

The verse novel and Don Juan as the vehicle of satire

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1 Introduction

Lord Byron's *Don Juan*: first verse novel

- contemporary (19th-century) English literature: *Don Juan* belongs to the tradition of the Romantic verse narrative (Fischer 1991) – verse novel not established as a genre (Bacskai-Atkari 2016; to appear)
- term “verse novel” or “novel in verse” (Роман в Стихах) stems from Pushkin (*Eugene Onegin*) – idiosyncratic subtitle indicating some closeness to the Russian prose novel (see Tosi 2006)
- verse novel as a genre designator emerges along with the cross-cultural spread of relevant examples (world literature) – well-established genre in certain national literatures, e.g. Hungarian literature (Bacskai-Atkari 2016)
- contemporary verse novels in English (e.g. Anthony Burgess's *Byrnie*, see Addison 2009) – verse novel as a genre in English literature (Bacskai-Atkari to appear)

characteristics of the verse novel: foregrounding of the narrator, reflexive narrative structure, ironic/satirical mode

questions:

- whether the choice of the hero in *Don Juan* is essential to satire
- whether the character of Byron's Don Juan has an influence on later verse novels that have different heroes

proposal:

- choice of Don Juan: arbitrary decision of the narrator, the hero is secondary to the presence of the narrator → contributes to a strongly reflexive text with a dominant narrator
- choice of Don Juan as a familiar character who embodies certain qualities → allows the narrator to place the hero into diverse roles in several contexts, resulting in a multi-level satire
- later verse novels: role of Don Juan one possible role, becomes both a vehicle and target of satire

2 Byron's verse novel

beginning of *Don Juan*:

I want a hero: an uncommon want,
When every year and month sends forth a new one,
Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
The age discovers he is not the true one;
Of such as these I should not care to vaunt,
I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan,
We all have seen him in the pantomime
Sent to the devil, somewhat ere his time.

(Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, I.1)

narrator's person dominates the text and his presence is given earlier than his alleged choice of a hero

→ narrator's rhetoric suggests that Don Juan is merely a last resort option

choice of Don Juan:

- one possibility of several others – many of these enumerated in stanzas 2–5
- Don Juan well-known for the readers (maybe too much so) from popular genres as well, hence the hero's story and eventual fate are not new
- also: the narrator has more freedom regarding Don Juan – story not only known but also flexible (legendary but still fictitious character)

Don Juan's legend well known – Tirso de Molina, Molière, Lorenzo da Ponte/Mozart; various theatre versions and performances (see Haslett 1997)

fixed point of the Don Juan story: hero going to hell at the end (see quotation above)

otherwise: Don Juan rather embodies a certain quality (womaniser, young and wealthy libertine able to seduce all women) – the fixed ending stands as a punishment for this quality, and the description of the quality through actions is relatively free

→ Byron concentrates on the development of Don Juan into a seducer and on his adventures, plans concerning the length of *Don Juan* vary constantly and the end is postponed, structure essentially allows for infinite continuation (text not finished due to Byron's death)

moreover, Don Juan is often neglected on the expense of other topics → Don Juan used as a vehicle of satire – in line with non-identificational mood

Don Juan constantly reflects on the contemporary world (cf. McGann 2002: 38–45) – multi-level satire (contemporary society, some prominent members thereof, literary trends, modes of expression)

due to the dominance of the narrator and his frequent digressions, satire is not restricted to the depicted events of the story but can be observed in the narrator's remarks pointing outside of the text – constant interaction

several scenes in *Don Juan*: Spain, Greece, Turkey, Russia, England – all include social satire but to varying degrees (also: many elements in Canto I set in Spain are reminiscent of England)

satire most explicit when Don Juan is placed into England – high expectations contrasted with his first experience (robbed by a mugger)

→ choice of Don Juan as a hero is in line with the social satire and the highly reflexive narrative structure of the text

3 Don Juan as a role

features of Byron's Don Juan:

- essentially lonely, disillusioned (spleen), experimenting with several roles (without true identification), the opportunity of true love lost (Haidée episode)
- seducer (follows from the legend, no complete overlap with the legendary icon)

features of heroes of prototypical verse novels:

