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; Bacsakai-Atkari 2011a)
  ● Byron’s own epic poetry – *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (cf. Bacsakai-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-literary 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)
  *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 Szállinger’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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