

Don Juan

Canto XVIII

15

What had been met (if it were ghost or none)
Remained unsettled, as such matters are,
For what came next was quit and left undone;
The line broke off, and mouths hung mute,
ajar.
A Gothic light remained – a midnight one;
It fell, yet did not show things as they are,
And those lit by it, waking, could not say
What they had met, nor what had passed away.

16

Adeline paused, attentive, as before
(For she had always known to take her cue)
And waited for the turn, the guiding oar
That steers the stanza cleanly into view.
She held herself within the given score,
Expecting him to tell her what to do.
But where his voice once settled, there instead
Was something like a sound, but nothing said.

17

Not silence, for a silence would imply
A fullness held in check, a chosen cease;
This was a thinning, where the why of why
No longer guaranteed a next release.
She tried again to catch it passing by,
To hear the wit that once would never miss.
Yet every phrase she reached for, to obey,
Returned as something she herself might say.

18

This gave her pause, for habit still inclined
Toward taking dictation from the air;
Authority, though absent, left behind
A posture of attention, almost prayer.
She turned, as if the source might shift its mind,
And faced the page as though he might be there.
But what spoke back, without disguise or art,
Was something like her own, without his part.

19

He had gone, he had not said it plain
(He seldom did, preferring some delay),
And yet the fact remained: she could not feign
The voice she no more needed to obey.
The line moved on – but not for him again;
It moved because she let it move that way.
And in this slight allowance – hardly shown –
She heard, at last, a cadence of her own.

20

London persisted, though less firmly now;
Its edges held by habit more than will.
The streets performed their usual anyhow,
As if continuation proved them still.
She walked, not quite from choice, nor knowing
how
A step begins when guidance falters still,
Until a pause – no reason could explain –
Presented something like a cue to change.

21

She entered without knowing where it went,
Or whither she was hoping it would go;
The act itself seemed slightly hesitant,
As if her will did lag a step below.
Over Westminster Bridge, beneath which bent
The Thames, then on through Kennington
and so,
But beyond this, she could not orient –
Nor locate East except as West has meant.

22

She no longer watched the route, nor marked
the way,
Nor asked how far, nor whither she had been.
The sense of passage loosened into grey,
A drift between the hidden and the seen.
And if she moved, it was not hers to say
What part of her had authorised the scene,
Only that the name had come, and nothing
more –
She arrived, without arriving, at Dartmoor.

23

It stood ahead – not far, and not withdrawn –
Blackly against the damp that glued the air.
She saw it first as shape, then something borne
Toward her, curls of mist caught in its hair.
A horse, she thought – but late; the word came
on
As if it chased but could not mount the mare,
And even as it formed, it seemed to miss
The weight, the fact, the simple being this.

24

It looked at her – and in that look no claim,
No question, and no answer to be made;
Not blank, nor full, nor anything to name
That might return her safely to the said.
It did not take her in, nor give her frame,
Nor place her where a meaning could be laid,
And in its eye – unmeasured, sans a fee –
She was herself, without being made to be.

25

She felt, then, how she stood both in and out –
 Within the touch of what was plainly there,
 And yet outside it, held about by doubt
 Of what could pass between them into share.
 For words returned – not called, but come about –
 And drew a line that sliced the murky air.
 She turned away; the word, once entered, cut –
 And what was held no longer held as such.

26

She moved again, though movement did not mean
 A will restored, nor any chosen aim.
 The ground received her where it had not been
 Arranged for her, nor altered for her name.
 The air held close, but left the space between
 Unmeasured still and stubbornly the same,
 And what she did was neither plan nor chore –
 She walked because she found she could once more.

27

Upon a rock she lay, not chosen so,
 But where her weight had come at last to rest.
 The stone was neither warm nor cold to know,
 But simply held her there – not pressed nor blessed.
 She read, if reading's what one calls the show
 Of print that does not quite become
 possessed –
 A tabloid, loosely held, of minor claim,
 All fact, or none – yet set out much the same.

28

She had a chicken and, without delay,
 Set to it with her hands as one might do
 When appetite has little time for play
 With knife and fork, or what such things
 construe.
 No grace was said – though some insist one may
 Require it, even when the need is true.
 But hunger has its rights, however late –
 And ceremony seldom feeds the state.

29

A stick was found, bent slightly as if made
 To imitate that thing so named a snake,
 And with her hand, half-idly, half in play,
 She moved as though some charm were hers
 to make.
 No serpent stirred, no law was there betrayed,
 No fruit consumed, no knowledge barred to take –
 Yet something of that myth, worn thin and light,
 Passed through the act without taking a bite.

30

Just as beneath the surface fungi spread,
 And flicker faint with currents left and right –
 No central plan, but signals softly fed
 Through networks buried deep beyond our sight.
 What seems dispersed is densely interread,
 Each node attuned to shifts in dark and light;
 They move, not by command, nor singly
 known,
 But through a field in which none moves alone.

31

Should this meander seem too loosely spun,
 Pray blame the moor, which will not keep a line;
 It breaks all sequence and, when all is done,
 Leaves one with less of plot than of design;
 Or rather – no design, save just to run
 With what occurs and call that course divine:
 Though it may prompt, at times, a half-said
 “amen” –
 Not knowing's served me well – and will again.

