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The Hungarian Verse Novel in a Cross-Cultural Perspective

The verse novel is a particularly important phenomenon of 19th-century Hungarian literature. Even though there are considerable differences among the individual texts, we can speak of the verse novel as a stabilized genre; works belonging to it are characterized by features such as the high self-reflexivity of these texts, the foregrounding of narration, the ironic treatment of established popular literary genres and of literary conventions, or the figure of the hero who is characterised by spleen and does not find his place in society and ruins his personal life.¹ Such features may well be familiar from verse narratives in other languages, most especially from those of Byron or Pushkin; the Hungarian verse novel, however, is unique in its relatively firm generic self-identification, something we do not find in their English or Russian counterparts. But while we may speak of the Hungarian verse novel as a genre specific to 19th century Hungarian literary culture, it is also one that was formed in an intercultural context: it is an important example to how works so particularly belonging to a national tradition are to be understood as transcultural products. I want to suggest in this essay that their very “Hungarianness” could only come about through intercultural encounters.

Prototypical examples of the Hungarian verse novel include László Arany’s *A délibábok hőse* [The Hero of Mirages] from 1872, János Arany’s *Bolond Istók* [Stephen the Fool] from 1850/1873, or János Vajda’s *Találkozások* [Meetings] from 1877; there are also some texts that one can marginally add, for instance János Vajda’s *Alfréd regénye* [Alfred’s Romance] from 1875 or even Endre Ady’s *Margita élni akar* [Margita Wants to Live] from 1910. Although we may even find contemporary examples, it is a genre that was formed and flourished in the latter

part of the nineteenth century.² It is best examined in cross-cultural terms for two chief reasons. First, it is a unique by-product of self-conscious generic experiments related to the 19th century epic that can be observed in various national literatures across Europe; at the same time, the normalisation of these experiments into a single genre is an idiosyncratic property of Hungarian literature. Second, even though the Hungarian verse novel is a literary response to the Hungarian experiments related to the 19th century epic, its immediate incentives were the verse narratives of Byron and Pushkin (*Don Juan* and *Eugene Onegin* in particular). I will discuss how Hungarian verse novels interacted with their models; but in order to grasp how such influences were stabilized into a genre that we may regard far less amorphous than its sources, we must also map the particular circumstances in which this kind of writing was formed.

Generic Contexts for the Verse Novel in Hungary

The 19th-century verse novel may be seen as a genre produced in response to issues central to the Hungarian literature of the time, which is best displayed by examining its relationship to the debates concerning the epic in Hungary. One central aspiration of 19th-century Hungarian literature was the creation of the national epic. On the one hand, the national epic was to fill an apparent gap created by the lack of an original archaic epic or epic-like verse narrative (the kind that for instance the *Nibelungenlied* [The Song of the Nibelungs] was for German literature).³ On the other hand, there was a conscious aim of differentiating the 19th century national epic from examples of the classical epic, e.g. Miklós Zrínyi's *Szigeti veszedelem* [The Siege of Sziget], published in 1651. The national epic was to represent early Hungarian history, serving

also as an embodiment of national identity. Many Hungarian romantic epics can be considered embodiments of this aspiration and some of the most important poets of the time were involved, including Mihály Vörösmarty with his *Zalán futása* [The Flight of Zalán, 1825] and János Arany with his numerous unfinished attempts, such as the plan of the *Csaba-trilógia* [Csaba Trilogy 1853–1881] or *Buda halála* [The Death of Buda, 1863], all of which related to early Hungarian history and mythology.

Similar attempts can be observed in other Central-European literatures as well, though the degree to which such texts participated in the construction of national identity shows great variation.⁴ For instance, Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* (1834) in Polish literature clearly belongs to this trend,⁵ as well as Ján Botto's *Smrť Jánošíkova* [The Death of Jánošík; 1862] in Slovak literature,⁶ the 1888 Latvian national romantic epic *Lāčplēsis* [Bearslayer] by Andrejs Pumpurs,⁷ or the epics (e.g. *Gorski vijenac* [The Mountain Wreath], 1847) of the Montenegrin poet Petar II Petrović Njegoš in a fundamentally oral literary tradition.⁸ But as will be detailed below, this is not the situation in England, from where the primary incentive of the Hungarian verse novel derives – in English literature between 1790 and 1830, a central aim was to replace the epic by a modern kind of verse narrative,⁹ which crucially did not involve writing a designated national epic.

