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The narrator's position in selected novels by J. Bernlef

In his review of J. Bernlef's 1981 novel *Onder IJsbergen* (Under icebergs), the critic Hugo Bousset writes that while reading this novel he was repeatedly reminded of the "minimal art" of Roland Jooris, and in particular of his poem *Schrijven* (Writing):

Wegnemen, / schrijven is wegnemen,
/ waardoor / ik enkel nog / een
baksteenrode / bloempot / op het
raamkozijn laat staan / en valavond /
als met potlood / een hoek / van de
kamer / zie vullen

[Taking away, / writing is taking
away, / until / I only leave / a brick-red
/ flowerpot / on the windowsill / and
see dusk / fill in / a corner / of the
room / as with a pencil.] (Bousset 286)

And indeed, terms like "taking away" and "omission" characterize Bernlef's narrative style well. Omission is especially the right word for the narrative technique of the 1984 novel *Hersenschimmen* (Idle fancies; the English translation is called *Out of mind*) and the 1993 novel *Eclips*. However, omission here does not mean any endeavour on the narrator's part to verbally limit himself. Bernlef's "minimal art" can rather be characterized as an attempt to experiment with how much can be taken away from a human mind and still leave a narrator who can tell a

tale comprehensible and attractive to the reader. It seems justifiable to speak of an experiment because the author uses the device of lack of awareness on the part of his heroes only infrequently.

In *Hersenschimmen*, a first-person present-tense novel, the more the protagonist's dementia increases, the more problematic the narrator's position grows. We may contrast this situation with that in *Publiek geheim* (Open secret, 1987); there, it is not problematic at all to establish the narrator's position because he conducts the narration from an outside vantage point (the third person). There is an omission in this story, but it is deliberate: the real views of a deceased Hungarian writer about the 1956 revolt are suppressed in a TV documentary broadcast by the Communist government after his death. This kind of omission does not in any way interfere with the narrator's position. In the novel *Eclips* (Eclipse, 1993), on the other hand, that position is again reversed: the first-person present-tense tale encompasses the adventures of a protagonist who, in all likelihood as the result of a cerebral hemorrhage, drives his car into a canal and suffers a complete loss of memory, which lasts until the moment that he recovers enough to contact his wife. In this case, as in *Hersenschimmen*, the major question is again

where the narrative instance is located that is responsible for the minute rendition of what happened to the mentally incapacitated hero who is, nevertheless, supposed to be telling the story. We will discuss the two problematic novels.

Already at the beginning of his career, as founder and editor of the literary review *Barbarber*, Bernlef showed an interest in experimenting with literary devices. This "Journal for Texts," founded in 1958, published not only poems but also advertisements, jokes, fragments from a railway timetable - *het spoorboekje* that plays such an important part in the lives of many Dutch people - and texts written or attached to doors and walls. Bernlef himself later wrote about these publications (the translations are mine throughout this article):

One could say that the editors only later became aware that their judgments of texts no longer originated with well-established principles such as the absurd and the humorous, but with a reality that until then had had so few chances [to be expressed], simply because it was viewed as too ordinary, too unimportant, although it is precisely this reality in which we spend most of our lives.

(*Het spel en de knickers. Kernboek 2, 344*)

To be sure, ordinary things that we use daily have little in common with people who lose their minds or suffer a cerebral hemorrhage. But throughout his life Bernlef remained interested in topics which at first glance do not lend themselves very well as raw material for literary texts.

No attempt will be made here to establish whether the depiction of growing dementia in *Hersenschimmen*, and that of the slow return to normalcy from a mental blackout in *Eclips*, are consistent with medical descriptions of similar cases. A novel is not a medical report and a critic's task is rather to try to determine and analyze the artistic merits of a literary text. The psychology of fictitious characters should be consistent with the information provided by the narrator, but it does not have to coincide with the behaviour patterns of real people. It is interesting that in *Hersenschimmen* the hero's development runs from an almost normal mental state to complete dementia, whereas in *Eclips* it is the reverse: from a total blackout the hero finds his way back to a state in which he can again act more or less normally.

