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0521024331 - Romantic Verse Narrative: The History of a Genre

Hermann Fischer

Excerpt

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## Introduction

This work is subtitled ‘The History of a Genre’. It should be emphasized right from the start that it is not the intention of this author to develop an exclusive method of genre research. The problematic concept of genre excludes narrow schematization by its very nature: genres cannot be reduced to exact and absolutely valid definitions, since they are to a large extent subject to historical change. In the case of the specific genre that is to be studied here, moreover, the tendency in the romantic period for boundaries between genres to dissolve and even for the whole idea of genre to be regarded with hostility makes it practically impossible to apply a more precise method.

In the poetry of the romantic epoch, the genres might be compared with a network of subterranean water courses, and the researcher who is trying to follow the hidden lines of development with a water diviner who is obliged to obtain as many incomplete results as possible using all the methods at his disposal: observing the places where the underground streams come to the surface, i.e. where the poets are conscious of genre theory; divining for the development of taste; boring down into ‘archetypal’ ideas about genre; searching for the source, measuring and not least putting in additional colouring of his own to bring out the hidden changes of direction and mixtures.

It is not of course possible to talk about genres without definitive schematization. But such schematization cannot be justified as an end in itself, since it must always be imperfect and one-sided. It is only an unavoidable means to an end; and can only be defended if the end justifies the means. However, the end must not be to narrow down literary phenomena to fit them into a system for the system’s sake, but rather to apply an adaptable system to the individual literary phenomena in order to be able to understand literature better from both a historical and an interpretative point of view. For this reason various approaches to the study of genre will be found existing side by side in this book. The focus is on the form, content, history or ‘archetypal’ aspects of the genre as the work of the individual poet seemed to require it.<sup>1</sup>

As just mentioned, this subject – the history of the romantic verse narrative genre – particularly necessitates abandoning a strictly dogmatic genre theory and keeping the method flexible, since the romantic period was one in which the boundaries between genres were dissolved and there was even hostility towards their very existence.

The literary form that is to be studied here is more convincing proof of this

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than any theoretical considerations: it is harder to define as a genre than most other forms of poetry. For this branch of literature there is no binding terminology and there are no actual genre regulations. It is hardly possible to determine what length of poem, metre, level of style, stylistic attributes or themes are involved and there is not even a generally recognized name for the genre. While within the genre it did happen that successful works inspired imitation and initiated fashionable trends, resulting in the creation of ‘schools’ which emphasized and imitated a particular aspect, this was offset by the general tendency of the age towards originality and independent development of ideas from other sources, even to the extent of producing something so different that the original genre was only detectable as a remote influence.

The word romantic is thus also no guarantee of the kind of uniformity required of a historical genre such as the medieval court novel or the erotic epyllion of the Renaissance. The uniting factors that are implied by this description of a generation of poets are neutralized by the divisory aspects – the ‘schools’ and individual approaches – and the effect of these divisory aspects was so strong at the time that the collective name English Romantic Poets was not used for the poets of this epoch until after it was over.<sup>2</sup> Even today it can still be seen on closer inspection of precisely the forgotten narrative verse of the epoch, that the relative uniformity of other literary epochs – such as the Elizabethan period or the school of poetry from Dryden to Goldsmith – is missing in the period from 1798 to 1830. A time of radical change and liberation from centuries-old regulations and laws, it was a breeding ground for contrasting philosophies of life, political views and tastes.

The difference between great poets and minor poets, especially in the romantic period, is a particular example of such contrast: between poets who confronted the intellectual and artistic problems of the age and poets whose ‘romanticism’ consisted merely of imitating the superficial characteristics of the style change in order to be fashionable while intellectually remaining strongly bound to the thinking of the previous epoch. The many narrative poems of the romantic period cannot thus easily be accommodated within a uniform genre framework. The situation is so confusing and confused that, in W. M. Dixon’s words: ‘Distinguish and divide we may, but frankly it is not possible ... to propose a clue by means of which this labyrinth may be traversed. Type merges into type, classical forms into romantic to produce a confused panorama of scenes, characters, actions, where the distinctions that prevailed prevail no longer, where the old designations fail us.’<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, in the following study the attempt will be made not just to discuss the genre of the individual works one after the other and identify the models and influences that are blended into them, but also to bring out what the verse narratives of the English poets in the epoch from 1798 to 1830 do have in common in spite of all their differences, and to reveal a literary process in the midst of the variety that is characterized by a certain logic. Here the

word genre is used less in the sense of a particular type of poetic form than in the sense of a tendency of the period in question, a common denominator that is there to be discovered in all these works. Thus, whenever the romantic tale in verse is referred to in this book as a genre, it is always with these qualifications in mind, as it were putting the word in quotation marks. Three further points should be made on this subject.

