

Julia Bacskai-Atkari

Frye Reading Byron

In the third essay of the *Anatomy*, “Archetypal Criticism” Northrop Frye interprets Byron’s *Don Juan* as a clear instance of satire, belonging to the “mythos of winter” (1957, 223–242). As he points out, satire in *Don Juan* is to a large extent achieved by a strong self-parodying tendency and by constant digressions—both leading to the partial marginalization of the hero (1963).

I intend to show that Frye’s analysis can be extended to the genre of the verse novel as such. First, Frye’s approach helps capture the chief difference between the verse novel and the mock epic, namely that the latter type of satire fundamentally lacks the two features mentioned. Second, it shows that, in the verse novel, the parody of other genres, which typically belong to Frye’s “mythos of summer”, and the self-mocking tone reach a higher level; the verse novel is a genre which is by definition a literary response. As such, it is also self-responsive: verse novels after Byron tend not only to be self-reflexive as texts but they emphatically reflect on the genre itself, either by distancing themselves from (certain aspects of) previous verse novels, as did many Hungarian examples in the second half of the 19th century, or even by parodying previous ones, as does Térey’s 2001 work, *Paulus*, with Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*. Contemporary instances of the genre, including the latter and Anthony Burgess’ *Byrnie* (published posthumously in 1995), show that Frye’s analysis is very much of a current issue.

1. Frye on Byron

First of all, let us consider in more detail what Frye writes about Byron and how this fits into his larger framework. As is known, Frye distinguishes four main types of mythical movement to define the pregeneric elements of literature, *mythoi* or generic plots. These are the romantic, the tragic, the comic, and the ironic or satiric, which he associates with summer, autumn, spring, and winter respectively. (1957, 131–242).. As he says, “ironic myth is best approached as a parody of romance: the application of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic content” (223).

According to Frye, Byron’s *Don Juan* is a “second-phase satire”, where “second phase” means literal, descriptive or realistic in intent, and also an “intellectual satire”; this subtype of the satire is characterised by a clear stance against established beliefs in society and in literature by a deconstruction of the romantic idea of “the beauty of perfect form”. As Frye describes:

Tristram Shandy and *Don Juan* illustrate very clearly the constant tendency to self-parody in satiric rhetoric which prevents even the process of writing itself from becoming an oversimplified convention or ideal. In *Don Juan* we simultaneously read the poem and watch the poet at work writing it: we eavesdrop on his associations, his struggles for rhymes, his tentative and discarded plans, the subjective preferences organizing his choice of details [...], his decisions whether to be “serious” or mask himself with humor. (232–233)

The strong presence of the narrator throughout the text has a further consequence, pointed out by Frye: Don Juan is a secondary character in the text of *Don Juan* (Frye 1963). As Frye describes, Don Juan never actually emerges clearly as a character and there is no sense of engagement or participation to be perceived from his part—in other words, Don Juan is never an active agent. From all this it follows that since “*Don Juan* is not Don Juan’s poem but Byron’s poem, it could hardly have been ended, but only abandoned or cut short by its author’s death” (185).

2. The Byronic Verse Novel as Intellectual Satire

Having pointed out all this, I would like to elaborate on how Frye’s analysis can be extended to the genre of the Byronic verse novel and how it can be related to the narrative structure of *Don Juan* and other verse novels.

First of all, let us consider the issue of parody and self-parody. Though there is large variation in what is parodied in *Don Juan*, there are typical tendencies to be observed. Using Frye’s terms, the parodied genres fall into the category of the “mythos of summer”—such as the epic, romantic novels, and romantic poetry (mostly the Lake Poets). The way parody is achieved is that allusions to these genres are inserted in the context of experience and hence measured against it. As far as the nature of this experience is concerned, it is markedly literary experience.

At the end of Canto I (stanza 222), *Don Juan* exhibits a typical section parodying the Lake Poets and Robert Southey in particular:

*‘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 way parody works here is quite clear: the narrator quotes the first four lines from one of Southey’s works, taking them out of their original context and putting them into his own text. The difference between the two kinds of literature is explicitly highlighted by the narrator himself in the second half of the stanza where he distances himself from the first four lines and hence from the kind of poetry associated with Southey (and Wordsworth). This alienating gesture is accompanied by a strong value judgement as the narrator clearly considers his kind of poetry superior to that of Southey and Wordsworth.

