

Comparative Approach, Genre History and Verse Novels

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Aims

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 are they comparable?
e.g. Burgess's *Byrne* or Pollack's *Happiness*

+ 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

Byron's *Don Juan*

beginning of the verse novel

→ 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:

*'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.*

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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 does *Don Juan* still count as the first verse novel?

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*

The verse novel as a genre

in some cases it 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]

So...

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

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

The 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*

So...

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

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

results 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

Evoking...

- ◉ *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

?

Explicit references

YES!

Byrne (Part One, stanza 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 and author-narrator



Degrading

hero and author-narrator



Epic tradition

occasionally also evoked!

The Golden Gate (Canto One, stanza 1):

*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

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 text 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

Conclusion

the verse novel, either in the 19th or the 21st century, is best analysed by applying a comparative approach

Thank you!
Merci beaucoup!



Questions?



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