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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Book Reviews

*Write in Tune: Contemporary Music in Fiction*, Erich Hertz and Jeffrey Roessner (eds.), New York: Bloomsbury, 240 pages, £57.99, 2014, ISBN: 9781623565060 (hbk)

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In Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, a teenage girl maps out the pauses in various canonical rock songs and catalogues them according to duration, impact and intention as a series of Powerpoint slides. In Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document*, a teenage boy listens to Beach Boys outtakes on loop, sensing something mystical and epiphanic in these 'screwups' (Spiotta 21). Meanwhile, his mother's well-crafted alias, an attempt to obscure her past life as a political radical, unravels when her son spots her in a documentary about the 60s counter-cultural band Love. Both novels (Spiotta's is sadly absent from *Write in Tune*), build their imaginaries from popular music and its marginalia, its technologies, its fans and its affective structures. In particular, both Spiotta and Egan play on the idea of imminence in music, the pause before the beat kicks back in, as a space of potentiality that extends beyond just the track.

Clearly something is happening, and has been happening for a while with regard to the contemporary novel and music. Yet a novel with a soundtrack is nothing new. Think of the moment in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* where New-Woman-in-waiting Edna Pontellier sits down to listen to Madame Reisz play Frédéric Chopin on the piano, '[t]he very first chords [. . .] [sending] a keen tremor down Mrs Pontellier's spinal column' (Chopin 43). Or Virginia Woolf's short story 'A Simple Melody' where, as Emma Sutton argues, Woolf reveals herself to be both 'fascinated by, but wary of, the idea that music [is] a form of total expression, a model that writing could aspire to or imitate' (Sutton). More recently, Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* features a protagonist

whose fondness for musical top 5 lists becomes the organising principle of the novel, not to mention his feelings, whilst Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* takes as its title and leitmotif the Beatles' paean to romantic missed opportunities.

Several of the novelists considered in *Write in Tune: Contemporary Music in Fiction*, in particular Egan, share Virginia Woolf's suspicion that music might be able to express something that writing can reach for but not yet grasp. In her chapter on *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, for example, Danica van de Velde teases out the 'pauses, ellipses and temporal disjunctures' of Egan's novel, disjunctures 'that replicate the musical structures she thematizes' (123). There is much yet to be said about the ways in which musical form has influenced contemporary fiction but several of the pieces in *Write in Tune* make the difficult reach, a reach which the editors articulate in their introduction via Elvis Costello who is speculatively credited with the bon mot: 'Writing about music is like dancing about architecture' (1).

This is a timely and well-curated collection that serves as an apposite companion to the much-anticipated *How to Write About Music*, also by Bloomsbury—which continues to prove itself as a great home for music-writing, not least with the diminutive but punchy *33 & 1/3* books, each of which take a well-known, if not necessarily critically-acclaimed album as their object of concern. The editors of *Write in Tune*, Erich Hertz and Jeffrey Roessner, have both published extensively at the crossroads of music and literature and, for the most part, *Write in Tune* features an array of well-researched and eloquent interventions. However, Hertz's and Roessner's introduction suffers somewhat from not actually introducing any of the essays to come. Instead, it works as a short digest of musical fiction's 'greatest hits', with treatments of Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments* and Hornby's *High Fidelity* that are well-executed and yet take up too much room for the introduction's brief length. The introduction does set up necessary portions of the critical terrain, but it was a surprise that the editors did not take the opportunity to explicitly draw out the points of connection between the essays collected therein.

That said, these were many and productive. In particular, several of the essays dealt with the uneasy relationship between counter-cultural and mainstream musical forms, a relationship that most of the novels handled in the collection explicitly

address. Fiorenzo Iuliano's 'Playing (in) Seattle: Grunge as a Narrative Soundscape in Mark Lindquist's *Never Mind Nirvana*' provides a nuanced reading of Seattle and Washington State's sonic topographies, arguing that Lindquist's novel 'though seemingly just another by-product of the grunge scene,' in fact 'interrogates [ideas of] grunge authenticity and grunge subculture, as sites of both identification and rejection—crucial points for an in-depth understanding of the relationship between grunge and the city of Seattle' (70). Lindquist's essay tessellates at several points with Joseph P. Fisher's 'Queer Time, Queer Space, and Queer Edge in Lynn Breedlove's *Godspeed*' which gives an intelligent and humorous critique of straight edge culture, via its 'patron saint' band, Minor Threat, who hail from Washington D.C. Both essays take novels that could superficially be read as supplementary artefacts of their respective counter-cultures and, instead, turn these fictional works inside out, revealing the ways in which they undo the ideologies of these cultures. The queer, subcultural and politically radical aesthetics represented by grunge (at least, in its initial stages) and straight edge are gathered here alongside the shameless commodity fetishism of Brett Easton Ellis' Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, discussed by Carl F. Miller in "'Where the Beat Sounds the Same:" *American Psycho* and the Cultural Capital of Pop Music.' Reading the three essays alongside each other provides a wide, if cracked, window onto American pop and sub-culture from the early 80s to the mid-90s. The inclusion of two essays on Brett Easton Ellis might strike one as an act of cultural hegemony that would have pleased Bateman himself, though.

