de l'importance accordée à la famille. Chacun des membres du clan Seynaeve-Bossuyt a droit à une vignette dans le texte, et pour cause. La famille reste le noeud de la société flamande, même aujourd'hui, à la différence du Canada anglais et des Etats-Unis, sociétés à base d'immigration, où l'individu est prisé davantage.

Le roman est un pot-pourri linguistique. Le dialecte officiel y est mélangé avec tous les parlers locaux et régionaux et on ne peut négliger non plus la contribution de la Bible, de la littérature néerlandaise, du français, de l'allemand, et de l'anglais. Après tout, la Flandre est le carrefour des peuples occidentaux, et même le Flamand le plus puriste n'échappe pas à ce brassage des langues. Il ne surprendra personne que les Flamands, victimes historiques de l'agressivité de leurs voisins plus puissants, se sentent irrités par cette invasion linguistique. (Je me rappelle telle attaque véhémente du linguiste flamand J. Wilmots contre l'attitude laxiste des Hollandais vis-à-vis les emprunts lexiques). Mais c'est grâce à ce mélange que le flamand est un dialecte riche, varié, et exotique qui a donné une identité spécifique et distincte aux Flamands à l'intérieur de la communauté néerlandaise. Leur dialecte est à la fois plus classique que le hollandais, qui est un développement récent, et aussi plus novateur grâce aux emprunts du français. On peut donc dire que pour ces raisons on doit les considérer comme des partenaires à titre égal. Mais le Flamand, y inclus Louis Seynaeve, reste un homme angoissé.

Le tome que Hugo Claus a pondu compte 774 pages, mais sera-t-il suffisant pour faire taire les critiques fransquillons et libéraux? La sérénité de cet auteur n'est donc qu'apparente, car la Flandre ne tient pas vraiment ferme à ces principes. La pureté—linguistique ou autre—n'est qu'un mirage. Les traîtres et menteurs sont partout; la Flandre est entourée d'envahisseurs potentiels. Comme dans le cas du Québec, dont la Flandre partage les obsessions, l'histoire et la géographie n'ont pas toujours été leurs alliés naturels, et les deux souffrent d'un complexe de séquestration. L'option indépendantiste est une carte jouée par certains membres des deux peuples, mais serait-ce vraiment la clef qui ouvrira la porte du monde?

Le roman de Hugo Claus donne peut-être une réponse à cette question. L'extrême liberté artistique dont il use dans *Le Chagrin des Belges* lui donne des issues nouvelles. Il se peut qu'une vie économique et culturelle vibrante constitue un contrepoids suffisant à ceux qui exigent une indépendance politique qui fermerait autant de portes qu'elle n'en ouvrirait.

NOTE

[1] J.-P. Sartre. *Critiques littéraires*, (*Situations* I) Paris, Gallimard, "Idées", 1975, p. 86.

J. Bernlef: *Out of Mind*. Translated by Adrienne Dixon. London: Faber and Faber, 1988.

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"The new philosophy calls all in doubt."
- John Donne

J. Bernlef's time has come. Not for an immortal state or for judgement, but a time for this varied and prolific Dutch writer to be recognized as a serious voice abroad as well as in the Netherlands.

What does the literary community call "serious"? In Toronto a foreign writer displays seriosity by getting and accepting an invitation to read at the Harbourfront Festival. Bernlef is doubly serious: he has read there twice, once from his poetry (1986) and once sounding out his prose (1988). This in turn reflects his growing audience at home. He read at the 1981 Rotterdam Poetry International Festival where he met Greg Gatenby, the Harbourfront Reading Series' director. Bernlef read at Rotterdam as one of the Netherlands' foremost writers with a string of editorships and publications trailing behind him from 1959 on; then the dual literary and public success of his 1984 novel *Hersenschimmen (Out of Mind)* marked his critical arrival.

