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Review of The Value of the Novel

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Review of *The Value of the Novel*

Katherine Kruger

Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 156 pp., £12.99, ISBN: 9781107057494.

Cautious of partaking in a discourse of value imbued with a problematic mix of neo-liberal economics and social conservatism, Peter Boxall's *The Value of the Novel* succeeds in providing an inspiring assessment of the contemporary state of the novel. This success is due in no small part to the book's commitment to revealing and rethinking the paradigms that shape our understanding of the relationship between literature and the material world. As a result of what Boxall identifies as 'the instrumentalisation of the academy itself' and the related 'legitimation crisis' in the humanities, the contemporary marketplace demands a return to a form of criticism that will defend cultural value.¹ Mindful of the dangers of Terry Eagleton's contentious approach to literary value in *How to Read Literature*, Boxall recognises the necessity of undertaking this task in a way that does not deny the radical developments of 'theory' in the late twentieth century.² Whilst foregrounding his sustained scepticism of the ideology of value, Boxall builds on other important works on literary value in the twenty-first century, such as Ronan McDonald's *The Death of the Critic*.³ Responding to these works, Boxall engages with a resurgence of interest in the autonomy of literature and theory in order to reclaim the cultural value of the novel by asserting its alterity. Boxall does not tie the value of the novel to its long-outmoded function as a Leavisite vehicle for preserving an

¹ Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 5. All further references to this text will be supplied in parentheses.

² Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

³ Ronan McDonald, *The Death of the Critic* (London: Continuum, 2007).

ideologically prescribed version of cultural value. Instead, he appreciates the novel's unique capacity to configure alternate ways of being in the world. Boxall's ambitious but concise argument contends that 'the novel has always worked at the edge of the culture, in that space between a completely revealed world and a world that is yet to come' (p. 143). The novel cannot unproblematically reflect the world. Rather, its value lies in its capacity to both resist and to shape that world (p. 12).

Boxall binds the role of the literary critic to the history of the production of cultural value. *The Value of the Novel* responds to a landscape of literary criticism in which the death knell of the novel has been sounded repeatedly, and in which a plethora of new reading practices are emerging as the prominence of theory wanes. Identifying some of these shifts in critical approaches, Boxall cites critics such as Dorothy J. Hale and Martha Nussbaum, whose recent work is concerned with the 'need to develop a new set of critical languages' for articulating the ethical value of literature (p. 4). He addresses the disappearing boundary between critical writing and creative production and aligns his book in part, though not uncompromisingly, with the emergence of new materialisms, evinced in his references to Steven Connor's 'thingly turn' and Alain Badiou's 'rebirth of history' (p. 5, p. 76).⁴ Boxall presents his lucid and considered account of the value of the novel against this backdrop of critical uncertainty. His account seeks to show that the novel is uniquely capable of representing the precariousness of contemporary relations between discursive forms and material change.

The contemporary demands of our material conditions – the correspondence between the increasing virtualisation of capital and the burgeoning ecological crisis – underpin Boxall's revaluation of the novel. Faced with these pressing material concerns, we

⁴ Dorothy J. Hale, 'Aesthetics and the New Ethics: Theorizing the Novel in the Twenty-First Century', *PMLA*, 124.3 (2009), 896-905; Martha Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010); Steven Connor, 'Thinking Things', *Textual Practice*, 24 (2010), 1-20 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360903471706>> [accessed 10 October 2016]; Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2012).

can no longer live through the illusion that being takes place in language. Consequently, our ways of being in the world are in crisis (p. 91). In this context, reclaiming the value of the novel entails a complete reassessment of the realist novel. Boxall brings Daniel Defoe into conversation with Franz Kafka to suggest that the realist novel was never certain of its mimetic capacity (p. 49). The book as a whole provides evidence from a wide range of novels to argue that the novel as a genre has always been preoccupied with the failure of words to adequately capture material experience. Boxall demonstrates that the novel acts as a vehicle for the intimate investigation of those experiences which resist expression and is thus uniquely suited to exploring our anxieties about the representational failures of language. For Boxall, it is in those unspeakable or invisible experiences that we might find models for shaping the future. Interested in the precarious, liminal 'space between' the present world and the potential future, Boxall argues that the novel shapes reality not through seamless mimesis but by illustrating this discord between language and material experience.

Engaging with a 'materialist turn' in literary criticism, Boxall identifies a range of what he terms 'novel bodies': bodies, depicted in novels, which come into being — which *matter* — by virtue of their non-existence, their indistinctness. In so doing, these bodies 'test the capacity of discourse to realise itself' (p. 75). Having analysed a diverse selection of novel bodies in texts as chronologically separate as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2007), Boxall concludes that 'whilst always insisting upon [their] immateriality', these novel bodies can become 'so present [...] as to overwhelm discursive structures, to crowd them out with the stuff of being' (p. 75, p. 79). Responding to the necessity to 're-see the materiality of novel bodies, to retrace a history of the embodied fictional imagination', *The Value of the Novel* is divided into two parts: 'Art' and 'Matter' (p. 77). This structure refashions the traditional divide between form and content into a consideration of the intimate relationship between ideas and the 'materiality' of novel bodies. Boxall relates this shift towards the material dimensions of culture to the 'waning of postmodernism' and suggests that the

novel can have an invaluable role in both providing models for occupying our contemporary context, and as an instrument to forge visions of the future (p. 76).

In a period of ethical and material turmoil, the defence of the novel is invested with a renewed sense of urgency. The ambitious scope and concise form of *The Value of the Novel* match the urgency of its argument: reaching from Defoe to DeLillo, the book spans the rich history of the novel in order to reclaim the 'world-making' capacity of the genre (p. 8). *The Value of the Novel* is a timely intervention in the field of literary criticism and the stakes of its analyses are high: responding to the cynicism of Will Self's article 'The Novel is Dead (this time it's for real)', Boxall reinvigorates existing arguments to assert the continued relevance of the genre.⁵ Thanks to its clear and precise prose style, the book makes complex ideas accessible to undergraduates and is suitable for scholars at all stages. Boxall succeeds in constructing a radical defence of the cultural value of the novel while also providing a pertinent ethical and political critique of the forces determining 'value' and 'culture' in the contemporary period. Boxall's critical humility and his outward-looking approach to questions of literary or cultural value avoid the melancholic trappings of disciplinary navel-gazing to provide a hopeful vision for the future of the novel.

⁵ Will Self, 'The Novel is Dead (this time it's for real)', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction>> [accessed 28 November 2016].