In Hungarian literature, such a single designated text was in fact desired to fill the role of the national epic.¹⁰ The seriousness of this ambition is well marked by the fact that attempts at questioning the status of the epic were initially marginalised. For example, Sándor Petőfi's mock epic *A helység kalapácsa* [The Hammer of the Village] was not particularly well received at the time of its appearance (1844) though he was a defining poet; the same impulse also explains the

fact that when 19th-century critics and authors discussed the epic poetry of Mihály Csokonai Vitéz (1773–1805), they were not primarily concerned with his mock epic *Dorottya* but rather with the classic epic he planned to write.¹¹ Given the central role of the epic in the 19th century, we may suppose that the status of any verse narrative written in the period – including that of the verse novel – has to be considered primarily in relation to the epic.

Indeed, verse novels typically contain explicit references to the epic, markedly positioning themselves with respect to – and typically against – the conventions of the epic. In this sense, the verse novel can be considered as an explicit literary response to the epic. Although the mocking of the epic had been present in mock-epics previously as well (the most notable Hungarian example is *Dorottya* by Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, published in 1803), verse novels differ crucially in that they do not imitate the formal properties of the epic but merely refer to them.¹² For instance a mock-epic such as *Dorottya* places the invocation at the beginning of the entire text, that is, it adheres to the epic convention at least in formal terms; by contrast, a verse novel such as László Arany's *A délibábok hőse* [The Hero of Mirages] will also use an invocation, but will resituate it in the text, and while the epic convention remains recognizable, it is employed in a non-conventional form. (Byron may of course be thought of as a precedent here, as his famous mock-invocation in *Don Juan* – “Hail, Muse! *et cetera*” – is placed at the beginning of Canto III.).¹³ But, perhaps, the verse novel's critical stance towards the epic is even more striking when instead of evoking epic conventions out of context, the work contains explicit discussions of certain epic conventions. János Arany in Canto II of *Bolond Istók* [Stephen the Fool] includes a description of the failure of the national epic (the task of which was to a large extent assigned to János Arany himself,¹⁴ as well as reference to the critical responses of the audience to Arany's

own parody of the epic venture in *A nagyidai cigányok* [The Gypsies of Nagyida]. Yet another way in which the verse novel positions itself in relation to the epic can be detected in the work of Pál Gyulai, who was not only a prominent critic but also a novelist and a poet himself, and the author of the verse novel *Romhányi*. One of his primary concerns was the modern novel, and, besides reviewing contemporary Hungarian prose novels, he also published a shorter one himself in 1857, *Egy régi udvarház utolsó gazdája* [The Last Master of an Old Manor-House]. Gyulai perceived the verse novel as a middle way between the epic and the prose novel: while he deemed the epic more suitable for expressing certain national traits, he also thought that the classical epic was no longer satisfactory for modern literature.¹⁵ In other words, he was aiming at a kind of verse narrative that could replace the epic, and the verse novel was, in his view, an ideal candidate.

This last instance also reveals that the epic was not the only point of reference in the crystallization of the genre: Hungarian verse novels were very frequently critical towards other genres as well, primarily towards contemporary novels.¹⁶ Pál Gyulai had serious reservations concerning the prose novel, most examples of which he considered to be sensational and full of unrealistic events. Such reservations and explicit claims were also made in many verse novels, not only in Pál Gyulai's *Romhányi* (expressing direct criticism of Mór Jókai, one of the most prominent novelists in the period), but also in László Arany's *A délibábok hőse*. In Gyulai's *Romhányi*, there is a point in the story when the protagonist, who is on the run because he had fought in the revolutionary war of 1848–1849, is brought to the house of a woman he previously courted but abandoned. He is exhausted and unconscious, as described in Canto II stanza 36:

