

# Comparative Approach, Genre History and Verse Novels

## 0. Introduction

role of comparative approach in genre history – genre of the verse novel

contemporary verse novels

*Autobiography of Red* (Anne Carson)

*Der fliegende Berg* (Christoph Ransmayr)

*Paulus* (János Térey)

question: how far they are comparable

e.g. Anthony Burgess's *Byrne* or Frederick Pollack's *Happiness*

also: historical connections – Byron's *Don Juan*

→ proposal: approach from genre history and comparative approach

- notion of verse novel not a predefined category
- interpretation of a text within a literary context dependent on comparative approach

## 1. The Byronic verse novel in English literature

beginning of the verse novel: Byron's *Don Juan*

→ question: status of *Don Juan* within Byron's oeuvre and in English literature

precursors of *Don Juan*

- mock epics – Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (cf. Rawson 1990; Cronin 2011)
- romantic verse narratives – Scott's ballads (cf. Fischer 1991; Bacskai-Atkari 2011a)
- Byron's own epic poetry – *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (cf. Bacskai-Atkari 2011b)

features of *Don Juan* – ironic tone; particular narrative structure

- strong presence of the narrator
- highly reflexive text – both on the diegetic and the extradiegetic level
- intertextual links – literary debates

Canto I, stanza 222:

- (1) '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 status of *Don Juan* in English literature

- belongs to the romantic verse narrative – the last one (cf. Fischer 1991)
- no continuation in English literature in the 19th century

- regarding English literature, *Don Juan* is not the first verse novel
- question: why and how *Don Juan* still counts as the first verse novel

## **2. The Byronic verse novel in the 19th century – a comparative approach**

strong impact of Byron on national literatures in Europe – differences

verse novels resembling *Don Juan*: mostly sporadic examples  
e.g. Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* in Russian literature

in some cases the verse novel appears as a genre – several instances

Polish literature – e.g. Słowacki's *Beniowski* (cf. Modrzewska 2004)

Hungarian literature – e.g. János Arany's *Bolond Istók* [Stephen the Fool]

→ significance of *Don Juan* can be understood only via a comparative approach

- this may cast light upon certain features that proved to be fruitful in cross-literary terms too
- even for a monographic study of Byron (or Pushkin) – imitation of his verse novel not restricted to its own national literary context

## **3. The verse novel as a self-reflexive genre**

self-reflexive tendency in verse novels

- a given text reflecting on itself
- reflections on the genre – cross-literal connections established intra-textually

Pushkin: references to Byron

Hungarian verse novels: references both to Byron and to Pushkin

Pushkin had a more significant impact (cf. Imre 1990) – closer to the prose novel

- explicit references
  - Pál Gyulai's *Romhányi*: narrator at one point states that his hero will differ from Don Juan and Onegin
  - János Arany's *Bolond Istók* [Stephen the Fool]: long introduction claimed to be the influence of Byron – convention
- implicit references – e.g. paraphrases
  - Pál Gyulai's *Romhányi* and László Arany's *A délibábok hőse* [The Hero of Mirages]: paraphrases of *Eugene Onegin*

→ notion of the verse novel as a genre emerges only cross-culturally

## **4. Contemporary verse novels**

importance of the genre in English literature ← considering contemporary verse novels

highly heterogeneous pool of texts – subject matter (cf. Addison 2009), versification

comparative approach required even when considering English texts only

*Byrne* (1998) – Anthony Burgess (British)

*Happiness* (1998) – Frederick Pollack (American)

*Autobiography of Red* (1998) – Anne Carson (Canadian)

*The Golden Gate* (1986) – Vikram Seth (Indian)

*Akhenaten* (1992) – Dorothy Porter (Australian)

genre characteristics arising as a result of a comparative approach

- strong self-reflexive tendency
- marked presence of narrators
- ironic treatment of existing tradition – also that of the Byronic verse novel
- adopting classical forms and experimenting with new ones

*Autobiography of Red* – recreating an ancient Greek myth and an author

autobiography written by Geryon, written by the poet Stesichoros  
but: set in a modern context, original myth seen as fiction

Byrne, *The Golden Gate*: evoking the tone of *Don Juan*

evoking forms

*Byrne*: Byronic stanzas (ottava rima)

*The Golden Gate*: Onegin stanzas

→ cross-cultural references (Byron → Pushkin → Seth)

- explicit references too

*Byrne* (Part One, stanza 2):

- (2) *He thought he was a kind of living myth  
And hence deserving of ottava rima,  
The scheme that Ariosto juggled with,  
Apt for a lecherous defective dreamer.  
He'd have preferred a stronger-muscled smith,  
Anvilling rhymes amid poetic steam, a  
Sort of Lord Byron. Byron was long dead.  
This poetaster had to do instead.*

degrading (hero, author-narrator)

occasionally the epic tradition also evoked

*The Golden Gate* (Canto One, stanza 1):

- (3) *To make a start more swift than weighty,  
Hail Muse. Dear Reader, once upon  
A time, say, circa 1980,  
There lived a man. His name was John.  
Successful in his field though only  
Twenty-six, respected, lonely,  
One evening as he walked across  
Golden Gate Park, the ill-judged toss  
Of a red frisbee almost brained him.  
He thought, "If I died, who'd be sad?  
Who'd weep? Who'd gloat? Who would be glad?  
Would anybody?" As it pained him,  
He turned from this dispiriting theme  
To ruminations less extreme.*

other genre connections – e.g. *Happiness*: science fiction utopias

### 5. More on the cross-cultural nature of verse novels

appearance of contemporary verse novels not restricted to the English language

Ransmayr's *Der fliegende Berg* – German

free verse – but verse form still preferred over prose

Hungarian verse novels – e.g. Balázs Szálinger's *A százegyedik év* [The 101st Year]

cross-cultural references

János Térey's *Paulus*: paraphrasing *Eugene Onegin* (also: degrading)

### Conclusion

- the notion of the verse novel as a genre not a pre-given category
  - the fact that a particular texts belongs to this genre becomes obvious only when taking other verse novels into account
- otherwise Byron's *Don Juan* or contemporary verse novels may seem to be isolated works
  - the verse novel, either in the 19th or the 21st century, is best analysed by applying a comparative approach

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