À propos of Ellis, the collection is somewhat weighted towards white male authors and white male musicians making music for white male listeners. Whilst the editors write astutely, if briefly, about music as a technology of identity, the collection as a whole would have benefited from an explicit addressing of its own politics in the introduction—particularly necessary now, one would have thought, since the popoptimism vs. rockism debates.<sup>1</sup> Overall, though, *Write in Tune* is a necessary and rich

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful, if heated summary of this debate, see Saul Austerlitz, 'The Pernicious Rise of Poptimism,' *The New York Times Magazine* [online] 4 April 2014 [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/magazine/the-pernicious-rise-of-poptimism.html?\\_r=3](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/magazine/the-pernicious-rise-of-poptimism.html?_r=3) [accessed 22 March 2015].

collection which grapples as much as it says it will 'with the promises music whispers into the ears of listeners' (11).

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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*Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*, Robert K. Bolger and Scott Korb (eds.), New York and London: Bloomsbury, 296 pages, £80, 2014, ISBN: 9781441128355 (hbk)

*David Foster Wallace and 'The Long Thing'*, Marshall Boswell (ed.), New York and London: Bloomsbury, 256 pages, £14.99, 2014, ISBN: 9781628928914 (pbk)

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Since his death in 2008, attending to David Foster Wallace's place in American literary culture has been complicated by a public impression of him – centred on his Kenyon College commencement address (later published as *This is Water*) – as a prophet of twenty-first century alienation whose secular sermons reveal deep wisdom. This can sometimes divert attention from his specifically literary importance, and obscure those more sober, disinterested appraisals of his work. If his work has perhaps been studied and canonized at a faster rate than it might have been were Wallace still alive, this has also meant an increase in the number of these kinds of appraisals, and scholars are moving beyond the themes of alienation, addiction, and ideas of success that preoccupied early responses to Wallace's work. Both of these collections can be considered part of this movement, although *Gesturing Toward Reality* at times seems to use that public impression as a starting point for academic enquiry, which comes with certain drawbacks.

The essays in Bolger and Korb's collection vary widely in scope. Those by Andrew Bennett, Thomas Tracey, Allard den Dulk and Jon Baskin (familiar to readers of Wallace for a fine essay in his magazine *The Point* on the differences between Wallace's work and Franzen's) situate Wallace's writing in relation to particular philosophers, adding Stanley Cavell, Schopenhauer, the American Pragmatists, and Sartre to a burgeoning list. It is here that Bolger and Korb's collection overlaps with Boswell's, which includes essays that connect Wallace with philosophers and critical

theorists. In addition to the oft-mentioned Wittgenstein, Boswell includes essays on Wallace, Derrida and Paul de Man (by Bradley J. Fest), Wallace and Kierkegaard (den Dulk again), and Wallace and film (by Philip Sayers), which makes use of writing by Barthes, Lacan, and Althusser. Both books, then, understand Wallace as a writer engaged with and attuned to a broad range of philosophical concerns, something that undoubtedly contributes to Adam Kelly's nomination of Wallace as a 'novelist [. . .] of ideas' in Boswell's collection (3).

These are not, however, the only kinds of essays in *Gesturing Toward Reality*. Some discuss less the relationship *between* Wallace's fiction and philosophy but rather the philosophical ideas found *in* it, while others ill-advisedly incorporate parodies of Wallace's self-conscious erudite tone, which is rather irritating and distracts from the arguments the essays are trying to make. There is perhaps too much interest shown in biographical details, and reading Wallace's suicide in terms of his philosophical interests risks, among other things, foregoing a rigorous, critical examination and elaboration of those interests. Touching on Wallace's suicide (however unavoidable it may be) means touching on his life, which often involves reading biography into his work in ways which are not necessarily helpful or enlightening. Bolger and Korb are wise to include Maris Bustillos' essay, which tackles precisely this point, suggesting that answers, if they exist at all, are to be found in the work rather than the life. As Toon Staes notes in Boswell's collection, Wallace himself 'was quite sensitive to the dangers of reading a writer's personal life into his work' (23).

