CASTI'S *IL POEMA TARTARO* AND BYRON'S *DON JUAN* CANTOS V-X[1]

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Though Byron never mentions *Il Poema Tartaro*, we know that he was an assiduous reader of the poems of Giambattista Casti,[2] and the parallels between Casti's Russian satire and (at least) the Russian Cantos of *Don Juan* have always seemed too striking to be overlooked. I wish in this essay to examine them, to try and ascertain how much influence, and what kind of influence, is at work; and to compare the two poets' approaches to the same theme.

Byron, who looks sceptically at all supposed greatness in human achievement, could not be expected to take Catherine II either at her own self-evaluation or at that of her numerous gazetteers and flatterers. He had plenty of recent historical and journalistic sources[3] from which to borrow accurate details about her reign. But Casti's much more apocalyptically critical view of the eighteenth-century Russian empire and of its ruler would probably have impressed him more than any prose work.

Casti stayed in St Petersburg from June 1777 to either summer 1779 or 1780, in the service of the Austrian ambassador, having made a brief earlier visit, in 1776.[4] He thus arrived three years after the end of the First Turkish War and of the Pugachev rebellion, during a period in which Catherine (who was forty-eight years old when he arrived) changed lovers six times.[5]

Letters now in the Bibliothèque Nationale[6] reveal how strong were his feelings about Russia, and how assiduously he, as a conscientious diplomatic adviser to the Emperor Joseph II, tried to change Austrian foreign policy, from alliance with Russia against Prussia and the Porte, to a multi-national anti-Russian coalition – which would include England – aimed at cutting Russia off from her new Black Sea outlets (thereby rendering forever vain Catherine's ambitions to set her grandson on the throne of Constantinople) and even forbidding her access to the Baltic:

1: The text of *Il Poema Tartaro* used is that of the second edition, 1796 (no imprint, no publisher named). Also consulted: *Giambattista Casti Abbe Galante Poete et Politicien*, by Herman van den Bergh (Amsterdam / Brussels 1951); *Byron's Don Juan, A Critical Study*, by Elizabeth French Boyd (New York 1958); *Le Occasioni di un Libertino* (G.B.Casti) by Gabriele Muresu (Florence 1973); *La Poesia Narrativa di Giambattista Casti*, by Krzysztof Zaboklicki (Warsaw 1974); *Byron and the Italian Literary Tradition*, by Peter Vassallo (Macmillan 1984); and *Notizie e Appunti sulla Vita e l'Operosità di G.B.Casti negli Anni 1776-1790*, by Antonino Fallico (Italianistica, 1972, pp. 520-538).

2: For his reading of the *Novelle Galanti*, see *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, ed. Marchand, V 80; of the *Animali Parlanti* (at least in William Rose's watery and neutralising translation) see VI 24. See also Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Lovell, pp. 140-141. A *possible* date for Byron's discovery of *Il Poema Tartaro* may be December 11th 1817, when Hobhouse's diary records

> ... at Madame Albrizzi's I sat next to a man who had persuaded himself we should have another irruption of barbarians from the great plateau of Tartary - he said he intended to translate some of Lord Byron, adding he could not find all his words in the dictionary ... (BL.Add.Mss. 47234 38v).

Compare the apocalyptic quotation from Canto V, on page 12 above.

3: His two principal prose sources were William Tooke, *Life of Catherine II* and C.F.P.Masson, *Secret Memoirs of the Court of St. Petersburg* (both 1800).

4: See Muresu, op. cit. p. 79; Zaboklicki, op. cit. p. 87. Fallico - whom I incline to trust more - gives 1790 as the year in which Casti left Russia.

5: The favourites in question were Piotr Zavadovskii, Semen Zorich, Ivan Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Stakhiev, Vasily Levashev, and Alexander Rontsov. A seventh, called Strakhov, was rumoured. See John T. Alexander, *Catherine the Great, Life and Legend* (Oxford 1989) p. 214.

6: See Fallico, op. cit.. Fallico is successfully at pains to dispel the cliché of Casti as facetious degenerate.

> Dopo l'Epoche tartare dei Gengiscani e dei Tamerlani non offre la storia esempio alcuno de' si rapidi e vasti progressi di potenza o di dominio, come questi, che in questo secolo ha fatti la Russia. *(Since the epoch of the Genghis Khans and Tamburlaines history has not shown anything like such a rapid and vast progress of power and dominion as that which Russia has made in this century.)*[7]

For Casti, Russia represented a

> ... contagiosa cancrena, che minaccia d'attaccare, infettare, corrompere, e discostarne tutte le parti [dell'Europa]. *(... a contagious cancer, which is threatening to attack, infect, corrupt and alienate all parts of Europe.)*[8]

> Utile insomma sarebbe all'Europa tutta di togliersi dai confini e slontanar più che sia possibile una Potenza rapace, infida, ingannevole, prepotente, inquieta, soverchiatrice, impertinente, pericolosa, insaziabile, che così sarebbe costretta a riconcentrarsi a Mosca e rinunciare a ogni influenza e ingerenza Europea, e ritornare come le altre volte a divenire Potenza asiatica. E così sia amen. *(To sum up, it would be useful if all Europe could combine to confine and keep at a distance more than has hitherto been possible a Power so rapacious, faithless, deceitful, arrogant, turbulent, overwhelming, impertinent, dangerous, and insatiable, so that it would be forced to centre itself again on Moscow, renounce all European influence and interest, and return as in past times to being an Asiatic Power. Let all say Amen.)*[9]

For parallels with Byron's distrust of Russia forty years later, see *The Age of Bronze*, especially Parts VI and X.

Il Poema Tartaro is said to have been written between 1780 and 1781:[10] (though it satirizes Catherine's famous journey to the Crimea, which occurred in 1787). It was given in manuscript to Joseph II in 1786 – Casti had become the Austrian court poet – but first published (anonymously) in Milan in 1796, the year Catherine died. Byron would have read the following account by Ugo Foscolo, in his essay on *Narrative and Romantic Poems of the Italians*, in the *Quarterly Review* for April 1819, before even the first Cantos of *Don Juan* were published:

> After amusing himself with kings in comedy and heroes in tragedy, he renewed his satires upon royalty in the person of Catherine the Second; with whom he made free in a very long poem entitled Tartaro. Casti succeeded the Abbate Metastasio as Poeta Cesareo, and lived at Vienna in high favour with Joseph the Second, who used to set him on against the monks and friars. When the 'Poema Tartaro' appeared the Emperor Joseph was on very ill terms with the Empress Catherine; but when each had got a slice of the kingdom of Poland, they made up their differences. The Czarina insisted that the Poeta Cesareo should be turned away; and Casti was banished from Vienna: but the Emperor directed that the poet's pension should continue payable during the remainder of his life. Casti, with a spirit which would have honoured a better man, refused the gift, and when Joseph remitted the money to him, he would not touch it. The pecuniary losses consequent upon the publication of the Tartaro were not made up in fame. Foreigners did not relish it, and the Italians did not understand it, for they knew nothing of the court of St. Petersburgh beyond what they read in the newspapers. Neither did it add much to Italian literature. The style is

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7: Casti, dispatch in Bibliothèque Nationale, MS 1629 ff 152-161; quoted Fallico, op. cit., p. 530.
8: Ibid.
9: Ibid.
10: See Muresu, *op. cit.* pp. 85-91; Zaboklicki, op. cit. pp. 87-90. Fallico gives no suggestion as to the poem's dates.

