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Brian R. Hamnett. *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Representations of Reality in History and Fiction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. ix + 332 pp. $110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-969504-1.

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A European Tradition: Tensions, Dilemmas, and Boundaries in the Writing of the Past

The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe is an ambitious work both in aim and scope, for as the title suggests, it seeks to trace the changing nature of the historical novel over both the course of the nineteenth century and the political space of Europe. As Hamnett rightly acknowledges, the nineteenth century was an important time in the development of the novel, for it saw not only a continual refinement of form as a result of the emergence and consolidation of a realist mode of representation, but also a concurrent accrual in readership and social acceptance. At the same time, historical scholarship was undergoing its own transformation as it was increasingly institutionalized as a professional and academic discipline. One consequence of these dual processes was a complicating of the relationship between fiction, history, and the historical novel; literature and history were forging their own identities, but this left the historical novel in a very ambiguous and uncertain position. It was, Hamnett argues, a position characterized by tensions, dilemmas, and boundaries and it is this that *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe* sets out to explore.

There has been no dearth of interest in the historical novel of the nineteenth century (see, for example, Helen Cam, *The Historical Novel* [1961]; Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* [1962]; James Kerr, *Fiction against History: Scott as Storyteller* [1989]; and Richard Maxwell, *The Historical Novel in Europe* [2009]). What is different about Hamnett's work though, is its "*emphasis on text*" (p. 12, my italics). In their interest in the relationship between history and fiction, previous studies have tended to take an overly theoretical approach, losing sight of the novels and what they actually sought to achieve within their own time and space. By refocusing attention on the novels, Hamnett argues that it is possible to move beyond studies that reduce the historical novel to either "history" or "literature" and to explore, instead, the tensions and dilemmas at the heart of its writing. Thus, rather than following a chronological sequence, *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe* takes form through the texts themselves. This is a very refreshing approach for not only does it suggest that time was not the only factor at play in textual change, but it creates space for sustained textual exegesis, which at times appears to be a thing of a rarity within contemporary scholarship.

The organizing principle or problem of *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe* is the question of how to write the past. It is a question Hamnett explores in two ways. In part 1 of the book he explores the theoretical and methodological issues surrounding the writing of historical fiction, and in part 2 he explores how particular texts and authors have negotiated the writing of the past. Like many studies of the historical novel, whether methodological or practical, this is a problem that coalesces at the boundary between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, but added to this is a strong awareness of geography–of the manner in which this boundary and its meaning is spatially nuanced. Thus, rather than taking a purely Anglophone view that assumes the historical novel to follow a very British, developmental trajectory, Hamnett conceptualizes the historical novel as a situated writing that results from pan-European influences. It is this European focus that makes Hamnett's work so exceptional, for it challenges so many of our assumptions about both the novel and literary history.

Spatial studies of the novel have existed for a long time, both within literary and geographical studies.[1] Many of these however, have followed New Criticism and have focused upon the space in the text, rather than the space of the text. There are exceptions to this, for instance, Franco Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* (1998), but it is in Hamnett's work, perhaps, that we find one of the most sophisticated readings of the spaces of the text. It is sophisticated precisely be-

cause it moves beyond broad geographical patterns to offer a fine-grained analysis of how one particular genre, the historical novel, takes form in and across European space. This is significant for three reasons. Firstly, despite greater conversations between literature and geography such stylistic geographies have been notable by their absence. *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe* is one move towards redressing this absence, and in so doing it intimates the extensive possibilities for such geographical studies of genre. Modernism, for instance, is often seen as a metropolitan literary culture, and while we are alert to its postcolonial patterning as well, our understanding of its European geography is somewhat impoverished (Peter Childs, *Modernism and the Postcolonial: Literature and Empire, 1885-1930* [2007]; John Hegglund, *Word Views: Metageographies of Modernism Fiction* [2012]).

This points to the second reason why Hamnett's focus upon the European geography of genre is of such importance. At a time of renewed interest in the role of influence and intention in the creative process, it is an approach that divorces the historical novel from overly simplistic equations with inward-looking national traditions and identities. This is particularly well done in chapters 10, 11, and 12, where we begin to see the interconnections between Spanish, Russian, and German historical and literary scholarship. Although the depth of this analysis is circumscribed, in part by the breadth and number of texts Hamnett discusses, the import is not lost, for it is an approach that enables Hamnett to democratize, or at least decenter, the historical novel; the historical novel becomes a shared, European tradition, rather than a form associated with particular, iconic authors, like Walter Scott, or particular political states. What is revealed, therefore, is a flourishing European literary community, yet it is a community that tends to be overlooked within contemporary scholarship by the continued dominance of Anglo-American and postcolonial literary relationships, and so, it is time, perhaps, to follow Hamnett in recovering (or discovering) the European novel.

The third reason why Hamnett's European focus should be endorsed rests in the way it challenges the conventional wisdom of literary understanding. One of Hamnett's overriding arguments is that we need to understand the historical novel not as a simplistic outcome of social context, but rather, as an intellectual and ideological response to cultural change. This is particularly well drawn out in chapter 9, where George Eliot's *Romola* (1862-63), a novel often seen as something of an oddity within Eliot's oeuvre, is compared with Gustav Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862). The intention is to demonstrate that while quite odd and different novels, both were instances of intellectual self-examination. As such, they trouble our understanding of the nineteenth-century novel more broadly, for this was the height of the realist mode of representation, which in its objective tonality and authorial certainty positioned itself as a form of social examination. It would be several decades before Modernism's introspective analysis and subjective forms of address and narration would challenge this self-confidence. Yet, in recognizing the introspection and self-examination of nineteenth-century historical novels, Hamnett's work resists this reductive and hermetic approach to literary history. Consequently, what we find in Hamnett's work is a challenge to the way we think about and conceptualize literary history, and if we can free ourselves from this prescriptive way of reading the literary past then it is likely that new insights into both history and the novel will arise.

The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe presents us with a genre that was continually exploring how to write the past in a way that blended accuracy, instruction, and entertainment. What is more, it is a work that seeks to challenge and dismantle the overriding tendency to reduce the historical novel to either literary or historical analysis. Yet it is its European focus, and its emphasis upon a European literary community, that prove most insightful, for it presents us with an inherently geographical form that asks nuanced questions about the relationship of fiction and fact, imagination and reality across time and space. At the same time, it reconnects fiction and history with geography, creating a study that not only speaks to, but challenges, a resurgent and interdisciplinary interest in the relationship between novels and geography. To date, interest in the relationship between novels and geography has tended to focus on particular authors, particular novels, or particular spaces. It is rare to come across longitudinal studies, like Hamnett's, of such historical depth or geographical breadth. As such, *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth Century Europe* is pregnant with questions it should behoove literary, geographical, and historical scholars to ask at and of the boundary between fact and fiction.

Note

[1]. Marc Brosseau, "The City in Textual Form: Manhattan Transfer's New York," *Cultural Geographies* 2 (1995):89-114; David James, *Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space* (London: Continuum, 2008); and Andrew Thacker, *Moving through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

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