La Sapienza

Revisione esterna tesi dott. HOWARD ROBERT COASE (37 ciclo)

COASE HOWARD ROBERT

Evaluation form for PhD dissertation

Evaluation form

Title of the thesis

"A viable breathing substance": the poetics of atmosphere in the work of Barbara Guest

Affiliation of the reviewer

The University of Bialystok, Poland

Report

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Review of Howard Robert Coase's
"A viable breathing substance": The Poetics of Atmosphere in the Work of Barbara Guest

The dissertation submitted by Mr. Howard Coase introduces the concept of a "poetics of atmosphere" as an interpretive tool to analyze the poetry of Barbara Guest, an American poet, essayist, and biographer whose writing career spanned over 40 years (from 1960 to 2005) and whose work, as the Author argues, still needs to be located more precisely on the map of the 20th-century American literature. The main body of the dissertation is 243 pages long and is followed by 24 pages of bibliography.

The quote in the first part of the dissertation's title, "a viable breathing substance," envisions (reconstructs) Guest's idea of the poem's ontological status (formulated in Forces of Imagination: Writing on Writing) not as a verbal representation of reality but the formal reproduction of "the vitality of the world in motion" (235) achieved by metonymical means. To a large extent, then, Mr. Coase reads Guest's poetry on her own philosophical-cum-critical terms, even if the conceptualization of the aesthetic work as atmosphere can be traced back to the theoretical propositions by Mikel Dufrenne or Veronica Forrest-Thomson. This is a fortunate and, in the end, fruitful analytical strategy.

The two organizing nodes of Mr. Coase's undertaking—the poem as "atmosphere" and "a viable breathing substance"—emerge from a few contextual, meticulously recalled environs of Guest's artistic development: 1. her overtly admitted indebtedness to modernist aesthetics, 2. the initial pigeonholing of her oeuvre as belonging to New York School of poetry and subsequent meaningful exclusions, 3. her fascination with visual arts (going far beyond early exercises in ekphrasis), and 4. the detectable proximity of her verse to modes of feminist writings. Perceiving the above research fields as insufficient, i.e., as not doing justice to the richness and innovativeness of Guest's work, the dissertation draws a connection between her poetry and theories of affect. Irrespective of the differences between the theorizations of affect by Brian Massumi, Marta Figlerowicz, Rei Terada, and Eve Sedgwick, they all, as is

argued, shed light on how, by experimenting with form, Guest explores the psychological and epistemological problems, such as subject formation, its precarious status, its operating "beyond the threshold of … awareness" (4), and the viability of conveying affect in language, to name but a few.

The dissertation is neatly divided into four chapters that trace the development of Guest's poetics chronologically from the 1960s to the early 2000s, focusing on the most representative or relevant poems from the given period, all subject to close reading. The Author resorts to an almost mathematically balanced structure of his research—each chapter being of similar length and divided into five sections. This is not an empty gesture but a manifestation of a more profound, critical rigor and discipline that characterize Mr. Coase's argumentation on every page of his dissertation. If dense, syntactically complex, and occasionally couched in excessively used abstract vocabulary, the discourse builds up a line of reasoning that always leads to convincing and logical conclusions. The text is idiomatic, and the Author uses English with great panache.

The lengthy, impressive, and wisely referenced bibliography is undoubtedly an asset of the dissertation. Still, I need to emphasize the fact that the argumentations and interpretations of the source texts benefit from often being based on unpublished material that Mr. Coase found in the archives, notably "Barbara Guest papers" deposited in Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven. On the other hand, in the case of a biographical-historical research strategy (if guarded by the comprehensive theoretical framework), delving into, e.g., the artist's private correspondence seems unavoidable. Thanks to the spectrum of secondary sources used with unquestionable expertise, the dissertation has significantly contributed to 'Guest studies.'

The text of the dissertation has been carefully proofread, edited, and formatted. I have noted one minor error. On page 3, in footnote 8, instead of "acknowledge" there should be "acknowledged." Besides, I have two suggestions. When the Author mentions "a distinctly Kristevian interpretation of subject formation" on page 47, he should not assume the remark is evident to the reader. A reference and possibly at least a footnote is needed. If the text of the ekphrastic poem "The Poetess" on page 53 were accompanied by a reproduction of Joan Miró's painting, understanding the point the Author of the dissertation is making here would be easier.

All in all, I think the dissertation "A viable breathing substance": The Poetics of Atmosphere in the Work of Barbara Guest requires only minor revision for admission of the candidate to the defense of the work in front of a national evaluation board.

Confidential report (it will not be shown to the candidate)

I have no other comments than those included in my evaluation report.

Evaluation file (optional)

Presentation and clarity

[ ] None [ ] Poor [ ] Average [ ] Good [X] Excellent

The reviewer should be able to read the text without difficulty. This implies that the dissertation is clear and 'user friendly', without duplications or repetitions.

Integration and coherence

[ ] None [ ] Poor [ ] Average [ ] Good [X] Excellent

The manuscript should present logical and rational links between different parts of the thesis.

Introduction to scientific background

[ ] None [ ] Poor [ ] Average [ ] Good [X] Excellent

The text should contain a satisfactory introduction to the scientific background which is relevant to the research, preparing the reader to the exposition of the problem.

Review of relevant literature

[ ] None [ ] Poor [ ] Average [ ] Good [X] Excellent

The candidate must have a detailed knowledge of original sources, have a thorough knowledge of the field, and understand the main theoretical and methodological issues.

Statement of research problem

[ ] None [ ] Poor [ ] Average [ ] Good [X] Excellent

A clear statement of the research problem should be made, together with specific hypotheses, predictions, or questions which the research is designed to address.

Originality

[ ] None [ ] Poor [ ] Average [ ] Good [X] Excellent

The research must be the candidate's own work. The degree of independence may vary according to the research topic.

Contribution to knowledge and scientific relevance

[ ] None [ ] Poor [ ] Average [ ] Good [X] Excellent

The dissertation should be substantial enough to be able to form the basis of two articles on refereed journal, a book or research monograph.

Mastery of the English language

[ ] None [ ] Poor [ ] Average [ ] Good [X] Excellent

The candidate must be proficient in written English and show mastery of appropriate scientific/technical language.

The thesis can be considered for a 'cum laude' award

[X] Yes [ ] No

A major goal of the review process is to evaluate if the present version of the thesis is:

1) adequate as is

2) require minor revision

3) require major revision

for admission of the candidate to the defense of the work in front of a national evaluation board.

[ ] Accept as is [X] Minor revision [ ] Major revision

Date: 12/11/2024
Reviewer: Partyka Jacek