

# Reviews

## Novel Values

PETER BOXALL, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), pp. 202, paper, \$17.99.

Peter Boxall's slim and elegant volume, *The Value of the Novel*, offers a deft, timely, and persuasive argument for reexamining some of our most intuitive assumptions about the novel, including how it functions, how it has evolved, and what we can expect from it moving forward. Arriving at just over 140 pages of clear and brilliant analysis, the book will no doubt leave many readers wishing Boxall had written even more. For the laconically inclined, however, I offer the following one-word summary of Boxall's argument for the value of the novel: ~~voice~~. Boxall never bothers to cross out *voice* typographically like this—the whole *sous rature* thing being hard to pull off in our ostensibly “post-theory” moment—but it is an apt image, I think, for conveying what Boxall believes is the structural essence of the novel. According to Boxall, the novel has from the beginning always functioned according to a kind of dialectical movement: on the one hand, generating an intimate sense of voice (presence, the self, a clear mirror of word and world) while, on the other, simultaneously undermining the very conditions for that voice (exposing discursive absences, dissolving the boundaries of the self, and deepening the inevitable cracks in our representational mirror). This flickering dance of “voice” and “—,” he argues, is what novels *do*—all of them.

As Boxall knows, the odd thing about presenting these two discursive moves as being two sides of the same novelistic coin is that we are already quite familiar with them as *successive* elements in an ongoing story about the historical development of the novel. In the terms of Boxall's useful generalizations, the chronological evolution from a quasi-imperial invocation of novelistic voice (Defoe, Dickens, Balzac) to its innovative undoing (Joyce, Kafka, Beckett) is central to our understanding of the historical arc of the novel. Not only that, it is central to our understanding of theory, or at least why we entered into the whole enterprise of theory in the first place. As Boxall puts it, the whole “task of theory” was to “overthrow the myth of the voice” as the source of authentic self-presence (20). If, in other words, the metaphysical humanistic tradition had not all along assumed that some kind of holistic voice lay hidden in the words that appear on a page (or vibrate in the air), Derrida and colleagues would have had nothing to argue against. We needed theory, finally, to convince us that our word-world mirrors were “always already” broken. This is why, Boxall explains, the historical arc of the novel seems to parallel, or even anticipate, the deconstructive erasures of high theory: to map the narratological trajectory from Dickens to Beckett is to witness a culture finally coming to its theoretical senses, realizing “that the voice has always been a fantasy, in which we need no longer believe” (27).

Boxall is thus keenly aware of the historical task he has undertaken. In recent decades, he argues, we have witnessed a “curious depletion in the energy that drove the theory wars themselves, and with it a creeping nostalgia for the old specters of cultural value,” even a “growing desire for a new means of articulating a set of values for our own generation” (1–2). But before jumping onto the “value” bandwagon, Boxall sets the stage carefully. There are paths to avoid. The “great rationalization” of the humanities, for example, which would force

academic departments to demonstrate their “value” in terms of economic viability, must be carefully negotiated if not avoided altogether (7). We also cannot simply pretend that the storms of high theory were something we just had to sail through before returning, calmly and comfortably, to the smooth waters of representational lucidity. Something *did* happen in the last century to our confidence in the word-world mirror, and it is useless (and ridiculous) to pretend it did not. The task, in short, is to “rethink the value of the novel” in a way that will allow for new “critical languages” to emerge without either legitimating neoliberal attempts to rationalize the humanities or returning to the retrograde politics of liberal humanistic naïveté (8).

The cleverness of Boxall’s strategy is to take the “always already” of theory and render it historical. Whereas, again according to Boxall’s understanding of the literary-critical tradition, we have for decades assumed that a vast narratological chasm separates Dickens’s narrators from Beckett’s—the former a treasure trove of ostensibly unified personas, the latter a hall of broken mirrors—Boxall brings them into the same room together, hoping to locate a common essence within them. Dickens’s narrator in *David Copperfield*, as Boxall reads it, turns out to have been deeply haunted by representational absences (where are all the *fathers*? [30]), while Beckett’s narrator in *Molloy* cannot quite shake the recurring specters of presence (the entire effort to dispel voice ends up producing a “fresh encounter with it” [36]). “Beneath the historical distinctions,” Boxall insists, “one can find something like a novel imagination, a fictional logic that binds these writers, despite their differences” (129–30). A similar move emerges in Boxall’s assessment of the supposed narratological distance separating Defoe (we have overlooked that Crusoe’s island journal is rife with narratological absence) and Kafka (we forget how much the “materiality of existence” functions as a kind of “obsession” throughout his work). All of these novels, centuries apart, simultaneously invoke voice and cross it out; the only historical question, then, ends up being how self-consciously they cross it out. In early novels by Defoe and Dickens, the crossing out is “hidden deep within the folds of the text so that we have to gently part them to see it,” while in later novels by Kafka and Beckett, it is “precisely this [crossing out] that is revealed, thrust into view” (35). Beckett, in other words, is not “overturning” the novelistic processes used by Dickens but offering a kind of “distillation,” or an even more “naked depiction of a kind of ur-predicament that one also finds in Dickens” (*ibid.*). Every novel bears its cross, even if some crosses are bigger than others. But Boxall’s overarching point is that we must be attentive to the mechanisms of both “voice” and “—” (both presence and absence) as they function in all of them. Put several other ways, the novel works:

