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Beyond postmodernism: oscillation, reparation and affect in contemporary Dutch novels

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Introduction

“*Het ging er niet om wie van de twee meer macht uitoefende over de ander, maar om wie van de twee er meer gekoesterd werd.*”¹

It was this quotation from a 2014 novel *De consequenties* by Niña Weijers that made me realize that it might not be only my pious hope that postmodernism as a dominant trend in literary production as well as a reading informed by deconstruction and the hermeneutics of suspicion were over. Weijers’ novel garnered significant critical attention (Olnon and Van Dijk, 2015, Demeyer and Vitse, 2018, Op de Beek and Van Dijk, 2019). The author has been hailed as a representative of a new generation of authors and her novel as a new kind of writing. The turn from issues of power (and the subsequent reaction of critics consisting of its unmasking)² to interpersonal and emotional concerns expressed by the quotation signalled to me that contemporary fiction is turning to different concerns³. My contention is that if literary critics want to appreciate the novels for what they are attempting to express, reflect on and foreground as a concern, a different reading practice is called for than the one that Rita Felski describes as ‘critique’. In this context, the aim of this dissertation is twofold. Firstly, to pay attention on the textual and formal level to the interaction between the comparatively innovative affective concerns and the continuities of contemporary Dutch novels with postmodernist and modernist heritage. Secondly, to develop a theoretical concept that defines a reading practice that does justice both to the new and the continuing concerns.

Contemporary Dutch literature has inspired three distinct debates that delimit the breadth of the methodological and theoretical reflection in this dissertation. The three debates are, firstly, the debate on the end of postmodernism which is inspired by posing literary historiographical questions: is postmodernism over and if it is, what has contributed to its ending, how is this

¹ “It was not about which one of the two held more power over the other but who of the two was being more cared for.” Niña Weijers, *De consequenties* (Amsterdam: Atlas Contact, 2014), 137-138.

² In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski comments on the suspicion of power typical for critique as the dominant style of literary analysis in the last forty years in the following words: “Knowing full well that all-powerful forces are working behind the scenes, the critic conjures up ever more paralyzing scenarios of coercion and control.” (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 34.)

³ Demeyer and Vitse (2018) write about a turn in reaction to postmodernism: “In plaats van de ontmaskering van het alledaagse als het resultaat van onderdrukkende machtsrelaties of andere ficties, wordt de controle veeleer omarmd als een antwoord op het verlangen naar zorg en de wil om gekoesterd te worden”. Instead of the unmasking of the mundane as a result of oppressive power relations of other fictions, is control embraced as an answer to the desire for care and the will to be cherished.

visible in literary production and what should we now read for in contemporary literature? The periodization debate that I consider in the same breath asks itself a broader methodological question, namely, whether the literary historiographical approach, traditionally inspired by the idea of bounded and successive periods is a methodologically sound way to approach contemporary literature.

Secondly, there is a debate on the future research agenda and methodology for literary studies. Questions around what literary studies (and perhaps even more broadly, the humanities) should focus on have arisen with the realization that what the methods inspired by poststructuralism and deconstruction provide are variations on the same insight. I take my cue here from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who claims that this insight is “to unearth unconscious drives or compulsions underlying the apparent play of literary forms”⁴ and “to uncover violent or oppressive historical forces.”⁵ The third debate may be seen as an answer to the question posed by the second debate about the research agenda and methodology for the humanities. The study of literature should follow literature in the turn suggested by the quotation from *De consequenties*, namely, from issues of power to issues of affect, and study these. This should include paying attention to the affective aspects of the readerly position, as I suggest in chapter 3.

Paying attention to affect has been happening not only in literary studies, but also in the humanities and social sciences ever since the affective turn which I map in the third debate. Affect is a term that has not only a complicated genealogy but also various mutually exclusive conceptions. I explain what I mean when I speak of affect and what part of affect’s genealogical tree I draw on in part 3 of chapter 1. Each debate that I map serves as a steppingstone to a formulation of my contribution to, or intervention in that debate. The contribution is formulated fully in conversation with three contemporary Dutch novels that are analysed in chapters 2, 3 and 4 and that follow the theoretical overview of the three debates. My aims and the three debates to which this study wants to contribute, lead me to the following research question: How can the reading practice of scholars do justice to the shift towards affective concerns in contemporary Dutch literature without repeating the tendency to declare this to be a new period?

⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

⁵ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

0.1 The central methodological instruments

I offer an answer or a contribution to the research question and the questions raised by the three debates by means of an analysis in which I use two methodological instruments, foregrounding and oscillation. Foregrounding is an instrument of formalist-oriented textual analysis introduced by Roman Jakobson and employed successfully for the analysis of postmodern and contemporary novels that pose a challenge to the structuralist reading focused on unity and coherence. Jakobson uses foregrounding as an instrument that identifies “the focusing component of a work of art; it rules, determines and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure.”⁶ I follow Brian McHale, here, and Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse, who have also made use of the concept of the dominant. It therefore plays an important role in my analyses too, especially in chapter 2. However, because the real work of choosing and interpreting specific parts of the novel that I pay attention to has been done by means of the tool of foregrounding, I deviate from McHale and Demeyer and Vitse in referring to foregrounding and not the dominant as the central methodological instrument for my dissertation. Foregrounding is a tool that draws my attention to both the innovative elements and the continuities in the texts. The methodology also accommodates my experiment with foregrounding by means of a readerly position that I engage in in chapter 3.

Oscillation is a concept with a less rich and complex genealogy. It has been recently introduced by Robin Van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen as a main characteristic of metamodernism, a term aspiring to fill the terminological void left by the supposed departing of postmodernism. Van den Akker and Vermeulen claim that “metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.”⁷ The affectively charged abstracta characterizing the poles that metamodernism oscillates between indicate that the term has been conceptualized as a “structure of feeling that [...] has become the dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies.”⁸ As with the dominant, I use the term metamodernism in this dissertation much less frequently than the tool of oscillation. This is because the scope at which

⁶ Roman Jakobson, “The Dominant“, In *Readings in Russian Poetics*, edited by L. Matějka. K. Pomorska, 82. Michigan Slavic Publications, Ann Arbor, 1978.

⁷ Robin Van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, “Notes on Metamodernism”, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2010, Vol.2 (1), p.56-77, 60-61.

⁸ Robin Van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, “Periodising the 2000s or The Emergence of Metamodernism” In *Metamodernism, Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, 4. London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.

metamodernism functions as a characteristic of Western cultural production that emerged in the 2000s is too broad for my interest in analysis of literary novels.⁹ I will explain this at length in chapter 2, that focuses on the first debate mentioned above.

0.2 The connections between three theoretical debates and three analyses

The methodological instruments are used in each of the three analyses of contemporary novels, each time on a different level of the analysis. The three chapters of analysis thus build on each other in taking a step further towards the answer to the question of how to read contemporary novels with attention for both continuities and innovative elements. In chapter 2, the analysis of the first novel *Zonder noorden komt niemand thuis* (Without a North, No One Gets Home)¹⁰ by Nelleke Noordervliet, focuses on what questions – epistemological, ontological or affective – the textual and formal elements foreground on the level of the literary text. In this chapter, I am taking a cue from the way McHale and Jakobson have used foregrounding and dominant. The contribution of chapter 2 to the extant methodologies consists in combining foregrounding with oscillation. I am looking for places where the novel oscillates between foregrounded modernist epistemological, postmodernist ontological and affective questions. This emphasis on oscillation helps me to avoid the danger of constructing too sharp a difference between the innovative elements of this novel (the affective questions) and the continuities (the ontological and epistemological questions). Instead, the analysis of *Zonder noorden* focuses on the continuities with the modernist and postmodern heritage of the novel. This allows me to describe the contours of the shift towards affective concerns without needing to claim that this necessarily results from the whole novel being governed by a new period or concept.

Continuing the explanation of the way in which the three debates, three analytical chapters and three methodological contributions are connected by the use of the terms foregrounding and oscillation, I move on to chapter 3. After having mapped (in chapter 1) the contributions to the second debate mentioned above, on new methodology and research questions for literary

⁹ For the periodisation of the emergence of metamodernism, see Van den Akker and Vermeulen, *Metamodernism*, 4.

