

THE ACT OF READING AS HYPOTHESISED PERFORMANCE

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Verse novels, such as Lord Byron's *Don Juan* or János Arany's *Bolond Istók* [Stephen the Fool], are known to have narrators with empathic presence, which not only licenses them to step forward and to make their texts more personal, but allows for various reflections either on the narrated story or on the text as such. Since the narrator generally presents himself (or, less typically, herself) as the author of the text, these reflections typically concern the creative aspect, the performance of writing (a particular text) and hence create the appearance that the text is just being written. However, there are several instances of reflections on the (possible) readers and the process of reading, which assume that the text is already a completed unit; moreover, these reflect on an entirely fictitious performance, as hypothesised by the narrator.

1. The act of writing as creative performance

One of the most striking characteristics of verse novels is the seemingly immediate communication of the narrator towards the readership, either in the form of reflections on the text or as direct addressing of the readers.¹ The reason why it may have a striking effect is that occasionally it evokes the traits of oral communication and of a situation where the narrator and the reader(s) are co-present both in terms of their location and time. Since, however, the text itself is clearly a written one – an assumption otherwise shared by the narrator –, there is a conflict between the nature of the text and the aforesaid narrative gestures.

In fact, the only locus where such a co-presence is possible is the text itself: from a theoretical perspective, one can say that though the text may create the illusion that the (biographical) author and the readers are in direct contact, i.e. the text is only a means of the (biographical) author to address his/her readership, what happens in fact is that the implied author and the implied reader(s) enter into a relationship within the text. Since this has widely been discussed in the literature from diverse perspectives², my aim here is neither to justify

¹ It has to be mentioned that the phenomenon is not unprecedented: similar gesture may be found in the works of Ariosto or in mock-epics. See László Imre, *A magyar verses regény*. (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990): 12–13.

² The terms “implied author” and “implied reader” were coined by Wayne C. Booth, cf. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961). As for the implied author, similar views can be found already in Jurij Tynjanov, On Literary Evolution. *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*. Eds. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971): 66–78 (originally published in 1927). Other Russian formalists also developed similar ideas, cf. Christine Götz, *Autorthorien im slavischen Funktionalismus. Slavische Erzähltheorie: Russische und tschechische Ansätze*. Ed. Wolf Schmid (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009): 187–237. Cf. also Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure*

the theoretical separation and relatedness of these notions, nor to show that this can be applied to verse novels, as they could well be applied to any text; the reason why it bears particular importance in the case of verse novels is that verse novels themselves have an increased tendency to reflect on the issue. That is, while there are plenty of gestures that strongly associate the speaker with the poet or that address particular people, such as fellow poets, these are invariably contradicted by other parts of the texts that explicitly assume the impossibility of such immediate relations.

The imitation of an archetypal situation, whereby the poet recites a story in front of his listeners, is actually not alien to written narrative poetry and was also used in English narrative poems that are in a way precursors of the Byronic verse novel, such as in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or in Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Importantly, both of these works contain embedding: there is an internal narrator (the ancient mariner or the last minstrel), who narrates the main story, and who is introduced by an external narrator in a frame story. The role of the frame story in each case is the explanation of the situation in which the internal narration takes place, which is necessary as otherwise the readers could not decipher it.³

The imitation of such a situation was rejected by Lord Byron himself, whose *Don Juan* can be considered the first verse novel. In fact, he even mocked the tradition in his preface to the first two cantos, which appeared in 1819; though the preface remained unfinished and was not published in Byron's time, it is still important to consider here. The sharp criticism expressed in it is actually directed at a particular preface written by Wordsworth to his poem *The Thorn*, in which he asks his readership to suppose that the poem itself will be narrated by a captain of a merchantman or small trading vessel. Byron is highly critical of this method

in Fiction and Film. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Wilhelmus J. M. Bronzwaer, "Implied Author, Extradiegetic Narrator and Public Reader." *Neophilologus* 62 (1978) 1–18. As for the implied reader, cf. also Gerald Prince, "Notes toward a Characterization of Fictional Narratees." *Genre* 4 (1971): 100–106; Wolf Schmid, *Der Textaufbau in den Erzählungen Dostoevskijs*. (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1973); Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*. (München: Fink, 1976); Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

³ For a recent study on this in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, and on how Scott's work differs from Byron's *Don Juan*, cf. Julia Bacskai-Atkari, *The Lay within the Lay: Scott, Byron, and the Romantic Verse Narrative*. *Ritka művészet – Rare Device: Írások Péter Ágnes tiszteletére – Writings in Honour of Ágnes Péter*. Eds. Veronika Ruttkay, Bálint Gárdos and Andrea Timár (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Anglisztika Tanszék, 2011): 90–103.