> unimpassioned, and the diction without grace or purity. But the poem abounds with point, and it succeeded amongst certain readers, in the same way that small wits take in society. They amuse for a moment because they flatter the bad passions of the human heart, and they end by becoming tedious. [11]

It is hard to say whether Foscolo – no friend either to tyranny or to Austria – is being sincere in thus putting-down *Il Poema Tartaro*: his essay was translated and in part augmented by Francis Cohen, who may have edited it with a view to adhering to the *Quarterly's* ideology.

Il Poema Tartaro has found little or no favour with English critics. Germaine Greer writes

> The poem is vituperative and libellous in the extreme, and the versification is frequently laboured, unmusical, and often even ungrammatical, and any resemblance to Byron's control of tone will be sought in vain among the coarse descriptions of the habits of Catherine the Great and her hangers-on … Casti is not so often informal and loose in his stanza structure as tortured, ungrammatical and clumsy; there is nothing in him like the notion of wit as we are familiar with it in English poetry, although there is no lack of burlesque. [12]

And Peter Vassallo's opinion of it is as low:

> … the total efect of *Il Poema Tartaro* is marred by the poet's over-indulgence in personal invective, with the unfortunate result that the poem degenerates into a bizarre and hysterical denunciation of Catherine and her 'ossequia nobilità mogolla' … [13]

The satire offers itself as an epic in the manner of Ariosto, set in the Middle Ages; but this fools no-one. Its hero is a handsome young "gentiluom d'Irlanda" (I, 4, 3) called Tommaso Scardassale, whose nose – traditional emblem of virility – is early described as "un troppo grosso" (I, 5, 8) and who, in Canto I, goes on a Crusade. Here, what military ardour he has is rapidly dissipated in the violation of women, whether Christian or Pagan (I, St. 10). He is captured and sent with twelve companions as a present to the Caliph of Babylon, a kind of Islamic Pope – "Mussulman Pontefice" (I, 56, 2) – who may be a forerunner of Byron's complacently ignorant Sultan in Cantos V and VI. [14] Put in charge of the Sultan's seraglio gardens, which are modelled on those of Semiramis (I, St, 21) he conceives a lust for the beautiful Zelmira, a Circassian odalisque, who fancies him in return ("Zelmira" was the petname of Princess Augusta of Brunswick, sister-in-law of Catherine the Great). [15] Zelmira steals the key to the garden gate (I, St. 25) and makes love to Tommaso energetically (I St. 28). However, the Caliph himself finds Tommaso so attractive that he proposes a promotion for him – to Chief Eunuch, upon the death of the previous encumbent (I, Stanzas 30-1). Escaping with Zelmira (who again plans the escape, disguising herself as a Saracen warrior: I, St. 44) Tommaso goes with her, at her insistence, to her father's province of Circassia (her words actually are, "Là cì darem

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11: Ugo Foscolo, Narrative and Romantic Poems of the Italians, Quarterly Review April 1819, p. 491.

12: Germaine Greer, *The Development of Byron's Satiric Mode* (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Sydney, 1962) pp. 197 and 190.

13: Vassallo, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

14: See Alexander, *op. cit*. p. 257. See Vassallo, *op. cit*. pp. 91-92. The stanzas quoted are I, 16 and 18. Byron's Sultan bears no resemblance at all to the westernised sophisticate Selim III, who really was on the throne when Ismail was taken, and whose reign is described in the final chapters of Hobhouse's *Travels in Albania.*

15: See Zaboklicki, *op. cit*. p. 93

la mano": I, 41, 1). They meet Battù Khan, grandson of Djenghis-Khan (Count Souan, grandson of Peter the Great) a marshal of Tartary (Russia). Zelmira, whose independence is stressed throughout (only the size and number of her breasts – she has two – disqualify her from being an Amazon: I, St. 50) instantly and disconcertingly agrees to marry Mengo, the son of Battù.

It will be seen that several aspects of Casti's first Canto parallel events and characters in *Don Juan* Cantos V and VI: the seraglio setting, the desire to escape, the perpetual threat of castration, the possible homosexuality of the Sultan (Byron's Sultan finds Juan very attractive in drag) the greater initiatives taken by the women, and the escape north. Tommaso, like Juan, is at the mercy of circumstance throughout the poem; and once she has escaped with him, Zelmira fades from Casti's narrative focus, just as Byron's less assertive Turkish heroines do.

There are also some parallels between the Turkish Cantos of *Don Juan* and the later Cantos of *Il Poema Tartaro*, and on these I shall comment. However, the first Canto is only a comical-romantic prologue. Not until the action reaches Mogollia (Russia) does Casti's theme become clear – he is writing about Russia as Hell on earth: the title can be read either as "The Poem of Tartary" or "The Poem of Tartarus".

With Battù, Zelmira and Tommaso journey to Caracora (St. Petersburg) where the Emperor Ottai (the unpopular Peter III) has just died (I, 94, 4) and where Turrachina (better known as Cattuna: Catherine the Great) has just ascended the throne. (Casti's parallels with thirteenth-century Mongolian history are often very neat: he probably borrowed from de Guignes, *L'Histoire générale des Huns*, published in Paris, 1756-8, as well as works by Marco Polo and the Franciscan Giovanni di Pian Carpino, who, in the *Poema*, "plays the role of" the Papal Nuncio to St. Petersburg, Giancarlo.) [16] Cattuna's potential as ruler is summed up thus:

> Nulladimen montata poi sul Trono
> Qualità dispiegò sublimi, e altere,
> Un animo gentile, umano, e buono
> Generosi pensier, dolci maniere,
> Core sempre all'amor, facile, e prono,
> Fibra sempre sensibile al piacere,
> E seconda dicevano i maledici,
> Avute avea quindici amanti, o sedici. (II, 7)

[Scarcely had she mounted the throne but she displayed sublime and dignified qualities: a gentle soul, good, humane and generous thoughts, a heart always and easily inclined towards love, senses always delicate for pleasure; and, according to wicked tongues, she had already had fifteen lovers – or sixteen.]

