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Paratextual Masereel and Love Trap. When Thomas Mann, Max Brod and Herman Hesse Were Reading Graphic Novels (1927-1933)

*Masereel paratextuel et le piège d'amour. Quand Thomas Mann, Max Brod et
Herman Hesse lisaient des romans graphiques (1927-1933)*

Daniel Droixhe

In memory of Philippe Roberts-Jones

1 In 1933, Herman Hesse wrote:

The Flemish painter and engraver Frans Masereel arrived in Switzerland and in Geneva when he was young, driven from his country by the World War, and he quickly became one of the best-known and most appreciated figures of the small group of opponents to the war. From this time, he became an important painter and perhaps the most famous European graphic artist. His suites of narrative images especially have quickly found countless friends. His simple technique seemed easy to copy, and in fact a number of young artists imitate him, but it was found that his ingenious scheme is not enough to explain his great magic... (Hesse, "Nachwort" 65-69).

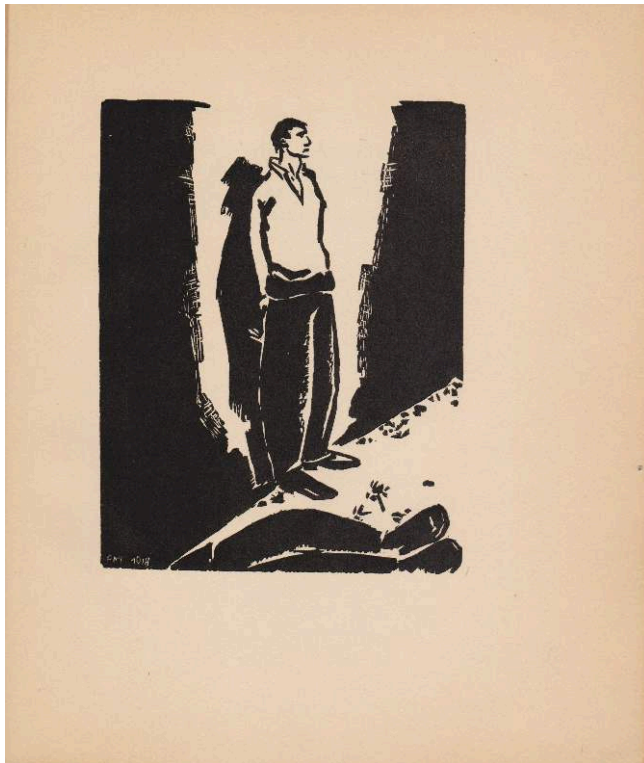
Figure 1. Oskar Kreibich. *Hermann Hesse reading a book*. Lithography, 64,7x50 cm.



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- 2 Among these “suites of narrative images”, the first important one, *25 images de la passion d’un homme*, was published at the end of the war. This 1918 “graphic novel” indeed enjoyed wide success. The novel, entitled *Die Passion eines Menschen*, was printed in 1921 in Munich by Kurt Wolff (1887-1963), who published Kafka’s earliest works. *Die Passion eines Menschen* had a print-run of 750 copies, and it has been said that it reached 5,000 copies in 1924. Re-editions followed in 1927 and 1928 (Ritter 115-19).
- 3 With the double meaning of its title - biblical and personal - the *25 images de la passion d’un homme* told the story, until his tragic death, of a mischievous and unruly young boy, a kind of black cat seemingly born under a bad sign, who found himself in jail and at the head of rioters against the established order and war. The final woodcuts were those of a trial held under the symbol of the Cross and of the shot down of the supposed hero. This fantasy story could be to some extent considered as expressing Masereel’s personal character (figure 2).

Figure 2. Frans Masereel. *Die Passion eines Menschen*, 1918, woodcut [25].