¹⁰ None one of the novels that I have chosen to analyse have been translated into English, according to the information available on the website of Nederlandse letterenfonds (Dutch Foundation for Literature). I am however going to use the English translations of the titles in my text. I am going to draw on the translations of titles available on this website or elsewhere in secondary literature throughout the dissertation. All translations of novelistic texts and secondary literature written in Dutch are mine and have been made for the purposes of communicating what the quotation says, not for artistic purposes, which is important especially with regard to the novels.

studies, I come to the conclusion that the (affective) position of the reader needs to be theorized. This insight is caused by the realization that formal and textual elements are not the only aspects contributing to dominant questions becoming foregrounded. The issue is who is doing the foregrounding: the text or the reader who - in academic literary criticism most conspicuously, but not only there¹¹ - arrives with already pre-formed, theoretically informed preferences? The decision to read a novel from, say, the affective dominant, is influenced by the predilections and preferences of the reader, many of which have an affective component. The concept of the dominant, in McHale's and Demeyer and Vitse's use proves flexible enough to allow for the theorization of the readerly position. In Chapter 3, foregrounding thus works less from within the text and is more based on the readerly attitude as the source of foregrounding. Oscillation appears in this chapter as a movement between two readerly positions that influence foregrounding: a paranoid and reparative one. The theorization of readerly attitude helps to resolve an interpretive problem in the novel analysed in chapter 3, *Klont* (Clump) by Maxim Februari, and illuminates what is at stake when choosing between the widely different interpretations foregrounded by the two readerly positions.

In chapter 4, foregrounding and oscillation appear in a changed guise. By first interpreting contemporary literature by means of a focus on foregrounding and oscillation on the textual level and by subsequently theorizing the level of readerly position, I have laid the foundations to the possibility of designing a theoretical instrument that pools the previously gained insights. This instrument serves the purpose of consolidating the process of interpretation of contemporary novels by means of dominant and oscillation into a reading practice. I draw on the theoretical basis for the transhistorical frame provided by Thomas Vaessens in *Geschiedenis van de moderne Nederlandse literatuur* (History of Modern Dutch Literature). Vaessens identifies three constitutive elements of a frame; textual signals (present in the literary text), poetics (attitudes to literature) and socio-cultural context (attitudes to modernity).

The levels at which I have been observing and interpreting literature – foregrounding by means of textual signals and the readerly position – map onto two aspects of the frame, textual signals and the poetics. Based on this overlap, I draw up a new transhistorical frame for the interpretation of contemporary novels. The socio-cultural aspect of the frame has been mapped in the recent publication by Demeyer and Vitse, *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel* (Affective

¹¹ Felski shows what advantages academic criticism can reap from considering the motivations for reading and paying attention to affective states that reading can cause in non-professional readers in *Uses of Literature* (2008).

crisis, literary restoration) where they present an ideologically critical take on the analysis of affect in the novels of the millennial authors. Their description of how affect is produced and influenced by social, political and economic circumstances of the second decade of the 21st century is thorough and exhaustive. I therefore mainly focus on the definition of the remaining two aspects (given by Vaessens) of the new relational frame: the textual level and the level related to poetics. In this chapter, oscillation does not get left behind either, because I observe how *Wij zijn licht* (We are light), the debut novel of Gerda Blees, accommodates the oscillation between the readings produced by the different frames.

0.3 Choice of analysed novels

My choice of analysed novels might at first sight seem if not random, then certainly eclectic. However, there is method to this madness. The contribution that I am making with the dissertation is rather inspired by methodological and theoretical questions that arise in a project that attempts to interpret novels published after a supposed paradigm and aesthetic shift. The methodological interventions that I am proposing through my use of oscillation, the theorization of the readerly position and finally, the introduction of a new relational frame, are all done for the sake of an informed and responsible reading of the novels which would be fed by recent theoretical insights from the three debates. The novels therefore on the one hand function as illustrations of the theoretical and methodological steps that I have made. On the other hand, I could not have made these steps without the novels. Contemporary novels call for the mapping of the ways in which they foreground several different questions at once and in which they cater to readers with different predilections and preferences. In short, they call for an explanation of the oscillation between continuities and innovative elements. I contend that the theoretical instruments that I designed for the interpretation of these three particular novels will be helpful in the process of interpretation of many other contemporary novels.¹² The foregrounding of the questions might occur by means of different themes, the poles between which the oscillation would take place might express different thematic accents, but affective questions would still be raised. Oscillation would still be a necessary tool that explains contradictory or opposing