and mocks Wordsworth's suggestion by making a similar one: that is, he asks his readers to suppose that the narrator of the poem is a Spanish gentleman:

The reader, who has acquiesced in Mr W. Wordsworth's supposition that his 'Misery, oh misery' is related by the 'captain of a small, etc.', is requested to suppose by a like exertion of imagination that the following epic narrative is told by a Spanish gentleman in a village in the Sierra Morena on the road between Monasterio and Seville, sitting at the door of a posada with the Curate of the hamlet on his right hand, a cigar in his mouth, a jug of Malaga or perhaps 'right sherris' before him on a small table, containing the relics of an olla-podrida. The time, sunset. At some distance a group of black-eyed peasantry are dancing to the sound of the flute of a Portuguese servant, belonging to two foreign travellers, who have an hour ago dismounted from their horses to spend the night on their way to the capital of Andalusia.

As can be seen, Byron is highly ironic when describing the possibility of embedding as found in Wordsworth and he explicitly refers to it as an "exertion of imagination". Though the criticism expressed here is mainly directed towards the Lake Poets – chiefly Wordsworth and Southey –, it is still important to note how dismissive Byron is of the entire tradition of embedded narrators who would feature as archetypal poets. Conversely, Byron contrasts the text written by Wordsworth with his own (written) text and as far as the literary debate is concerned, *Don Juan* contains reflections on the aspect of writing. This characteristic feature is adopted by later verse novels as well.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that verse novels would be product-oriented as there are several references on the process of writing. Let us consider the ending of Canto II of *Don Juan*:

*In the meantime, without proceeding more
In this anatomy, I've finished now
Two hundred and odd stanzas as before,
That being about the number I'll allow
Each canto of the twelve or twenty-four;
And laying down my pen, I make my bow,
Leaving Don Juan and Haidée to plead
For them and theirs with all who deign to read.*

The narrator here informs his readers about the state of the art of his own work and relates the text produced so far to the entire concept he has in mind. This way the focus of narration shifts from the story to the process of writing, including text-external aspects as

well. The shift is crucial especially because the story of Don Juan has just taken an important turn by him and Haidée falling in love.

The immediacy of such narrative gestures stems precisely from the fact that the narrator's reflections interrupt the storyline, as if the reciting poet turned to his audience to comment on his own work. However, there is an important distinction between oral and written poetry in this respect, which is reflected on in *Don Juan*: namely that the writer has the privilege to abandon his readers and leave the story unfinished, at least for a while.

It is worth mentioning that in the case of *Don Juan*, this kind of reflection and interruption was also natural, inasmuch as *Don Juan* was issued in parts: Cantos I and II were published as early as 1819, while the publication of Cantos III, IV and V was delayed until 1821, hence the narrative gap reflected on in the text coincided with a factual one.

Though reflections on the writing process tend to be scattered across the entire text, they still form a network of reflections, such that the narrator-writer's changing ideas can also be detected. The ending of Canto III of *Don Juan* is the following:

*I feel this tediousness will never do;
 'Tis being too epic, and I must cut down
 (In copying) this long canto into two.
 They'll never find it out, unless I own
 The fact, excepting some experienced few,
 And then as an improvement 'twill be shown.
 I'll prove that such the opinion of the critic is
 From Aristotle passim. – See Ποητικης.*

By “tediousness” the narrator again reflects on his tendency to digress; this time the story is abandoned precisely when there is considerable suspense: namely, the life of the protagonist – and also that of his lover – is endangered.⁴ Nevertheless, the narrator interrupts the storytelling process, due to a compositional problem, i.e. that the present canto is too long already. This immediately contradicts his previous plans: Canto III has altogether 111 stanzas, which is exactly half the length of Canto I and approximately half the length of Canto II (which have 222 and 216 stanzas, respectively). Hence “cutting the canto into two” means precisely that the narrator had the previous plan in mind when starting Canto III but has

⁴ It has to be mentioned that the shift is not sharp as the narrator starts digressing from the actual storyline earlier; still, his readers may expect him to continue narration rather than ending the canto. On the conflict between the crucial situation in the story, cf. also Anne Barton, *Don Juan Reconsidered: The Haidée Episode*. *Byron*. Ed. Jane Stabler. (London: Longman, 1998): 195. Such delaying digressions are present in previous works as well, notably in Fielding. Cf. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. (London–New York: Routledge, 1997): 125–126.

