15 February 1934 that he was worried Schmidt would turn his work into a comedy (Elsschot 1993, 229). Elsschot thought that his style was untranslatable.

However, a paradox is to be found in Elsschot's stance. In spite of his dislike of translation, he was only too aware of the importance of translation as «the principal means of access to the literary world for all writers outside the center» (Casanova 2004, 133). In the same vein, Ter Braak, in his letters to his companion Edgard du Perron, calls Elsschot a novelist whose work is not suitable for translation, whereas in public he is full of praise for Elsschot, doing everything to bring the author to the attention of readers (Van Dijck 1994, 99). On the one hand, Ter Braak puts Elsschot on the scene as a strategy to bring him into focus, but on the other, in a letter to Du Perron, he passes judgment on the writer: «About Elsschot[,] I agree. At the end of the day, he lacks that which would make him worthy of being read by foreigners as well. He is and remains: a novelist» (Ter Braak and Du Perron 1976, 109)<sup>7</sup>.

In today's literary world, gaining access to the English literary system is the means to international prestige, legitimation and visibility. In Elsschot's time, however, France, «though lagging behind the rest of Europe economically, was the undisputed centre of Western painting and literature» (Braudel 1992, 68). Elsschot knew very well that French translations published in Belgium, a country which found itself linguistically and culturally dominated (and yet ignored) by the French, did «not exist for the rest of the French world» (Carmiggelt 1975, 10). He did indeed attempt to penetrate the Parisian publishing scene, but to no avail. In a letter to Crahay, a French translator of his work, Elsschot explained: «I do not want to publish a French translation in Belgium, because it would be dead on arrival. A French work must be published in Paris. This is the only way to be judged once and for all by the French critics and the public in France. However, it is not easy to get published in Paris by a reputable editor like Stock, Grasset, etc. I'm not well-known enough for that» (Van de Reijt 2011, 578)<sup>8</sup>.

5. Willem Elsschot to Jan Greshoff, Antwerp, 15 November 1935. «Ik vrees alleen dat die Fransche tekst [van Tsjip] niet meevalt. Hij doet zoo raar aan». (Elsschot 1993, 212).

6. Elsschot to Jan Schepens, Antwerp, 27 May 1937. «Ik persoonlijk vind dat het veel verliest. Ik heb zelf al geprobeerd maar vind het zéér moeilijk om te vertalen». (Elsschot 1993, 229).

7. «Over Elsschot accoord! Ook hij mist tenslotte datgene, dat hem waard zou maken door buitenlanders gelezen te worden. Hij is en blijft: een romanschrijver» (Ter Braak and Du Perron 1976, 109).

8. Elsschot to S. Crahay, Antwerp, 4 November 1945. «Je ne veux pas faire paraître une traduction française en Belgique, estimant qu'elle serait mort-née. Un livre français doit paraître à

Moreover, as a Dutch-speaking Belgian writer, Elsschot never cultivated a purely national or local profile. Alongside his mother tongue, he spoke French, English and German. A lively correspondence with various translators indicates his regular interference in the translation processes. He demanded access to the translations and scrupulously corrected them. He also translated his own work and the work of others. However, doubts exist about his command of the various languages he claimed to master. When Elsschot translated *Lijmen*, the publisher refused publication: «I myself translated *Lijmen* into French [...] But the publisher wrote me that he would publish it only if I reworked it — I do not know exactly what that man wants» (Carmiggelt 1975, 10). The correspondence of the well-known Flemish writer Gerard Walschap sheds more light on the reasons for the publisher's refusal. In 1943, Walschap, who was Elsschot's neighbour and friend, was facing a dilemma: whether to let his friend produce the French translation of his latest work, *Genezing door aspirine*. The first page in *Cure d'Aspirine* indeed states: «Traduit par Willem Elsschot». However, his translation was so bad that it was replaced by another right before publication. In a letter to the Belgian publisher Yvonne Batta-Snoeck, Walschap explains:

I dare not tell Willem Elsschot what happened to his translation. He has his sensitivities, as I do, and I like our friendship too much to risk it for something that I do not feel responsible for. All of us have heavily sinned against him, and now I would have to go to confession completely alone. I am absolutely not pigeon-hearted, quite the contrary, but to tell him now: «Fons, your French is horrible» when he turned sixty fully convinced that his French is fine, dear Madam, I beg you, spare me, let me keep my neighbour in peace and harmony. (Walschap 1943)<sup>9</sup>