¹² In the process of researching and writing this dissertation, I have, of course, also read other novels than the three forming my case studies. Among the novels that call for and at the same time can be fruitfully interpreted by means of the relational frame which encapsulates all of my theoretical insights, I can list the already mentioned *De consequenties* by Niña Weijers, *Gebrek is een groot woord* by Nina Polak, *Onschuld* by Jeroen Theunissen, *Hoor nu mijn stem* by Franca Treur, *Dennie is een star* by Maartje Wortel, *Wormen en engelen* by Maarten van der Graaff, *Fuzzie* by Hanna Bervoets and *De mensengezeer* by Koen Peeters.

meanings as the novels navigate the innovative and inherited elements from the three dominants. It would still be necessary to assume the reparative readerly position in order to grasp and appreciate some of the meanings and scenarios that the novels are offering.

Speaking more specifically, my choice for *Without a North*, *No One Gets Home*, *Clump*, and *We Are Light* has been influenced by the positioning and the name that the authors have made for themselves in Dutch literary studies (as is evidenced in both academic and non-academic criticism). Furthermore, my choice has been influenced by the diverse accents that these differences in position have allowed me to make in a characterization of these contemporary novels that might otherwise seem to have nothing in common. The choice of the novels has also been inspired by influential publications of Dutch literary criticism in the last decade. In 2009, Thomas Vaessens published *De revanche van de roman* (The Revenge of the Novel). In this book he has characterised the oeuvre of Maxim Februari as one of the representatives of a new trend of late postmodernism¹³ crowning his account of the development of 20th century Dutch literature. Vaessens however discusses Februari's 2007 novel *De literaire kring* (The Book Club), and I have been interested in whether Februari's next novel confirms the trend sketched by Vaessens or whether there are other aspects of the development beyond postmodernism that he has not considered.

In 2020, another influential publication appeared, namely the already mentioned *Affektieve crisis, literair herstel* by Demeyer and Vitse which created a grouping of authors under the denominator 'millennial generation'. As far as age and the foregrounding of affect in her novel is concerned, Gerda Blees would have fitted perfectly into this group, however, her novel was published around the same time as Demeyer and Vitse's book. It was in an implicit dialogue with their publication that I analyzed Blees' novelistic debut. By taking an author who would have fitted very well into their corpus, I wanted to illustrate the differences between their interpretation by means of an affective dominant inflected towards critique of ideology and my relational frame influenced by reparative reading. As for Nelleke Noordervliet, who was born in 1945, she does not fit into either of these groupings or generations constructed by the recent Dutch literary criticism. She is however a bestselling author of literary novels who has been active for more than 30 years in the Dutch republic of letters and her 2009 novel that I have analysed fits my broad category of contemporary novels. By looking at Noordervliet's work through the prism of the affective dominant that Demeyer and Vitse claim is characteristic for

¹³ Other representatives of this trend include Joost Zwagerman, Arnon Grunberg and Charlotte Mutsaers according to Vaessens (2009, 5).

the authors of the millennial generation, I contest the emphasis that they have placed on the idea of a new generation. The affective questions are also foregrounded by some parts of Noordervliet's novel, thus complicating the idea that the affective dominant is typical for the novels of the millennials.

0.4 Relevance of the research

In conclusion, this dissertation aspires to offer guidelines for the interpretation of contemporary novels and a methodological reflection on already introduced concepts, such as the affective dominant and metamodernist oscillation. This dissertation intervenes in the way that contemporary novels are being read by reflecting on the readerly position and the affective component that each such position presumes. I have also considered the two different levels – the textual one and that of a readerly position – on which foregrounding works and provided a systematic differentiation between them by considering them apart in chapters 3 and 4. Finally, I have designed a tool that pools in all the resources used for, and insights gained by, the analysis of the first two novels and methodological considerations from the three debates, namely, the relational frame. This frame allows for a reading of contemporary novels beyond the postmodernist frame while not succumbing to a periodizing tendency that propels the need to start reading through an entirely different frame. The relational frame also incorporates the insights from the reading debate, with its theorization of the readerly position, and can thus function as a counterbalance to the ideologically critical approach to the affective dominant introduced by Demeyer and Vitse, which might otherwise seem the only possible one. The relational frame is also a structured, condensed and clear way to replicate my methodology and reading for other novels. By designing and testing out the frame in chapter 5, I am hoping to offer a shorthand for the production of oscillating and reparative readings of contemporary novels with an emphasis on affective concerns.