changed his intentions since then. This shows that, besides reflecting on the writing process, the text can be procedural also in the sense that the writer-narrator's changing ideas can be followed.⁵

On the other hand, the narrative gesture of ending the canto in a rather arbitrary way, in this case, would not have been necessary, as Canto III and IV appeared together and thus the separation that is thematized in the text was never actually accompanied by a factual one. Nevertheless, the gesture of separation when ending a canto may remain even when there is no extra-textual need for it. This is reinforced by the fact that even in verse novels that were never issued in parts, cantos may end with a strikingly similar gesture, such as Canto I in *A délibábok hőse* [The Hero of Mirages] by László Arany.

In addition, the stanza quoted above seems to reveal an aspect of the writing process that is supposed to be invisible for the readers, as is also acknowledged by the text itself. That is, the narrator creates the impression that he is writing the first version of the text, which is to be copied later on: the first version is supposed to consist of one larger canto and to contain the remark that the canto should be cut into two – conversely, the second version is supposed to consist of two shorter cantos of approximately the same length and not to contain the remark that the canto should be cut into two, as the narrator does not want his readers to “find out” that he has actually done so. There is clearly a contradiction since the final text is divided but at the same time still contains the remark in question – which, strictly speaking, should not be written down at all.

The way to overcome this contradiction is to say – or, rather, to acknowledge – that the narrator simply uses the text as a possible means of conveying his thoughts regarding any

⁵ It is notable how the concept outlined by *Don Juan*'s implied author changes throughout the text, cf. also Richard Ackermann, *Lord Byron* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1901): 150. This also leads to the seemingly never-ending nature of *Don Juan*: the text – as well as the expected length – becomes longer and longer, clearly indicating that there is no previous plan underlying. On a more detailed analysis of these problems, cf. Julia Bacskai-Atkari, “The Ironic Hero: Narration in Lord Byron's *Don Juan*.” *Első Század* 2008/1 (2008): 45–89. See also Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society*. (Baltimore–London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993): 215; Peter J. Manning, *Byron's Imperceptiveness to the English Word*. *Byron*. Ed. Jane Stabler. (London: Longman, 1998): 183. This loosened structure also contributes to the poem's strongly improvisatory nature, which is, according to Robson, a solution for “the problem of the long poem”. W. W. Robson, *Byron as Improviser*. *Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Paul West. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963): 92. On the other hand, as is clear from the quotation above, his remarks are also against an existing tradition, namely that of the epic, cf. George M. Ridenour, *Don Juan: “Carelessly I Sing”*. *Byron: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Paul West. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963): 136.

aspect of the writing process and hence it may result in parts of the writing process being devoted to reflections on the writing process itself.

2. The product of writing

The paradox concerning the ending of Canto III largely stems from the fact that there is reference both to the writing process and the product of writing, i.e. the book itself. References to the book as artefact are generally done in two major ways in verse novels: in relation to the author's plans and with respect to the readership.

As I have already pointed out, the plans expressed by the author-narrator may change throughout the text, which logically follows from the fact that the narrator and the implied author are strongly intertwined and the narrator explicitly presents himself as the writer of the text, not e.g. as an editor thereof. Still, there is a remarkable awareness of the book format in verse novels and narrators seem to be concerned with compositional and publication issues just as well as with minor questions regarding their texts.

In *Don Juan*, apart from the length of the individual cantos, the number of cantos is also subject to changes. While the ending of Canto II (quoted in the previous section) explicitly states that there will be twelve or twenty-four cantos altogether, in Canto XII stanza 87 we find the following:

*Here the twelfth canto of our introduction
Ends. When the body of the book's begun,
You'll find it of a different construction
From what some people say 'twill be when done.
The plan at present's simply in concoction.
I can't oblige you, reader, to read on;
That's your affair, not mine. A real spirit
Should neither court neglect nor dread to bear it.*

There are two major points to be considered here. First, the designated length has changed since Canto II in such a way that the original total amount of twelve or twenty-four cantos is exchanged in favour of an undefined but certainly larger number: the first twelve cantos are labelled as introduction and hence it seems likely that the length will exceed the twenty-four cantos too. In this way, the epic design is incorporated into a constantly changing one: it has to be remembered that the twelve and twenty-four cantos denote classical setups, as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* both have twenty-four cantos, while Virgil's *Aeneid* has

twelve.⁶ In this way, markedly classical epic designs are abandoned and partly also mocked as in a certain way the “introductory” twelve cantos of *Don Juan* equal the twelve cantos of (the entire) *Aeneid*.