Specifically for *Kaas*, which Elsschot considered «superior» to his other works (Elsschot 1993, 100), the translation into English was delayed by the author himself. After the adaptation of *Kaas* in Afrikaans for the Cape Town Broadcasting Organization (*Die Suid-Afrikaanse Uitsaaikorporasie*) in 1956 (probably under the influence of

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Paris. C'est le seul moyen de se faire juger une fois pour toutes par les critiques français et par le public de France. Or, il n'est guère facile de se faire éditer à Paris par un éditeur connu comme Stock, Grasset, etc. Je ne suis pas assez connu pour cela» (Van de Reijt 2011, 578).

9. Walschap to Batta-Snoeck, Antwerp, 21 April 1943. «Ik darf Willem Elsschot niet zeggen wat met zijn vertaling is gebeurd. Hij heeft zijn gevoeligheden, zoals trouwens ikzelf ook en ik houd veel te veel aan onze vriendschap om die te wagen aan iets waarin ik me ten slotte niet plichtig gevoel. Wij hebben allemaal samen tegenover hem zwaar gezondigd en nu zou ik gansch alleen moeten gaan biechten. Ik ben absoluut noet (sic) bang van aard, wel integendeel, maar hem nu gaan zeggen: 'Fons, gij kunt geen Fransch' als hij volle zestig geworden is in de overtuiging dat hij het wel kan, lieve Mevrouw, ik bid u schoon, bespaar het mij, laat mij den gebuur in peis en vrede behouden». In another letter Walschap insist with great force that «something like that cannot be written»/«Zooiets mag niet geschreven worden» (Walschap 1943).

Greshoff), the press in South-Africa wanted to know whether Elsschot's work was available in English and if not, whether they could get permission to provide translations themselves. It is not clear why Elsschot never responded to these letters but one year later in November 1957, Greshoff, who resided in Cape Town at the time, asked him again about the English translations of his work (Elsschot 1993, 987). With some reserve, Elsschot eventually agrees to the English translation of *Kaas* only. «If this turns out fine», he writes to Greshoff, «I will think about *Lijmen*, *Tsjip*, etc.» He adds that «knowing how hard it is to translate *Kaas*, it would please me very much if you want to read and correct the translation» (Elsschot 1993, 993)<sup>10</sup>. However, maybe to his relief, Elsschot would never hear from this project again. Ironically, after his death, *Lijmen*, *Tsjip*, *Het Been* and *Villa des Roses* would be published in English years before *Kaas*.

## 5. THE TRANSLATORS OF THE NOVEL KAAS

### 5.1. Anthony Gishford

Anthony Gishford was born on 9 October 1908 and died on 23 January 1975. He was educated at Westminster School, Wadham College, and at the *Handelshochschule* in St. Gallen. From 1947 to 1958 he was the editor of *TEMPO*, a musical journal. He lived in The Hague for some time and had a very large circle of friends and acquaintances, among them Elisabeth de Roos, renowned critic, translator and wife of the famous Dutch writer Edgard du Perron. Through his friendship with Elisabeth de Roos, Gishford became acquainted with «a very agreeable group of young writers, the most outstanding of whom [...] was Menno ter Braak» (Gishford n.d., 136). In a letter to his friend L.J. Pieters te Rhoon he explains how he got to know Elsschot's work:

I discovered the writers Jan Slauerhoff and Willem Elsschot, among others I have now forgotten. I cannot remember which of the two of them it was who wrote a novel called *Kaas*, but it seemed to me a small masterpiece. I even translated it into English, but at that time the idea of there being such a thing as contemporary Dutch or Flemish literature appeared nonsensical to English publishers (Ter Braak 1967, 508).

Unfortunately, his translation has thus far not been recovered.

10. Elsschot to Jan Greshoff, Antwerp, 5 March 1958. «Gaat dat goed dan zal ik verder zien wat *Lijmen*, *Tsjip* enz. betreft. Uw vrienden kunnen mij dus een formeel contract ter ondertekening zenden. Wetend hoe moeilijk *Kaas* te vertalen is zou het mij bijzonder aangenaam zijn indien jij de vertaling wilde lezen en corrigeren. Voor dat werk kunt u met de Nat. Boekhandel rechtstreeks overeenkomen» (Elsschot 1993, 993).



