

forgi e possa poi essere utilizzato solo dopo aver compreso l'altro lato della piantagione, l'Europa: «sperando che gli occhi dei figli / imparino un giorno / non il verde soltanto / non l'Africa soltanto [...] ma Cortez / e Drake / Magellano / e quel Ferdinando / il marinaio / che fino a questa terra ha perforato i mari salati». Nelle foreste metropolitane, lo zio Tom diventa Tom l'eremita con cui il vecchio Lear fuori di sé, fallito il sogno dell'amore filiale, impara la condizione dei diseredati, in un paesaggio tenebroso dove il viaggio di Conrad si svolge al contrario – «il viaggio verso la città»; «curve del Congo / e giù / per quel fiume nero / che ci conduce all'inferno». Le storie delle conquiste delle Americhe e del colonialismo in Africa confluiscono in un unico discorso in cui i conquistati, dominati, denigrati diventano i dannati di una terra infernale il cui centro pulsante è l'Europa. Colombo è un emigrante ottuso

colpevole d'ignorare il vero significato dei suoi viaggi – «Che significava questo viaggio, che / cosa questo nuovo mondo: s-/ coperta? O ritorno ai terrori / dai quali era partito, che aveva già conosciuto?» – e le sue domande senza risposta sono le stesse che attraverso i secoli si pongono i migranti che viaggiano in senso opposto verso le capitali – «a Londra, è fredda la metropolitana. / Dalla tenebra il treno compare / con le nostre paure».

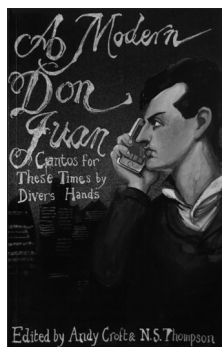
Il poema finisce con il ritorno ai Caraibi rappresentato da una simbolica casa la cui porta sarà forse scardinata e a cui non si fa ritorno, a indicare l'apertura anche inizialmente forzata verso l'estraneo, lo straniero, il diverso che coabita da molto tempo in ognuno, e la fine delle radicalità, che creano sensi di appartenenza e di legittima opposizione – «Dovresti fra-/cassare la porta / e camminare / al mattino / consapevole in tutto / del futu-

ro / che viene? / non si / torna indietro».

A quasi mezzo secolo dalla sua apparizione, *Rights of Passage* rimane un importante appello a ridefinire con forza le radici culturali di un'umanità profondamente cambiata già all'indomani della prima modernità; un appello rimasto inascoltato, come accade troppo spesso alla letteratura, a giudicare da alcuni versi tragicamente profetici che sembrano alludere a fatti di cronaca dei nostri giorni. «Così che fare, amico? / Bandire la bomba? Buttare / le bombe qui sopra? [...] portare una barba / e un turbante /.../ tu fai il musulmano?». C'è da augurarsi che le fonti culturali del mondo globale acquistino maggiore rilevanza e questa bella traduzione fa ben sperare.

(Roberta Cimarosti)

**ANDY CROFT, N. S. THOMPSON (Eds.),**  
**A Modern Don Juan,**  
Nottingham, Five Leaves Publications, 2014, pp. 352,  
£ 14.99



The cover of *A Modern Don Juan* indicates clearly enough what to expect from this collection. The instantly recognizable figure of Lord Byron is portrayed looking pensive and clutching a smartphone. The full title tells us that the book brings together «*Cantos for These Times by Divers Hands*». The poets are «divers» enough. The editors, Andy Croft and N.S. Thompson, are both British, as are nine of the other poets included (with a fair division between England and Scotland);

there are three Americans (one of whom lives in Greece) and one Australian. As far as gender goes, it is 11 to 4 (M to F).

Each of the editors contributes a canto and they also divide the lengthy dedication between themselves. This begins by echoing Byron's own dedication to *Don Juan*, but whereas his is a witty attack on his arch-enemy Robert Southey («my epic renegade»), Croft and Thompson are paying tribute to Byron as inspirer of their whole poetic venture:

Lord Byron! You're a poet, so to speak;  
Unrepresentative of all the race  
By virtue of your wit, the sheer technique  
With which you cocked two  
[fingers at disgrace.

These opening lines (by Andy Croft) give a hint of the challenge that faces all the contributors. They have to find a way to be daringly irreverent (otherwise just what would the point be?) while at the same time showing a certain deference to the creator of the original comic epic. For the most part they succeed, and it is probably due to the licence they have been granted by the editors.

Clearly the house-rules that were imparted to the contributors were far from stringent: the task of each poet was to write a canto portraying the adventures

of Don Juan in the 20th or 21st century; it was up to them to decide how closely they would model their figure on Byron's original. One guideline seems to have been offered, which some chose to make more of than others, and this regarded Don Juan's occupation: as suggested by his initials, he is now a DJ. The only other stipulation, of course, was that the cantos were to be written in *ottava rima*.

This last requirement offers the greatest challenge. It is not simply that it is a very demanding form to use in English, with its requirement of two triple rhymes in each stanza; there is also the fact that it is virtually impossible to use the form in English without appearing to imitate or parody Byron. There is perhaps no other verse-form in the language so closely associated with a single poet (with the possible exception of the limerick). Maybe only Yeats has used it without sounding Byronic, and principally because he allowed himself a certain flexibility (frequent use of half-rhymes, for example).