Bernlef's road has been literarily straight but not swift in getting him recognition. At the age of twenty-one he waitered in Sweden, isolated with his own language, and discovered the difference formal tampering made to his writing. 1959 bought him the Reina Prinsen Geerligsprijs for his short story and poetic products. He returned home and founded and edited *Barbarber*, a literary journal which continued in its adventurous style through the 1960's. Bernlef's list of short story collections, poetry, essays, drama and novels runs long, far and wide.

His list of national awards is as impressive in quality, if not exactly concurrent with the whole of Bernlef's writing career. Once Bernlef received the Geerligsprijs he faced a long period of production unrewarded by much of the critical recognition so necessary to a young writer. Substantial awards came only after several periods of Bernlef's self-styled "cyclical"

development had passed: 1985 bought the Constantijn Huygensprijs; 1987, the AKO Literatuurprijs.

Why the delay? Bernlef himself claims that his writer's voice took time to mature and become individuated from the international accents influencing him. He does not bring up the fact that while Dutch writers have a smaller audience to court, they proportionately look forward to less room at the top of their nation's awareness.

More specifically, Bernlef's narratives do not catch a wide readership because they unsettle. His interests are absurdist and his humour often black. He pirated the name "Bernlef" from an eighth-century blind poet. Retrospectively we notice that he trains his vision on dark corners. Death and/or decay befall all his protagonists. He eagerly unravels the systems constructed by humanity of earlier eras, and in fine modern form he persuades us that science, religion and language are — or were — just human constructs placed grid-like to order a formless world. Mystery in some shape centers his writing. *Meeuwen* (Gulls, 1975), a detective novel, takes an anti-detective ending. Bernlef undercuts his rational detective figure by irony from the first. His investigator imposes a solution on an insoluble crime. Even were this detective's logic not so sloppy, the human impulse to tidy the senseless would still fall beside the absurdist point.

Out of Mind manages a subtler success while writing about much the same dark matter, Perhaps Bernlef's latest concern for more "human-interest" contexts takes some credit for the novel's popularity. Maarten, our first-person narrator, contracts and breaks down from Alzheimer's disease. Perhaps also the trend in the later Bernlef to flesh out characters whom he used to keep "epic" and distant pulls this text closer to the reader.

We are allowed close access to Maarten at the brink of his withdrawal. He and his wife Vera have retired to the isolated place of his last transatlantic appointment: in snow-covered Gloucester, a peninsula town north of Boston. The text contains a brief snapshot of their slowed but still-healthy life. Maarten comments on their physically narrowing world:

> The house seems bigger than it did once....the ground floor is enough for us. We potter. That is one difference with the past, when you still went to work. You start pottering, you walk around for the sake of walking around. Open a door or closet here and there, and shut it again. For no reason. (7)

But this snapshot of uncomplicated boredom comes as a flashback. *Out of Mind* begins with Maarten's recognition that something is awry. The opening is the first of a long series of attempts to blame the symptoms on external, not internal, factors:

> Maybe it is because of the snow that I feel so tired, even in the morning. (1)

Admission and denial are a problematic combination. They are particularly Maarten's problem, and this is ostensibly Maarten's text. His mind seemingly directs the work from within. Alzheimer's gives Bernlef an individual, concrete example of the fall of humanity's *logos* and its branches, reason and speech. Memory is the human capacity to link disparate spots in linear time with the present. Maarten's memories are both narrative bricks and his identity. His memory narrative increasingly confuses the present with the early past, until he erases the more recent past altogether and estranges the present:

> To see something you must first be able to recognize it. Without memory you can merely look, and the world glides through you without leaving a trace. (41)

Maarten's suspicions mount as the world outside his mind becomes less and less orderable. His rhetoric changes in stages of alliance. First his unifying capacity reaches out to link the external world:

> I am the only person who can see in her all the women she has been. Sometimes I touch her, and then I touch all of them at once, very gently. (4)