Apart from romantic poetry, epic conventions are also often subject to parody in *Don Juan* (Bacskai-Atkari 95–103). The following example is from Canto I (stanza 207):

*Besides, in Canto Twelfth, I mean to show
The very place where wicked people go.*

This is part of an argumentation in which the narrator tries to convince the readers that his poem is not the least immoral and here refers to the epic tradition of the hero’s journey to hell (note that there are other references to this in the text as well). However, his ironic tone reveals that although the epic tradition will be kept, he does not fully take it seriously and the chief aim is not

to comply with certain established rules but to satisfy the needs of certain readers, about whom he is similarly ironic and considers their need to see “wicked people” sent to hell as childish.

Such gestures lead us to the second major narrative feature of *Don Juan* and the verse novel, which is the large number of reflections on writing as such. In the quotation above, the narrator partly talks about his work in general and partly refers to specific plans concerning the text yet to be written. This is even more emphatic at the end of Canto II (stanza 216):

*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.*

As can be seen, the narrator here explicitly makes reference to his plans concerning his work, abandoning the actual narration of the story. Note also that his plans are relatively vague since he talks about writing twelve or twenty-four cantos; again, the numbers are references to the revered epic tradition: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have 24 and the *Aeneid* has 12 cantos. This reference is again ironic since it is the narrator's personal decision to establish the number of cantos, and it does not follow from the nature of the text being a proper epic otherwise.

It is worth mentioning that the reflections on the extradiegetic level may be more emphatic than the ones on the diegetic level. This naturally results in an increased tendency of stepping away from the story itself and it is quite typical that the narrator leaves his characters while digressing on other topics; when and how he does this is fully arbitrary.

The third fundamental feature of the narrative structure of *Don Juan* regards composition, which is characterised by a certain kind of infinity, as was also pointed out by Frye. This is not accidental as the form is constantly being revised throughout the entire text and there are several plans mentioned concerning the length, but any two of these are at least partially in conflict with each other—moreover, the planned length also increases as the text proceeds. Recall that the narrator promised twelve or twenty-four cantos altogether in Canto II (see the quotation above); in Canto XII, however, he says the following (stanzas 54–55).

*But now I will begin my poem. 'Tis
Perhaps a little strange, if not quite new,
That from the first of cantos up to this
I've not begun what we have to go through.
These first twelve books are merely flourishes,
Preludios, trying just a string or two
Upon my lyre or making the pegs sure;
And when so, you shall have the overture.
My Muses do not care a pinch of rosin
About what's called success or not succeeding.
Such thoughts are quite below the strain they have chosen;
'Tis a 'great moral lesson' they are reading.*

*I thought, at setting off, about two dozen
Cantos would do; but at Apollo's pleading,
If that my Pegasus should not be foundered,
I think to canter gently through a hundred.*

Here the narrator explicitly refers to the fact that he has changed his plans regarding the length of the work. This creates the impression that the text is actually not born out of a concept set in advance (cf. Christensen 215) but it is rather created when narrating, and in this sense it is possible infinite, inasmuch as there is no text-internal reason that would bind it to a given length.

Apart from this, infinity is also reinforced by the fact that the main focus is not on the hero but on writing about the hero hence the primary concern of the narrator is not to round off the story of Don Juan but rather to prolong it as much as possible.

All of these characteristics pertain to the verse novel in general and contribute to the distinctive narrative structure thereof. Hence these can be considered as structural characteristics of the genre and as such they are fundamentally in line with Frye's analysis presented in the previous section. There are a number of examples for the Byronic verse novel in Hungarian literature as well, mostly dating from the second half of the 19th century and the 1870s in particular. A prototypical example would be László Arany's *A délibábok hőse* [The Hero of Mirages].