De rá nem ismer, oly nagy láza,
S ismét behunyja a szemét...
Hát ily sovány regényem váza,
S mily prózai, szokott beszéd.
Jó olvasóm, tán így fogsz szólni,
Ki vártál nagy jelenetet,
Romhányi hogy' fog szónokolni...
Nem kínozom a beteget.
Ha nagy, csodás és szörnyű szép kell,
A Jókai regényét nyisd fel;
Én ezt meg nem tanulhatám,
Nincs hozzá sok phantasiám.¹⁷

In verbatim translation:

But he does not recognize her, so high is his fever,
And he closes his eyes again...
So meagre is the skeleton of my novel,
And what prosaic, common speech.
My dear reader, so will you perhaps speak,
Having expected a great scene,
How Romhányi would orate...
I will not torture the patient.
If you need something great, miraculous and terribly beautiful,
Open Jókai's novels;
I could not learn this,
I have not much phantasy for it.

The narrator in the third and fourth lines describes a response that he attributes to his reader, as a response to the first two lines. The clash represented here is between the kind of literature the narrator wishes to (and does) produce and the kind which is here represented by Mór Jókai, a contemporary of Gyulai who was famous for his romantic novels. They are characterised by highly improbable scenes and romantic extremities, at least according to Gyulai's narrator. As this instance reveals, verse novels can display an ironic stance not only towards the epic, but also towards the contemporary novel.

The epic aspiration and its eventual rejection, as well as the critical debates surrounding the prose novel, are the primary features of the Hungarian literary culture of the time which enhanced the emergence of the verse novel. It emerged as a genre that can be defined through its

critical relation to other genres preoccupying Hungarian writers, and in this critical self-positioning, the verse novel stands as an alternative to forms aspiring for the status of grand national narratives. But it could hardly have taken the shape that it did without intercultural literary encounters, which must now be also observed.

Intercultural Contexts of the Genre of the Verse Novel

Beyond the immediate context of Hungarian literature and criticism, the formation of the Hungarian verse novel was enhanced by two outstanding European precedents, Byron's *Don Juan* and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Significantly, these works were in their own cultural contexts regarded as generically unstable or ill-defined, while in Hungarian critical literature they were perceived as belonging to the generically unambiguous form of verse novels. Although in the case of *Eugene Onegin*, the designator "verse novel" or "novel in verse" (Помаи в Стихах) comes from Pushkin himself, what seems to have been an idiosyncratic subtitle for Pushkin came to be interpreted as a genre designator in Hungarian literature (and the Hungarian interpretation of *Don Juan* and, especially, *Eugene Onegin*). Genres are, of course, never essential or ahistorical abstract entities to which particular works conform; they come about and shift shapes in a complex process of literary negotiation, via imitation and innovation; generic denominations can thus often be contentious issues. Byron's and Pushkin's works, despite (or perhaps because) of the numerous generic indicators they employ were seen as generically idiosyncratic. That in a Hungarian context they were unanimously seen as verse novels was not

due to what they “really” were in generic terms, but was the by-product of the emergence of the Hungarian verse novel.

Indeed, the English and the Russian literary contexts were rather different from the Hungarian one (and also from each other), and literary responses to the epic were not normalised into a single genre in either of them. As mentioned above, there was in England a desire to devise a new kind of verse narrative that could supplant the epic, but this did not go along either with an aspirations for, or with a criticism of an aspiration for producing a national epic. The experiments in this field are covered by the umbrella term “romantic verse narrative” by Fischer, and they include examples quite close to the epic (such as Southey’s *The Curse of Kehama*, *Joan of Arc*, *Thalaba*, or *Madoc*) as well as ones that were closer to the ballad and the romance (such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, or Scott’s ballads, most remarkably *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, *Marmion*, or *The Lady of the Lake*). Several texts of Byron also belong here (e.g. *The Giaour*, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, or *Don Juan*).¹⁸ English narrative poetry was fairly divergent in the period, there being several sporadic experiments only loosely connected to one another. This is also to say that in the English context, no genre identifiable as “verse novel” crystallized.