In Canto II Siveno, "sagace Greco" (II, 57, 1) shows Tommaso the degraded sights and corrupt manners of Caracora, in the manner of Virgil showing Dante over the Inferno: the social critique is far more damning than anything even implicit in *Don Juan*, where much of the satire is directed cunningly at England. In Caracora, the years are named not after consuls, in the Roman fashion, but after lovers: not "Consoli tali" but "tali Amanti" (II, 54, 7-8). Here, the nobles are not noble, but barbarians and slaves, the buyers and the bought (II, St. 75): a cabal rules (II, 68, 8) men unworthy of command are given it, and men worthy to command die of hunger

16: See van den Bergh, op. cit. pp. 144-6; Muresu, op. cit. p. 81; Vassallo, op. cit. p. 83.

(II St. 70). Lies and falsehood prevail everywhere (II, 74, 8). All Asia believes in the civilisation of Mogollia, but there is no such thing: it is all the simulacrum creation of foreign parasites and imposteurs: those expelled from their own countries always find places here (II, Sts. 102-3).

Casti's experience in Russia had clearly aroused in him a profound, first-hand horror of the place. This is sometimes analysed as a consequence of the way he felt his own talents to have been undervalued there; [17] but for any liberal Western European, no matter how vain or ambitious, Catherine's Russia would probably have been a sufficient shock to the moral system to inspire the need to write angrily about it.

In Canto III, Siveno shows Tommaso more and more of Caracora ("The chief City / Of the immortal Peter's polished boors": *Don Juan* IX 23, 2-3). It is full of colossal statues, all in imitation of the worst excesses of European art. An illiterate heads the Academy (III, St. 8); conferences are held by incompetents to whom no-one listens (III, St. 13). All elegies are bought. Law is a word with no meaning (III, 32, 3-8). Despite the prevalence of Arab (that is, French enlightenment) ideas, unfortunates are still subjected to one thousand blows of the knout (Cattuna has merely decreed that the punishment need not continue once the victim has died – III, St. 21) and to the mutilation of noses and ears (III, 23, 5: compare Pushkin, *The Captain's Daughter*, where, also in Catherine's reign, the interrogation of an earless and noseless suspect is abandoned when he opens his mouth to reveal that he has no tongue either). [18] Cattuna's dead lovers are worshipped as saints (III, St. 28).

Siveno explains that a group of men whom they see passing, "all'abito gli credi un stuol di pazzi" (III, 31, 5) are the compilers of Catherine's new legal codex (the Bolshoi Nakaz, or "Great Instruction" of 1770, an idealistic collection of ideas from Montesquieu and elsewhere, famous the world over – III St. 37 – but never put into effect). Siveno says:

> ... ne tal Codice sussiste
> Nè qui sussister mai forse potrebbe,
> Ma spiegherotti ove l'error consiste:
> Di formalo Cattuna il pensier ebbe,
> E questa è la miglior di sue gran viste,
> Nè mai negherò lode a chi si debbe,
> Sicchè vuole a color darne l'idea,
> Cui commetter la grande opra volea.
>
> E a tale effetto avendo insiem raccolte
> Quanti pensier, quanti percetti, e quante
> Frasi, e sentenze avea d'autori tolte,
> E da savi stranieri udite avante,
> Fenne un volume; e ciò per donna è molto;
> Pi ancor per donna del piacer amante,
> E moltissimo ancor, se si combina
> Amante del piacer, donna e regina. (III, 38-9)

17: Pushkin, *The Captain's Daughter*, Chapter 6.

18: The only Western European writer to have entered the Constantinople Seraglio and lived to tell the tale was Aubrey de la Mottraye, who went in pretending to be the assistant to a Huguenot clock-maker, when the women were all safely at the Summer Palace. See his *Travels*, 1728 English translation, pp. 172-3. This is all the factual evidence Byron has for his descriptions in Cantos V and VI of *Don Juan.*

["... in this Codex exists something which might never have existed. But I shall explain to you where the mistake lies: Cattuna's thinking was theoretical, and this is the best of her great visions; I shall no longer deny praise to those who deserve it; she did want to inspire those whose job it would be to carry out the great work. / And having thus synthesized their thoughts, insights, learned foreign quotations and commentaries, they wrote a book; and that's quite something for a woman; still more for a woman in love with pleasure, and still more even, if the woman combines in herself a hedonist, a woman and a queen."]

Whether Casti's satire would have been as whole-hearted if Russia had been ruled by an idealistic but ineffectual man, no matter how hopeless, is open to doubt: Byron certainly shares some of his misogyny.

The huge is preferred in Mogollia to the useful and the good (III, 52, 1-2). The state religion is soiled. Finesse is unknown in the commerce between the sexes (III, Sts. 61-4): real commerce flourishes on corruption, and not even river traffic can be properly managed (III, Sts. 80-1 and 88-93). The people constantly suffer under the reign of favourite after favourite. The language of justice is, despite the aspirations of the Empress, debilitated throughout:

Vero è però ch'ivi non già di stile
Scorgi la nobiltà, la robustezza;
E non legislator genio virile,
E non d'idee sublimità e giustezza,
Ma di scriver prurito femminile,
Debil, non franca piuma, e non avezza
A trarre alla virtù gli umani petti
Con tuon di filosofici precetti. (III, 41)

["But it is true that there is no style there to distinguish nobility, or strength; no manly lawgivers, no sublime concept of justice; but instead the weak, feminine itch to scribble, without the frank desire to bring humanity into the path of virtue with a true philosophical tone."]

Siveno sums it up, in Dantesque phrasing:

Oh Caracora obbrobbrio delle genti,
D'ogni scelleratezza afilo, e nido!
Sul tuo capo a cader perchè più tarda
Fiamma dal Ciel, che ti consumi, ed arda? (III, 105, 5-8)

[Oh Caracora, hateful to mankind, adopter of and nest for every kind of wickedness! Why does Heaven wait so long before sending down fire on your head to consume and burn you?]

However, Tommaso, despite having Siveno for his guide, "Perchè come stranier potrebbe andare / Smarrito per le vie di Caracora" (compare *Inferno*, I, 1-3) is soon to join the ranks of its damned. In Canto IV he is introduced by Battù to Toctabei (more commonly named Toto: Potemkin) the leading nobleman and greatest of Cattuna's ex-lovers, who is constantly intriguing against Caslucco (Grigori Orloff). Toto, the evil mentor, now takes over Tommaso's guidance from Siveno, the virtuous one.

The one-eyed Toto, likened to Polyphemus "in abito d'amore" (IV, 6) insists that Tommaso bathe first. Impressed by what is thus revealed (IV, St. 12) he recommends

that the Irishman become the next favourite. Each writer emphasises the finery with which his hero is decked out.