1. It will become clear in the course of this treatise that the length of a romantic tale in verse has hardly any influence on its qualification for the genre, which includes both poems of a few hundred lines and tales running to thousands of verses. It would be arbitrary to treat the latter as a separate genre.

2. Given the lack of definitive terminology for this whole field, it was not possible to avoid either describing the concepts involved in detail or inventing new expressions. The first solution encumbers the style, and the latter sometimes makes the text less easy to understand. The author has attempted to use whatever method seemed most appropriate for the particular subject in hand, while realizing that the pitfalls just mentioned could not always be avoided.

3. The aim of the study was not to give an overall picture of what during its history the romantic tale in verse consciously and unconsciously took over from other genres and what represented a new development. With an outline of this nature it would only have been possible to offer abstract hypotheses, which would not have been very convincing. The only way for the ideas of the book to appear to some degree substantiated was through the inclusion of as many provable details as possible, whereby the main interrelationships of the various aspects would automatically become clear.

The material to be evaluated was very extensive. The objective of the study could not be achieved by analysis of the works in question and the indications as to their genre alone. As well as dealing with the poems themselves, it was important to give ample space to the poets' own commentaries on their work and the opinions of the contemporary critics. In scarcely any other age have the literary problems and controversies been so richly documented as in the romantic period. For practical reasons it was not possible to include everything: of the many periodicals only the three most important are dealt with: *Edinburgh Review* (*ER*), *Quarterly Review* (*QR*), and *Blackwood's Magazine* (*BM*). In addition to these three periodicals, reference is also frequently made to Hazlitt's *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818–19) and his *Spirit of the Age* (1825), which are valuable sources of information about contemporary views of English verse narratives.

The usefulness of what has been undertaken in this study will not be denied by anyone who has ever tried to find a chapter about the characteristics the romantic verse narratives have in common, or any separate discussion of this type of poetry as a genre in the current literary histories. This is not intended

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as a criticism. In all the ‘compendia’ and ‘surveys’ the authors have to decide on a compromise between the various dimensions of literary history – epochs, individual personalities, genres, trends, influences, schools, etc. – when organizing their material, and in the romantic period in particular classification by poet is more important than classification by genre. All that is being pointed out is that histories of literature do not investigate genre in the way that is being done here. However, even specialized histories of the epic or romance genres in European or English literature have not gone very far in this direction either. Many of these books end with an outline of the further development of narrative poetry in the later nineteenth century,<sup>4</sup> but since such works are always either based on classical normative definitions of the epic as well as of the metrical romance, or introduce a number of self-made definitions which blur rather than clarify the character of the genre to which the present study is devoted,<sup>5</sup> they are of no help to someone wanting to pin down the protean class of poetry that at the beginning of the nineteenth century was fashionable under such names as ‘tale in verse’, ‘metrical tale’, ‘metrical romance’, or just ‘romantic poem’. To some extent today’s unfavourable view of the decline of the epic genre in most narrative poems of that time has even resulted in these works being omitted from such studies. The connection of the most valuable examples of the romantic verse narrative genre – Keats’ *Endymion*, *The Eve of St Agnes* and *Lamia*, Shelley’s *Alastor* and *The Revolt of Islam* – with the fashionable ‘metrical tales’ of their period is thus lost sight of.

There have been very few scholars up to now who have been willing to embark on a study of this genre complex where both the themes and the form are so hard to define. The older standard works on the period from 1798 to 1830, for example, Saintsbury’s *History of Nineteenth Century Literature* (1896) and his *Essays in English Literature 1780–1860* (1895), or Elton’s *Survey of English Literature 1780–1830* (1924) do of course touch on this subject. H. A. Beers, in his *History of English Romanticism in the Nineteenth Century* (1901), shows a clearer view of genre in English romantic poetry than most earlier scholars when he maintains that Scott’s verse narratives are the centre point of romantic development in England. In the *Geschichte der englischen Romantik* (History of English Romanticism) by Helene Richter (1916) there is, in Volume III ‘Die Blüte der Romantik’ (The Flowering of Romanticism), an entire chapter devoted to the descriptive poems and tales in verse from Pope to Southey, where with thorough knowledge of her subject the authoress sketches several important lines of development but then – as is the case with most histories of literature – pads this out with so much heterogeneous material that they are lost to view.