Byron’s *Don Juan*, which in Hungary was seen as a prime example of the form, was in the English context seen as but one possible version of the romantic verse narrative, and Byron was generally perceived to be a follower of Scott, especially with his earlier works,¹⁹ while *Don Juan* was seen as taking verse narratives into a self-destructive direction.²⁰ This destructive character attributed to the work is to a large extent due to the reflexive nature of the text, which involves the ironic treatment of established works and genres. In this respect, Byron was influenced by

mock-epics, but also by novelists such as Fielding and, most importantly, Sterne.²¹ Such a mixture of precedents, however, did not point towards any notion of a verse novel, a genre that never came about at the time of the boom of verse narratives in Britain – as opposed to the Hungarian context.²² *Don Juan* did not even find any imitators in the period in England,²³ and far from being seen as establishing the genre of the verse novel, it was rather regarded as the endpoint of the tradition of English romantic verse narrative.²⁴

But despite *Don Juan*'s lack of direct influence in English literature at the time, it had considerable impact on the continent. The best-known instance of this impact is probably Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. But not even in the course of this transcultural exchange did Byron's work become a defining specimen of the genre of the verse novel: in the Russian context, *Eugene Onegin* was considered to be related to the (prose) novel, primarily because the genre of the verse novel was as alien to Russian literature as it was to English literature. The sense of the generic proximity of this kind of writing to the novel can be discerned in the network of influences surrounding it. On the one hand, Pushkin's work was strongly influenced by Russian prose novels, e.g. the works of Karamzin;²⁵ in turn, it came to be influential in terms of later Russian novels, e.g. the works of Ivan Turgenev or Leo Tolstoy. On the other hand, the impact of *Don Juan* on Russian literature was – apart from Pushkin – manifests primarily in prose novels, e.g. in Lermontov's *Герой нашего времени* [A Hero of Our Time].²⁶ Although *Eugene Onegin* explicitly makes ironic references to the epic tradition in the way *Don Juan* does (for instance, the invocation is placed at the very end of Chapter VII, which is the penultimate chapter), it also contains features that stress, more strongly than in Byron's case, the form's proximity to the novel: unlike *Don Juan*, it consists of chapters and not of cantos. It is also more succinct and

centred on the story, for even though narration is foregrounded, the storyline does not become subsidiary to the narrator's personal concerns. Thus, we may say that similarly to the case of *Don Juan*, Pushkin's work – its generic contextualization and its influence – also failed to produce the stable form of the verse novel in Russian literature that Hungarian writers could adopt as a ready-made genre.

Although in the English and the Russian contexts these seminal works were not defined as initiating the genre of the verse novel, their impact in Hungary did have such an influence. Indeed, both Byron and Pushkin were highly influential in 19th-century Hungary. Many Hungarian verse novels testify the impact of *Don Juan*. Many (including János Arany's *Bolond Istók* or László Arany's *A délibábok hőse*) were written in the stanzas of Byron's *Don Juan*, and we also find numerous explicit references to Byron's texts. For instance, in János Arany's *Bolond Istók* the narrator refers to his tendency to digress from the storyline as an inheritance of Byron (Canto I, stanza 71):

Hosszas valék, de Byront követém:

“My way is, to begin with the beginning”–

Azazhoggy *kezdem a legkezdetén*;

(Ő mondja ezt, pedig külön *legin'* mint

A többi dúdoló e sár-tekén;

Vagy ha nem is, külön bizonynal mint *mink.*)

Méltán! hisz' a kis búszerző elég

Sokat tön már, noha picinyke még.²⁷

In verbatim translation:

I have been lengthy, but I have been following Byron:

“My way is, to begin with the beginning” –

That is, I *begin* at the *very beginning*;

(He says so, and he is a better *lad* than

The other hummers on this globe of mud;

Or even if he is not, he is definitely better than *us*.)

Justifiably! since the little troublemaker has

Done a lot already, though he is still tiny.