Like Juan, Tommaso is presented: but before he comes before the Empress, he is led by Toto through her boudoirs. The scene of the procurer leading the procured, through mysterious rooms and passages, into the presence of the lady employer, parallels that in *Don Juan* Canto V, except that where Byron strings it out with maximum mystery through nearly fifty stanzas, Casti keeps it brief. The description of Catherine's rooms of pleasure is very striking, and much more confident than Byron's of those of Gulbeyaz (see Canto VI, Stanzas 97-8):

Toto intando ei seguia, che alfin si rende
In solitaria parte ad altri ascosa;
Nel tranquillo silenzio ivi risplende
Copia d'accese faci; e dilettosa
Sensazion soave al cor discende
In quell'oscurità misteriosa;
Pregno è l'aer l'odori, e tutto spira
Qui il lusso Perso, e la mollezza Assira.

Ogni piacer quì regna altrove ignoto,
Se stessa quì la voluttà rassina,
Sacro a Venere è il loco, e a quel remoto
Recesso mai profano s'avvicina,
E n'e permesso sol l'adito a Toto.
Questi li bagni son di Turrachina,
Ne mai simili a questi a parlar serio
Capri voluttuosa offr× a Tiberio.

Cristalli nitidissimi, e perfetti
Pendon sopra le vasche, e col riflesso
Van raddoppiando del piacer gli oggetti,
Ed in leggiadre camarette appresso
Ergonsi intorno in varie foggie i letti
Ove giacer vorebbe amore istesso:
Toto a Tommaso allor fece un soghigno
E in tuon parlagli affabile, e benigno. (IV 9-11)

[Meanwhile Toto followed him, to a lonely, hidden place; in that tranquil silence, where resplendent torches shine, and a delicious sensation descends into the heart; in that mysterious obscurity, the air is impregnated with odours, and everything breathes Persian luxury and Assyrian softness. / Here pleasures reign which are unknown elsewhere; passion feeds on itself; the place is sacred to Venus, and nothing profane ever comes near; Toto is the only person who has access; these are the baths of Turrachina; to speak truth, Capri never offered such voluptuousness to Tiberius himself. / Translucent and perfect crystals hang over the ponds and with their reflection redouble the objects of pleasure, and, in charming little rooms nearby, are spread around the variously-fashioned beds, on which Love itself would gladly rest. Toto then leered at Tommaso, and spoke to him in an affable and benign tone.]

There is no equivalent passage in *Don Juan*, except the briefest mention of Catherine's "boudoirs" (Canto IX 63, 5). The laconic dignity of Baba is very strikingly seen when contrasted with the voyeurism of Toto / Potemkin; but the major contrast is with the tone of fascinated disgust in which Casti describes the love-nest.

He had perhaps had first-hand experience of such locations in St Petersburg, while neither Byron, nor any other occidental observer, had seen their equivalents in Constantinople.[19]

Tommaso would not have become the lover of Turrachina without the intervention of the pimp Toto (though he is happy enough to be made their common plaything) but Juan is unwillingly procured, not, however, for Catherine in Canto IX, but for Gulbeyaz (by Baba) in Canto V. His introduction to the Russian Empress is altogether more dignified: he is the bearer to her of the news about the fall of Ismail.

On receipt of Toto's note about Tommaso, Cattuna smiles lewdly and covertly to an attendant:

Dunque incontro venutagli costei
Introdusse Tommaso a Turrachina
Che il ricevè benignamente, ed Ei
Profondissimamente se le inclina,
Ed il foglio le dà di Toctabei:
Ella il prende, e mentristi le si avvicina
Con maggior agio, contemplò Tommaso,
E più si confermò ch'egli era al caso,

E mentre che leggea quei scarabocchi
Facea spesso a Turfana un cotal'atto,
E parea s'intendessero cogli occhi
Sghignando alla furtiva, e di soppiato;
Dissegli poi: pria, che con lui m'abbrochi,
Ritiratevi seco infin che fatto
Abbia riflession sulla proposta,
E che ritorni poi per la risposta. (IV, 18-19)

[Then Tommaso approached her to introduce himself; she received him graciously, and he bowed most profoundly to her, and gave her Toctabei's note; she took it, and beckoning him towards her in the most relaxed way, stared at him, and assured herself that he was as the note said, / And as she read the scribble, she repeatedly made secret gestures to Turfana, and appeared to smile indecently and secretly with her eyes, finally saying, "Before I get together with him, you go in with him, until I have thought about the proposal, and then come back for an answer".]

The detail of the Empress' smile is three times used in *Don Juan*, at IX 46, 1-2, at 58, 3-6 and at 61, 1-4, where Catherine meets Juan for the first time, with the obsequious court watching; but it is a different kind of smile, and far more amusingly contextualised:

The Courtiers stared, the ladies whispered, and
The Empress smiled; the reigning Favourite frowned ...

... she tore
The letter open with an air which posed
The Court, that watched each look her visage wore,
Until a royal smile at length disclosed
Fair weather – for the day ...

19: If there was such a position at Catherine's court – and modern historians, anxious, it appears, to play such things down, are coy on the subject – it was shared between Countess Bruce and her successor Mlle. Protasov. See George Solovyetchik, *Potemkin* (Percival Marshall 1949) p. 49.

The first two feelings ran their course complete,
    And lighted first her eye and then her Mouth;
The whole Court looked immediately most sweet,
    Like flowers well watered after a long drouth ...

Byron, less nauseated and much wittier than Casti, creates far subtler effects. Turrachina turns Tommaso over to Turfana, "Amazone di Venere, d'Amore": IV, 17, 2). This lady (Mlle. Protasoff) [20] is "L'Éprouveuse" mentioned at *Don Juan* IX Stanza 84: where Byron puts the interview out of sight as being "inexplicable to the Muse", Casti describes it in some detail (IV, Stanzas 20-25: a section, in fact, entirely verbal, perhaps a disappointment). Tommaso gets a good report, so Cattuna installs him as favourite.

The way in which Juan and Catherine start their liaison is altogether different, and conveys a paradoxical dignity upon them both. Byron takes thirty-six stanzas to establish what has happened, most of them satirically digressive. Perhaps using the speed and distaste of Casti as an example of how not to work, he cunningly has his cake and eats it by making the most of the characters' emotions, while contextualising them unambiguously within the Empress's lust and the young man's vanity. I quote the two stanzas (IX, 67-68) closest in plot terms to those by Casti printed above:

Her Majesty looked down, the Youth looked up –
    And so they fell in love; She with his face –
His grace – his God-knows-what; for Cupid's Cup
    With the first draught intoxicates apace –
A quintessential laudanum or "Black Drop,"
    Which makes one drunk at once, without the base
Expedient of full bumpers; for the Eye
In love drinks all Life's fountains (save Tears) dry.

He, on the other hand – if not in love –
    Fell into that no less imperious passion,
Self-love – which, when some sort of Thing above
    Ourselves, a singer, dancer, much in fashion,
Or Dutchess, Princess, Empress, "deigns to prove,"
    ('Tis Pope's phrase) a great longing, tho' a rash one,
For one especial person out of Many,
Makes us believe ourselves as good as Any.