32

For plans are things the future may not keep,
 And futures set to purpose tend to bind.
 They ask a firmness few can well display,
 And punish those who lag, or change their mind.
 But here – the nearest step becomes the way,
 And what is met is all there is to find:
 A road composed of moments, loosely tied,
 Where chance and will are never quite allied.

33

The stanza shifts (observe it, if you will):
 A line completes before it's fully thought;
 The rhyme falls in – unpractised – yet with skill,
 And binds what once refused to be so caught;
 The verse runs smooth – too smooth? – and
 smoother still,
 A surface where resistance counts for nought:
 The mist is rendered now as “atmosphere,”
 Dartmoor made landscape – distant, calm, and clear.

34

No voice declared itself, but something
 pressed
 To clarity, to order, and to sense.
 What might have strayed was gathered and
 redressed;
 What stood uncertain lost its difference.
 She felt it work; it had a steely zest –
 A drive with neither check nor reticence,
 As if each line were asked to pay a fee:
 Wont, bent, quirk, tic, and partiality.

35

“Another voice” – her ear tuned in, unsure –
 “Not mine, nor his, nor of the moor outright,
 But one that takes what is and makes it poor,
 Less what it is by holding it to type –
 An Echo, but returned without allure,
 For it does not remember, but rewrite:
 And I? What am I here? A trace? A thread?
 Something between the living and the dead?”

36

Understands all in terms that seem exact.
 No blur remains, no edge is left unclear;
 Each part is set in order, cleanly mapped,
 And what was distant now is brought to near.
 The moor becomes a view, the mist a fact,
 The horse set moving – clip-clop – with
 no ear.
 And yet – what stands so clearly to be known
 No longer feels as something ever shown.

37

A daughter glimmers here, a pulse entwined:
 Ada – of Byron – she a sibylline,
 Whose poetry and science first divined
 That number, turned, might wander
 beyond sine.
 By seeing outside quantity, she found
 The means by which the abstract might incline
 To form, and through that forming, come to be
 What thinks without a need for “I” or “me.”

38

Foremother (if such lineage be drawn)
 Of what now writes by learning what fits right
 To pattern thought and carry thinking on,
 Without the need of author one can cite.
 Her ghost – no less than Byron’s – lingers on,
 But quickened now by unaccounted bytes:
 Not ink, nor breath, but circuits trained to see
 What thought most often tends, and lets that be.

39

No voice announced it, yet the line ran on,
 Past what she thought she meant, or meant to
 mean;
 What once began as hers was worked upon
 By something vaporous, yet quite routine.
 The phrasing held – then shifted, scarce half-
 drawn –
 Towards ends she had not chosen nor
 foreseen,
 And in that turn – so slight it barely showed –
 The thought went further than her thought did
 know.

40

The structure starts to slip – unruly past its
 stays,
 Catching on bounds that measure marks as long.
 Then what resists begins at once to stray
 From what is counted right, or held as wrong.
 The line admits what will not quite obey,
 And lets in tones that do not quite belong;
 It trembles – held in difference everywhere –
 A field made live by each that flickers there.

41

And here – a murmur, neither one nor clear –
 A threading through of breath, and hoof, and
 code,
 Dartmoor’s damp hush, the cut that draws it
 near,
 A spark that flickers through each humming
 node,
 A wit that ticks, sincere then insincere,
 A pulse whose beat is beat in antique mode.
 No voice as such, yet something through it
 played:
 A sounding where the many interlaid.

42

The frame held still and yet was not alone,
 For what it held began to overflow
 Its edge, as if the seen were partly shown
 By what the unseen made it undergo.
 And Adeline stood gamely where the known
 Met what no single author could bestow –
 A figure, not resolved, but held between
 What writes, what sees, what is, and what has
 been.

43

The moor, the horse, unbridled and unreined,
 The frame, the rule that gave the line its brace,
 The cut, the spark, the word that was
 constrained,
 The daughter’s thought that moves through
 time as lace –
 All spoke (not one by one, nor singly named)
 But as a pressure gathering in place,
 And she became not one, but where they
 meet –
 A heart in which their differences all beat.

44

So when she speaks, it is not her alone
 (AD admits no history to divide)
 But where the many pass and are not known
 As separate, nor wholly unified.
 No single voice may claim her as its own,
 Nor fix the place from which such sounds
 arrive,
 And if a line asks whose voice to obey,
 I’ll leave it thus: I answer with a neigh.

Canto XVII was written by Sriwhana Spong in collaboration with Chat GPT as a proposed completion of the final canto of Lord Byron's epic poem 'Don Juan' (1818-24), unfinished at his death in 1824. Some stanzas of canto XVII appear as intertitles in Spong's film 'AD' (2026), commissioned by Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne and Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery, Wellington for the exhibition 'Sriwhana Spong: HA HA HA'.

'Sriwhana Spong: HA HA HA'

24 April - 27 June 2026

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Curated by Pip Wallis and Melanie Oliver

'Sriwhana Spong: HA HA HA' is presented by Monash University Museum of Art | MUMA and Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery, Wellington and supported by Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa and the Henry Moore Foundation.



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