On the other hand, the narrator at this point admits that his plans are subject to constant change by referring to them as being “in concoction”. This causes the entire composition to be unpredictable; hence the narrator’s references on the book itself – understood as an object that the readers may hold in their hands – are also vague, as is in the quotation above, where there is a hint on “the body of the book”. In principle it would be possible to have unpredictability of composition restricted to the level of narration: in that case, the book itself would be finished, contradicting the narrator’s remarks.

However, *Don Juan*, as has been mentioned, was issued in parts: Cantos I and II appeared in July 1819; Cantos III, IV and V in August 1821; Cantos VI, VII and VIII in July 1823; Cantos IX, X and XI in August 1823; Cantos XII, XIII and XIV in December 1823; Cantos XV and XVI in March 1824; and Canto XVII remained unfinished. This means that towards the end of Canto XII, when the narrator declares that so far he has produced only the introduction, the reader is supposed to have gone through four books and, judging from the fact that the present one contains only two that no longer qualify as the introduction, there are many more to be expected. Hence references to the book format have a double nature: on the one hand they refer to a finite form into which the cantos are transferred at some time during the writing process and which contains frozen text in the sense that the narrator has no direct access to them from the ensuing volumes. On the other hand, the structure of the book in the sense of book series is fundamentally non-finite, as so far no volume has proved to be the final one and there is no foreseeable ending either.

Yet there are considerable reflections that refer to the book format. For instance, at the end of Canto I we find the following:

⁶ Interestingly, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, a work of primary importance for Byron, was originally published in ten cantos in 1667 but when the second edition followed, it was reorganised into twelve cantos, most probably precisely in order to follow Virgil’s composition. For more on this, cf. John K. Hale, “Paradise Lost’: a poem in twelve books, or ten?” *Philological Quarterly* 74.2 (1995): 131–149. Since my primary concern here is not to investigate the prevalence of this particular epic tradition further, I will leave the question at this point; suffice it to say that by abandoning the markedly classical epic designs, Byron in *Don Juan* again very strongly opposes and partly also mocks the epic tradition.

*'Go, little book, from this my solitude!
 I cast thee on the waters, go thy ways!
 And if, as I believe, thy vein be good,
 The world will find thee after many days.'
 When Southey's read, and Wordsworth understood,
 I can't help putting in my claim to praise.
 The four first rhymes are Southey's every line;
 For God's sake, reader, take them not for mine.*

The text is here highly ironic and is a continuation of the author-narrator's criticism directed at the Lake Poets, particularly Southey and Wordsworth – just like in the introduction, as we have seen earlier. By inserting Southey's text into a fundamentally different new context (i.e. the text of *Don Juan*), the narrator partly also mocks the tradition of the envoi as there is no particular reason for saying goodbye to the entire book right at the end of the first canto, especially because there is at least one more. The otherwise traditional narrative gesture – hence not Southey's distinctive feature⁷ – at this point thus seems to be rather theatrical and functionless, and highlights rather that the book is far from being finished.

Reflecting on the book format is in fact more embedded at the end of Canto I than appearing in the last stanza: the preceding one already and even more markedly makes reference to the book as an object:

*But for the present, gentle reader! and
 Still gentler purchaser! the bard – that's I –
 Must with permission shake you by the hand,
 And so your humble servant, and good-bye.
 We meet again, if we should understand
 Each other; and if not, I shall not try
 Your patience further than by this short sample.
 'T were well if others followed my example.*

As could be seen in the previous examples, references on the book tend to involve the reader to some extent; this is logically so, given that the reader by default encounters the final version of the text published in the form of a book. In the quotation above, reference to this is even more direct as the narrator refers to his reader as the purchaser. Just as the text receives

⁷ For instance, similar texts appear as early in English literature as at the end of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* – also beginning with “*Go, little book...*” –, and the tradition flourished in his time. Its origins can be traced back to Latin literature and was still used in subsequent periods as well. On these, cf. John S. P. Tatlock, “The Epilog of Chaucer's ‘Epilog’.” *Modern Philology* 18 (1921): 113–147; Frederick Tupper, “The Envy Theme in Prologues and Epilogues”. *The Journal of English and German Philology* 16 (1917): 551–572; Bernd Engler, “Literary Form as Aesthetic Program”. *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 7 (1990): 61–97.

material form when printed in a book, the reader is suddenly materialised into an agent who is capable of buying that book. The rather material viewpoint adopted here by the narrator is further reinforced by his own attitude: he seems to be more concerned with his book being purchased than with his text being read. Ironically, the notion of the purchaser is paired up with that of the bard on the author's part, which is far less material – in fact, it is a relatively archaic notion for a poet –, hence there is a sharp contrast between the author and the reader but also between the author's claimed self-image and his profit-oriented attitude. The clash is of course humorous and adds to the strong reflexive quality of the text in general.

