



**University  
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

**TIM PERSONN**

State Examination (Universität of Hamburg, 2010)

**“Fictions of Proximity: The Wallace Nexus in Contemporary Literature”**

Department of English

Wednesday, July 25, 2018

9:00 A.M.

Clearihue Building

Room B017

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Christopher Douglas, Department of English, University of Victoria (Co-Supervisor)

Dr. Stephen Ross, Department of English, UVic (Co-Supervisor)

Dr. James Rowe, School of Environmental Studies, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Jeff Severs, Department of English, University of British Columbia

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Ben Nadler, Department of Mechanical Engineering, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

## **Abstract**

This dissertation studies a group of contemporary Anglo-American novelists who contribute to the development of a new humanism after the postmodern critique of Euro-American culture. As such, these writers respond to positions in twentieth-century philosophy that converge in a call for silence which has an ontological as well as ethical valence: as a way of rigorously thinking the 'outside' to language, it avoids charges of metaphysical inauthenticity; as an ethical stance in the wake of the Shoah, it eschews a complicity with the reifications of modern culture. How to reconcile this postmetaphysical promise with the politico-aesthetic inadequacy of speechlessness is the central question for this nexus of novelists—David Markson, Bret Easton Ellis, David Foster Wallace, and Zadie Smith—at the center of which the study locates Wallace as a key figure of contemporary literature. By reconstructing the conversation between these authors, this dissertation argues that the nexus writers turn to indirect means of representation that do justice to the demand for silence in matters of metaphysics, but also gesture past it in the development of a neo-romantic aesthetics that invites the humanist category of the self back onto the scene after its dismissal by late postmodernism. The key to such indirection lies in an aporetic method that inspires explorations of metaphysical assumptions by seducing readers to an ambiguous site of aesthetic wonder; in conversation with a range of contemporary philosophers, the dissertation defines this affective site as a place of proximity, rather than absorption or detachment, which balances out the need for metaphysical distance with the productive desire for a fullness of experience. Such proximate aesthetic experiences continue the work of 'doing metaphysics' in post-metaphysical times by engaging our habitual responsiveness to the categories involved. Hence the novels discussed here stage limit cases of reason such as the unknowable world, the unreachable other, the absence of the self, and the unstable hierarchy between irony and sincerity: Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* imagines skepticism as literal abandonment and reminds us of our metaphysical indebtedness to a desired object/world; Ellis's *American Psycho* shows the breakdown of communication due to a similarly skeptical vision of human interaction and presents a violence that tries to force a response from the desired subject/person; Wallace's *Infinite Jest* creates a large canvas on which episodes of metaphysical and literal 'stuckness' afford possibilities for becoming human; Smith's *The Autograph Man*, finally, pays attention to gestural language at the breaking point of materialism and theology, nature and culture, tragedy and comedy.