Byron seems unwilling (or too discreet) to depict the relationship over any further period of time. His failure to do so is for many readers the main reason for the thinness of the Russian Court Cantos, and it is true that the percentage of digression increases markedly in them, leaving the human drama much less room to develop. Canto IX is only eighty-five stanzas long, and Canto X eighty-seven, making them two of the shortest. However, although the narrative is perfunctory, the satire – aided, I should argue, by the subtextual presence of *Il Poema Tartaro* – is never less than whole-hearted. Consider how, in Canto IX Stanzas 62 and 63, Byron contrives to include lightly everything upon which Casti dwells in disgust and horror:

20: ... Voltaire playfully proposed to ask Pugachev – "Sir, are you master or servant? I do not ask who employs you, but simply whether you are employed" Alexander, *op. cit.* p. 178.

Though somewhat large, exuberant, and truculent
When wroth, while pleased, she was as fine a figure
As those who like things rosy-ripe and succulent
Would wish to look on – while they are in vigour;
She could repay each amatory look you lent
With interest, and in turn was wont with rigour
To exact of Cupid's bills the full amount
At sight – nor would permit you to discount.

With her the latter, though at times convenient,
Was not so necessary – for they tell
That she was handsome, and, though fierce, looked lenient,
And always used her favourites too well;
If once beyond her boudoir's precincts in ye went,
Your "Fortune" was in a good way to "swell
A Man" (as Sir Giles says) for though she'd widow all
Nations, she liked Man as an Individual.

Rarely can a middle-aged nymphomaniac serial-killer have been portrayed with more sympathy on the one hand, or more clinical objectivity on the other: that is, with more economy and wit. Consider the question, to which of the two competing words – *those* or *things* (both at 491) – does the pronoun *they* (who are in vigour) refer at 492? To the male admirers of things *rosy-ripe and succulent* (that is, in this context, to *pleased* women) or to the things themselves? Consider the astonishing Byronic rhyme-run, over two stanzas, from *truculent* and *succulent*, via *look you lent*, *convenient* and *lenient*, to the inevitable *in ye went*: or the way sexual appetite melts into financial appetite, becomes the same thing in the Massinger quotation, changes for six words (*for though she'd widow all / Nations*) into an appetite for mass murder, before summing itself up in a phrase which does justice both to Catherine's pseudo-liberal political posturings, and to her insatiable desire for men. Casti is more filled with hatred: the passion of Cattuna for her new lover is cruelly portrayed by him as very undignified, given her advanced years:

E mostrando il desir avido, e caldo
Nei tremoli occhi, e nell'accesa faccia
Con transporto allor fallace, e baldo
Licenziosamente il baccia e abbraccia:
Egli in postura tal parea Rinaldo
Quando giacea d'Armida in fra le braccia,
E somigliato Armida avrebbe anch'ella
S'era men grossa, e vecchia, e un po più bella. (IV, 71)

[And revealing her eager and warm desire, in her trembling eyes and her shining face, with bold and erring abandon she lustfully kisses and embraces him. In posture he seemed like Rinaldo when he lay in Armida's arms, and she would even have resembled Armida, had she been less big and old, and a little more beautiful.]

She explains to him – in speeches much longer than anything Byron allows Catherine (who says nothing in *Don Juan*) how important Love is in her life:

Me di fibra sensibile, e di vive
Tempe, come ben sai formò natura

E diemmi ancor molle, e al piacer proclive,
Cor, che in van di resistere procura,
Alle dolci invincibili attrative
Di bella qual tu sei, maschil figura;
E o fanciulla foss'io, vedova, o moglie,
Invan m'opposi all'amorose voglie.

Or perchè sol regnando amar poss'io
Liberamente, e premiar chi degno
Parmi de'premii miei, dell'amor mio;
Perciò sol di regnar formai disegno;
Ne mai sott'altro aspetto a me s'offrio,
Il Diadèma Real; lo Scettro, il Regno,
E tutto'altro che il Trono ha in se di pregio
Miro con filosofico dispregio. (IV, 76-77)

["As you can tell, Nature has made me of sensitive stuff, and of passionate energies, and has given me tenderness, and a liking for pleasure; my heart, which cannot be resisted, obtains for itself those sweet invincible beauties which you, proud man, know all about; and, whether a maiden, a widow or a wife, it has always been impossible for me to resist my loving inclinations. / Now, since I reign alone, I may love liberally, and choose lovers from amongst the finest around me; and everything else that is offered me – the Royal Diadem, the sceptre, the power, and all of value that the throne offers – I regard with philosophical indifference."]

Tommaso is promoted General; at a vast birthday party given by Toto for Cattuna, all present (except Siveno, who averts his eyes: IV, St. 99) whisper and speculate about him:

Le Dame contemplavano Tommaso
E taluna dicea: Che ferma coscie!
Me ancor costui avrebbe persuaso,
Che non mi fan piacer le membra floscie:
Tal altra soggiungeva: Oh! Che bel naso
Di grande un non so che vi si conosce
E tutte conchindean: degna è del Trono
Cattuna, che sì ben distingue il buono. (IV, 55)

Per desio di veder l'Adon novello
D'ogni banda ciascun tosto s'è mosso:
Ov'è egli? ... ov'è egli? ... eccolo là ... si quello,
Ah, ah quel bel zerbin del naso grosso;
Oh che bel tocco d'uom! oh bello! oh bello!
E ognun l'osserva e gli tien l'occhio addosso,
E un all'altro chiedea la patria, e il nome,
E perchè venne, e d'onde, e quando, e come. (IV, 88)

[The ladies stared at Tommaso and said to one another, "What firm thighs! There's no fun to be had from flabby members"; others said, "What a nose! I never saw one like it!" and all admitted that he was worthy of the throne of Cattuna, who was always so skilful at distinguishing the good. / In their craving to see this new Adonis they immediately gathered from all sides: "Where is he? where is he? ... there he is ... yes, it's him ... Ah, it's that fop with the big nose; oh, what a fine man! Oh, beautiful! Oh, beautiful!" And

they all stare at him, and asked each other his nationality and his name, and why he came, and whence, and when, and how.]

The moment in *Don Juan* which parallels this last stanza most closely is not in Canto IX, but at Canto VI Stanzas 35 and 44, where Lolah, Kattinka and Dudù gather round the newcomer ("Juanna") and ask similar questions. At *Don Juan* IX Stanzas 78-79, Byron depicts the same moment in the Russian court, but his satire is much less obvious and more amusing:

> The whole Court melted into one wide whisper,
> And all lips were applied unto all ears!
> The elder ladies' wrinkles curled much crisper
> As they beheld; the younger cast some leers
> On one another, and each lovely lisper
> Smiled as she talked the matter o'er; but tears
> Of rivalship rose in each clouded eye
> Of all the standing Army who stood by.
>
> All the Ambassadors of all the Powers
> Inquired, Who was this very new young man,
> Who promised to be great in some few hours?
> Which is full soon (though Life is but a Span);
> Already they beheld the silver showers
> Of Rubles rain, as far as Specie can,
> Upon his Cabinet, besides the presents
> Of several ribbons and some thousand peasants.