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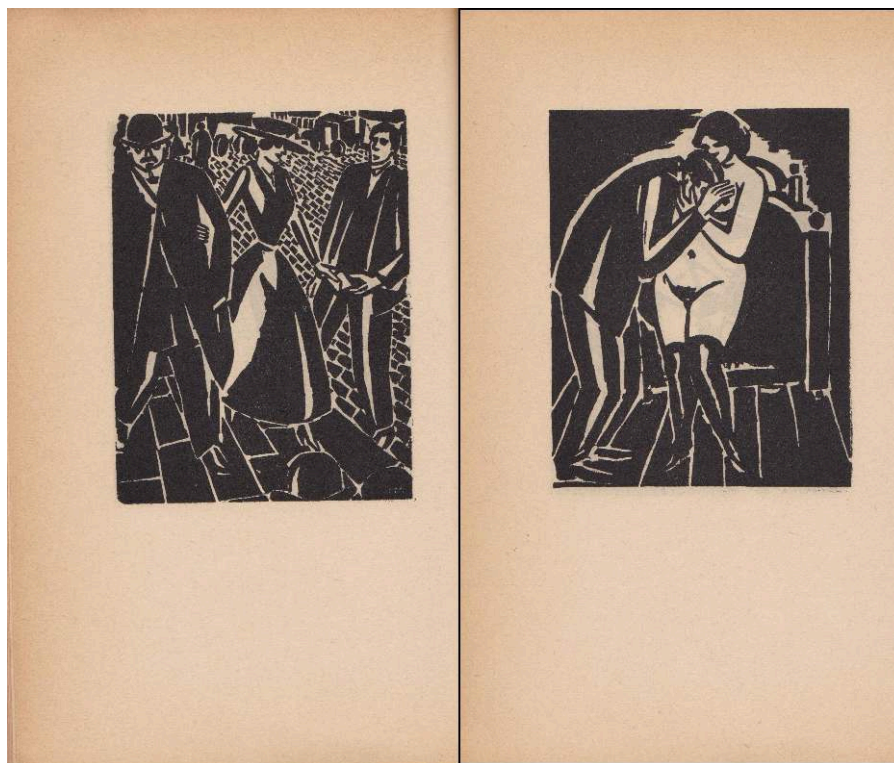
- 4 When Wolff undertook to publish Masereel's "graphic novels", he quickly conceived how they would be enriched and, so to say, raised to the level they deserved by prefaces contributed by famous authors. This article is devoted to the way these prefaces could enlighten Masereel's images of women – regardless of any consideration regarding the artist's love life.

Kurt Wolff and the readers of Masereel's novels

- 5 One of Masereel's first series of images without words was *Mon livre d'heures*, published in 1919. From 1926 to 1928, Wolff provided a German edition, entitled *Mein Stundenbuch*, with a preface by Thomas Mann. The internationally renowned author of *The Magic Mountain* (*Der Zauberberg*, 1924) was naturally profiled for presenting – and transcribing – Masereel's novel which could be considered as a *Bildungsroman* where a young man constructs his personality through ordinary feelings, hopes, sorrows and disappointments. *Mein Stundenbuch* enjoyed enormous success in this edition: had a print run of 15,000 copies.
- 6 However, as early as 1922 an American edition appeared, entitled *My Book of Hours* with a preface by Romain Rolland, which in 1948 received the title *Passionate Journey – A Novel in 165 Woodcuts*. The 1926 preface by Thomas Mann, translated into English by Joseph M. Bernstein, was inserted into this 1948 edition and Rolland's preface was omitted. We use this translation and that in French by Uta Müller and Denis Denjean, in the 2011 *Mon livre d'heures* published by the Éditions cent pages, to quote Mann's preface below.

- 7 We propose hypothetically that *Mon livre d'heures* especially warns against the dangers and pains linked to sentimental adventures – “passionate journeys” – as they reduce the freedom of man discovering the world, and notably that they may limit the artist’s ability. In any case, a rather dark representation of women is suggested.
- 8 Thomas Mann counts the images devoted in the book to various themes. Eight just show him “as the cherished friend of children, the big brother of little ones for whom he does a headstand and tell stories”, etc. “No less than ten deal with the splendour of the sea. Thirteen with adventures among Black, and Chinese people”. “More than a dozen engravings deal with woman, with the man’s experience of the body, and with romantic upheavals.”
- 9 The hero’s encounters with women are distributed among three main sequences. If we enumerate the woodcuts without counting the frontispiece, as is the practice in Ritter’s *Bibliography*, we see that, in nr. 17, he meets a coquette who first slips him money stolen from a rich man (figure 3a). After he follows her and proclaims his love under the balcony, they undress and make love. But the next engraving shows him burying his head in the woman’s breast, in a movement which could at the same time express an extreme devotion and a feeling that makes him cry (figure 3b). The sequence however ends with an illuminated image of the satisfied lover: “Let us appreciate his radiance”, Mann writes, “when, for the first time, he finds happiness with a woman, the epidermal and metaphysical happiness of love which makes him embrace the neckline of a tired old taxi horse.”

Figure 3a-b. Frans Masereel. *Mon livre d'heures*, 1919, woodcuts 18 and 23.