In 1961, Anthony Gishford wrote an unpublished autobiography entitled *Fifty plus: an autobiographical examination*. In this work he sketches an interesting image of the Dutch and Flemish literary scene at the time: «The wrong people were writers and artists and musicians, and very agreeable they were» (Gishford n.d., 136). In this autobiography he also repeats his fondness of *Kaas* and he explains that Elsschot's novels as well as Slauerhoff's work had been written just a bit too early for the American boom in translations from European languages. Even in translation, he states, «the market for Dutch experimental literature is a fairly limited one» (Gishford n.d., 137). Finally, Gishford sees the orientation of Elsschot's work as a bridge between Flemish and purely Dutch literature. «The creative heart of the Netherlands still beats in Flanders, as it has always done», he concludes (Gishford n.d., 137).

In contrast to the translation, the anonymous laudatory review of *Cheese* in *The Times* in 1934, probably written by the same Anthony Gishford, was actually published. The review praises the book as a moving «tragicomedy, set against a lightly sketched background of Flemish middle-class life». It was published in the section of interesting foreign literature. Apparently, publication in English was no precondition for these works to be reviewed. Elsschot himself, who received the article from Jan Greshoff, reacted with delight: «I immediately gave this clipping from *The Times* to my brother who is walking around 'le tout Anvers médical' with it» (Elsschot 1993, 185)<sup>11</sup>. In conclusion, Gishford's translation was never published nor retraced, if it existed at all, yet it was received by the English readers through a review in *The Times*. In such a way, reception is not always and not completely subject to translation or even actual circulation of a work of art. Here we can speak of the reception of a non-translation, in contrast with what follows: the non-reception of two translations of *Kaas*.

## 5.2. A. J. Van Riemsdijk

In his Elsschot biography, Van de Reijt links this anonymous 1934 review to a second unpublished translation titled *Cheese-Business* and produced by A. J. Van Riemsdijk (Van de Reijt 2011, 233). A. J. Van Riemsdijk made a 64-page typescript of *Kaas* which can be found in the House of Literature (*Letterenhuis*) in Antwerp. He was the son of A. K. Van Riemsdijk, and both worked for the Belgian National Fund for Literature (*Nationaal Fonds voor Letterkunde*). This fund was established in 1947 to support Dutch- as well as French-speaking Belgian writers and literature. Together with the Literature Committee of the Flemish Community (*Letterencommissie van de*

11. Elsschot to Jan Greshoff, Antwerp, 16 May 1934. «Dat uitknipsel uit de *Times* heb ik direkt aan mijn broer gegeven die er natuurlijk 'le tout Anvers médical' mee afloopt» (Elsschot 1993, 185).

*Vlaamse Gemeenschap*), it was a precursor to the current Flemish Literature Fund (*Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren*), which was launched in January 2000.

As early as the 1950s, the Fund conceived a plan to publish a series of thirty (which later became twenty-five) important works of Belgium's literary history into French, German and English. The series, initially called *Bibliotheca Belgica*, later politically rebranded to *Bibliotheca Flandrica*, ran from Hadewijch's poems to Walschap, Elsschot, Marnix Gijsen and Johan Daisne. It would be concluded with a collection of poetry and prose from the last thirty years, and an essay on Flemish literature. The three series were not identical in the three languages. In the case of Elsschot, for example, both the translations of *Tsijp* or *Kaas* were an option, dependent on the language. As it turned out, this strategy of divergence would become the problem child of the Fund.

In 1952, Elsschot's *Kaas* was published in the German series. In the same year, *Einsame Brände*, an anthology of Karel van de Woestijne's works, was published, as was a collection of Guido Gezelle's poems. The French series, however, seemed doomed to failure. The minutes of the meeting of 1954 report how the Fund tried in vain to persuade various French publishers to take on the series (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde 1955). The Fund negotiated successively with the publishing companies *Renaissance du Livre* (Brussels) and *Hachette* (Paris) and cultural mediators Marc Eemans (for the journal *Hermès*) and Pierre Seghers (for the series *Autour du Monde*), but nobody was interested, at least not in the series as a whole. In response, the Fund considered editing the collection into various smaller series. Finally, its novels would be entrusted to *Le Club français du Livre*, its poems to *Editions P. Seghers*, and its medieval literature to *Editions du Seuil* (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde 1953). The contracts were rejected, however, and in 1954 the French series was broken off until further notice (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde 1955).