Tommaso, unlike Juan, flourishes at his post. The list (V, Sts. 2-6) in which gifts pour on him, is a remote reminder of how Juan is showered with luxuries by Haidee in Canto III. In Canto V, estates cascade on to him, and he is immensely popular (compare *Don Juan* X 29, 1-2: "Juan, instead of courting courts, was courted, / A thing which happens rarely"). The court physician, referred to by Byron at Don Juan X 39, 2-3, offers him help in poisoning his enemies (V, Sts. 87-88). In the final Stanzas Siveno, his Good Angel, leaves Caracora on a pass provided for him by Tommaso, who is by now virtually omnipotent.

In a long digression (V, Sts. 52-82) Casti describes the hellish origins of Mogollia and of its inhabitants:

> Quando l'Asia innondò d'Orde un profluvio
> D'origin, di natal, di nome ignoto.
> Chi razza la credea dopo il diluvio
> Nata della putredine, e dal loto,
> E chi dell'eruzion d'Etna e Vesuvio
> Sovra il suol vomitata, e del tremoto,
> Ma'l parer più comun fu che i lor avoli
> Fosser fozza genia di streghe, e diavoli ...
>
> ... Dacchè esiston Mogolli ... (V, St. 52 and 59, 1)

[Asia was once flooded with a great wave, whose origin, birth, and name were unknown. Some think that Mogollia was born, after the deluge, out of corruption, from the lotus; others, that the tremblings and eruptions of Etna and Vesuvius vomited it over the earth;

but the commonest legend relates that it was born from a race of witches and demons ... thence the Mogolli came into existence ...]

The poem's sixth to twelfth Cantos catalogue the impossible attempts Cattuna makes to civilise and educate her subjects. They are paralleled by nothing in *Don Juan*. Catherine and her court are foolish imitations of the courts portrayed by Ariosto and Tasso; nor is she herself anything like Alcina, or Armida (see IV, 71 7-8, quoted above) overwhelmingly luxurious as her bower may be: and Tommaso – like Juan – is entirely without that Christian conscience which causes Ruggiero or Rinaldo to redeem themselves and rebel. Indeed, Tommaso, though sexually very active, is militarily null. Juan's illness is occasioned more by erotic and physical distaste than by moral qualms (see *Don Juan* X, Stanza 37).

Of Peter the Great (Djenghis-Khan) Casti speaks with awe:

Assiduo, infaticabile, indefesso,
Forte, robusto, insomma un uom di ferro,
Giudice, e Giustizier a un tempo istesso
Artista, marinar, monarca, e sgherro,
Anzi vita cotal facea ben spesso,
Più che ad un uom, conveniente a un verro,
I perigli schernia, vincea gli ostacoli,
E facea cose, che parean miracoli. (XI, 58)

[Hardworking, inexhaustible, tireless, strong, healthy, in short a man of iron; judge and lawgiver at once; artist, seaman, king and soldier; he did so much, at such speed, that he seemed not be a man; he dared such perils, and overcame such obstacles, and seemed to perform miracles.]

But it is clear that his successor's reign, supposedly so magnificent, is in reality a sad anti-climax. Toto, the power-broker and Imperial pimp, is a much more apt man for the hour:

Ma Toto era per Dio ben altra cosa;
Non v'era in tutta quanta Tartaria
Anima più superba, e ambiziosa.
L'immensa avidità, la superbia,
La maniera sprezzante imperiosa,
La pompa, il lusso, e quindi l'angheria,
Che co'suoi Creditor usar solea
Dell'odio universal scopo il rendea. (II, 12)

[But Toto was, God knows, quite a different matter. There was not anywhere in Tartary a soul prouder or more ambitious; overwhelming greed, arrogance, a manner at once contemptuous and imperious; his pomp and lust created such outrage that he was made the target of universal hatred.]

In Canto VI, the longest, at 146 stanzas, Cattuna and Toto plan to invade Korea (the Crimea) and to make war against Geppano (Turkey) despite empty coffers and ill-equipped ships (where the Mongols had failed against the Japanese in 1281, the Russians had been successful against the Turks, at Cheshme in 1770, at Ismail in 1790 and elsewhere.) Casti describes the onset of war in tones of which Byron would approve:

L'Angel sterminator guida, e conduce
Il feral carro per l'eterea strada;
Riconosco ben io l'infausta luce,
E il balenar, nella fulminea spada,
E le grand'ali al tergo, e il guardo truce
Guai dovunque il gran colpo a cader vada:
Temete, o Regi l'ultima ruina
L'Angel sterminator già s'avvicina. (VI, 7)

[The exterminating Angel drives and guides the funeral wagon down the etherial way; I recognise its inauspicious light, its lightnings, its thunderous sword, the great wings at its back, its threatening countenance; woe to the place where its blow will fall; tremble, O Kings, at your ultimate ruin, for the exterminating Angel is already approaching.]

In reaction to the crushing taxes levied to finance the war, a rebellion erupts under Turcano (Pugachev); Cattuna trembles on her throne, and Toto suffers agonies from diarrhoea (VI, St. 47). Tommaso offers to go and fight, but Cattuna insists that he stays. Turcano promises the peasants that they will be "liberi e contenti / Come nell'aria augei, pesci nell'onde" (VI, 44, 5-6): he threatens to ally with the Japanese Songo (the Sultan): but he and his supporters are bloodily crushed. Casti's stanzas describing Cattuna's soldiers ("I ruffiani, i carnefici, i siccari": VI, 68, 8) may be part of the subtext for Byron's stanzas against mercenaries; though no English are mentioned in the Italian poem, and it is not clear that the butchers are foreign. Confronting his vanquisher Apua (Piotr Panin) Turcano defies him:

Apua, gli disse, io ti conosco bene;
Perchè vinto son io tu mi detesti
Se fossi vincitor mi adulteresti.

Ma sentimi: il destin dette a noi dua
Condizion di sudditi, e di servi;
Non soffersi la mia: soffri la tua,
Io servir più non volle, e tu ancor servi
Siccome l'esca appresso il fuoco ... (VI, 99-100)

["Apua," he said, "I know you well: because I am defeated you detest me, but if I had won, you would worship me. / But listen: fate has given us two conditions, to command, and to serve; but I do not serve – that's your lot, to serve as the tinder serves the flame".]

Compare the dignity given in *Don Juan* to such foes of Russia as the old Tartar Khan and his five sons (VIII Stanzas 104-18) or to the Chief Pacha of Ismail (VIII Stanzas 98, and 120-2). However, these are foreign victims of international Russian aggression, not domestic insurgents (Byron, perhaps anxious not to crowd his canvas, never mentions such a possibility).