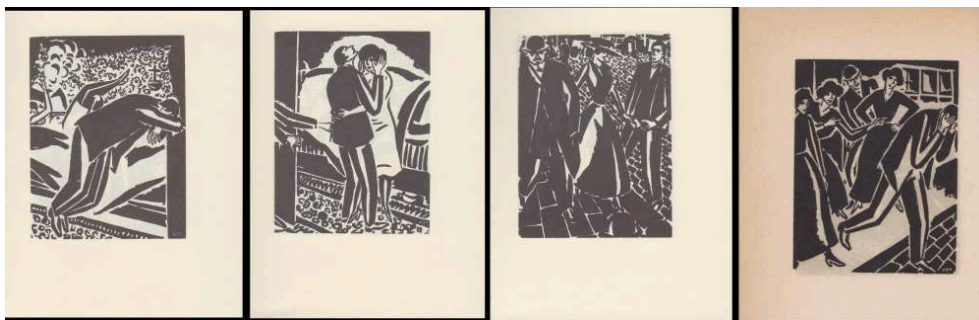


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- 10 A second sequence of a dozen images, from nr. 62, deepens the image of the woman, which is now extended to encompass some collective representation. A double

treachery is inflicted on the man. She runs around town with another man whose top hat lets us guess that he belongs to the rich classes. A report is drawn up on the previous sequence where, as Mann writes, the hero “is shown listening to a speaker in a meeting, undertaking research on social problems in a library, delivering personally a revolutionary speech and marching at the head of a crowd bent on revolt” (Masereel, *Mein Stundenbuch* 20). After rejecting the unfaithful woman, the hero lets himself be seduced again while she helps a partner to steal from him. As soon as he turns his back on the wide-open legs of the woman, or if he is begging her on his knees, the hero must hide his crying face. “Observe how life is going”, Mann writes, “how somebody takes advantage of your tender headiness to steal from you ! Let grief and nausea teach you the sorrow of getting drunk, which makes the streets around you stagger.” Now, the man must flee a group of mocking women (figure 4a-d).

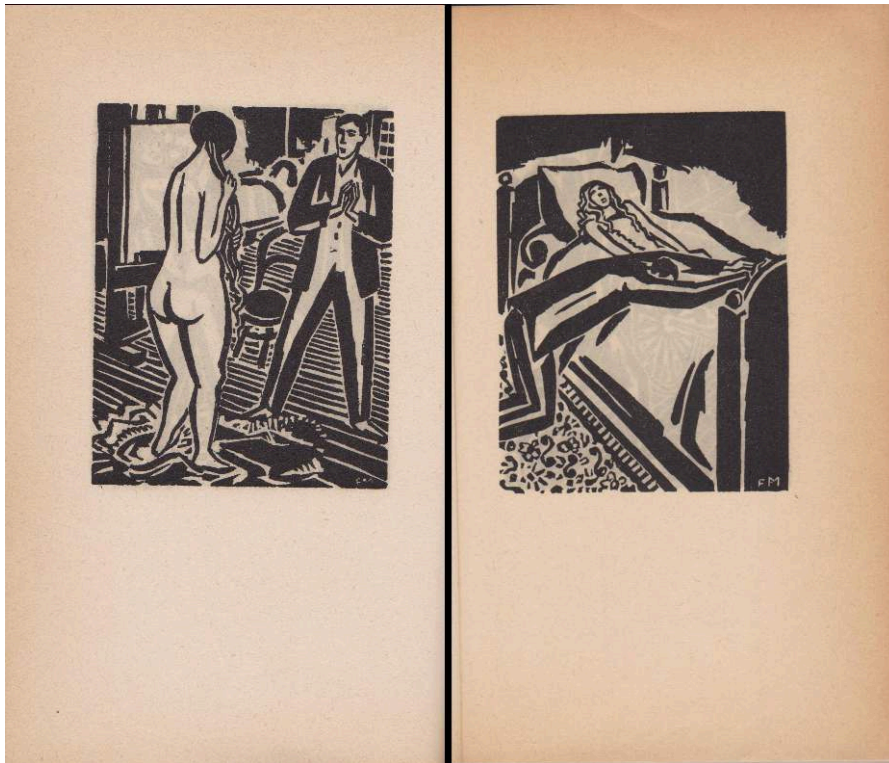
Figure 4 a-d. Frans Masereel. *Mon livre d'heures*, 1919, woodcuts 69, 72 73 and 75.



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- 11 It does not take much time for the man to find a new young girl, a childish one to whose naked beauty he cannot remain indifferent. A third sequence cuts what could have happened as she dies (figure 5a-b). A new chapter of discoveries – and pleasures – opens for him.

Figure 5a-b. Frans Masereel. *Mon livre d'heures*, 1919, woodcuts 83 and 86.



© Ritter B a) Nr. 6.IV.

Hesse, Brod and *Geschichte ohne Wort* (1927, 1933)

- 12 In 1920, Wolff published Masereel's *Histoire sans paroles*. In 1927, he provided a German edition under the title *Geschichte ohne Wort* and added a preface by Max Brod, who met with Kafka in 1912. But the international recognition earned by Herman Hesse with his *Steppenwolf* in 1927 decided Wolff to replace Brod's *Vorwort*, in 1933-1935, with a *Nachwort* by Hesse which was mentioned at the beginning of this article. Hesse's afterword is the shortest – and simplest – of the two presentations. The way it deciphers the novel might seem to repeat that of *Mon livre d'heures*.