Even more complicated is the history of the English series. A certain scholar Renier (25 September 1892, Flushing - 1 September 1962, Twickenham), professor of Dutch history at the University of London, negotiated with *Routledge and Kegan*, a London publishing company that considered publishing the series. However, the negotiations were frozen in 1952 when the London firm demanded to receive the translations of the texts before making a final decision (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde 1952). This was problematic because most of those texts still had to be translated. In 1954, the Fund reports that the Commission had not overcome the difficulties that obstructed the publication of the *Bibliotheca Flandrica*. In this respect, there is not much to add to the general report covering the period 1949-1954 (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde 1955).

At his own suggestion, Van Riemsdijk, who resided in London at the time, started looking for a new publisher from 1953 onwards. When he died in 1954, his son came forward to finish his father's work. He also produced a translation of *Kaas*, probably

to avoid a repeat of the calamity outlined above. Year after year the Fund kept trying to publish the series, every time granting more «expenses and incentive bonuses» (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde 1958)<sup>12</sup> but to no avail. In September 1962, Van Riemsdijk reports in a letter to the Fund that he contacted thirteen publishing companies, none of which showed any interest. However, he also mentions that one publisher reported that an agreement had been struck with the Belgian and Dutch governments to publish a series which included titles listed in the *Bibliotheca Flandrica* (Van Riemsdijk 1962). In her article «The National Fund for Literature: fifty years of support in the literary field», Musschoot characterizes the working of the Fund in relation to this situation as follows: «confusion and amazement, good intentions but misinformation and above all lack of coordination of various initiatives» (Musschoot 2004, 425).

In fact, the Netherlands succeeded in realizing a similar project around the same time. Van Voorst explains how, in 1954, on the initiative of the Dutch government and in collaboration with the main literary organizations in the Netherlands, the Foundation for the Promotion of the Translation of Dutch Literary Works (*Stichting ter bevordering van de vertaling van Nederlands Literair Werk*) was founded (Van Voorst 2013, 31). At a conference in 1957, a resolution was accepted which stated the concrete cooperation between the Netherlands and Belgium, «in which the hitherto different procedures should be brought into line» (Van Voorst 2013, 36). This resolution would result in the composition of a *Bibliotheca Neerlandica: A Library of Classics of Dutch and Flemish Literature*. From the Flemish side, Gerard Walschap (Royal Flemish Academy), Albert Westerlinck (Flemish Society of Men of Letters), Angèle Manteau (publisher) and Luc Indestege (in a private capacity) joined the committee of the foundation. Between 1963 and 1967, the foundation realized the publication of the series in English through *Sythoff and Heinemann*. It consisted of ten volumes, containing translations of medieval religious and secular literature, including *Reynard the Fox*, and work by Ruusbroec, Hadewijch, Multatuli, Couperus, Coenen, Van Oudshoorn, Van Schendel, Walschap, Vestdijk, Elsschot and Teirlinck (Meijer 1978, 379). It is very probable that the contract mentioned in A. J. Van Riemsdijk's letter above indeed refers to this *Bibliotheca Neerlandica*.

With regard to Elsschot, three works were published in 1963 under the title *Three Novels* including *Soft Soap (Lijmen)*, *The Leg (Het Been)* and *Will-o'-the-Wisp (Het Dwaallicht)*. The translations were made by Alex Brotherton. Together with Vestdijk's work, these bundled novellas of Elsschot were the most popular in the series, selling

12. «De voorstellen van de Commissie betreffende het uitbetalen van uitgave- en aanmoedigingspremies voor de onderhandelingen met een literair agentschap voor de publicatie van de Engelse reeks der B. F. worden zonder oppositie goedgekeurd» (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde 1958).

several hundreds of copies per year (Van Voorst 2013, 40). All the same, Van Voorst states that the negative reviews, the low sales, the lack of translators, the low quality of the translations and the low rate at which the translations were delivered marked the demise of the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica* (Van Voorst 2013, 41).

### 5.3. Vernon Pearce

A third translation was made by Vernon Pearce, a German of Jewish descent who fled to England a year before the outbreak of the Second World War and took a new name and identity (his name is an Anglicization of Werner Peritz). In 1948, Pearce married a Flemish girl and migrated to Belgium (Vilvoorde)<sup>13</sup> where he claims to have translated five of Elsschot's works, namely *Villa des roses*, *Een Ontgoocheling*, *Het Tankschip*, *Dwaallicht* and *Kaas*. In 1989, he sent some fragments of his translation of *Cheese* to Johan Anthierens, a journalist for the Flemish daily newspaper *De Morgen*, who published an article with these fragments in the issue of May 31. In his article, Anthierens calls on experts to peer review the translation and to publish it, but his call went without response. The 59-page document, an annotated typescript, now resides in the House of Literature (*Letterenhuis*) in Antwerp.