If these problems come in part from paying more attention to *This is Water* than I think the speech warrants, considering it a philosophical document nonetheless helps *Gesturing Toward Reality* examine some of the problems of definition that surround Wallace and philosophy. If Wallace famously began pursuing an academic career in philosophy, and often mentioned philosophers in interviews, he also admitted an interest in what Bennett calls 'the para-philosophical discourse of pop-psychology' (74). Some of the essays in Bolger and Korb's collection conceive of philosophy more in this vein and read Wallace, and *This is Water* especially, for evidence of a 'philosophy of life.' Bustillos is careful to distinguish this from philosophy as



an academic subject. 'In its everyday use,' she writes, 'the word [philosophy] means not searching for answers but having already found them, and the common phrase, "my philosophy," indicates a set of personal precepts, like a guide to behavior . . . this homely understanding is antithetical to the intellectual discipline of philosophy' (126). Bustillos' essay provides a welcome and rigorous historicization of the genre of self-help and its relationship to theology and philosophy before situating Wallace and his work in relation to it. An important issue this collection raises, then, is how one defines philosophy in relation to Wallace; in his work it is at once an academic discipline, subject matter, an influence on literary form, and a guide to life. While *Gesturing Toward Reality* doesn't always get the balance between these right, emphasizing the latter at the expense of some of the former, it nonetheless acknowledges the presence of these multiple definitions and suggests that we might benefit from thinking about them – at least in relation to Wallace's work – interconnectedly.

In his contribution to Marshall Boswell's collection, Stephen J. Burn writes that 'we are clearly still in the prototype phase of *Pale King* criticism' (149). While we might not be in the prototype phase of *Wallace* criticism, I don't think it is the case that his place in the literary canon is assured just yet. Rather, if he has been provisionally accepted into that canon, his work is now being submitted to sustained attention in order to ascertain his exact prominence in it. If, then, we've reached the point of a certain acceptance of his literary concerns (very broadly defined), we are still at the early stages of a more specific and testing interrogation of his work. Boswell's collection is part of that. Its first decision is to bracket off Wallace's non-fiction and short stories from its purview, focusing entirely on the novels. Secondly it is largely made up of essays that either go beyond or make more complex Wallace's familiar literary concerns – addiction, boredom, irony, self-consciousness, and so forth. Here, then, in addition to den Dulk's examination of Wallace and Kierkegaard and Burn's careful and necessarily provisional outlining of the models of consciousness in Wallace's fiction, we have essays on Wallace as a novelist of ideas (by Adam Kelly), Wallace and film (Sayers), the relationship between the encyclopedic novel and foot- and endnotes (David Letzler), and the interface of human and machine

(Conley Wouters). The first section includes two essays on narrative form by Toon Staes and Andrew Warren, and the collection ends with essays from Ralph Clare and Boswell himself on Wallace's attempts in *The Pale King* to historicize and, unlike his character Glendenning, describe in 'political terms' (Wallace 136) the cultural and political landscape of America in the early twenty-first century.

These essays originally appeared across two issues of the journal *Studies in the Novel* in 2012 (edited by Boswell), and are on the whole more rigorous than those in *Gesturing Toward Reality*. Critical rigor is particularly important when dealing with Wallace because of the simplifying tendencies of that public image. *This is Water* is partly to blame here, because it can make Wallace seem like a 'benignant and morally clairvoyant artist/saint,' as Jonathan Franzen put it (Franzen). It is in this respect that Letzler's essay in Boswell's collection has something useful to say not just about Wallace's work but about how we might go about reading and studying it. Letzler describes the 'near-objective pointlessness' (132) of some of Wallace's endnotes, which he describes as 'junk text, simultaneously too excessive and too vacuous to be worth anyone's attention' (131). This is important not just because one needs to acknowledge the limits of a writer's talent as much as recognize their genius, but because this very pointlessness is, Letzler's essay argues, part of the text's effect. But if we need to be able to say that parts of *Infinite Jest* are pointless, and that that pointlessness is in the service of an argument about the need to filter useful information from what Letzler calls 'cruft' (127), we also need to be able to countenance the possibility that sometimes there is a difference between this 'useful' cruft and actual cruft. In other words, we need to apply the lessons of the novel to our study of Wallace's work. We need to say when that work *doesn't* work, and point out the ways in which Wallace's project – explicitly stated in so many interviews and essays – sometimes failed or even, arguably, was misconceived from the beginning. Hence this remark from Letzler about the Incandenza filmography provided in *Infinite Jest*: 'it is very odd that *Fun with Teeth* seems to *expand* rather than reduce the stupidity of the concept films it parodies. The result seems to me precisely the toothless postmodern irony against which Wallace railed' (138). While the essays in

*David Foster Wallace and 'The Long Thing'* tackle different aspects of Wallace's work, they all demonstrate how valuable insights can be gained from maintaining this commitment. These essays will surely help us more finely describe Wallace's importance to American literature.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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