

External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Anna Krýsová
"Beyond Postmodernism: Oscillation, Reparation and Affect in Contemporary Dutch Novels"

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Report of the PhD Dissertation *Beyond Postmodernism: Oscillation, Reparation and Affect in Contemporary Dutch Novels*, submitted by Anna Krýsová

Examiner: Hans Demeyer

I am happy to confirm that the PhD dissertation by Anna Krýsová, entitled *Beyond Postmodernism: Oscillation, Reparation and Affect in Contemporary Dutch Novels*, provides sufficient evidence in conducting independent scientific research to be allowed to defend their dissertation.

The dissertation situates itself intelligently and persuasively within the current debates about Dutch contemporary fiction beyond postmodernism, engaging with and positioning itself in relation to the main contributions in that field: meta-modernism, relationism, the affective dominant – and to a lesser extent late postmodernism understood as a resurgence of commitment. The dissertation's main aims revolve around the development of a new reading practice to better attend to contemporary fiction's aesthetics. On the one hand it wants to break with a model of literary innovation that emphasizes breaks and underrepresents continuities through a practice of foregrounding and oscillation at the levels of the text and the reader. This results in a more flexible approach to a literary text and allows to draw out different concerns and issues without necessarily implementing a hierarchy upon them. On the other hand, it wants to introduce a reading practice that it is more attuned to the affective dimensions of a literary text.

For me, the dissertation's main strength and major contribution to debates of Dutch literary fiction is the development of this affective reading practice. The candidate

convincingly demonstrates how *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* predominantly focuses on ‘collective affect’ and sociological criticism, whereas she situates herself in the tradition of speculative criticism and puts more emphasis on the event of reading. This leads to fascinating readings of the relation between cognition and affect in Noordervliet’s novel, to a reparative reading practice that focuses on the affective relation and repair between reader and text in *Klont*, and ultimately to a relational reading that pays attention to the affective saturation of form in *Wij zijn licht*.

What emerges is ultimately, albeit rather implicitly, a plea for a reading practice that values a slower pace of reading and an ethical approach that refrains from quick judgements and that is open to (positive) surprises. The dissertation offers an alternative to the hermeneutics of suspicion (or ‘critique’, or ‘paranoid reading’), without however dismissing its importance. This alternative remains nevertheless as necessary today as when Sedgwick first wrote her essay on paranoid and reparative reading and for the very same reasons she pointed out, given that the former still reigns in academic writing and especially teaching. The value of this dissertation is that it has taken the time to offer a more structured and transferrable model than other attempts in contemporary Dutch literary studies. Collective repair indeed needs to be supplemented by individual repair, and not in the least because contemporary fiction demonstrates how the good old ‘consciousness-raising’ that the hermeneutics of suspicion professes cannot always redeem or alleviate affective issues of belonging, care, and attachment. I hope that the dissertation’s discussions of a relational, affective, and reparative reading practice will find its way to an academic publication.

I however have some reservations with regards to the historiography of literary development that the candidate proposes, and then especially to the concept of ‘oscillation’. I do not want to counter the idea that both textual elements and reader’s positions move in-between different positions. I also agree that the structuralist concept of the dominant tends to overemphasize one particular type of question, and that a literary analysis could do more in mapping, as the dissertation does, the relation between the different questions. Yet, I do wonder if one can still not point to relations of hierarchy or determination in the oscillation between these separate questions. At the end of *Affectieve crisis*, Sven and I speak of a ‘dialectic’ between affective and epistemological questions, in which the former drive or prompt the latter. It seems to

me that for *Zonder noorden*, the epistemological drives or determines the affective – see for instance page 52, where it says that ‘epistemological doubt also encroaches upon the affective and relational aspects of Robert’s life.’ In *Wij zijn licht*, as the candidate seems to indicate, the affective dimension overshadows the epistemological one.

What I would like to discuss with the candidate, then, is how one can distinguish between different literary periods if oscillation refrains from specifying the relations between the different questions. My hypothesis – following from my understanding of the dominant – would be that oscillation between epistemological, ontological, and affective questions is a feature of modern literary texts; what distinguishes a period and marks it as ‘new’ is the shifting relations between them. To what extent does the candidate’s model of oscillation between different foregrounded questions still allow for the distinction of periods and how would it distinguish them?

Secondly, one of the main drawbacks of ‘meta-modernism’ is that its oscillation between ‘the modern and the postmodern’ depends on a reification and reduction of modernism and postmodernism to two particular sets of features: modernist enthusiasm, hope, naïvité, empathy versus postmodern irony, melancholy, knowingness, apathy (11). It would not be hard to find a respectively postmodern or modernist counterexample for each of these features, but more importantly, I would (again) suggest that it is the relation between the different components that particularizes the distinctive texture of a literary period. This shortcoming is to some extent also present in the dissertation when it identifies particular concerns as ‘modern’, ‘postmodern’ or ‘contemporary’, and this mostly in terms of epistemological, ontological and affective concerns.

I find this difficult to agree with because it seems to suggest that one issue seems to govern – although the dissertation is ambiguous in this respect – all literary production of a certain period. Here, I thought it would be useful if the candidate could engage with the work of Bart Vervaeck on literary innovation in the novel (see the publications ‘Genre in verandering’ and ‘En garde: poëtica’s voor een nieuwe roman’, both 2014) in which he, with reference to Raymond Williams, develops a model of dominant, emergent, ‘fashionable’ and residual literary production. Following that model, I would read Noordervliet’s novel as the continuation of a dominant modern-realist tradition

that can be distinguished from the emergent millennial novel. I thus do not agree that 'affective questions are also foregrounded by some parts of Noordervliet's novel, thus complicating the idea that the affective dominant is typical for the novel of the millennials' (16), because, as indicated above, those concerns are not dominant and seem to be driven by an epistemological question.

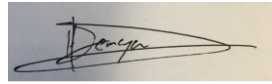
Yet, it is also crucial to me that an epistemological, ontological, or affective aspect begets the quality of a crisis or an issue of concern in relation to particular motives. Noordervliet's protagonist believes in his 'vitale vermogen to liefde en herstel' (55), or can experience sex as a way of becoming 'nieuw en anders' (71), whereas in the novels of the millennial generation the affective capacities to love and experience are in crisis. In short, to what extent does the model that aims to look at the oscillation between continuity and innovation not risk reifying aesthetic features of a literary period and in doing so actually under-describe how the relations between aesthetic features develop what is at stake in a literary text?

If the above are suggestions, I would like the candidate to correct some of the narratological terminology. In particular, the dissertation mistakes heterodiegetic for extradiegetic narration. Extra- and intradiegetic narration refers to the level of narration; the former is the instance that is not narrated by any instance above it. Hetero- and homodiegetic narration has to do with the relation of the narrative instance to the story: it respectively does not and does take part in it. The narrator in *Zonder noorden* is therefore extra- and homodiegetic (56-57). The narrator in the Bodo Klein parts of *Klont* is heterodiegetic, while it is unclear if it is extradiegetic (81 etc). What the candidate in part III constantly refers to as 'the ultimate narrator' would be, in narratological terms, the extradiegetic narrator who tells all storylines. That it is unclear who the extradiegetic narrator is creates the particular tension and confusion the analysis otherwise persuasively points out.

To conclude, the strength of the Krýsová's dissertation is that she not only points to limitations within existing research but also offers counter- or supplementary models that will enrich both the understanding of contemporary fiction and our reading practices. I hope it will be clear that I am looking forward to discussing the dissertation's results with the candidate.

I provisionally classify the submitted dissertation as *passed*

13 June 2023

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored background. The signature is stylized and appears to be 'D. J. ...'.