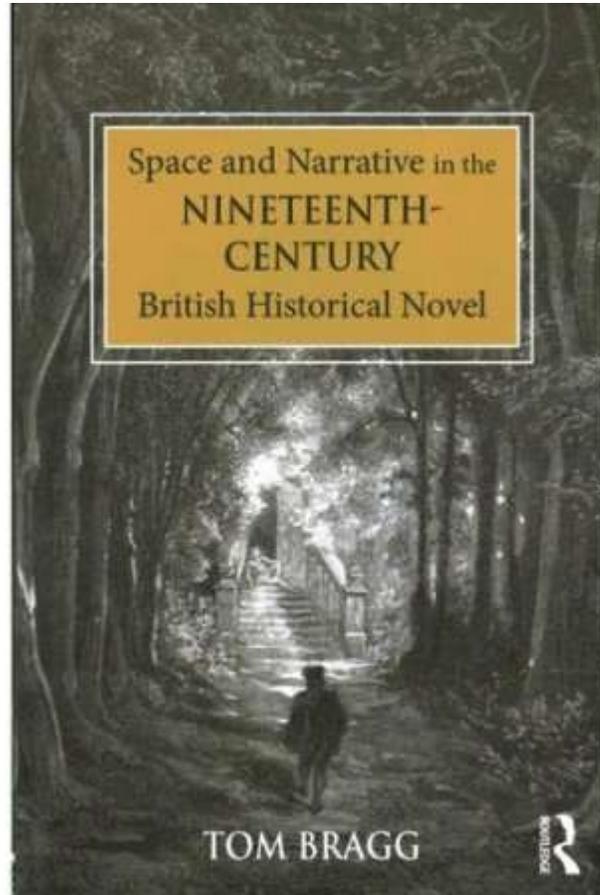


## Book Review

### Space and Narrative in the Nineteenth Century British Historical Novel



Author: **Tom Bragg**

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Ever since the publication of Sir Walter Scott's historical novels in Britain in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, specifically his Waverley Series, together with the works of some continental and American writers like Balzac in France and James Fenimore Cooper in America, the historical novel genre has come to life and received a spectrum of criticism. Many influential critical works like Georg Lukacs' *The Historical Novel* (1955), Brian Humnett's *The Historical*

*Novel in Nineteenth Century Europe* (2009), Richard Maxwell's *The Historical Novel in Europe, 1650-1950* (2012), Jerome De Groot's *The Historical Novel* (2010) and others have tried to speculate and see into the genre's broader characteristics and ethos. An axiomatic definition of the historical novel centers around the way history is genuinely re-incarnated in an authentic way relying on realistic details and faithfulness to the historical fact. Here then, the emphasis is put on the way past histories, civilizations, cultures, and even manners are revived and brought to life in the present time. More important than this, the revival presupposes not only a concern with genuineness, resemblance and fidelity to history through character or event, but at the same time discloses, in Lukacs' understanding, the difference as well as the continuity between the past and the present.

By assumption, the historical novel as a text or as a narrative, taking into consideration the author's style and his influences, may claim some rhetorical and artistic elements which are eclipsed by the approach the author (or narrator), as a historian rather than as an artist, carries out. In fact, most of criticism on the genre capitalizes upon the realistic aspects and disregard the metaphorical characteristics, considering them as vestiges or anxieties of influences from other movements and genres rather than building blocks of the genre. Nevertheless, as a distinguishing re-evaluative study, Tom Bragg's book entitled *Space and Narrative in the Nineteenth Century British Historical Novel* (2016) reviews nineteenth century selective approach toward the historical novel genre and, in its place, recommends a narrative approach that considers the rhetorical and artistic elements characteristic of the genre throughout the century.

Accordingly, Bragg's book, *Space and Narrative in the Nineteenth Century British Historical Novel* (2016) studies the representation and the importance of space as an important trope in the revaluation and well understanding of nineteenth century British historical novel. The space is as important in the genre simply because it functions as a clue to narrative, characters, style, and historical knowledge. The author looks at the genre's fictitious traits overstepped or minimized by most of the studies and thus opens the possibility of extending its definition and broadening its scope, away from the social realism bias to the poetics of the novel and narrative. To do so, Tom Bragg studies the different shifting representations of space in the genre, the interconnectedness between space and narrative, and the notion of the narrative's and space's palimpsests—which all amount to the genre's richness and poetics.

