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; Bacskaï-Atkari 2011a)
- **Byron’s own epic poetry**
  - *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*  
    (cf. Bacskaï-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
‘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.
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,
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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]
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 – crossliteral 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)
  Anne Carson (Canadian)
- The Golden Gate (1986)
  Vikram Seth (Indian)
- Akhenaten (1992)
  Dorothy Porter (Australian)
Genre characteristics

- 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

results of a comparative approach
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!
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!
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
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)
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
Thank you!
Merci beaucoup!
😊
References