Of course, one could say that imitating Byron is precisely the point in a book of this sort. The closer, the better, surely. However, for the book to be something more than a series of parodistic exercises, it is essential that the poets achieve a certain independence of voice and tone. And most, I would say, succeed in this,

since they already possess strong poetic personalities. There is no doubt that with a form as demanding as ottava rima, the narrator inevitably comes to the fore; this was the case with Byron's original, in which the narrator is far more striking a figure (and far more audaciously licentious) than the supposedly scandalous protagonist. The reader cannot help but be constantly aware of the flamboyantly dexterous rhymers who are pulling the strings of the narrative and Byron takes full advantage of this position to establish a particular kind of intimacy with the reader.

The narrators in this book are clearly inspired by Byron, and often enough include unambiguous nods in his direction, with quotations and parodied lines or stanzas; but they also succeed in creating their own versions of his hero and, more crucially, in establishing a new and convincingly contemporary world for him to relate to. N. S. Thompson's introductory stanzas give a fair enough overview of the different versions of the character that the book offers us; he uses four stanzas to depict the various situations we will encounter in the book, telling us, for example, that

One Don, Antipodean, takes a trip  
 Into the clublands of Australia,  
 Another trips all pastoral and hip,  
 One in the North talks of his  
 marriage failure [...]

As indicated here the poems vary widely in setting, ranging from the rather surreal outer space of the first canto (Ben Borek) to different parts of England, Italy (N.S. Thompson, with an imaginative satire of the Camorra-ridden South), Amsterdam, Hungary (George Szirtes, naturally), Australia and Hell. Greece plays a major role, being the setting for poems by A. E. Stallings and Sinead Morissey, while three of the contributors (Croft, Stallings and Tim Thorne) do witty variations on

Byron's striking lyric, *The Isles of Greece!* (two of them begin, not perhaps so surprisingly today, with the words «The trials of Greece»). And W.N. Herbert takes us to the imaginatively conceived, if rather bewildering, «Bering Straits' Byzantium».

Rachel Hadas's canto has the most intriguingly unspecific setting. She has taken up the opportunity offered by Byron's digression to meditate on digression itself and its relationship with poetic composition; her canto offers a reflection on the paradoxical nature of the ottava rima form, which seems in both Byron's hands and her own to combine a sense of hazard with an adherence to strict rules. As she says about the hero, «His life was giddy, but not so the form. / As bows tied round wrapped presents make them smart, / Each final couplet gleams with careful art.» Hers is the most literary (in the most stimulating sense) of all the cantos in the book, with reflections not only on Byron, but also on Milton, Keats, Shelley, Dickinson and even on the Narnia books. The form seems to have opened up new horizons for Hadas, who explores themes already found in her poetry (her husband's dementia, for example) in an entirely fresh way.

Indeed, the real revelation of this book is the way the strict form of ottava rima proves liberating for so many of the poets. They accept the challenges of the stanza form with gusto. They vary in their faithfulness to its requirements. Sinéad Morissey, for example, is the loosest in her rhymes (the rhyming words in stanza 1, for example, are *of joint, Mayans, newsprint, lifespan, of it, down, warn us, precious*). Elsewhere we have some superbly witty (and very Byronic) examples of feminine rhymes, often characteristically across languages; A. E. Stallings, for example, rhymes *Cavafy* with an enjambed *off, he* and then *coffee*. Claudia Daventry rhymes *tarot* with *Harrow* and *barrow*, and (in the same stanza) *dhoti* with *goatee* and *floaty*.

Quoting a few random examples of

rhyme-words is obviously a rather unsatisfactory way of giving an idea of the riches contained in this book. At the same time, however, it is clear that it is the serendipitous nature of rhyming that has stimulated some of the most imaginative inventions, like the strange and surreal geography of W. N. Herbert's canto, which seems to owe as much to Byronic rhyming as it does to Coleridgean psychological exploration. A. E. Stallings handles the stanza form with superb skill, and her experimentation with it has borne fruits outside this book, in the narrative poem, *Lost and Found*, published in 2013, which seems to look beyond Byron to Ariosto for its inspiration. Her canto in this book gives a wittily caustic account of life in contemporary Greece, and concludes with a final stanza that succeeds in merging Byron with Cavafy, transforming the closure of the latter's poem *The City* into an ottava rima stanza, much as Byron did with lines from *Il Purgatorio* (Canto VIII) in the third canto of *Don Juan* (III, 108).

Perhaps the best way to testify to the range of tones to be found in this book is to close my review with this haunting stanza by A. E. Stallings:

*I'll find another land, another shore,  
 There has to be a better place  
 than this –  
 That's what you said, and what you've  
 [said before,  
 When one by one dreams died,  
 [or went amiss.  
 And so the years rolled by, score after  
 [score,  
 It's not too late, you say, to seek  
 [your bliss.  
 But you've failed everywhere once you  
 have failed.  
 All roads are dead-end roads. All ships  
 have sailed.*

Gregory Dowling