The most important older writings about the history and character of the type of poetry that is being examined here are two older works and three books written twenty to thirty years ago. A. C. Bradley’s lecture on the ‘Long Poem in the Age of Wordsworth’ in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909) compresses into

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a very small space several important historical and critical problems. C. H. Herford's Introduction to his anthology of English verse narratives, *English Tales in Verse* (1924)<sup>6</sup> places the romantic tales in the wider context of verse narratives which do not claim to belong to the genre of the 'great epic poem' but go beyond the shorter ballad form and the story in verse of only a few lines. Both works, however, are so short that they are limited to an outline of their subject and only a few examples.

In *The Romantic Assertion* (1958) R. A. Foakes confirms some of this author's findings about the genre of long romantic poems. However, since his book is primarily about the relation between imagery and thought in romantic poetry and only occasionally in passing deals with the question of genre,<sup>7</sup> it does not render superfluous this attempt at a detailed genre history of the tale in verse from 1800 to 1830. Because of its particular slant, Foakes' book also focuses on different epochs: important romantic and Victorian poems are dealt with together and contrasted with the poetry of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries.

Karl Kroeber's *Romantic Narrative Art*, which was mentioned in the Preface, confirms my own work in many respects, in spite of the different objectives already described. It would be pointless to include in this monograph all the observations and quotes with which he supports his arguments and our two books may thus be considered as complementary studies each with a different emphasis. The same is true of Brian Wilkie's *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition* (1965), that arrives at a similar conclusion in many matters to those of this book (particularly in the chapter entitled 'Epomania: Southey and Landor') and contains valuable additional material on some of the subjects I have dealt with. Wilkie of course concentrates exclusively on works which were consciously written by the romantic poets as epic poems, which I have only dealt with in passing – Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*, Keats' *Hyperion* and Byron's *Don Juan* – so that the two books cannot really be said to overlap. Wilkie moreover admits in his Preface: 'this book is not a genre study as that term is often understood ... I am only secondarily interested in changing readers' ideas about what a certain literary form really is'.<sup>8</sup>

The general approach of Herford's Introduction draws attention to an important question: should not a history of the literary form known as the 'tale in verse' from Chaucer to the present time be written first, before a history of the romantic verse narrative genre is attempted? Herford's essay is too short to give more than an outline of such a history, and is thus not much more than a list of the best and most familiar achievements in this field of literature. A detailed history of the whole genre would without doubt be a desirable background to the specific study of romantic forms that is the object of this book. How much does the educated reader of our time know about generic continuities within the history of the shorter narrative poem in England, of that type of poem which does not claim to be an epic and for which 'tale in

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verse' is the only possible collective term?<sup>9</sup> While we know individual names and works that stand out from the general stream – Chaucer, the short Renaissance epics composed by Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare, Drayton and Southwell, and Dryden's *Fables*, etc., we seldom stop to consider that these are not just isolated high points but are linked in a multitude of ways with each other and with older – classical and medieval – traditions.

In special studies such as H. G. Wright's valuable book on *Boccaccio in England from Chaucer to Tennyson* (1957) sections of this vast subject are dealt with, and it is surprising to discover that in every period following their first appearance the novellas of *The Decameron* were used as sources for tales in verse. This is also the case with other works: with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and other classical tales, with certain material from the Middle Ages that was also popular in the baroque and neo-classical epochs (such as the Arthurian cycle of legends) and with biblical material. A monograph on verse narratives in English literature would indeed be of great value. There is no such monograph. In order not to leave this genre history of the romantic tale in verse hanging in the air (it would be one of the later chapters of the missing monograph) and in order instead to give it the solid foundation it needs, two general chapters have been added preceding the study of the poetry itself. The first provides the essential theoretical and terminological basis, the second puts romantic narrative poetry in the context of English verse narrative and deals with the situation at the end of the eighteenth century when romantic narrative poetry began to be written.

But is all that is gained for a study of the history of the romantic tale in verse as a distinctive genre a chapter on the history of a literary form that has hardly ever been dealt with as a whole? It is hoped that the present study will provide something more than this. Neither a mere historical survey nor a classification of all these works according to an abstract genre system is felt to be very valuable. The genre itself is being studied because the author believes that by this means the surviving poetry of that time can be better understood and defended against false judgements – provided of course the concept of genre is not interpreted too narrowly or theoretically. With this approach it is hoped to provide a deeper insight into the intentions of the romantic poets, an insight that cannot be obtained by studying the outstanding works out of context, as is the usual practice.

The ultimate purpose of this book is thus not to produce a system for system's sake, nor a mere record of historic material, but to make living poetry and artistic, intellectual and cultural phenomena that were important right up until the beginning of this century more understandable. A re-valuation of the mass of romantic verse narratives will nevertheless only be possible in exceptional cases. Most of the poems are considered valueless today, and this is not only attributable to changing fashions: their absolute poetic value is often not very high. However, with respect to

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quality assessment too a study of the genre history can also help to provide more objective standards.