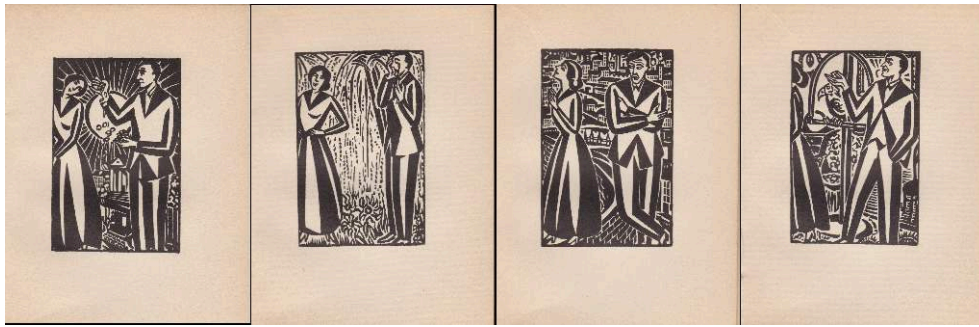
This *Histoire sans paroles* is not about war and revolution, or work and the misery of the masses; it tells the story of a love, and of a very specific love: the love of the ideal youth, of the spiritual and imaginative love, for a beautiful and banal woman. She enchants him, she wakes up the dreamer from his loneliness and peace, fills him with a desire for love, with a desire for sensual pleasure, of the world, of dedication, she drags him into an impetuous courtship and, while he, at her feet, gives her the moon and the stars, she remains the clever, cold female who does not care about moons and stars, who smiles to the storms of his craze and stirs it up to sell herself as expensively as possible. (Hesse 66)

- 13 Max Brod's preface – five years before that of Hesse – immediately darkens this “cold female” in the first lines

Masereel has here teased us with the story of an especially fragile and naughty girl, a false cat, such as this nice, clean animal, but with such a bad reputation, who appears several times symbolically in this series of images. (Masereel, *Geschichte ohne Wort* 1927 5).

- 14 Thus, with this symbolic reference to “a false cruel beast”, the *Geschichte ohne Wort* recalls the tales told “by some old masters teaching wisdom, or by demonologists who always talked about love as an evil enchantment which must be followed by a painful awakening”. Brod uses a funny - Kafkaesque - pirouette to mention the variation “that a witty friend drew from a famous Latin proverb”: “Ante coitum omne animal Tristan.” The inversion from *post* to *ante* gives the tone of a threat to the old proverb, notably recalled by Schopenhauer and Freud, as is also well-known.
- 15 Of course, neither Brod nor Hesse draws any general lesson from Masereel’s story. It would be an error, Brod says, to see here any moralizing vision in the “final painful disappointment” of the lover. Hesse is even more explicit on the subject. If Masereel tells the story of “a burning, even fanatical passion”, it would be another error to perceive “a bitter indictment against love, woman and the senses”. It would also be a mistake “to consider this as the story of a unique, rare, special and unfortunate case.” However, Hesse must recognize that the man, in these series of images, definitely has “the shape and features of the artist himself”. Some woodcuts show Masereel, he says, adopting the nude posture of an “Adam of our time”. “In the appearance of today, he makes the experience of the human universal.” But the artist is to some extent supposed to transmit, with this *Ausbildung*, how he learned “to suffer, to try to survive, to conquer this experience or to overcome it.”
- 16 Brod of course also rejects Masereel’s composition of a new representative myth of Adam and Eve, in the last picture which shows them back to back: “And they were both naked and ashamed in front of each other.” “There is no rule to regulate the relationship between the sexes.” However, that which is suggested between the particular case depicted and the level of generality seems to Brod not completely absent in Masereel’s story. This relationship is even “much more complicated” – more than Brod himself would have been convinced of... This may be understood as: is Masereel delivering a personal message, or not?
- 17 Brod strongly insists on the general meaning of the hero’s bad sentimental experience. “Masereel never loses the feeling that it is a separate case.” “Not all girls behave (fortunately) like this *belle dame sans merci*.” “Not all lovers consider with a feeling of disgust the possible dedication of the women they desire so much.” As a confirmation, Brod opens Masereel’s *Livre d’heures* and stresses the pages where this other lover, “after waking up from sensual intoxication”, the fruits of love having been given, has won “the aureole of the supernatural” which allows him, “due to the deep experience of the world of the senses”, to take control of his life and of his love. Then comes the time for resting his cheek on the head of an old tired taxi horse, of giving gifts to the poor, of feeding the birds, and of entertaining groups of children, as we have seen.
- 18 But the hero’s mind in the *Histoire sans paroles* is not necessarily the same as in the *Livre d’heures*. Brod agrees that, even if the ballad of disappointment in the *Histoire*, also “starts like a great love song”, “life is not so simple that the two types may be easily distinguished.” The man who feels the thunderbolt of love, who pays his court, who offers his heart with the promises of a magic lamp and acts beautiful, like a peacock – this man is there, diversely and symbolically illustrated, from the beginning of the second novel. Money flows before tears – as before – because the woman resists and disappears into the frame (figure 6a-d).