3. Reading as hypothesised performance

Proceeding in this line of thought, the fact that the narrator reflects on the readers and on the reading act raises yet another question, namely how the text may contain information regarding the reading process. In fact, verse novels contain several references to how readers may react to (parts of) the given text: their reaction is crucially viewed as a certain kind of performance, whereby they actively respond to what they are reading. This may be realised both verbally and non-verbally; in either case, however, it is a hypothesis of the narrator. Such hypotheses may of course be based on previous reactions of the readers: the narrator may also choose to respond to these but the point here is that there are cases where the narrator, based on the text (s)he has just produced, sets up predictions concerning the reception thereof and hence responds only to his/her hypotheses.

As can be expected, most of these instances include a hypothesised negative reaction from the readers' part, in the sense that the text contradicts their expectations; in *Don Juan*, the most frequent opinion is probably that the text is immoral, according to public standards.⁸ Consider the following from Canto III (stanza 12):

*Haidée and Juan were not married, but
The fault was theirs, not mine. It is not fair,
Chaste reader, then in any way to put
The blame on me, unless you wish they were.
Then if you'd have them wedded, please to shut
The book which treats of this erroneous pair,
Before the consequences grow too awful;
'Tis dangerous to read of loves unlawful.*

⁸ See for instance: Canto I stanzas 120, 207 and 209; Canto IV stanzas 4–7, Canto V stanza 130, and Canto XII stanzas 28, 39–40, 50, 86.

The narrator does not the least say that the reader necessarily thinks that the story at this point would be immoral; however, he seems to assume that at least some of his readers do think so, which is why he immediately starts contradicting the hypothesised view of the “chaste reader”. Apart from approbation, the narrator also draws up a hypothesised performance in the form of suggestion, i.e. that the reader should shut the book.

Very often narrators imagine verbal reactions from their readers. In Pál Gyulai’s *Romhányi*, there is a point in the story when the protagonist Romhányi, who fought in the revolutionary war of 1848–1849 against the Austrian government and is now on the run, is brought to the house of a woman he previously courted but abandoned. However, he is so exhausted that he is not conscious (Canto II stanza 36):

*De rá nem ismer, oly nagy láza,
S ismét behunyja a szemét...
Hát ily sovány regényem váza,
S mily prózai, szokott beszéd.
Jó olvasóm, tán így fogsz szólni,
Ki vártál nagy jelenetet,
Romhányi hogy’ fog szónokolni...
Nem kínozzom a beteget.
Ha nagy, csodás és szörnyű szép kell,
A Jókai regényét nyisd fel;
Én ezt meg nem tanulhatám,
Nincs hozzá sok phantasiám.*

In verbatim translation:

*But he does not recognize her, so high is his fever,
And he closes his eyes again...
So meagre is the skeleton of my novel,
And what prosaic, common speech.
My dear reader, so will you perhaps speak,
Having expected a great scene,
How Romhányi would orate...
I will not torture the patient.
If you need something great, miraculous and terribly beautiful,
Open Jókai’s novels;
I could not learn this,
I have not much phantasy for it.*

The narrator in the third and fourth lines produces a text that he attributes to his reader, as a response to the first two lines. The clash represented here is between the kind of literature the narrator does and wishes to produce and the one which is here represented by Mór Jókai, Gyulai’s contemporary famous for his romantic novels, and which can be characterised by

highly improbable scenes and romantic extremities, at least according to Gyulai's narrator. Just as in Byron's case, it is the narrator's own text and methods which are claimed to be superior and hence the reader's expectations are ridiculed.

Again, the hypothetical nature of the reader's textual performance is encoded in the text itself: the narrator uses the word *perhaps* and he also puts the reporting clause (*so will you perhaps speak*) into the future, hence associating it with a temporal dimension he definitely cannot control in the sense that he does not know whether the reader will perform such a text at all – what he can do is to prepare for the possibility by an apt response, which he indeed provides.