The first paragraph of *Hersenschimmen* hardly gives us the impression that there is anything wrong with the protagonist, Maarten Klein:

Perhaps it is because of the snow that I feel so tired in the morning. Not Vera, she loves the snow. In her eyes nothing can beat a snowscape. When all human traces disappear from nature, when everything turns into one immaculate white surface: so beautiful! She says that almost in ecstasy. But that situation does not last long here. Already after a few hours you see everywhere footprints and tire tracks and the main roads are cleared by snowploughs. (7)

We learn in due course that the Kleins have immigrated into the United States from Holland and that Maarten worked for an American body called IMCO, the Intergovernmental Marine Consultative

Organization. Since his retirement, something has started to go wrong with his mental health and Vera is aware of the fact. Thus, when Maarten impatiently asks where the children are, Vera has an ironic answer ready: "The children? Where else would they be but in Holland?" (10) Maarten's reply makes sense, though: "'No, I was thinking of the children that live here.' I point outside. 'The Cheevers' and the van Robbins' children, and those of Toms Richard.' 'But Maarten, it's Sunday today. Look, your tea's getting cold.' How could I have forgotten that, and forgotten about my tea? I could have sworn it was morning." (10) At this early stage of his dementia, Maarten is still aware of his unusual behaviour. He experiences "that feeling of being conscious and nevertheless of being absent, of being lost, of going astray" (17).

In the subsequent stage of his illness some problems arise for the reader. Vera evidently decides that the time has come to ask their family doctor, Dr. Eardly, to pay a visit. In a timid voice she tells him: "Soms is hij net een vreemde voor me. Dan kan ik hem niet bereiken. Het is een verschrikkelijk, een machteloos gevoel. Hij hoort me wel, maar ik geloof dat hij me op zulke momenten niet meer begrijpt. Dan gedraagt hij zich alsof hij alleen is." [From time to time I get the impression that he is a stranger to me. Then I cannot reach him. It's a terrible helpless feeling. He hears me all right, but I think that at such moments he doesn't understand me anymore. Then he behaves as if he's alone] (69). The narrator comments: "I understand exactly what's on her mind. Just now everything became a mess. Suddenly I had to translate everything into English before I could say it. I uttered only some kind of sentences, bits and pieces, but the content was altogether lost." (69-70) However, up to this

point the reader has read only correctly and logically constructed sentences, not bits and pieces. Thus, although it is obvious from the contents of the novel that the protagonist's mental capacities are rapidly fading, that process is not expressed in the language or the structure of the text. Vera, for instance, must have spoken to Dr. Eardly in English, but Maarten's rendition of her words into Dutch does not show any loss of competence on the narrator's part.

Here one can object that Maarten did not have to utter these words, but in his direct speech he does not show any hesitation either, he formulates his thoughts quickly and well. On the contrary, despite the fact that Maarten has problems distinguishing between his Dutch past and his American present, his spoken language, albeit at moments childish, is original and funny. For instance, he watches while Vera puts the groceries she has just purchased into the kitchen cupboard: "'Sometimes,' I say, 'when you cannot get the familiar brand any more and you buy a different tin, you can't find that tin at first. The memory of the familiar tin makes the other one invisible.'" (72-73) But the signs of his mental decay constantly increase. At one moment he is sitting at his own desk in his American home, but imagines that it is his father's desk, at which he was allowed to sit and draw on Sundays. One image is superimposed on another: "The door of the desk cabinet [i.e. of his father's desk], behind which are hidden three deep drawers full of papers, is locked but I have the key [obviously of his own desk] in my pocket." (79)