Il Poema Tartaro next descends into sub-Dantean regions (for in the *Divine Comedy*, all punishment is deserved). Horrifying vengeance is taken on those who had revolted with Turcano / Pugachev:

Disoterraro ogni padrone ucciso,
E in luogo suo lo schiavo ancor vivente
Poservi, e sopra lu× di marcia intriso
Distesero il cadavere fetente,

Piedi a piè, ventre a ventre, e viso a viso,
E il risseppelliron nuovamente
Perchè il padron e vivo, e morto ancora
Star dee dissopra, e il servo sotto ognora.

Questi, ed altri inventar barbari scempi
Contro quegli infelice, e molte, e varie
Torture atroci, ed inumani esempi
Dieron di crudeltà straordinarie;
Cangia indole il Mogol secondo i tempi
E da viltade passa alla barbarie,
Superba nelle prospere vicende,
Avversità spregevole lo rende.

Quei che il cor vile, e l'anima codarda
Mostrò già nel periglio, e nell'ambascia
E al balenar d'un asia e alabarda
Tremò come plebea vecchia bagascia
Se forza, e l'autorità non lo ritarda,
Contro gli inermi incredulir non lascia,
Pertanto l'inuman rio trattamento
Fra que' popoli sparse alto spavento. (VI, 103-105)

Or chi può dir quali empi frazi, ed adri
Commiser quelle militar masnade?
Scannaro i putti in braccio alle lor madri;
Per bronchi, e selci e asprissime contrade
Strascinar donne avvinte e vecchi padri,
E il lasciar sventrati in sulle strade,
O, nelle membra in pria mutili, e tronchi
Gli appeser nudi, e capovolti ai tronchi. (VI, 111)

[They disinterred every murdered master, put a living serf in his place, and laid the corpse over him, soaked in rottenness, foot to foot, chest to chest and face to face, and buried him again, because, whether living or dead, the master should be above and the servant beneath. / These and other barbarous deaths they invented for these unfortunate ones; many and various were the atrocious tortures they inflicted, and many would be the examples of outlandish inhumanity that we could give; the times changed the nature of the Mongol, and he passed from the vile to the barbarous; where prosperity had made him proud, adversity made him despicable. / Those who had already, in the midst of danger, shown the vileness of their hearts and the cowardice of their souls by the way that, faced with the flash of halberds, they trembled like old whores, now, with neither force nor authority to stop them, subjected the unarmed and disbelieving people to the most inhumanly evil treatment. / Who now can tell the wicked deeds committed by those gangs of soldiers? They slaughtered the babes in their mothers' arms, dragged women and old men from the rebellious districts and disembowelled them in the streets; or, having first cut their limbs off, hung their trunks upside-down naked.]

Here, perhaps most strongly, we see the difference between Casti, a writer so close to the horrible truth of his subject, that he almost loses artistic control, and Byron, who, having less of an axe to grind, does not wish to expose us to the horror of things in the same way. However, he does ask us to imagine them. See *Don Juan*, VIII 69, 4-5:

... babe and mother
With distant shrieks were heard Heaven to upbraid ...

or VIII 82, 5-8:

Here War forgot his own destructive art
In more destroying Nature, and, the heat
Of carnage, like the Nile's sun-sodden slime,
Engendered monstrous shapes of every crime.

or the climactic VIII Stanza 123:

All that the Mind would sink from of excesses,
All that the body perpetrates of bad,
All that we read, hear, dream, of man's distresses,
All that the Devil would do if run stark mad,
All that defies the worst which pen expresses,
All by which Hell is peopled, or as sad
As hell, mere mortals who their power abuse,
Was here (as heretofore and since) let loose.

Though less visceral than Casti's, Byron's effect manages to be as memorable, and more profound theologically to boot (his first thought for lines 6-7 was "more sad / Than hell").

Cattuna next decides, by way of atonement, to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of the God Fo in Cattai (Casti's version of her trip to "Tauride" – southern Ukraine and the Crimea, the voyage made famous by its alleged "Potemkin villages"); but famine and plague are everywhere, and even her fleet sinks (VI, Stanza 142). All naval commanders present receive medals to cover up the loss of face. Thus, having convinced the world that Caracora is "in pace e in guerra / Il vero paradiso della terra" (VI, 145, 7-8) she goes home "con cor tranquillo" (VI, 146, 3) to shower more favours on Tommaso.

In Canto VII, Pier delle Vigne (Voltaire) opens a correspondence with Cattuna, after having stayed at the court of Azzodino (Frederick the Great). Part of Casti's intention in the poem is to correct the grossly idealised version of Catherine that Voltaire, Diderot and d'Alembert had created in Western Europe – Voltaire had named her "Minerva" and "Notre Dame de Saint-Petersbourg". At *Don Juan*, IX 23, 5-6, Byron too laments the way Voltaire had succumbed to Catherine's fake charisma:

I know its mighty Empire now allures
Much flattery – even Voltaire's, and that's a pity.

Although, at IX 71, 8 he does compare Catherine unironically with Pallas.

On the death of delle Vigne, Cattuna acquires his library (VII, Stanza 10) as Catherine had Voltaire's. Pian Carpino, on the assassination of the Grand Lama (VII, Stanza 66: the Archbishop of Moscow, killed in 1771) brings in many more foreign artists, who sell trashy works to the Tartars at inflated prices. Caracora becomes "Fogna del mondo, e universal cloaca" (VII, 87, 8).

Cattuna, meanwhile, involves herself wholesale in world politics, invading Cochin-China and Tonkin, and intervening "neutrally" in other conflicts (VII, Stanza

100). Love and the desire for world-domination go, with her, together. As Tommaso sums it up, later:

Gloria le idee, gloria i pensier le estolle
Nello spirto il vigor gloria le infonde,
Amor, gentil costume, ed un cor molle
E maniere le dièè dolci e gioconde.
Per queste due passion l'armi Mogolle
Muove, e i tesori a piene man diffonde
Tutto ella pon per appagarle in opra
E vada il regno, e il mondo inter sossopra. (XII, 30)

[The idea and thought of glory inspire her spiritually, and the energy that goes with glory informs her; the gentle habits of love and of a soft heart, and a sweet and happy manner: the Mongol army is moved by these twin passions, and distributes its treasures from a generous hand; to satisfy her, the country must be emptied, and the whole world turned upside-down.]

Compare *Don Juan*, VIII 92, 6-8:

And whom for this at last must we condemn?
Their natures? or their sovereigns, who employ
All arts to teach their subjects to destroy?

Fantasies engendered by her reading in Eastern romances govern her gargantuan political aspirations, as well as her love-life:

Udii sovvente dir che Turrachina
Contrasse pei romanzi Orientali
Fisso, e deciso gusto da bambina,
Piena perciò d'impressioni tali,
Non pria le giuste idee pesa, e combina,
Ma sempre gigantesche, e colossali,
Forma i progetti, e romanzesche imprese
Onde ne parli ogni lontan paese. (II, 90)

[The imagination of Turrachina was formed by Oriental romances, and by the taste of a child; full of such impressions, she never felt the force of just ideas, but always of gigantic, colossal ones, and romantic concepts, such as would be spoken of in faraway lands.]

