

FRYE READING BYRON

0. Introduction

Archetypal Criticism: Byron's *Don Juan* a clear instance of satire ("mythos of winter")

extension to the genre of the verse novel

- differences from the mock epic
- parody of other genres (~ "mythos of summer")

self-mocking and self-responsive genre – contemporary verse novels

1. Frye on Byron

Archetypal Criticism: four main types of mythical movement (Frye 1957):

- within romance (romance – "summer")
- within experience (irony and satire – "winter")
- down (tragedy – "autumn")
- up (comedy – "spring")

Don Juan: "second-phase satire" ("intellectual satire")

against established beliefs in society and in literature

deconstructing romantic idea of beauty of the perfect form

"*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 over simplified 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." (Frye 1957)

Don Juan: secondary character in the text of *Don Juan* (cf. Frye 1963)

“Don Juan never emerges clearly as a character”

no “sense of engagement or participation” – Don Juan “never an active agent”

→ “As *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.”

2. The Byronic verse novel as intellectual satire

parody and self-parody

“mythos of summer” parodied – epic, romantic novels, romantic poetry (Lake Poets)

in the context of experience – literary experience

Lake Poets – Robert Southey:

*‘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.* (I. 222)

epic conventions (cf. Bacskai-Atkari 2011):

*Besides, in Canto Twelfth, I mean to show
The very place where wicked people go.* (I. 207)

reflections on writing

*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.* (II. 216)

→ reflections on the extradiegetic level may be more emphatic than ones on the diegetic level

narrator often leaves characters while digressing on other topics (arbitrary)

composition – infinity

form constantly being revised – several plans in the text

main focus not on the hero but on writing about the hero

- these characteristics pertain to the verse novel in general – distinctive narrative structure

→ structural characteristics fundamentally in line with Frye's analysis

e.g. László Arany: *A délibábok hőse* [The Hero of Mirages]

infinity generally due to abandonment – e.g. Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (arbitrary)

- differences from the mock epic

Don Juan partly also referred to as a mock epic

but: lack of self-parodying tendency and digressions in mock epics

verse novel fundamentally deconstructing established literary norms

3. Extensions

contemporary verse novels – reflections on 19th-century verse novels

similar characteristics too – e.g. János Térey's *Paulus* has a dominant narrator

three storylines (Pál 'Paul' the geek, Friedrich von Paulus, the biblical Paul)

→ the form of the verse novel is further deconstructed

Térey's *Paulus*: rewriting Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (cf. Margócsy 2002)

Pál and Ludovika ~ Onegin and Tatiana

Ludovika already married when meeting Pál – but: affair

“letter” of Ludovika – virus (destructive)

finally Ludovika sends Pál away (more harshly than Tatiana)

→ Frye's way of reading Byron is also productive on the genre level

References

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- Frye, Northrop (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
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- Margócsy, István (2002) Térey János: *Paulus*. 2000 14.1. 37–45.