

Peter Boxall, **The Value of the Novel**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. ISBN 978-1-107-63724-5. 144 pages.

In spite of its brevity, this book is surprisingly wide-ranging and capacious. Peter Boxall looks back to the early history of prose narrative and forward to the task of the novel in the future and manages to conjure an early twenty-first century state-of-the-novel appraisal that is both inventive and unorthodox. He deals with, Swift, Woolf, Tolstoy and Melville, Balzac, Flaubert, Proust and Dostoyevsky, and many more besides. He juxtaposes Dickens with Beckett, and Defoe with Kafka, and includes discussions of contemporary writers like Zadie Smith, J. M. Coetzee and Don DeLillo. It is a eulogy to the realist novel, and, at the same time, an investment in its variegated past and future. Boxall believes that the novel is the thing in which we can read the world and see our selves. "If the novel has a task now, then it is perhaps more than anything else this – the requirement that we tune ourselves to a new future, that we craft a new shape in which we might encounter the time to come." There is a strong sense of historical sweep, but key concepts like 'voice,' 'realism,' 'body,' 'matter,' 'space,' 'time,' and 'justice' hold the material in place and provide an organizational structure. As the names above suggest, there is a strong European and North-American bias, but it would be churlish to complain about the lack of Latin-American or South-American writers in Boxall's study. There is enough here to justify this stock-taking exercise.

Taking as his cue Gertrude's blunt admonition to Polonius to use "more matter with less art" in his 'narrative,' Boxall suggests that it is in the interplay between "matter" and "art" that you can divine the essential nature of the novel. How is it that something like fiction, so obviously an invention, a product of the imagination, a lie, can at the same time be so full of matter and body, can manage to make the immaterial so material and the unreal real? In a brief but excellent example from Tom McCarthy's recent novel *Remainder*, in which the narrator openly abdicates any claim to authenticity ("The truth is, I've been making all this up"), Boxall discovers that the effect on the reader is nevertheless palpable and real. The lie becomes the truth.

Some of the self-consciously modernist techniques employed by twentieth century novelists, and the language in which they were couched, the author suggests, were prefigured in much earlier fiction in a less recognizable manner. For some readers the voice heard in Robinson Crusoe's diary may come across as univocal, authoritative and realist, but Boxall shows that this voice, the language it employs and the world it attempts to describe, are as disintegrated and destabilized as anything by Beckett or Kafka. The novel was always modern, of its own time, in the sense of the Latin word *modo*, meaning 'just now.' In the beginning, Boxall suggests, following Beckett (a guiding light in the book), fiction IS, or begins, when "we propose bodies taking up spaces, in the full knowledge that these bodies and these spaces do not exist." It is never a question of fact OR fiction, but of fiction AND fact.

Boxall repeatedly refers to “the task” of the novel. This may seem unnecessarily prescriptive in the post-postmodern age, but it comes as no surprise that a critic who, in a previous work (*Twenty-First Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*) approvingly quoted DeLillo’s connection between terrorism and fiction, should advocate that fiction deal with the real and physical world. Perpetrators of terrorism and fiction both share “a desire to sculpture the forms in which we experience our collective reality.” 9/11 (and Paris13/11), the information revolution, and the impending (?) eco-catastrophe are valid if not urgent subjects for fiction today. But there is, of course, no obligation on novelists to follow any dictates. In practice, novelists tend to accept a self-imposed brief that originates externally but resonates internally. The winner of the 2014 Nobel Prize for Literature, Patrick Modiano, believes that “the novelist has an ethical duty to record the traces of the people who have vanished, the people who were made to disappear.” In his case, that has meant devoting nearly all his work to the nightmare of occupied Paris and the shadow of the Holocaust. The young Irish novelist Paul Murray felt the need to take on the Celtic Tiger and the banking crisis in Ireland in his recent *The Mark and the Void*.

There are things to argue with in this book, and I get the distinct impression that this is precisely what Boxall wants. His own voice is strong, but it is frequently hedged by a gracious ‘I think’ that makes his style of writing attractively democratic and classless. He does not lecture or attempt to write a closed text, but one that invites a dialogic imagination and a reader who can disagree. I am a little out of sympathy with Boxall’s repeated insistence that when it comes to “the condition of living inside a body” (by which I assume that, broadly, he means ‘the human condition’) the novel is superior to “anything that could be presented on stage, on canvas or on celluloid.” This comparison between prose and other artistic expressions emanates from a discussion in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* on the relative merits of paint and language. The origin of the disagreement lies in the statue of ‘Sleeping Ariadne,’ one of the most renowned sculptures of Antiquity. This statue is the only visual illustration provided in Boxall’s book, and we are clearly meant to look at the b/w photo of the sculpture and realize how dismally the artist has failed to move the viewer. But Boxall does not explain why the idea of visual art should be limited to cold Hellenistic stone when the novel is allowed to roam freely through the centuries. Responding to language tends to be a mindful, intellectual process, filtered through the rational mind before acquiring emotional weight, whereas Pablo Picasso’s and Francis Bacon’s bodies, for instance, where paint takes on the properties of language and deliberately and directly deforms conventional realism, may incite a reaction that bypasses reason and creates a visual and visceral impression that can be just as “intimate” and “molecular” (to use Boxall’s terms) as any language. There is life beyond words. Walter Pater famously claimed that “All art constantly aspires to the condition of music,” and Edgar Degas suggested that “Art is a lie to which one gives the accent of truth.” What Boxall claims for the novel applies also to other artistic modes of expression. His preference for narrative prose may also appear contradictory in the light of Saussure’s theories, but Boxall elegantly manoeuvres around this particular Scylla

by stressing that realism was never really realism in any case, but an “endlessly shifting emptiness between words and what they mean.” We know that now, post-Saussure and post-structuralism. But perhaps we should nevertheless remind Boxall that an emoji (Face with Tears of Joy¹) was recently made ‘Word [sic] of the Year’ by the Oxford Dictionaries and that 92 percent of the online population use pictographs in their own cyberspace. The visual is used to convey messages or to strengthen the verbal. This trend may represent a threat to the status and value of literary fiction or a new challenge to the kind of writing that the novel embodies. Boxall, I suspect, would relish the latter. And there is already, of course, the relatively new phenomenon of the graphic novel, where the visual and the verbal are collaborators.

There is an attractive mix of critical theory and traditional interpretation in Boxall’s book. He states early on that the theory wars in the nineteen-eighties and nineties “were well and truly won by the theorists,” but he positions himself somewhere in between tradition and modernity in order to mobilise his own resources and promote the value of the novel today and in the future. Constantly switched-on and inventive, frequently inspiring and compelling, *The Value of the Novel* would make an excellent counterweight to the more canonical works on the history of the novel for literature students at masters and doctoral level in the Nordic countries.

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¹ The Oxford Dictionaries ‘Word of the Year 2015’: 