Figure 6a-d. Frans Masereel. *Geschichte ohne Worte*, 1920, woodcuts 14, 15, 16 and 17.



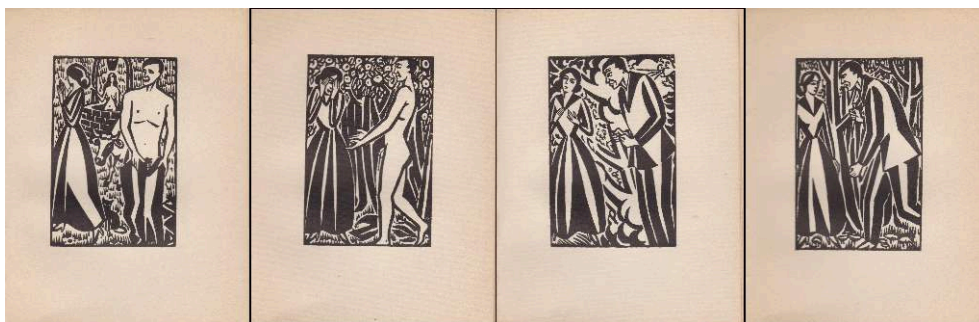
© Ritter B a) Nr. 10.II. W. 14 and 16. Reprod. Holitscher / Zweig.

19 Brod first comments:

The animal areas are so close to those of the highest spiritual activity. However we cannot ignore a connotation of irony which impregnates the “history” from the very beginning. The woman immediately has something deceitful in her surprised smile; and the man puts his finger to his lips as if it was a sort of confection. His feeling oscillates between sweetness and envy. However, what Stendhal calls the “process of crystallization” starts now. (Masereel, *Geschichte ohne Worte* 1927 11-12)

- 20 However, the man’s sex appeal seems to go down, even if, as Brod notices, the girl is not “without winking between fingers with which she covers her small eyes, lustfully curious” about the splendour offered by the naked man. Brod also finds some superior irony in the sentimental challenge of the man. “Who are you, girl, to act like you do?”. But the superior power is on the girl’s side, who “smiles with a crooked mouth, waits and shuts up.” Now, libido is growing and the male desire, first represented by flames, takes the form of phallic trees, while Cupid gently but ironically blows on the man, the woman keeping her hands on her breast in a defensive gesture (figure 7). The next image shows the threatening man with a knife, but a sort of miraculous apparition – a reminiscence of the legend of saint Hubert? – stops him, in tears.

Figure 7a-d. Frans Masereel. *Geschichte ohne Worte*, 1920, woodcuts 21, 22, 36 and 38.



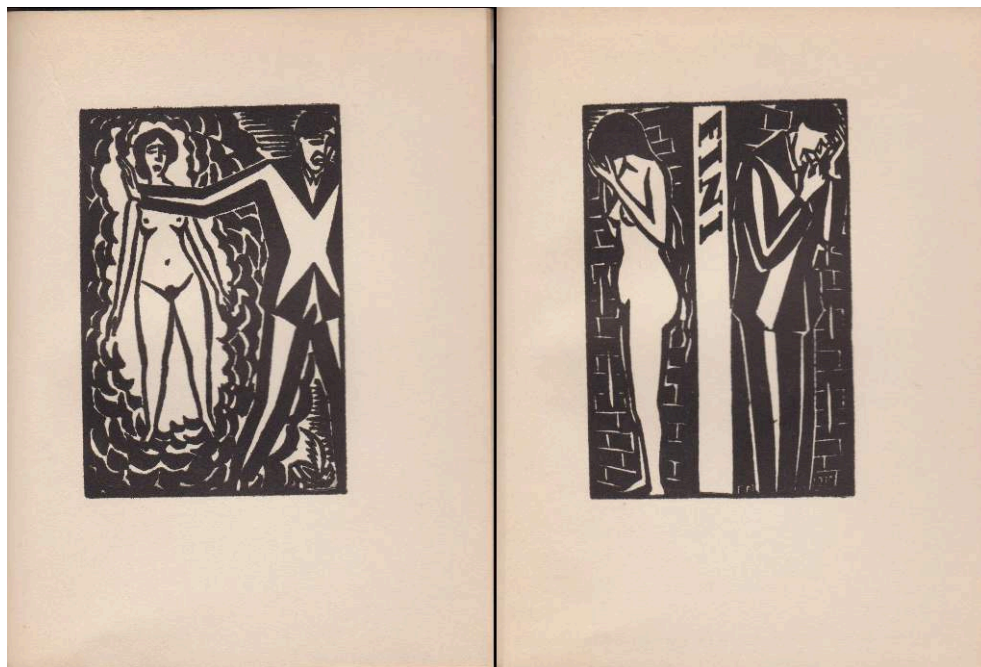
© Ritter B a) Nr. 10.II.

