

Introduction

(What does it mean to) Think the Novel?

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What does the novel allow us to do? Moreover, how does it allow us think? How might it promise more than mere representation by grappling with what we must contend with in life: estrangement, alienation, contradiction and discontinuities – just to name a few. The contributions in this issue critically engage with such ambiguities, proposing that the novel and, indeed, the author, offer something to the modern reader. The novel as a site of meditation allows us to think (and re-think) the world we live in, that others have lived in and to tease out possibilities for a future. The novel has never really been renowned for its ‘usefulness’ and sometimes, much like in Brechtian fashion, has been undertaken as a practice in its own right – the very act of writing and reading is a participation, a praxis with the injunction to ‘delight’ and, perhaps, conquer some of the outdated respectabilities of the past.

Certainly, the novel has proved to be an accepted social function of the arts, but the activity itself of engaging with the novel as both a conceptual and prosaic means *and* ends allow us to repeatedly rediscover what the novel does – and did –, what it means – and meant –,

and what propels it to keep going. And it is here that the thing of the novel appears, only to disappear and reconvene. Those of us who read novels do so for a multitude of reasons, but there is something satisfying about the human possibility of the novel which promises to place ourselves as indistinguishable from the written word. In reading the novel, we have the potential to write ourselves over and over again, fantasise about a different personal history as well as grasp appetites and desires which might well lie dormant in everyday life. The novel both connects and disconnects us from the past – we can ‘use’ literary history as way of delving into those events and catastrophes which cannot be expressed in any other way – here only language in all of its nuances and limitations is the vehicle for literary provocations.

The novel fascinates us: Dicken’s portrayal of the French Revolution, Brecht’s sometimes cynicism of Weimar, Melville’s characterisation of the simultaneous courage and cowardice of man, Woolf’s stream of consciousness, James’s impressionist ponderings of love, Dostoevsky’s desire to create a spiritual, mythical atmosphere, Sebald’s depiction of trauma, Beckett’s obsession with and ontology of failure, and so it goes on. As the contributors to this issue offer, the novel – and those who write them – provides a method and meditation for which we can create our own modern sensibilities.