Shortly after this, Maarten's illness reaches the point where he no longer recognizes his own wife. Yet his brain continues to operate with amazing clarity. He takes a book and

suddenly has the impression that the text is familiar to him: "What is that feeling called, at one time I read an article about it. *Déjà-vu*. A short circuit between brain neurons. The image is registered a fraction of a second prior to the awareness of that image and thus you think that you recognize something which you know for sure you never could have seen before." (98-99) The major question here is whether the reader is supposed to accept this logically composed sentence as the utterance of a deranged mind. Despite Maarten's total confusion between childhood memories of Holland and more recent American experiences, and despite his latest forgetfulness resulting in the constant repetition of certain phrases, the narrator turns out to be capable of rendering into perfect Dutch a conversation, quite certainly carried on in English, between Vera and Phil Tayler, a lady who is going to help with her increasingly difficult domestic tasks: "More than forty years I have been married to him. And then suddenly this. Most of the time, something like this comes on slowly, gradually. But with him it started suddenly. It descended upon me unexpectedly. It is cruel and unjust. Sometimes I get so mad and feel so resentful when I see how he looks at me as if I am from another world. And then again, I am only sad and want so very much to understand him. Or I simply go along with him and then I feel ashamed later on." (101)

My question is whether the unexplained and disturbing discrepancy between the protagonist-narrator's impaired mental state and his still remarkable writing and composition skills make *Hersenschimmen* a flawed novel. However, the enormous enthusiasm with which the Dutch public received the book - first published in 1984, it reached its 18th reprint only three years later -

must be taken into account in assessing the novel. The question is rather: where has the author placed the narrator, in the protagonist or sometimes outside him?

As was mentioned above, in his 1993 novel *Eclips* Bernlef returned to a similar plot, although things happen in reverse order. In all likelihood as the result of a cerebral hemorrhage, the protagonist-narrator Kees Zomer loses control over his actions and drives his car into a canal: "I have to go to the right, off the road. Because the left side of the world has disappeared, suddenly nowhere. Thus I have to go to the right, into the canal, straight as an arrow. With a loud bang the rear bumper hits the concrete wall. Then the sinking begins." (7) Miraculously, Zomer succeeds in getting himself out of the sinking car, grabs the pole of a landing stage and hoists himself onto it. Then he faints, and upon awakening can remember nothing. In contrast to Maarten Klein, Kees Zomer, also a protagonist-narrator who makes use of the present tense, is totally incoherent in his direct speech. However, as in *Hersenschimmen*, the descriptive parts are expressed in an unexpectedly elegant and sophisticated style.

Incapable of determining any direction, Zomer starts dragging himself through a field and suddenly finds himself in front of a huge office building. His outlandish appearance no doubt startles the doorman, who asks him what his name is. Hereupon Zomer discovers that he cannot answer in a normal fashion: "Ja ziet u, dat komt, ik weet het zelf ook op dit moment nog precies zo, zo precies nog, zo niet. Ook. Precies. Precies bedoel. Juist, precies bedoel. Dat." [Well you see, it's because, well, just right at this moment exactly, just right now, don't know. Just. Exactly. Mean exactly. Just exactly mean. It.]

(10) The spoken words of others, meanwhile, are rendered accurately enough. The guard, obviously annoyed by the stranger's odd behaviour, answers none too politely: "Ouwehoer. Neem mij een beetje in de zeik." [Fuck off. You're trying to take the piss out of me.] (10)

Later on, Zomer enters a shed that he discovers at the edge of a garbage dump. For the girl behind the counter in the shed, and for an outlandishly dressed female tramp by the name of Toos, it is not difficult to determine that the newcomer is mentally disturbed. Apart from talking nonsense, Zomer finds that he is tending to use a kind of official jargon: "Laat me, vanaf het begin, een verklaring doen uitgaan... Financiën zijn in het ongerede geraakt. U weet wel, rekeningen, afschrijvingen, nota's, betaalbewijzen, alles via de bank lopend, ook wel automatisch. Nu zit het zo." [Let me, to start with, make a declaration... Financial documents have been mislaid. You know, bills, writings-off, accounts, receipts, everything that goes through the bank, sometimes automatically. Now it is like this.] (28). At a certain moment Zomer taps his right temple and Toos is quick to react: "Zeker, het is in je bol geslagen... Ach, je bent de enige niet. Als je zo om je heen kijkt. De een is nog leiper dan de andere." [For sure, you're off your nut... Well, you aren't the only one. When you look around. Everyone's as nutty as a fruitcake.] (29). Whoever is responsible for the narration of these scenes, the contrast between Zomer's nonsensical language and the colloquial and down-to-earth speech of his entourage is most effective.