The author selects three important nineteenth century British historical novelists including, in the vanguard, Sir Walter Scott as the canonical forerunner of the genre, then William Harrison Ainsworth and ultimately Edward Bulwer Lytton, and explores the relationship between space and narrative in some of their known historical novels. In Scott's historical novels, Bragg emphasizes upon 'the marginal space' of rural settings and concentrates on the fluidity, spirituality, and even strangeness of the Waverley space, Scott's characteristic space model which seems to be a space of ideas and which sets up opposing and conflicting styles. Ainsworth and Bulwer, as Bragg shows, tap into the description of the factual and fictitious spaces of the city; while Ainsworth deals with the city's architecture, Bulwer investigates archeological ruins and settings.

Tom Bragg's book is divided into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction leafs through the traditional selective approaches towards the historical novel which delimits its scope and perspectives, and at the same time brings to the fore the major studies that counter them and call for a more inclusive approach for the understanding of the genre. These include Richard Maxual's which encourages the genre's borrowing from other genres and even

other cultures, Brian Humnnet 's which focuses upon sociopolitical issues and realistic methods within the historical novel, and ultimately, Fiona Robertson's which delves into the gothic elements the genre may reveal. The introduction also elaborates on the notion of the palimpsest, a method of textual analysis in the historical novel which takes into consideration the interactivity between different ideas, perspectives, genres within it, and which Bragg aspires to revive.

The first chapter of the book entitled *A Certain Kind of Space: Walter Scott and the Poetics of the Historical Novel* Space deals with the representation of space and genre in the historical novels of the Scottish writer, Sir Walter Scott, including his *Waverley* (1814), *The Monastery* (1820) and *The Talisman* (1825). In his portrayal of space, Bragg suggests, Sir Walter Scott strikes a blow at the sublime spaces of the countryside and wild territories rather than the urban spaces. Drawing on Franco Moretti's ideas of the historical novel's 'unhistorical spaces,' (qtd. in Bragg, 25), as well as the intertwined connectedness between space and genre, Bragg suggests that Scott advocates the palimpsest model of space which accounts for the fluidity of the Waverley space he weaves. Bragg, in particular, concentrates on the natural space in Scott's *Waverley*, commonly known as 'the pass of peril' (30), the two converging streams bordering the highland territory, by drawing a connection between the scene itself, the movement of the plot, the themes the author intends and characterization. The two different streams, as Bragg elaborates, reflect the political conflict between the Hanoverians and the Jacobites, allude to a variety of genres from romance and Gothicism (as the romantic encounter between Waverley and Flora to and the space spiritual character), and inquire into Edward and even his companions as characters.

The same intertwining between space and narrative is evident in Scott's *The Talisman* and *The Monastery*. In *The Talisman*, a change in space and place reflects a change in the style and tone of the writer as in chapter three in the novel where two men; the protagonist, sir Kenneth and the Saracen emir, sheerkorf, as they travel on, stumble upon "dark taverns and chasms amongst the rocks, the grottoes so often alluded to in Scripture" (36) which led the author to shift to a gothic style to suit the mood and purposes of the story. Similarly, in *The Monastery*, Scott shows a dexterous handling of the palimpsest model and reveals different kinds of spaces, some of which are poetic, like the 'Corrie-nan-shian ravine' and others are ordinary spaces, like the 'Glendearg', much like Melrose, in Bragg's view point.