- 21 The second half of *Histoire sans paroles* shifts the novel from ordinary reality to dramatic fantasy. The transfer is progressive and rigorous. Rejected by his woman who calls the police (n° 42-43), the man drinks, the urban landscape wavers (n° 44-45), he gesticulates in a dance whose name is suggested in a corner of the engraving by a tarantula spider (n° 46). The lover literally sinks into madness and crosses a balcony to throw himself into the void (n° 47-48). But the following images immediately show him next to a

hearse, welcomed among the skulls by the smiling woman, with whom he exchanges a passionate kiss in a celestial light and who gives him her nude body (n° 49-53).

- 22 The satisfied lover is carried into the space, trying to seize the world. The last five of the sixty pictures bring back a man who has recovered, and who is standing up, interrogating himself, enclosed from behind by the hand and the leg of the woman. The latter seems to hold a dead body. If he wakes up, he just feels the everyday rain of ordinary life, tries to protect himself with an umbrella and pushes back the naked woman who is now herself enclosed in dark shadows.
- 23 In the corner of the woodcut nr. 58, a small feather/pen has been discreetly depicted. It is difficult not to see a relationship with his artistic work. It has been said that the latter had something monastic. Could this allow disruptive distractions, diversions, emotions? The last image of man/woman relationships is in any case gloomy. The couple is divided by a stiff white stripe: back to back, the woman nude and crying, the man lost in thoughts (figure 8 a-b).

Figure 8a-b. Frans Masereel. *Geschichte ohne Worte*, 1920, woodcuts 58 and 60.



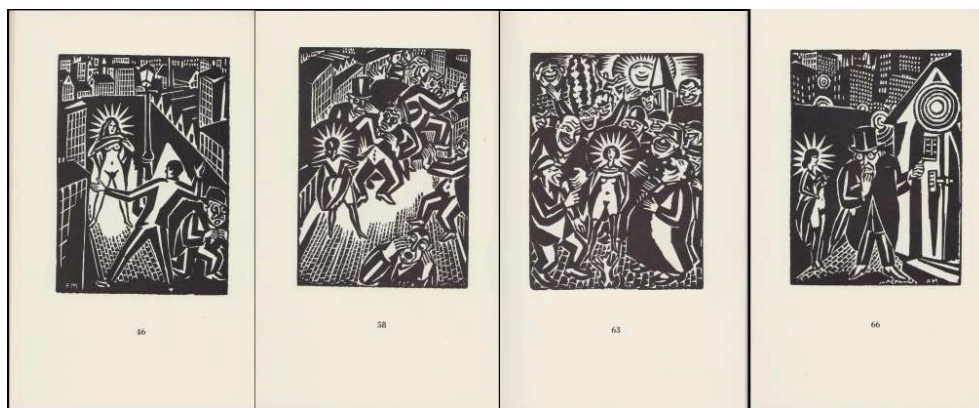
© Ritter B a) Nr. 10.II.

Conclusions

- 24 The first conclusion belongs to Thomas Mann. The latter tries to situate the hero of *Mon livre d'heures* – Masereel himself – socially or politically. “There is something pure, strange, free, unattached in his bearing.” If he sometimes looks like a revolutionary, “he does not seem to be a worker,” “certainly not a class-conscious man.” “As you follow him, you get the impression that he is on earth like a visitor to a strange land whose customs and spectacles he appreciates and in whose life he participates with a feeling – all-too-feeling – heart.”

- 25 Our personal impression is that the hero feels at the same time against and above “this mediocre middle class,” “this philistinism,” that he despises “in such a violently Flemish way,” Mann writes. For the latter, when Masereel shows his hero “fleeing an irate mob of the ‘right minded’” (did Masereel, as such a widely acclaimed artist, have to do it?), the meaning could be: “The world has had enough of him and he enough of the world.” A decisive point is associated with this dissatisfaction or rejection. “He has even had enough of love, judging from the gesture with which he exits through the door.” The fact that Masereel’s hero tramples on his heart, in a following engraving, could also be read as a cautious attempt at the prevention of the deviations and disturbances of love. Mann seems right when he distinguishes in Masereel’s heroes “the intellectual and imaginative man” and “the ‘practical man’,” whose suspicions push him to control his life.
- 26 Another graphic novel, published in 1920, received in 1927 a foreword by Herman Hesse, *Idée – Sa naissance – Sa vie – Sa mort* or *Die Idee*. It tells how a discovery takes the shape of a woman who likes to provoke the hero, right-thinking circles, authorities and the Law by showing her sex when she is dressed and she is ordinarily naked (figure 9a-d).