The troublesome ambiguity of the word ‘romantic’ could not be avoided: it was already ambiguous in the early nineteenth century. It should be clear from the context which meaning is intended: whether the word still has something of the ironic nuance that it had in the eighteenth century; whether it implies the emotionalistic combination of feelings, sensation, adventure and surrender to love which made it appropriate to use ‘romantic poetry’ as a synonym for the verse narratives of Southey, Scott and Coleridge, etc.; whether it is to be understood purely as the term for the epoch from around 1795 to 1835; or whether it is being used in today’s sense of the ‘romantic school’, in Friedrich Schlegel’s sense, or to denote transcendently idealistic poetry.<sup>10</sup> Where there is any danger of the meaning being misunderstood, clarifying explanations such as ‘romantic in today’s sense of the word’ or ‘romantic generation’ have been added.

In closing, a few words about the limitation of the period to 1798 until around 1830. As already mentioned, this study also deals with the forerunners of the genre. They do not appear, however, before 1798, the year that is generally considered for other reasons too to mark the beginning of English romanticism. As far as developments after 1830 are concerned, a number of contemporary statements are included later in the book that clearly indicate a flagging interest in the genre at around this time.<sup>11</sup> Even though in England and America verse narrative of the romantic type continued to be produced for decades<sup>12</sup> – and even at the beginning of the twentieth century there were still new works that could be traced back to that fashionable genre<sup>13</sup> – the 1830s brought with them social changes, a new public, different tastes and new poets, who, if they went back to the verse narrative at all, either abandoned the form and content associated with the romantic tradition, or only developed those characteristics by means of which the great representatives of the younger romantic generation had already diluted the original type.

Finally, when the works were selected that are examined in greater detail to support the theses of this study, the aim was to provide as complete a picture as possible, but without unearthing every minor poet active in this area. Nothing would have been gained for example by including the numerous imitators of Scott – poets who even in their day were very much in the shadow of the man they copied and who only lasted a few years. The most gifted of these poets only differ from the head of the ‘school’ in that their work is less vivid than his, and to include them would add nothing new. As far as the unimportant poets who copied their models without talent are concerned however, it is as Scott said in the Introduction to *Rokeby* of 1830: ‘[they] at least lay hold of their peculiar features, so as to produce a strong burlesque’, so that ‘the effect of the manner is

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rendered cheap and common, and ... ridiculous to boot'. The criterion for the selection was provided by the reviews of the three journals already mentioned: those of the lesser poets whom the influential critics did not consider worthy of detailed discussion were not in general very important and had no decisive influence on the history of the romantic verse narrative.



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**Part I** *THE GENRE AND ITS HISTORICAL  
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## 1 Genre definitions

The strong emotional repugnance felt by many critics toward any form of schematization in poetics is ... the result of a failure to distinguish criticism as a body of knowledge from the direct experience of literature, where every act is unique, and classification has no place. Whenever schematization appears in the following pages, no importance is attached to the schematic form itself, which may be only the result of my own lack of ingenuity. Much of it, I expect and in fact hope, may be mere scaffolding, to be knocked away when the building is in better shape.

Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957, p. 29

Literary kinds 'may be regarded as institutional imperatives which both coerce and are in turn coerced by the writer ...'. Genre should be conceived ... as a grouping of literary works based ... upon both outer form (specific metre or structure) and also upon inner form (attitudes, tone, purpose – more crudely, subject and audience). The ostensible basis may be the one or the other ... but the critical problem will then be to find the *other* dimensions, to complete the diagram.<sup>1</sup>

### Towards a workable genre theory

These sentences from Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1941) contain all that is needed in the way of a framework for any discussion of genre: the problematic conflict between the freely creative artist and tradition; the institutionalization of genre norms through description and repeated use of these norms; the varying scope of the notion of genre, which ranges from the universal categories lyric, epic and dramatic to traditional types of work – types by which as it were authors and readers may orientate themselves; and finally the breadth of each particular genre from the point of view of form and production as well as of conditions governing its reception by the public, a breadth which sometimes makes definition an extremely difficult business.

There have been occasional attempts, on account of the fact that all more precise regulations can be falsified, to deny the validity of genre classifications (in so far as they were not purely descriptions of the outer form such as Pindaric ode, or sonnet). However, this did not remove the genre problem, the need to speak of genres, to classify according to genre and study the history of genres. Everyone who approaches literature in this way is conscious of the