The reference to Byron is also a reference to a certain standard to which the narrator adheres: a given quality of the text (that is, lengthiness), is justifiable because it stems from Byron, which Arany also underlines with a direct quotation from *Don Juan* (Canto I, stanza 7). In other words, a Hungarian verse novel may refer back to *Don Juan* as a point of orientation: an example that should be followed, and hence the basis of a genre. Note also that Arany here is referring to a trait of *Don Juan* that concerns the poetics of Byron’s text: digression is not merely a feature that can be detected in *Don Juan* but rather a fundamental narrative trait that is essential in the composition.²⁸ In turn, the reference is not accidental in Arany’s text either, in that the composition of his *Bolond Istók* is fundamentally characterised by digression as well. This may indicate that beyond the adaptation of a stanzaic form or explicit references to Byron or his text, *Don Juan* also offered a model in poetic structure that helped shape the Hungarian verse novel.

And we may observe a wider context as well in which Byron was instrumental for the formation of the genre in Hungary. It must be noted that the Hungarian verse novel appeared relatively late in the course of Byron’s spreading popularity. He was already very well known in

Hungary in the 1820s and 1830s, at that time primarily through the huge impact of *Childe Harold* on lyric poetry.²⁹ János Arany was already familiar with Byron's lyric poetry in the 1830s, but he had only read *Don Juan* (as far as we can tell) by 1845.³⁰ Arany published Canto I of *Bolond Istók* [Stephen the Fool] in 1850 but he continued with Canto II only in 1873. Similarly, Pál Gyulai started working on *Romhányi* as early as 1858 but this work was again resumed only in the 1870s. This chronological difference between Byron's general impact and his influence on the verse novel is significant because it coincides with a general shift in Hungarian literature in the period: the gradually decreasing interest in creating the national epic and the increasing appeal of a highly ironic mode. The two processes are presumably not unrelated and their connection suggests how the formation of a genre in peculiarly Hungarian contexts is by no means independent of intercultural negotiations.

A similar scenario presents itself when we look at the influence of Pushkin. This influence was boosted by Károly Bérczy's 1866 translation of *Eugene Onegin*, initially based on the existing German translations, and relying only later on the Russian original.³¹ This translation made fully available in Hungarian another model for a highly ironic verse narrative. Pushkin's influence is even more visible than Byron's partly because Hungarian verse novels are often paraphrases of the Onegin-story.³² Pál Gyulai's *Romhányi* can be mentioned as one example, and László Arany's *A délibábok hőse* as another, the latter being a rather ironic paraphrase of Pushkin's original. In both cases, the basic scheme is that the hero leaves a young woman who is in love with him, and when he returns to her, she is already married to someone else. In the case of *A délibábok hőse*, the protagonist (Balázs) is actually in love with this woman, but he leaves to join the army without asking her hand in marriage. When, years after, they meet again, Balázs

goes out drinking with her husband, and when they return home and the husband falls asleep, Balázs ends up trying to rape her. This is in line with the general characteristic of László Arany's work that represents the clash between ideals and reality in a way that suggests a deepening of Pushkin's cynicism.³³

As mentioned above, Pushkin's work in a Russian context is more readily relatable to the prose novel than to the verse narrative (the generic frame of *Don Juan* in an English context). Hungarian verse novels are similar to *Eugene Onegin* for (typically) retaining a novel-like storyline; but as discussed in the previous section, they are also markedly positioned against the contemporary trends in prose novels, which complicates the generic matrix of Pushkin's influence. In the Hungarian context, the ironic mode of the verse novel also extended to alienating narrative gestures pertaining not only to the epic, but also to the novel. This typically takes the form of genre parody, with the result of an explicit distancing of the verse novel from the prose novel, as is the case in László Arany's *A délibábok hőse* when the narrator tells us that the hero has escaped from the army, and continues as follows (Canto III, stanzas 9–10):

Majd észrevették, s a tenger fokáig
Egész csapat zsandár üldözte őt;
Itt víz alá bukott, úszott sokáig,
Utána ötven cső hiába lőtt;
És úszik egyhuzamban Anconáig,
Hol egy halásztanyán nyer új erőt...
– Így mondaná talán el sok regény,
De kérlek, olvasóm, ne hidd, hogy én.