Figure 9a-d. Frans Masereel. *Idée / Die Idee*, 1920, woodcuts 46, 58, 63 and 66.



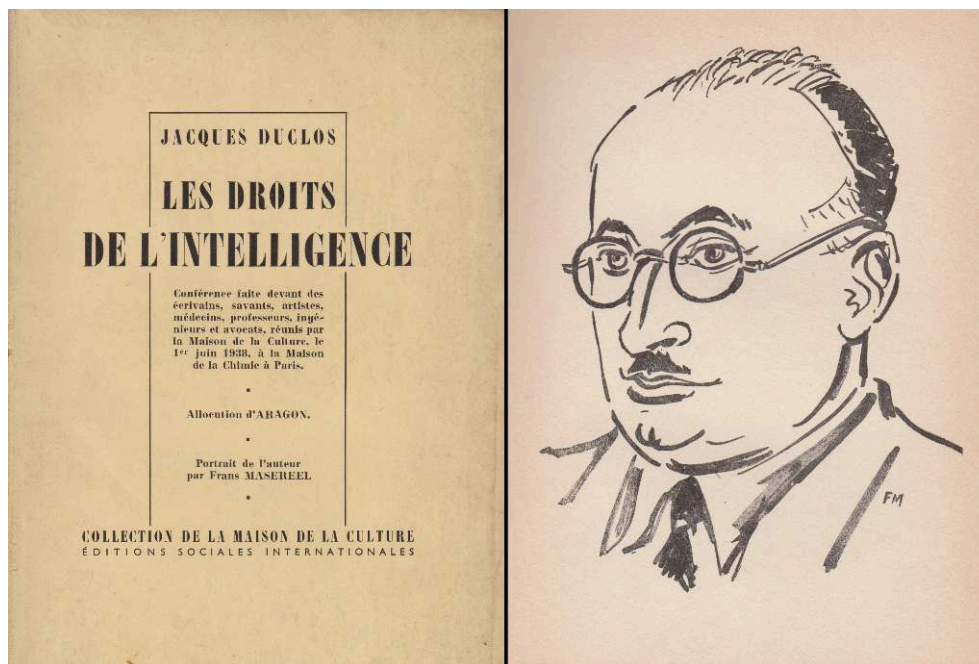
© Ritter B a) Nr 1-11.VI.

- 27 Then, the young girl seems to be used by technology to propagate rather common if not vulgar products, through printing, pornography, photography, cinema, to the sound of thunderous music (Droixhe, “Musiques noires”).
- 28 Eight years after the *Idée / Idee*, the way a creative power can go astray or does not achieve satisfaction is illustrated by Masereel in *L'œuvre* or *Das Werk*. The gentle giant or *golem* that a sculptor magically releases becomes sad, angry and violent after having tried to get in touch with a small – naked – woman seen at her window. Is it the only reason for the destructive urban woodcuts which follow? Or are they after-images of the war? Or again the effect of a growing belief that such a deceiving society had to change, even radically (figure 10a-d)? In any case, the small female creature that the giant saves and adopts is again found nude in the woods: the hero has no choice but to turn his back on the battle of good and evil.

Republic.”¹ He appears there alongside the famous cartoonist Raoul Cabrol, a communist activist. Masereel is also active in the association named Les Amis de l’U.R.S.S.²

- 31 In 1938, he provided Jacques Duclos’s portrait, leader of the French Parti Communiste, for a conference on *The Rights of Intelligence*. If Masereel is not mentioned among the personalities who have answered to the invitation, his name is highlighted on the book cover with that of Aragon (picture 12). We can assume that some statements made by Duclos explain the recourse to Masereel and to his woodcuts of the first World War, when it is said that, “in all areas of creative activity, we see science collide with considerations of interest.” (Duclos 45-46). If, in “its period of greatness, which will have been a moment of human progress, capitalism has advanced Science, a condition for the development of effective technology,” this capitalism is now “embarrassed by its powerful technique which goes beyond the outdated form of property”. Thus, there is no area which “more strongly stimulates this technological slippage” than “the industry of death”: “nothing stands in the way of finding new explosives and more sophisticated means of killing,” so that “this branch of production is the only one, so to speak, which benefits from an organization...” Masereel’s name will also be associated with Aragon and Jean-Richard Bloch when he will collaborate in 1939-1940 with the newspaper *Ce soir* (Ritter D a) Nr. 10)

Figure 12a-b. Jacques Duclos, *Les droits de l’intelligence*, 1938 and Frans Masereel, *portrait*.