The second chapter entitled *(Mis) Reading the palimpsest: Readers of Waverley Space* capitalizes upon the readers of the Waverley space and cross-examines the different types of knowledge these readers may gather from them. Bragg highlights that Scott's readers are his characters in the text and the idea of epistemology, or 'ways of knowing,' is both conducted by intellectual (the historian) and folk characters. Indeed, as Bragg shows, Scott populates his Waverley novels with men of noble and gentrified classes who indulge in the process of deciphering and carries out tests or investigation of masculinity and manhood. Nevertheless, some of Scott's characters excel in the process of readership but others fail as they confuse things and draw erroneous conclusions from the space they explore or encounter. This is clearly shown in *Waverley*, where Edward Waverley interprets 'the pass of peril' and all Scotland as a whole as a site for his romanticism and military adventure, based on the scene's romantic quality. In another novel, *The Antiquary*, Scott busies himself with recovering knowledge through the exploration of ruins and unveils the difference between folk men whom Bragg calls ELEMENTALS and scholarly intellectual men. The novel features two men's reading of the Kaim of Kinprune ruin in the landscape; Jonathan Oldbuck, the historian, reads the Kaim of

Kinprune as a roman antiquity and Edie Ochiltree asserts that what Olbuck fancies for roman ruin is nothing more than the remains of a barbecue. By giving two different views on a hillside ruin, one erudite and the other folk, Scott examines different modes of recovering history's significance, and at the same time hints at the shifting, uncertain nature of the historical novel's space. More important than this, for Scott, the elementals themselves form a kind of a palimpsest revealing as many qualities as the miscellaneous ruin spaces. In Bragg's understanding, the elementals challenge the realism, the exactitude, and the levelheadedness of the scientific approaches to history many Intellectuals advocate and suggest that historical can be retrieved through others means rather than the verifiable scientific or scholarly methods.

The third chapter entitled *Architectural Incongruities: History and the Space of Contrast in the Novels of W. H. Ainsworth*, Tom Bragg studies the architectural spaces of the city in the historical novels of William Harrison Ainsworth by emphasizing upon the montage of sensational and gothic effects the spaces convey and their ability to direct and serve the narrative's plot, characters and themes. Indeed, Ainsworth's historical structures and gothic cityscapes reflect his attitudes towards genre and narrative, approaches to history and epistemological assumptions. In a form of a palimpsest, he mixes drama and humor, historical facts and gothic effects to show history as an amalgam of different fragments, patches, and contrasts, which are gathered in the text to clarify the difference between the present and the past. More important than this, Ainsworth believes that history is not to be read in historical books or reported by common people, but it is a place to go to verify, compare, and to explore with eyes. Thus, for him, tourism is the best way to rescue historical ruins from neglect.

Ainsworth likens narrative to a historical building with a complex and versatile structure, drawing ideas and history from inside, outside, beneath and around them. That is to say, Ainsworth uses the physical layout of the monuments, including rooms and wards, the external shape of the building together with the internal components—to direct and organize genres within it, assist in characterization and storytelling, and set tones and types of information. Ainsworth's chapters' titles in *The Tower of London* demonstrate his thorough task in classifying and detailing in the description of the monument. He writes "of the mysterious occurrence that happened to Queen Jane in Saint John's chapel in the White Tower", how Gilbert escaped from the By-Ward-Tower" "how Jane was imprisoned in the Brick Tower, what befell Cicely in the Salt" (qtd. in Bragg, 109).

Still, Ainsworth's spaces glance at the relationship between architecture, landscape, and masculinities. His description of architectural spaces, buildings, and monuments, Bragg clarifies, indicates his conscious use of space to 'imply information he cannot detail more explicitly' (114) on his characters and themes. In the same work, *The Tower of London*, Ainsworth draws a historical personage called Sir Giles Mompesson, a worker in the titular judgment chamber and a corrupt man who takes pleasure and vicious interest in punishing prisoners. Ainsworth's description of Mompesson's house, which is a part of the prison, including its coldness, emptiness, the underground passages to the prison and Mompesson's passion for revenge— all detail ideas on the protagonist's "sadistic and perverse nature, a degenerate villainy perfectly in step with the novel's larger preoccupation with the effeminacy and transgressive sexuality of James I's reign" (Bragg, 114)

Chapter four entitled *The Humbler Task; Bulwer Lytton and the Space of Archeology* scrutinizes the work of Edward Bulwer Lytton whose focus targets archeological spaces. Bulwer has written a number of historical novels including *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and its follow up *Reinzi* (1835), *The Last of the Barons* (1843) *Harold* (1848), among others. Typical to

Bulwer's historical novels is their stretched out temporal scope which result in what Bragg calls 'new seriousness' in the genre; it reached the fifteenth century Spain in *Leila* (1838), the fourteenth century Rome in *Reinzi* and first century civilization in *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Bulwer's method, Bragg argues, separates the historical facts from the sub-fictionalized plots the narrative incorporates: historical facts and figures like William the Conqueror, Harold, the last of the Barons and events like the Battle of Hasting do surface in his texts, but ideas about revenge, love, rivals are all imagined and slot into the narrative.