<break>

Tőlem ne várj kaland-okozta lázat;
Ha borzadályt kívánsz, vérbódítót,
Ha véred petyhüdt, hogy forgásba rázzad
Keress kötél tánccost, cirkuszt, bitót;
Vagy nézz el egy Pesten építte házat,
S lesd meg, mikor potyog le róla tót,
S borzadj, ha tetszik ott; de e poéma
Nem izgató szer, és tintám se pézsma.³⁴

In verbatim translation:

Then they saw him, and a whole group of gendarmes
Chased him up to the seashore;
Here he dived into the water, swam for a while,
In vain did fifty guns shoot after him;
And he swims at a stretch to Ancona,
Where he regains his power in a fisherman's cottage...
– This is how many novels would perhaps recite this,
But please, my reader, do not think that I would do so.
<break>

Do not expect adventure-incensed fever of me;
If you wish horror that is narcotic,
If your blood is droopy, look for acrobats, the circus
Or the gallows to stimulate it;
Or observe a house being built in Pest,
And watch out for the Slovaks to fall down,
And shudder there, if you wish; but this poem
Is not a stimulant, and my ink is no musk either.

The first stanza of the quotation above is an imitation of certain romantic (prose) novels, up until the last two lines, which explicitly show that the narrator rejects this kind of literature. In the next stanza the narrator argues at length that it is primarily the reader's expectation that a novel should include such unlikely adventures, making the point about novels not a question of the author's personal taste, but an issue of a more general literary debate about readerly expectations. The narrator's gesture actually calls on the reader to abandon the novel's sensationalism, and to opt for a form of literature that is alien to the dominant trends in prose novels. It must, however, be noted that while the verse novel is defined here through a critical contrast with the prose novel, the very fact that the comparison arises also suggests that verse novels, for all their difference, are not wholly unrelated to the prose novel – as, indeed, was the case for Pushkin's work in a Russian context.

The generic negotiations that are going on here are in fact characteristic of verse novels: they contain ample discussion of how the given text relates to others, either to particular ones or to certain genres. In Hungarian verse novels, there is an additional layer of literary reflection:

namely on the genre of the verse novel itself. This is something that was not available for Byron and Pushkin, given that in the English or Russian contexts the verse novel was not an identified genre in its own right. Of course, Pushkin was able to reflect on *Don Juan* or other works of Byron. For instance, the narrator of *Eugene Onegin* refers to Byron's way of writing in Canto I, stanza 56:

O flowers, and love, and rustic leisure,
o fields – to you I'm vowed at heart.
I regularly take much pleasure
in showing how to tell apart
myself and Eugene, lest a reader
of mocking turn, or else a breeder
of calculated slander should,
spying my features, as he could,
put back the libel on the table
that, like proud Byron, I can draw
self-portraits only – furthermore
the charge that poets are unable
to sing of others must imply
the poet's only theme is "I."³⁵

This is an explicit reference to a well-known quality of Byron's texts, that is, the tendency to keep the author-narrator's figure close to that of the hero, occasionally also merging the two. Pushkin's cross-cultural gesture both relates his text to and distinguishes it from those of Byron.

This link is actually recognisable for the reader who sees the similarity between Byron and Pushkin. And indeed, Hungarian verse novels very much saw this similarity and could adopt Pushkin's strategy of relating his work to Byron, by relating themselves to both Byron and Pushkin. And it is in doing so that they could reflect on a genre that was produced in Hungarian literature partly through just these intercultural encounters.