Naturally, when considering general features of the verse novel, it must be kept in mind that there are considerable differences as well with respect to the actual realisation of the features mentioned above. For instance, while infinity is truly prototypical for verse novels, it is generally due to abandonment rather than the death of the author, as was the case with Byron. For instance, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* also lacks a rounded-off ending but this is due to Pushkin's abandonment of the text and is paired up in the text with a gesture from the narrator that clearly indicates the arbitrary decision to abandon the story at a given point; that is, the narrator leaves his hero in a very uncomfortable situation and instead of narrating his story further on, he explicitly says that he prefers to leave the situation there as it is.

Apart from offering valuable points of consideration for the characterisation of verse novels, Frye's analysis also helps highlight some crucial differences from the mock epic. This is especially important because *Don Juan* is partly also referred to as a mock epic in the relevant literature. However, mock epics lack the self-parodying tendency and digressions that are central in verse novels. In other words, the verse novel fundamentally deconstructs established literary norms, which is not true for the mock epic.

3. Extensions

There is yet one more important extension line of the analysis presented so far, also built on Frye's insights. I have argued that the verse novel is a strongly self-reflexive genre, in that verse novels tend to have self-reflexive texts that may also reflect on questions concerning the essence of the genre itself. In addition, the verse novel is also self-reflexive on the genre level: besides the individual text being aware of their textual nature, the verse novel as a genre is also markedly aware of itself.

This becomes evident when considering contemporary verse novels, which contain reflections on 19th-century verse novels. Apart from explicit reflections and references, there are of course similar characteristics too; for instance, János Térey's *Paulus* has a dominant narrator,

who occasionally interrupts narration in order to reflect on his personal concerns and who also devotes considerable time to disclosing his plans concerning the text.

In *Paulus* there are actually three storylines: that of Pál ‘Paul’, who is a geek at the turn of the 21st century, the one of the German officer Friedrich von Paulus, taking place during the Second World War, and finally the story of the biblical Paul, which is mostly present in underlying form. Thus the genre of the verse novel is further deconstructed, in that any of these storylines is interrupted not only by the narrator’s personal concerns but also by the other two storylines—obviously, the three are interconnected in a number of ways and apart from interrupting each other, they also reflect on and reinterpret one another.

Térey’s *Paulus* is also a good example for postmodern verse novels reflecting on the history of the genre since it rewrites Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (Margócsy 37–45). This can be observed in the story of Pál and Ludovika, which is built on that of Onegin and Tatiana, that is, the former is similar to but is also markedly different from the latter. For instance, when she meets Pál, Ludovika is already married: nevertheless, they have an affair, albeit a rather short one. These features are excluded in *Eugene Onegin*: neither Onegin or Tatiana is married when they meet, which is precisely the reason why there is some chance of them getting together—however, when later on Tatiana is married to someone else, it is her marriage that acts as a barrier to Onegin’s advances.

Another point of difference is the letter written by Ludovika, which is actually a virus. Naturally, the text itself differs markedly from the one written by Tatiana, e.g. it contains explicit sexual references; still, the underlying gesture is similar in the two cases, and Ludovika’s letter strongly evokes Tatiana’s. Besides the text being different, the form of the virus indicates that Ludovika’s text is in a way fundamentally destructive—this is in line with the entire text of *Paulus* being destructive, indeed a deconstruction, of the genre of the verse novel. Similarly to Onegin, Pál also realises later (and in fact too late) that he should not have rejected Ludovika, who in turn finally rebuffs him—in doing so, however, she is clearly harsher than Tatiana (that is, she basically sends him to hell, rather colloquially).

The differences and similarities between *Paulus* and *Eugene Onegin* could of course be further examined as they constitute an intricate network of intertextual references. The point here is to stress that this is true for postmodern verse novels in general, though different texts may exhibit such reflexive characteristics to different degrees.

The fact that postmodern verse novels tend to reflect on previous ones in a similar way to how self-reflexivity is attested within the individual texts shows that reflections are indeed fundamentally important when considering verse novels and that Frye’s way of reading Byron is thus also productive on the genre level.

Works Cited

- Bacsikai-Atkari, Julia. “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. Eds. Veronika Ruttkay et al. Budapest: ELTE, 2011. 90–103.
- Christensen, Jerome. *Lord Byron’s Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957.
- . *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*. New York: Harcourt, 1963.

Margócsy, István. "Térey János: Paulus." *2000* 14.1 (2002): 37–45.