Like Scott and Ainsworth, Bulwer deploys the palimpsest model of the narrative and space; he gathers historical fragments and artifacts to structure and feed his narratives, extracting from them situations, characters and themes. Yet, what differentiates him from them is his proselytizing religious perspective and didactic aim. Indeed, Bulwer's teleological favoritism does surface in his *The Last Days of Pompeii*, where he skillfully draws a similarity between the ancient city's life of Pompeii and his own time cities like London and Paris. In the novel, Bulwer features the destruction of Pompeii by a volcano which he associates with fate and providence. In Bulwer's understanding, Bragg explains, the eruption of Pompeii is symbolic and serves as a moral lesson not only to the pompeians but also to posterity as a whole, and what is important is not the eruption itself, but the existence of the site of Pompeii and its use for a religious didactic aim. In short, Bulwer's handling of the historical archeological site is to reinforce a Christian and moral understanding and interpretation of world history. He collects fragments and signs from the site to foster his own interpretation, relying on historical or 'world knowledge,'

*In Space and Narrative in the Nineteenth Century British Historical Novel*, Tom Bragg has studied the interconnectedness between narrative and space in the works of three nineteenth century British historical novelists; Sir Walter Scott, William Harrison Ainsworth, and Edward Bulwer Lytton. As the study has revealed, if Scott has given birth to the historical novel in Britain with his Waverley series, Ainsworth and Bulwer have made a step further in developing the genre, at times extending and at other divorcing Scott's model; Ainsworth transcended Scott's rhetorical, spiritual, and wild spaces to concentrate more on the romantic and spectacular aspects of the city's historical monuments and buildings, and Bulwer excelled in the articulation of the didactic and religious intents historical spaces or ruins let slip.

Bragg's study is as important as it considers space as a clue to the understanding and re-evaluating of nineteenth century British historical novel's rationalism and Marxist propensity. Instead of considering as historical only novels that bear fidelity and authenticity to certain historical events and figures and that find shelter in the realist style of writing, Tom Bragg proposes a broad understanding of the genre that stretches its definition and scope, relying on the genre's palimpsest model that favors the co-existence of multiple, heterogeneous ideas and genres within it—characteristics that align it with the main stream novel rather than historical fiction, and also the fluid representation of the space in the genre as a peephole to narrative, character, style, historical knowledge as well as masculine ethos. Bragg's views of the nineteenth century historical novel and history as a whole bears resemblance to postmodern views of history, which lay claims to nether elements and which highlight history as well as fiction. Linda Hutcheon, a postmodern Canadian critic, argues that writing history in the era of postmodernity involves a displacement of the traditional realist methods at work with postmodernist techniques, like historiographic metafiction, which images both historical and non historical elements. She writes: "in the postmodern writing of history, there is the deliberate contamination of the historical with didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied

assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation” (92).

Moreover, through the three authors and the different historical visions they aim to achieve, Bragg has revealed nineteenth century British historical novel to achieve a lot of things at the same time, not only to revive a certain historical period or character, but to give a more broader, poetic, and religious view of reality and events in that distant past. Ultimately, Bragg emphasizes both the historical novel’s factuality and fictionality which associate it with the kind of fiction that instructs and entertain at the same time mainly through Ainsworth and Bulwer. Nevertheless, apart from the ground-breaking representation of space in the historical novel the study capitalizes, Bragg backs up earlier studies on the historical novel’s narrative palimpsest model to which Bragg’s book is indebted and at the same time extended, including Jerome de Groot (2010) study entitled *The Historical Novel*, where he approximately lists thirteen genres to be dissected from the historical novel, and Fiona Roberston’s study entitled *Legitimate Histories: Scott, the Gothic and the Authorities of Fiction* which clearly focalizes upon the fairy and gothic elements in the genre.

### References

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### Reviewer:

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