© Ritter C b) Nr. 74.

- 32 Masereel’s national consecration will occur in 1951, with exhibitions in Gent and at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussel.³ But the communist *Voix du peuple* / *Drapeau Rouge* remains unsatisfied and writes:

[Masereel] is one of the greatest artists of our country, which has many of them. He is also a remarkable activist for democracy. He is a determined worker, a Partisan of Peace in his books and in all his actions. This explains the disdain and the contempt to which the official spheres confine him. If he had sacrificed to abstraction, to the

toneless landscape, to miserabilism and academism, he would today be pampered and celebrated. He could have brandished some social-democratic alibi and played the big man in official circles.⁴

- 33 This also throws light on one chapter of art history in Belgium, when two types of abstraction – the lyrical/impulsive and the geometric/rational, as in Jo Delahaut's work – were soliciting new creators (*L'abstraction géométrique belge*).

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NOTES

1. *La voix du peuple*, 18-02-37.

2. *La voix du peuple*, 22-10-37.

3. *La voix du peuple*, 25-05-51.

4. *La voix du peuple*, 21-03-51.

ABSTRACTS

In the 1920-1930s, the publisher Kurt Wolff asked famous writers to introduce Frans Masereel's "graphic novels". Thomas Mann, Max Brod and Hermann Hesse introduced *Mein Stundenbuch* and *Geschichte ohne Wort*. These novels develop a narrative exposition of the dangers and pains linked to sentimental adventures and passionate love, damaging for a man discovering the world, and notably for the artist who has to protect his ability. Masereel's images of the woman are characterized differently by the authors. For Hesse, she is a "clever, cold female". For Brod, she is "an especially fragile and naughty girl" bringing "an evil enchantment", "followed by a painful awakening." Mann concludes that, ultimately, Masereel's hero "has had enough of love" and needs to separate "the practical man", decided to control his life, from "the intellectual and imaginative man".

Dans les années 1920-1930, l'éditeur Kurt Wolff demanda à des écrivains célèbres de présenter certains « romans graphiques » de Frans Masereel. Thomas Mann, Max Brod et Hermann Hesse

présentèrent *Mon livre d'heures* et *Histoire sans paroles*. On montre que ces romans développent une exposition narrative des dangers et douleurs accompagnant les aventures sentimentales et la passion amoureuse, dommageables pour un homme à la découverte du monde, et particulièrement pour un artiste soucieux de préserver ses capacités. L'image de la femme chez Masereel est ainsi caractérisée différemment. Pour Hesse, il s'agit d'une « intelligente, froide femelle ». Pour Brod, c'est « une fille particulièrement fragile et méchante », qui apporte « un mauvais enchantement ». Mann conclut que, finalement, le héros de Masereel « en a assez de l'amour » et éprouve le besoin de séparer « l'homme pratique », décidé à contrôler sa vie, de « l'homme intellectuel et imaginaire ».

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Mots-clés: Masereel (Frans), roman graphique, Mann (Thomas), Brod (Max), Hesse (Herman), amour, passion, sexualité

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AUTHOR

DANIEL DROIXHE

Ancien enseignant de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles et de l'Université de Liège

Daniel Droixhe a enseigné à l'Université Libre de Bruxelles et à l'Université de Liège. Il a fondé avec Muriel Collart (U.L.B.) la Société wallonne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle (swedhs.org). Sa bibliographie compte environ 220 publications (<https://orbi.uliege.be>). En histoire de la médecine, il a notamment publié *Soigner le cancer au 18 siècle. Triomphe et déclin de la thérapie par la ciguë dans le Journal de médecine* (2015) et *Les charlatans du cancer* (2018). Il est membre du CA de la Société française d'étude du dix-huitième siècle, membre de la Société française d'histoire de la médecine et membre de l'Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique (<https://www.arlfb.be/composition/membres/droixhe.html>). Articles récents: Droixhe, D. & Adams, D. (01 December 2023). Quelle contrefaçon rouennaise du Théâtre de Diderot a été imprimée par Oursel pour Pierre Machuel en 1770-1771 ? *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, 58, 211-218. <https://hdl.handle.net/2268/309739>; Droixhe, D. (August 2023). Dostoïevski dans la presse belge (1875-1900). *Revue des Études Slaves*, 94 (1-2), 245-267. <https://hdl.handle.net/2268/305954>; Droixhe, D., Collart, M., & Piette, A. (July 2023). 'Je suis à la troisième édition de Bélisaire'. Une contrefaçon du Bélisaire de Marmontel par Jean-François Bassompierre (1767). *Gutenberg Jahrbuch*, 98. <https://hdl.handle.net/2268/305447>