The references to Byron and Pushkin very often involve an attempt to define the given text as being different from Byron and Pushkin precisely in its being Hungarian. To provide one example, in Pál Gyulai's *Romhányi* the narrator at the very end of Canto III states that his hero (Romhányi) will be neither Don Juan nor Onegin because "he is only poor Romhányi", "Hungarian by birth":

Annyit megmondok most előre,
Hogy hősöm nem lesz Don Juan,
Anyégin sem válik belőle,
Szegény Romhányi ő csupán.
Magyar szülött, bírálóim bár
Tagadják s becsmérlik nagyon,
Hanem gúny rajtam ki nem fog már,
Munkámat félbe nem hagyom.
Nem csüggeszt balga vád, ítélet,
Nem ösztönöz hiú dicséret...
Ne kiméld gyöngé oldalát,
De várd el végét legalább.³⁶

In verbatim translation:

I can say as much in advance
That my hero will be no Don Juan,
Nor will he become Onegin,
He is only poor Romhányi.
Hungarian by birth, though my critics
Deny and deprecate him/it³⁷ a lot,
But jest does not beat me anymore,
I do not leave my work unfinished.
Foolish accusations, judgements do not depress me,
Vain praises do not motivate me...
Do not spare its weaknesses,
But await its ending at least.

Again, the text here establishes cross-cultural links both by differentiating itself from either *Don Juan* or *Eugene Onegin* and by suggesting that the three texts are comparable and hence belonging together in a certain way: apart from relating his text to those of Byron and Pushkin, the author-narrator implies here that there is a fundamental link that holds between *Don Juan* and *Eugene Onegin*, and that this link is already given. Moreover, it seems that the similarity between these two texts is such that they form a set that is distinctive. To slightly exaggerate, at the moment that the poem's narrator is reflecting on the work's genre by distancing it from Byron and Pushkin, he is creating this distinctive set (not defined in the original contexts as verse novels), which serves to define the Hungarian verse novel. Even though the Hungarian verse

novel was to a large extent a specific literary reaction to the epic, the anchoring point of the Hungarian verse novel lies in the set consisting of *Don Juan* and *Eugene Onegin*, which is a set that was partially created by the Hungarian verse novel itself, in that Hungarian literary tradition retrospectively interpreted these two works as instances of the verse novel, thereby also assigning the (Hungarian) genre an intercultural expansion.

What I think we may witness in this network of interactions is how the encounter with works of foreign cultures was instrumental in stabilizing into a particularly Hungarian genre a kind of writing that was defined in different and unstable generic terms in their original contexts. *Eugene Onegin* contains a vast number of references to Byron's texts and Hungarian verse novels adopt this feature in their references to both Byron and Pushkin. This is indicative of the Hungarian verse novel's relation to both *Don Juan* and *Eugene Onegin*, not only as individual models but, more importantly, also as texts of essentially the same genre, in which Hungarian verse novels can recognize themselves. The interpretation of *Don Juan* and *Eugene Onegin* as verse novels arises as a result of a particular intercultural contact, which has a huge role in producing a genre formed in a context differing from those of the model texts and peculiar to a national tradition.

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Notes

1 The term “verse novel” or “novel in verse” goes back to Pushkin, who labeled his *Eugene Onegin* as “A Novel in Verse” (Роман в Стихах) in the subtitle. Many Hungarian verse novels use the same or similar designations, and the Hungarian term “verses regény” (verse novel) has become an established term to refer to this particular genre. The English terms “verse novel” and “novel in verse” are in most cases used interchangeably; the reason why I prefer to use “verse novel” is that it conveys the idea of a separate genre better, rather than creating the impression that the particular texts were novels that just happened to be written in verse.

2 The English titles given in brackets are merely indicative: they are either my own translations or follow the more or less established ways of translating these titles into English; the texts themselves, however, have not been translated.

3 Note that several of the archaic epic-like verse narratives believed to be original texts were actually fakes: the best-known example is probably James Macpherson’s Ossianic poems from the 1760s. The most direct incentive for János Arany was also a fake: the Czech *Rukopis královédvorský* [Manuscript of the Queen’s Court, 1817] by Václav Hanka. Arany read a translation of the text in 1857, and it prompted him to carry out considerable philological work on the Hungarian literature of the Middle Ages; the result of this was his famous study entitled *Naiv eposzunk* [Our Naive Epic, 1860], in which he essentially claimed that a Hungarian national epic did exist once but was lost in the early Middle Ages. See Neubauer, “The Idea of Europe,” 362. The existence of a complete Hungarian translation (by Szende Riedl, published in 1856) also indicates that Hanka’s text was an important example for Hungarian literature, not the least due to the influential literary critic Ferenc Toldy; see Dávidházi, „Saját forrásvizsgálaton alapszanak,” 215–19.