Then his ordering capacity declines: "I keep missing links" (87). As he turns his remaining critical faculty on its own diminution, the text focusses on his mind:

> But the problem is that is it difficult to think about something you cannot remember. (5)

His relation to us becomes diaristic, confessional and at times pleading. Maarten tries to hide his disease from Vera and seems to address us instead:

> How are you to feel guilty if you can't remember anything about an incident? If you see only the consequence without knowing the cause? You have to refuse. (63)

He suspects the disordered world ("Clearly, she is inventing stories to test me," 59) and withdraws to

watch from between parentheses:

> (What a lot of activity for this hour of the day. Pleasant to watch.) (65)

He also hides his fragile thoughts from us:

> (As long as I do not know what exactly is the matter, I must keep all this to myself.) (17)

Diction recedes with Maarten's mind. Objects already introduced become unfamiliar with indefinite articles and sway back to familiar definition, from which they retreat again. Maarten introduces Vera's "wine-coloured coat" so often that we are ready to correct him. In fact, what seems like only "Maarten's" text is so finely shot through with Bernlef's work that we barely notice the delicate discourse the author establishes with us, circumventing the narrator, or rather defining itself by our response to the mistakes in Maarten's narrative discourse which the author lets us see. Bernlef uses Maarten as an unretentive transmittor. The author gives us information through Maarten. We keep it, Maarten loses it and makes blackly funny faux pas. He insists on inquiring after the dead.

This distinct authorial discourse is neither ironic ornament nor solely a secure grounding for the nonsenile reader from which he or she can gauge Maarten's retreat. Bernlef must tackle a problem he sets himself in choosing to narrate about a disintegrating mind, from within that mind. As Maarten's syntax seemingly turns to the philosopher's nightmare of idiosyncrasy, the author risks losing *all* communication with the reader if his chosen warped narrative form cannot stand without conventional structure and offers no new structure of its own. Bernlef's added textual presence begins a discursive dynamic which pulls the text now towards the decaying speaker, now towards the articulate author of this decay.

Yet Maarten's breakdown takes the form of unconventional textual signals that are perversely comprehensible as the breakdown of a speaker and reader. Such is the *trompe l'oeil* of "anti-linguistic" literature, and this is Bernlef's means of invisibly structuring Maarten's destruction. Maarten's language formally recedes to record his physical sensations in the nursing-home:

> Sick... sick as anything...but can't tell whether the sickness is inside or outside the skin... (125)

New textual signals in Maarten's voice repeat and shape another order of disorder for the reader: ellipsis, shivers of external speech set off typographically and a declining pronominal identity for himself from "I" to "he", "it" and finally "you". Flickerings of dispossessed logic could conceivably belong to Maarten's undulating mind:

> ...that is what he means when he thinks: only in language can I still undertake anything. (123)

Precisely here Bernlef's distinct voice grates. He runs to support the implicit formal message with explicit comment at the expense of textual subtlety. For who makes the intellectual remarks? If we take the explicit comments as Maarten's, the text traverses the cliche spectrum of the madman/genius we do not expect from a complex work. The democratic disease Bernlef threatens us with turns exclusive:

> Lightly undulating...the whole inside now threatens to come out....Einstein was right once but he forgot this place...light has no velocity here... (121)

> A madhouse?...think: not mad means nothing...one can't check for oneself whether one is mad or not. (124)

If we take the commentary as an exit for the authorial discourse, such lines read as loud self-reflexive aids to our digestion of Maarten's "broken" discourse:

> ...nothing but metaphors, boy...nothing but metaphors. (124)

We do not need the rescue. Bernlef should simply have more faith in the ability of his subtly ordered rubble to communicate a mind's downward spiral.