### 5.4. Paul Vincent

The only published English translation of *Kaas* was produced in London by *Granta Books* in 2002. The translation was made by Paul Vincent in the 1990s. In the various consecutive editions, small changes were implemented on its cover (a new cover design and tag line), and the novel was published both in a hardback and a paperback editions. In *W.E.G.-cahier* number 2 (a series of the Willem Elsschot Society/*Willem Elsschot Genootschap*), Vincent explains how some elements in his translation were adapted in between different editions (Vincent 2004, 63). *Cheese* is out of print for now, but Aarts mentions the appearance of various ghost editions of *Cheese* in New York, probably originating from Vincent's translation. Translator, date, edition, and many other details of the various editions can be found in *W.E.G.-cahier* 6, collected by Aarts (Aarts 2008, 75). According to Vlaar, the preparatory work of the editor played an important role in the publication of this work. Vlaar explains how *Granta Books* is known for its non-commercial orientation and its focus on content: «It's thanks to Granta that the book appeared on the market at all, and that it was widely talked about» (Trouw 2002).

13. In his debut novel *Land van Belofte* (*The Promised Land*), published by *Houtekiet* in 1999, Joseph Pearce (b. 1951) chronicles the history of his father's journey.

In a lecture on his translation of *Kaas*, Vincent mentions the Elsschot translations of Van Riemsdijk and points at the nature of the subsidized series in which they appeared. According to him, the series were beautiful but boring, scientifically impeccable but impossible to sell. Such publications «stink of subsidies», Vincent quotes, and he goes on to explain that this was the reason he, in the case of *Kaas*, took a very different road: he translated *Kaas* spontaneously, without commission or contract, and he himself sought out a publisher for the book (Vincent 2003, 2).

## 6. CONCLUSION

In his letter to Anthierens, Pearce adds an interesting comment: «Elsschot might have once said that his work was not amenable to translation, but with all due respect, I believe that his style and his unapproachable mixture of irony and deep humanity can be reproduced in English» (Anthierens 1989). In this respect, Vincent also commented that «Elsschot's ironic humour, restraint and economy would seem calculated to appeal to an English-speaking readership» (Elsschot 2002). Almost seventy years after the publication of the novel *Kaas*, the accuracy of these statements can finally be verified. Yet, a quick look at the translations immediately throws up various translation issues. One of the first sentences of the book sketching Laarmans' office «met telefoon, bureau-ministre en schrijfmachine» (Elsschot 2003, 18) is translated differently in each translation. Vincent chose to translate «bureau-ministre», which has clear ironic overtones, as «desk» (Elsschot 2002, 1), Pearce chose the words «pedestal desk» (Elsschot 1989, 6) and Van Riemsdijk writes «office desk» (Elsschot 1962, 6). None of the translators could fully grasp Elsschot's humoristic intention in English, which substantiates the writer's mistrust of translations.

Despite his reservations, Elsschot also acknowledged the importance of the translation of his work. The genesis of the translation of *Kaas* into English reveals interesting lines of thought, drawing in a number of important (f)actors: the author himself, editors and publishers, the translators, and the policy of the Dutch and Belgian governments. The history shows us in detail the differences between the Dutch and Belgian translation policy and the importance as well as the possible negative role of governmental bonuses and subsidies. Moreover, the changing international status of Belgian Dutch (Flemish) literature abroad, as well as the changing of literary centres from Paris to London, surface through this history. In 2003, one year after being published in English translation, *Kaas* was translated into French, Catalan, Japanese and Finnish, followed by Spanish (2004), Portuguese (2006), Lithuanian (2006), Bosnian (2007), Frisian (2007), Swedish (2008), a new Hungarian translation in 2008, Hebrew (2008), Chinese (2009), Albanese (2009), Arabic (2009), Estonian (2010), a new Indonesian translation in 2010 and a new German translation in 2014.

Finally, this case study opens up reception studies in a way that also stresses the gaps in translation processes and history, the importance of unpublished translations, the non-reception of translations and even the reception of a text that is non-existent for the English public.

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