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0521024331 - Romantic Verse Narrative: The History of a Genre

Hermann Fischer

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Hermann Fischer's lively and original study of romantic verse narrative traces in comprehensive detail the origins and development of this poetic form in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It brings together the longer epic verse tales of Scott, Byron and Southey and the more lyrical forms of narrative poetry in the romantic period, thus presenting familiar poems such as Shelley's *Alastor* and Keats' *The Eve of St Agnes* in the revealing but neglected context of the narrative genre and its history. Professor Fischer addresses the question of genre from a viewpoint that is both theoretical and historical, examining it in terms of form, structure and tone, and analysing its contemporary purpose and audience. Whilst looking at each of the major narrative poets in some detail, his study also proves illuminating in many areas of romantic literature, covering issues such as the role of the medieval revival and the decline of neo-classicism, the importance of popular sources such as the ballad and more literary influences such as the eighteenth-century heroic epic, and questions of changing taste and the reading public.

This edition, extensively revised and updated since the first publication of the work in German, makes Hermann Fischer's acclaimed study available for the first time in translation, rendering an important contribution to the field accessible to English-speaking students and scholars of romanticism.

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**European Studies in English Literature**

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# ROMANTIC VERSE NARRATIVE

## The History of a Genre

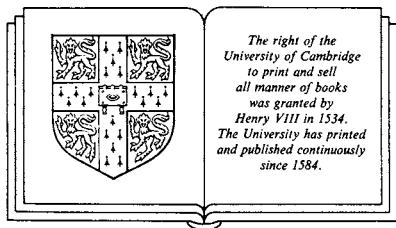
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Translated from the German by

SUE BOLLANS



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## Preface

It is doubly problematic for an author to publish a new edition of a book of literary criticism twenty-five years after it was first written: he himself is no longer the person he was then, and literary studies are also no longer what they were a quarter of a century ago.

As far as the first part of the problem is concerned, I may perhaps say here without vanity that I have never felt obliged to dissociate myself in general from what my former self wrote about the English romantic tale in verse. While I readily admit that the book contained immaturity of judgement, gaps and the occasional misplaced emphasis, these were all of such a nature that with conscientious reworking and abbreviation it was possible to eradicate them without having to produce a completely new version, and even the thought that the English reading public of the 1990s would approach critically something that was presented to a German faculty in 1962 as a postdoctoral thesis did not force me to make drastic alterations. The second part of the problem is more difficult: is it possible in this period of structuralism, deconstruction and the introduction into literary studies of sociological questions, linguistic methodology, demystifying philosophy and semiotic, intertextual and ideologically critical approaches to literature to republish a genre study that 'naively' and eclectically amasses material to show what thoughts about genre in narrative poetry were current from 1798 to 1830? Has not the material collected then also since been rendered obsolete by more recent research?

Reading the relevant books from England and America,<sup>1</sup> however, went a long way towards allaying my fears on both counts. None of the studies on romantic poetry as a genre subscribes to the fashionable trends I have just mentioned, and none shows my approach and my results to be either erroneous or out-of-date and superfluous. This is because none of these monographs has been written with the same objective as my genre study.<sup>2</sup> My objective was to describe all the identifiable attributes of the genre, and support this with historical evidence in such a way as to reconstruct as far as it was possible the views of the times. It is for this reason that the study has been extensively documented with extracts from the leading periodicals.<sup>3</sup> Only when the 'romantic' tale in verse began to become something completely independent, when 'romantic poetry' in today's sense made it seem of questionable value or at any rate of only very secondary importance to



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identify works as particular types of poem, in other words with the work of Keats and Shelley, did I make cautious use of Northrop Frye's Theory of Modes and modern theories about the nature of romanticism – hopefully in a manner that will be found neither too speculative nor too epigonal. Since with traditional classification according to genre stylistic and, in the case of poetry, metric characteristics are also always involved, verse technique and style have been examined in a number of places in the book, which has often of necessity entailed brief text analyses.

The extensive documentation of contemporary reactions to the genre as reflected in the three leading periodicals, the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*, has been included out of the desire mentioned above to back up all statements made about the genre with examples from the literary views of the times, and also because the 'boom' in verse narrative between 1790 and 1830 represented a fashion trend: it is obvious that for this reason alone the way this was reflected in the media of the times should not be overlooked. Since, however, many of the critical assessments of the period can only be properly evaluated against the background of the critics' personal or political attitudes, the relevant information has often had to be inserted. In order to keep the genre history readable and not overload it with too many digressions, much of this subsidiary information has been assigned to the notes.

This book was accepted in 1961 by the Philosophy Faculty of the University of Munich as a postdoctoral thesis and was published in German in 1964 by the Max Niemeyer Verlag Tübingen. The study was inspired and promoted by the Munich Anglist Wolfgang Clemen, who died in March 1990. I should like to dedicate this new edition in English to his memory, in gratitude for the academic and methodological training which I received from him.

I would also like to thank Cambridge University Press for making this new edition possible, and the translator Sue Bollans, who applied her bilingual skills to this far from easy task with untiring enthusiasm and interest.

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## Abbreviations

<i>CE</i>	<i>Collected Edition of the Works of Robert Southey</i> (London, 1837  8)
<i>E Studien</i>	<i>Englische Studien</i>
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Modern Philology</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>BM</i>	<i>Blackwood's Magazine</i>
<i>ER</i>	<i>Edinburgh Review</i>
<i>QuR</i>	<i>Quarterly Review</i>

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Perhaps he will yet come who is to sing the greatest heroic poem, comprehending in spirit whatever was, what is, what shall be.

F. W. J. von Schelling, *The Ages of the World* (1811), quoted in M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, 1971), p. 256

It does not matter whether a poem be called an epic or a romance, an epistle or a dirge, an epitaph, an ode, an elegy, a sonnet, or otherwise, as long as it is full of the material of poetry.

Barry Cornwall, *Essays and Tales in Prose* (Boston, 1835), vol. II, p. 147