Out of Mind, then, discusses and enacts the problem of interpretation, not least in this last evidence of authorial doubt that the text and readers can engage "correctly" without explicit semantic guidance. On the whole, however, Maarten's thoughts, which are at source Bernlef's text, dismantle rather than support interpretations of the world such as the coherent system that science posits. Bernlef almost always supplies one character with an obsession for facts and their measurement. Here that character is Maarten's father:

> I merely register facts. But you suspect a system behind those facts, I said. Yes, he said, you might say that. Unless all facts turned out to be aerations, he added...But then it would no longer be a system, I suggested. Or a system of which we can have no

> conception, he said. (2)

Maarten clearly questions whether there is a system "out there" at all, from his childhood on:

> A few times we saw a falling star. He tried to explain to an eight-year-old that what we could see up there in the evening sky was an ancient past, that we were unable to see the real state of the universe, that we could at best calculate it....I couldn't understand this, but I asked no questions. (2)

The adult Maarten points out to an empty room the failure inherent in imposing a human-centric order on the nonhuman world:

> The statistics and catch figures of the past year do not conform with reality and besides, no fish has ever let itself be guided in its movements by our computer forecasts. (35)

Maarten's father doubts only human comprehension of the system; Maarten doubts the system itself. Bernlef implies a generational difference in faith. Maarten was born during one war and was young during another. War and occupation do not figure obsessively as in Mulisch's work; instead Bernlef uses the Second World War as one proof in his deconstructive strategy. The world shattered even on a small scale:

> Uncle Karel had whiskers. Until 15 May 1940. When the Netherlands capitulated, Uncle Karel shaved off his proudly up-twirled whiskers. In protest. A first and last act of resistance. (27)

Maarten continues to shave long after Uncle Karel's death. Bernlef suggests a causal relation between the past war and this modern man's disavowal of traditional form, even in whiskers. If we follow Bernlef's symbolic (if not rational) argument, then the war broke the world's artificial order finally; and Maarten's mental breakdown lands as one symptom of modern fallout.

We also find a love-story alongside the fragments of previous beliefs. Most love-stories involve a chase and a capture. This one begins in Vera and Maarten's marriage and ends with her loss. True to form, Bernlef discusses the imminent disunion in every mortal bond. The finely written authorial discourse again lets us see around Maarten's oblivion to pick up hints of Vera's conscious pain:

> She nods reassuringly and sits down on the edge of the bed. Why is she crying? Could it be that I am mistaken and that the war has just begun?...Why is she crying then? I'm glad she's here. She is the only one I still trust. "You must never leave again," I whisper and take her hand. "Do you hear, Vera, never." (111)

Any English translation loses Maarten's full isolation. So long as he retreats in an English-translation text to an American nursing-home, the snippets of English speech from the world outside his mind blend with Maarten's text insofar as English is common to both. With Maarten's original decay in Dutch, the English dialogue and community regain the strangeness of another language:

> deportation?...only English is spoken here... (119)

Otherwise the text's simplicity and pain survive in Adrienne Dixon's translation. Harold Pinter has given such praise to her new American translation that Bernlef has arranged to have him quoted on that edition's cover. In this British version Dixon chooses simple words that stand as transparent panes over Bernlef's spare style:

> ...other snowflakes chase along with us, accompany us like falling stars and so we fall through space Vera and glimmer briefly afterwards (or are we already dead) until we fade away and burn out... (119)

Falling stars figure in Maarten's end as in his childhood, while looking up at the night sky with his father. *Vallende Ster* (1987, "Falling Star"), Bernlef's next novel, traces the motif further. Bernlef has chosen the anomalous voice of an ancient, blind seer who speaks the new philosophy of the constellations. We can expect an accent of light, however small and however ready for extinction.

Bert Schierbeek: *Crossroads*. Translated by Charles McGeehan. Rochester MI: Katydid Books, 1988. 181p.
Gerrit Achterberg: *But This Land Has No End*. Selected poems translated by Pleuke Boyce. Lantzville, B.C.: Oolichan Books, 1989. 72p. $9.90.

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It is perhaps the case with translations of poetry, as it is in Canada with all poetry, that we have to rely on