Even more striking is the case of János Vajda's *Találkozások* [Meetings], which begins with the following:

*A Váci utcán, fényes délben,
Úgy fél tizenkettő után...
– Szép olvasónő a vidéken
Ez prózai neked talán?
„A Váci utcán, hol a sarkon,
Mint jelfa a keresztúti parton,
A rendbiztos mereven áll...
Haha... gyönyörű ideál!”*

In verbatim translation:

*In Váci street, at bright noon,
After about half past eleven...
– Fair lady reader in the countryside
Is this perhaps prosaic for you?
“In Váci street, where at the corner
Like a signpost on the crossroads' shores,
The policeman stands stiff...
Ha-ha... beautiful ideal!”*

Again, just like in Gyulai's verse novel, the narrator's text is seemingly interrupted after two lines – first by the narrator himself, who suddenly turns to the possible thoughts of the (lady) reader and later by the reader herself.⁹ In this case, interruption is sharper than in

⁹ It is worth highlighting that Vajda's narrator here markedly addresses a female reader. This can be attributed to the fact that in the period readers were predominantly women, cf. Gábor Gyáni, *Az olvasás kultúrája* [The Culture of Reading]. *A magyar irodalom története II.* [The Histories of Hungarian Literature II] Eds. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák and András Veres (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 2007), 560–571, p. 569. On the other hand, it can be a manifestation of contemporary criticism, according to which women mostly read popular literature, cf. Gyáni, p. 569; Aladár György, *Magyarország köz- és magánkönyvtárai 1885-ben I.* [Public and Private Libraries in Hungary in 1885 I] (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1886), 330.

Romhányi for two reasons: first, this is the very beginning of the entire text; second, the (lady) reader's reaction is overwhelming with respect to quantity: the narrator spent only two lines outlining the setting of his story and then devoted two additional lines to reacting to his reader – by contrast, the reader not only has the four lines quoted above but the next stanza is entirely “written” by her. In this way the reader seems to dominate the text for considerable length; what is more, she even parodies the original text of the narrator.

The reader's text is again strictly hypothetical and is introduced by a *perhaps* on the narrator's part. Still, the narrator reacts to this in the third stanza by admitting that the setting is not particularly romantic but may nevertheless serve as a setting for romantic events. The line of argumentation is slightly different from the ones discussed in connection with *Don Juan* and *Romhányi*: in all the three cases, the readers' expectations seem not to be fulfilled in some sense but whereas the narrators of Byron and Gyulai mock these expectations and oppose them strongly by saying that their text is of a higher quality,¹⁰ in *Találkozások* the narrator only partially mocks and opposes his reader. In fact, what he claims is that his text will actually fulfil the expectations of the reader, even if not with the same machinery the readers are used to: in other words, if the reader expects a romantic story in a setting that is traditionally claimed to be romantic, then she should rather be prepared for a romantic story in a setting that is traditionally claimed not to be romantic but will be shown to be one. Since the narrator ultimately has the intention to satisfy his readers, it seems justifiable why in this case the poetic performance is for a while more emphatic than that of the narrator.

There are of course several other examples for such dialogues with the reader but as my main goal here is not to provide a comparative analysis of these instances, I will not investigate the issue further now. The point is that verse novels not only tend to contain references to readers' responses but this tendency also follows from a more general characteristic, which is the strong self-reflexive quality of these texts. As narrators constantly interrupt narrating the story itself for the sake of reflecting on their own texts – either on the diegetic or the extradiegetic level –, it is only one step further that they interact with the readers. Since readers normally have access to the text when it is already published,

¹⁰ This stance is more frequently taken up in prototypical verse novels than what we find in Vajda's work; in László Arany's *A délibábok hőse*, the narrator mocks romantic novels and claims that his work is not for fulfilling such expectations, which could best be satisfied by going to the circus rather than by literature. On the differences between Vajda's text and other verse novels see Julia Bacskai-Atkari, “A változó távolság játéka: Vajda János *Találkozások* című művének narratológiai sajátosságai,” [The Playfulness of Changing Distance: The Narrative Characteristics of János Vajda's *Találkozások*] *Első Század* 2009/1 (2009) 37–45.

interaction with the reader frequently involves reflection on the book, also allowing for narrators to reconsider their original plans concerning the structure of their work. On the other hand, readers' opinions may also appear as textually present, in which case the reader's thoughts – as hypothesised and formulated by the narrator – qualify as performance just as the narrator's text does.

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