- to “reject or suspend the forms of community that it helps to create” (11);
- to “both shape the world and resist its demands” (12);
- to “conjure a kind of presence . . . that carries a forsaking within it” (33);
- to create both “limpid, luminous expression and a kind of darkness” (61);
- to say that “there is a body, while saying also that there is none” (74);
- to “both open, and . . . close” (103);
- to vibrate “between historical extension and instantaneous being” (108);
- to operate “between the material and the immaterial” (121).

As the above examples indicate, Boxall’s primary method of analysis is close reading, moving deeply inside a few chosen novels, which he is very good at, although it is worth

noting there are a few dilemmas this approach introduces for his argument. The first has to do with the question of medium specificity, which comes on a bit strong at times: the novel's invocation-and-crossing-out-of-voice brings us "closer than any other medium or art form to the process by which we make ourselves out of the stories we tell ourselves" (38). Novels do this "more intimately, more molecularly than anything that could be presented on stage, on canvas, or on celluloid" (78). It is "the particular gift of the novel," something it does "more consummately than any other art form . . . in a way that no other mode of thinking can" (91, 98–99). However, because Boxall never shows us exactly how this yin-and-yang technique of ~~voice~~ would be necessarily *less* effective in poetry, films, plays, jokes, emails (and so on), he has to be a bit tentative in how he hands the novel its trophy. Specifically, Boxall constantly peppers his generalizations with qualifying phrases. Here, for instance, are a few of Boxall's many *perhaps*:

- "It is *perhaps* because the novel touches, in the most intimate way, on this ineradicable boundary between sound and silence, being and non-being" (38).
- "[T]he value of prose fiction, and of prose style, is *perhaps* found in the capacity not to depict bodies but to erase them, to reveal their nonbeing" (73).
- "[T]he novel is *perhaps* the exemplary form in which we might test this capacity for discourse to realize itself, whilst always insisting upon its immateriality. . . . The shape shifting, gender indeterminate waiter in McCarthy's *Remainder* is *perhaps* not a mark of that novel's abandonment of novelistic protocol . . . it is *perhaps* instead a late example of a novelistic capacity to simultaneously 'say' and 'unsay' the body" (75).
- "It is *perhaps* the central, driving desire of the novel to picture worlds which operate according to established rules, in order to gain some understanding of the principles that govern such rules" (116).

One could have made similar lists of phrases such as "it may be" and "possibly," but the point is not to harp on Boxall's style, since, as I indicated above, the overarching argument is quite persuasive. Still, it is worth noting that Boxall's tentative language has a somewhat destabilizing effect. The occasional thorny question will sometimes wander in while one is reading: Is it problematic, we wonder, that a mere handful of canonical, exclusively English-language novels stand in as "the" novel? Or what does it mean that in this particular historical and technological moment we have arrived at a theory of the novel's "genetic" code that ostensibly underlies its every iteration, regardless of its cultural and historical specificity? Is the special technology of oscillating ~~voice~~ that Boxall claims has (always already) been the unique property of the novel equally present in all types of novels? Is not every semiotic system beset by the very same dichotomies? Would a film not be at least as capable of invoking this effect as, say, a "bad" novel? Would a study of poorly written novels have generated the same theory? Why or why not? If a corporation wrote a novel (or even just a prose narrative, as they often do), would it too invoke this ethics of ~~voice~~?

That Boxall's little book raises so many large questions is not, I think, a weakness but one of its many strengths. If, as he argues, the "novel has always worked at the edge of culture" (143), then it will come as no surprise to find difficult questions lingering in those edges. For

scholars and students interested in digging into the structural “code” of the novel form (and sympathetic to the idea that such a code has ethical value), Boxall’s volume will be indispensable.

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