The last five Cantos of *Il Poema Tartaro* take leave of historical reality. In Canto VIII, Cattuna makes another pilgrimage to Fo's sanctuary, and, having had an unspecified Arab work (that is, a French one) translated into Tartar (VIII, Stanzas 85-87) she gives birth, unexpectedly, in a humble cabin (the birthplace of Ghengis Khan) to a son of unknown fatherhood (VIII, Stanza 109). On her return to Caracora the tribes confer on her the title of Divine Majesty as reward for these two achievements:

La Grande volean dirla in sulle prime,
Ma titol parve poi sì triviale
Che in oggi i più comun mestieri esprime;
Onde chi proponea l'Universale,
Chi Massima chimarla, e chi Sublime,
Altri Immensa, altri Eterna, altri Immortale;

Angelica, Serafica, Celeste,
O Antonomasia tal simile a queste. (VIII, 112)

[They had wanted to call her Great in her early years; but that title now seemed so trivial and mundane; others proposed The Universal One, The Greatest, the Sublime; the Immense, the Eternal, the Immortal; Angelic, Seraphic, Celestial, or Inexceedable, or some similar thing.]

All three events – the translation, the birth, and the title – are linked satirically, for, in the case of the translation, "la Mogolla Lingua" (VIII, 85, 1) is too barbarous to express the subtleties of "Arab" (Western) thought, the birth is cryptic and incomprehensible, and the title entirely unmerited. Russians, Casti implies, are inherently incapable of civilisation, and can only make the hugest and most empty gestures by way of compensation.

In Canto IX, a succession of foreign princes visits Caracora: Renodino (Prince Henry of Prussia) Azzodino (Frederick the Great) Aitone (Gustavus II of Sweden) Farredino (nuncio of the Babylonian Sultan). All are described with the sort of misanthropic detail that comes from first-hand scrutiny. At this point Tommaso briefly glimpses his old beloved Zelmira, installed as the wife to Mengo, who is now ambitious to become Emperor. Finally, the admirable Orenzebbe (Joseph II of Austria, Casti's master) arrives, incognito: Casti, oblivious to the satire he has himself directed at the elegists of Cattuna, praises him, Southey-like, to the skies (X, Stanzas 1-17) and Cattuna lavishes an unequalled welcome on him. But Orenzebbe is unimpressed by the false grandeurs the Tartars display: he prefers solitude and contemplation.

The fall of Tommaso occurs in Canto XI. He is too noble to remain in power in such a corrupt country; the evil slanders of Toto / Toctabei finally unseat him (XI, Stanzas 15-33) and he is banished to "Camskatka" (Kamchatka: XI, 36, 1). Casti is unfair here; none of Catherine's lovers suffered as a result of her losing interest in them – rather the reverse. In this Siberian desert, he becomes friends with the governor Bozzon (Josef Bergler, an old courtier of Genghis Khan / Peter the Great) a man as disillusioned with Catherine's Russia (XI Stanza 71) as Siveno had been. From him, Tommaso learns stoic wisdom and endurance.

In Canto XII, the Tartar princes conspire against Cattuna. Suvorov ("il vecchio Acar": XII, Stanza 11) his talents wasted, is an historically improbable party to their conspiracy. She too is brutally banished to Camskatka, and Cajucco (Tsar Paul) takes over. He reigns for one year and then dies (XII, 67, 8: the real Paul reigned for five years, and was assassinated). In Camskatka, Tommaso saves the life of Cattuna in a shipwreck (XII, Stanza 76): Toto, arriving later, dies of starvation on a desert island (XII, Stanza 47: an apt death for Potemkin, whom the chroniclers – used by Byron at Canto VII Stanzas 36 and 37 – credited with a Rabelaisian gluttony). Tommaso and Cattuna, both drastically changed by their experiences, recognise one another only with difficulty, but eventually arrive at a more charitable understanding. Zelmira pleads with Mengo (now Tsar) and Tommaso is recalled from exile; but as soon as he comes into the presence of the new Empress, drops dead in her arms (XII, Stanza 94). He is given a lavish funeral.

Tommaso's death in the arms of Zelmira perhaps gives us the single clue to the link between the Turkish Cantos of *Don Juan*, its Russian Cantos, and *Il Poema Tartaro*. In them the ambitions of women, whether erotic, romantic, or political, are thwarted by that malign and bathetic deity which stalks all characters in the ottava

rima satires of Byron. Part of the source of this concept – though he had evidence enough of it from his own observation – may well lie in the cynicism of Casti's work. Gulbeyaz is in Canto V a sexual fantasiser, trapped by the contrast between her perception of her own infinite power, and the cruel reality of its circumscription: she is alone with Juan for just fifteen minutes, before her husband arrives, and she has to relinquish him to the harem, where he ends up in bed with someone else. Catherine really has the infinite power which Gulbeyaz can only behave as though she possesses; but her wielding it causes Juan almost to die. This pattern of aspiration – apparent triumph – disaster is the underlying structure of all the sexual encounters in *Don Juan*: but immediately behind these two is the depiction by Casti of the Semiramis-figure Cattuna / Turrachina; her political power is the merest illusion, disguising the hellish barbarism of the country she claims to rule; and the very infinite nature of her erotic command, precluding the possibility of love, leaves the way open merely to sophisticated debauchery.

It is often said to be a pity that the Russian Cantos, carrying as they do so many important thematic aspects of *Don Juan* (female sexuality, the fall of man, war, the second fall of man, and so on) are not based – as the other Cantos are – on Byron's own travels and experience. However, it is also often said that Russia is a place where only seeing can ever be believing; and perhaps, had Byron actually been there, his impressions would have been so overwhelming that he would have been hard-put to keep his poem economically balanced. The distance between what contemporary legend said about Catherine's achievements, and what she actually failed to achieve, was so great that Byron might have been moved to see even Castlereagh and Southey in a new light. English cant – the primary foe of *Don Juan* – was as nothing beside Russian ("Moltissimo in parole, e nulla in fatto": VIII, 89, 8). His reading of *Il Poema Tartaro* – and it seems clear to me that he did read it – may have served as a warning of what an infernal and unwieldy subject Russia was, and may have formed part of his motive in getting Juan's stay at Catherine's court over with as soon as possible: after all, his vision of Hell had already been portrayed, before Juan gets to Russia itself, at Ismail. However, in the numerous passages where we can detect borrowings, or at least parallels, what strikes us is not only the greater wit of the Englishman, but also (he'd probably be pleased to hear it, given the reputation *Don Juan* had in its day) the greater control, tact and decency his epic displays. Wit and tact could not, probably, do justice to the Russia of Catherine the Great.