Toos invites Kees to accompany her and together they walk to a housing development under construction. Toos knows that one of

them already has running water, and there she plans to spend the night. The following descriptive passage is so logical and normal that it is impossible to assume that it was composed by a deranged mind: "Over a high threshold we step with difficulty from the loose sand onto the bare concrete floor of a space with empty window sills. Here and there bunches of electrical wire stick out from the wall. Toos puts her bags against the coarsely plastered wall. I put mine next to them... In what will be the bathroom she turns a tap. A foamy strong squirt of water runs into the white sink." (32)

The dénouement is reached when Koos, on a stolen bike, pedals all the way to Bergen and enters a bookshop whose owner, Richard Fielemieg, enthusiastically greets him: "Mr.Zomer... Mr.Zomer, you here?" (129). At this stage of his illness, Zomer is only capable of repeating what he has just heard: "'Mr. Zomer, you here?' I repeat with the same intonation. He thinks that I am imitating him, perhaps as a joke, but my speech cannot do anything else at this moment. I try not to listen to what a man and a woman are saying to one another at the back of the shop, afraid to have to repeat their sentence." (129). The pattern is similar to those discussed already: utter confusion in the direct speech but coherent narration in the descriptive part. At the end of the novel, when Zomer, practically back to normal, has been taken to a police station and learns that Fielemieg informed the authorities about his strange behaviour, he has to confess that he does not remember having seen the man. Thus, again in this case the reader may legitimately ask where the narrator of the above-quoted passage is located.

As was the case with *Hersenschimmen*, the question can be raised whether readers must

conclude that *Eclips* is flawed. They may well agree with the critic P. de Wispelaere who concluded his review with the words:

"But how can Zomer follow the course of his adventure when he is totally incapable of remembering what happened after his cerebral hemorrhage? In any case, at the end of the novel the reader is confronted with the paradoxical fact that he has heard a story 'from the mouth' of a character who is himself unaware of what took place. And that remains strange." (de Wispelaere 106).

On the other hand, a critic has to consider the great popularity of *Eclips* with the reading public (a reprint of the novel appeared the same year it was published) and wonder if the "flaw" is in fact a feature that arouses interest. Although there is certainly an inconsistency between logical storytelling and an incapacitated narrator, the enthusiasm with which both novels were received surely suggests that readers are in fact intrigued by this obvious discrepancy.

Traditionally the third-person omniscient narrator is located outside the novel's framework and the first-person narrator, with his/her limited viewpoint, is within it. But is there a logical explanation for the former's precise knowledge of the heroes' and heroines' most intimate thoughts and emotions? How, for instance, does the narrator of *Anna Karenina* know that Stiva Oblonsky, after the embarrassing discovery by his wife of the affair he had with his children's

governess, does not feel any remorse? The author simply endowed him with that knowledge, and the reader accepts that fact without difficulty. In the case of *Hersenschimmen* and *Eclips*, the reader is apparently not bothered by some obvious inconsistencies in the narrative techniques. He accepts that even within the heavily damaged brain of the protagonists an observing instance can "somewhere" remain active. The author has not situated an autonomous narrative instance somewhere outside them, but where he considers it necessary to insert detailed logical descriptions, he simply brushes the deranged protagonists aside. And the readers, although aware of this unusual manner of presenting narrative material, accept it as long as they are fascinated by the tales.

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