

Anthony Howe, *Byron and the Forms of Thought*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013. Pp. 196. £70. ISBN 9781846319716.

This fine new study engages with the critical debate over Byron's philosophical ideas, a debate which has developed from Arnold's and T. S. Eliot's declarations of the poet's intellectual nullity, through to recent attempts by critics such as M. G. Cooke, Terence A. Hoagwood and Bernhard Jackson to identify Byron's philosophical tenets. Anthony Howe's contention is that, while philosophical trends are certainly relevant to Byron's poetry, the poetry is not 'reproducible as a discrete branch of philosophy'. Rather, Byron distrusts overt argumentation, but makes 'philosophical thought [...] a prelude to self-understanding' (6). Crucial to Byron's enterprise, according to Howe, is poetic form. It is this that engages, investigates, subverts and energises thought, such that in the poetry, 'we often stumble into quiet clearings of lucidity, but we are rarely allowed to stray too far from the truths of disorder' (3).

The central chapters of Howe's book constitute a series of six essays: a deliberate strategy that evokes Byron's admiration of Montaigne and the form associated with him – suggesting, as it does, gestures or speculations, rather than a fully worked-out world-view. The first two essays, under the rubric 'Philosophy', explore Byron in relation to the tradition of philosophical scepticism, and go on to examine his ambiguous (and critically neglected) 'Mystery', *Cain*. Howe makes a convincing case for locating the play's 'uniqueness and experimental force' in Cain's combination of Enlightenment thinking and potential as a vatic poet (65), and for seeing Adah's take on human experience as an important counterweight to that of Lucifer.

The next two chapters consider Byron's involvement in the Pope-Bowles controversy, via his prose compositions, and trace out the implications for his poetics of the ideas at stake here, invoking as well the legacy of Locke and Burke. Bowles's crude misrepresentation of Pope (as he saw it) was baneful for Byron, Howe argues, because it was 'linked to the kinds of linguistic dishonesty that expedite moral and political degeneration' (77). By contrast, Dr Johnson, although somewhat critical of Pope, exemplifies 'lived experience' via his own performance of writing (84): Byron held a similar aspiration, and also insisted 'that we might think in more ways than one and at the same time' (98). Thus the apparently idealistic sections of *Childe Harold* 'suggest a mind more than aware of the forces that loom up against the possibility of vision', whereas in *Don Juan*, the 'threat of total scepticism ... finds mitigation in poetry's "outlines" or "hints", which [...] offer an unspecified hope' (112-15). Hence the later poem 'is not so much a clean break from or abandonment of earlier 'romantic' Byronic texts as a haunting of their problematic possibilities' (118).

The final two chapters, 'Outlines', develop the earlier themes of the study. Although all the chapters contain excellent close readings of the poetry, these last ones concentrate more fully on it, and focus especially on *Don Juan*. The first considers the differing tonalities through the representations of Juan's actual and potential love-interests, Haidée, Adeline, and Aurora Raby. The last is for Howe 'Byron's most resplendent symbol of poetic possibility' (141), yet she does not enable the poet to escape 'his own far muddier sceptical mire' (144). The following chapter takes up the issue of 'linguistic dishonesty' in relation to the siege cantos of *Don Juan*, looking back at Byron's earlier treatments of battles and their 'heroes'. Byron comes to 'think about how and why the individual emerges from the variety of "Brave men" who have "shone not on the poet's page"' (158), and the siege cantos do demonstrate a probing critique of language - but they also suggest that 'words can be instinct with virtue' (160).

If the achievement of poetry is more complex than the polemic of argument or the claims of philosophical discourse, then that is partly because of Byron's intellectual energy,

the passion he both feels and registers, and, of course, his own subtle and varied use of language. But for Byron, according to Howe, the impact of poetry was crucially dependent on readers, and, moreover, readers whose reactions the poet was less certain about once he no longer published with John Murray. One way in which the book delineates the difference between philosophical argument and Byron's poetry is through illustrating the latter's implicit or explicit reliance on reader response. The 'lively reader's fancy' invoked in *Don Juan* (VI, 98) is 'an object of great anxiety but also of great hope' (144). Thus we later readers understand Byron's legacy, Howe concludes, by accepting 'his invitation to think, read and imagine' (175).

Anthony Howe's study is well-written (if occasionally gnomic) and full of insights, combining a strong awareness of Byron's various intellectual engagements with consistently persuasive interpretations of the poetry.

Joanne Wilkes
University of Auckland, New Zealand