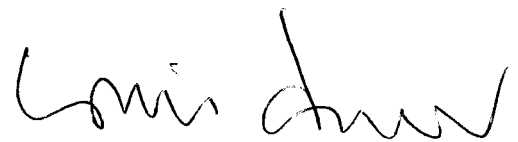Louis Armand, PhD
SUPERVISOR'S REPORT:

re "Literary Semiotics in the Early Works of Harry Mathews" by Veronika
Stankovianska
(BA dissertation, 2010)

Ms Stankovianska's thesis engages the work of the American experimentalist, Harry
Mathews, a figure often overlooked within the conventional framework of American
literary studies. Stankovianska approaches Mathews, the only American member of
the Oulipo movement, via the Oulipian preoccupation with mathematical (and
pseudo-mathematical) procedures. Ms Stankovianska is herself a mathematician, and
brings to the subject a degree of expertise, particularly in the area of cryptography;
an area with a long history of cross-over with literary semiotics.

The thesis begins with a brief overview of semiotics and semiology and moves on to
a consideration of the way in which the investigation of sign systems provides a
generative basis not only for the analysis but also "production" of literary forms. Via
the work of Raymond Queneau, a genealogy of generative "constraints" is mapped
from Shakespeare to the present. A longer discussion of Harry Mathews' "potential
literature," by way of his novel *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, then follows,
accompanied by appendices elaborating upon some of the mathematical/linguistic
principles addressed. All in all, the thesis adopts a novel approach to the question at
hand, which is the constituting of literary forms. While the argument is at times
marred by deficiencies of language, the overall conceptualisation is original and the
specific analyses of Mathews' texts incisive. Ms Stankovianska responds ably to the
highly unusual nature of Mathews' writing and the Oulipian project as a whole.

My principle question is: if mathematics provides a basis for a generative literary
semiotics, to what extent we can speak of the resulting texts as "mathematical." What
implications does the Oulipian project have for the way we might conceive of the
"meaning" of *mathematics* (and its Greek etymology); and IF such semiotics could be
said to reveal ways in which mathematics *is* or *is like* language, what implications
might this have for the ways in which we define literature, or potential literature?

My provisional recommendation for this thesis is a grade of excellent.

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