4 For a discussion of a broader context of epic verse narratives in Central Europe, see Neubauer, “Introduction.”

5 Koropecykj, “Adam Mickiewicz as a Polish National Icon.”

6 Raßloff, “Juraj Jánošík,” 447–48.

7 Meškova, “Constructing a Woman Author within the Literary Canon,” 241.

8 Slapšak, “Petar II Petrović Njegoš.”

9 Fischer, *Romantic Verse Narrative*.

10 Gere, “Nemzettörténet és mitológia határpontjain,” 138–41.

11 Dávidházi, “Csokonai és az irodalomtörténet feltételelessége,” 12–30.

12 Bacskai-Atkari, “Furcsa vitézi versezetek.”

13 Byron, *Don Juan*.

14 Borbély, “Arany eposza.”

15 Gyulai, “Szépirodalmi szemle II,” 88–105.

16 Imre, *A magyar verses regény*, 137–84.

17 I am quoting the text from the relevant volume of the collected works, see Gyulai, *Munkái I*.

18 Fischer, *Romantic Verse Narrative*.

19 Fischer, *Romantic Verse Narrative*, 146–50.

20 Fischer, *Romantic Verse Narrative*, 156–62; Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History*, 33–40.

21 Rawson, “Byron Augustan.”

22 Bacskai-Atkari, “Byron hiánya.”

23 See Fischer, *Romantic Verse Narrative*.

24 Fischer, *Romantic Verse Narrative*.

25 Tosi, *Waiting for Pushkin*.

26 Diakonova and Vatsuro, “‘No Great Mind and Generous Heart Could Avoid Byronism’.”

27 János Arany, *Összes költeményei I–II*.

28 See Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History*, who relies on McGann, *Fiery Dust*.

29 Imre, *A magyar verses regény*, 16–17.

30 Imre, *A magyar verses regény*, 17. See also László, *Arany János angol irodalmi kapcsolatai*, and Szinnyei, “Arany humora.”

31 Imre, *A magyar verses regény*, 40–41.

32 See Imre, *A magyar verses regény*, 40–55; see also Illyés, “Puskin.”

33 Interestingly, while the existence of paraphrases has received considerable attention in the literature in connection with several verse novels (see Imre, *A magyar verses regény*, 40–55), the ironic nature of the paraphrase, to my knowledge, has not been explored in detail. The question has recently become even more interesting, though: in 2001, János Térey published his verse novel *Paulus* (and more verse novels have appeared since then, hence the genre has a postmodern revival in Hungarian literature), which also includes a very ironic paraphrase of the Onegin-story, in which the even more degraded characters are constantly linked to those of Pushkin.

34 László Arany, *A délibábok hőse*.

35 Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*.

³⁶ Gyulai, *Munkái I*.

37 Note that the Hungarian text does not include an overt 3rd Sg object here (not even in the form of the pronoun), and hence the referent of the zero object pronoun must be inferred from

the context: this can either be the hero Romhányi (*him*) or the verse novel *Romhányi (it)*, as the former is discussed in lines 1–4 in the stanza and the latter in lines 7–12: the lines in 5–6 in between the two are ambiguous in this respect. The way in which hero and work collapse in Gyulai’s text at this point may be familiar from Byron (especially in *Childe Harold*) and from Pushkin, e.g. the way in which the narrator bids farewell to “Onegin” at the end is ambiguous between parting from his hero Eugene Onegin or his text *Eugene Onegin*. For a detailed analysis on the final scene of *Eugene Onegin*, see Bojtár, “Az irodalom gépezete,” 83–85.