- essentially lonely, disillusioned (spleen), the opportunity of true love lost (often the fault of the hero)
- experimenting with several roles (without true identification), including that of Don Juan

attitude of the narrator towards the hero: similarities and critical stance, Byron's narrator essentially adheres to Don Juan's character (both adventures and spleen), subsequent verse novels more critical with respect to a "Don Juan-like" behaviour

first verse novel following *Don Juan*: Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1825)

explicit references to Byron – narrator claims his methods are (partly) different from those of Byron (Chapter I, stanza 56); discussion of dark Romantic, Byronic heroes in connection with Tatyana’s readings/feelings (Chapter 3, stanza 12); Onegin’s spleen compared to Childe Harold (Chapter I, stanza 38)

The illness, whose well-hidden reason
Long time ago we have sought,
Like English spleen of a bad season,
In short, handra – a Russian word –
Slow brought him into its possessions;
To shoot himself, thank holy patience,
He didn’t attempt in his sore strife,
But wholly lost his zest for life,
Like Childe Harold, all pined and aimless,
He visited receptions’ lot;
Neither waltz-Boston, nor a word,
Nor a sweet look nor a sigh shameless
Nothing touched his extinguished soul:
He simply did not feel this all.

(Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, I.38; Yevgeny Bonver’s translation)

features:

- satire: Saint Petersburg society, village social life; but: overarching satirical mode characteristic of Byron is reduced
- language: similarly to Byron, highly self-reflexive, ironic, narrator dominant
- Onegin has Don Juan-like traits in both contexts – seducer in Saint Petersburg, pretends to be seducing Olga
- but: Don Juan only a role for him, with which he cannot identify – spleen after Saint Petersburg period, taking up the seducer role for Olga has a different purpose (revealing Olga’s character), and results in disaster (duel)
- hence: Don Juan is a clearly identifiable role but it is only temporarily present and is reviewed critically, in parallel with the overarching satirical stance

Anthony Burgess’s *Byrne* (published in 1995): explicitly starts with a comparison between the narrator and Byron, and between Byrne and Don Juan (see Bacskai-Atkari to appear)

- Byrne fairly similar to Don Juan (womaniser, adventurer), extensive travelling (as in Byron)
- but: Byrne essentially an epigone of Don Juan – Don Juan is again a role that the hero uses, though not just temporarily but rather embedding it into his general playing with masks (including names), hence role part of his self-representation
- satire: can be detected but the hero serves less as a vehicle for that, the text essentially establishes the legendary character of Byrne, while Byron rather demystifies the character of Don Juan

Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986): protagonist John Brown (IT-expert) past his womaniser phase:

Gray-eyed, blond-haired, aristocratic
In height, impatience, views, and face,
Discriminating though dogmatic,
Tender beneath a carapace
Of well-groomed tastes and tasteful grooming,
John, though his corporate stock is booming,
For all his mohair, serge, and tweed,
Senses his life has run to seed.
A passionate man, with equal parts of
Irritability and charm,
Without as such intending harm,
His flaring temper singed the hearts of
Several women in the days
Before his chaste, ambitious phase.

(Vikram Seth, *The Golden Gate*, I.4)

features:

- John is only remotely similar to Don Juan (except for his past) – his experiments with relationships (Liz, Janet) rather serve to find true love, not seduction
- the lack of Don Juan as a role makes the narrative more condensed (no seeking of adventures, travels)
- satirical elements barely present (primary focus: love, circle of family/friends), narrator not as dominant as in Byron, text less self-reflexive

János Térey's *Paulus*: strongly built on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*

- protagonist Pál an IT-expert: system administrator and hacker – double-sided nature generally present in the work, both imitating Pushkin's synthesising property and questioning it (cf. Margócsy 2002)
- similar to Don Juan in that he is a womaniser – but this is only one role for him among others he is experimenting with in his general dichotomy of building/destroying
- Pál's satirical stance viewed critically by the narrator – no overarching satirical mode in the sense that the satirical viewpoint is also thematised and questioned
- language: mixed, juxtapositions, highly self-reflexive

4 Conclusion

choice of Don Juan as a hero in Byron's *Don Juan*:

- enables a highly self-reflexive, digressive mode of narration (familiarity of the hero)
- enables a flexible handling of the story (filling the gaps of the legend with arbitrary content) → makes a multi-level satire possible
- consequences for later verse novels: both the figure of Don Juan and satirical mode serve as models but both tend to be embedded along other concerns and their validity may be questioned

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