

BYRON AND CASTI: DANGEROUS LIAISONS

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Critics have long recognised Byron's indebtedness to Italy and Italian authors for his writing of *Beppo*, *Don Juan* and *The Vision of Judgement*, works which epitomise the poet's new satirical mode and his "desultory," "half-serious" style of writing, a style which famously divided his contemporaries, provoking confused delight and doubt. Though the influence of poets like Ariosto, Pulci, Berni, Forteguerra, Firenzuola and Casti on Byron's works has been noted and documented by scholars over time, emphasis has been placed on the extent of influence of the Italian original on the plot, characters, and manner of the English works, rather than on the actual modifications and adaptations Byron made to the borrowed elements—and the reasons behind them. Truth be told, the process of arriving at a satisfactory answer regarding the ways Byron recasts his Italian models cannot be an easy one, because it often necessitates dealing with qualities of style which are somewhat intangible, even osmotic. Setting aside the cases where the relationship between Byron's poems and the Italian texts is pretty straightforward, it can be said that much of the influence can be at best sensed or vaguely grasped, rather than effectively pinpointed.

As I have argued in another essay,¹ Byron's rewriting of the Italian medley mode offers an important vantage point from which to view the literature, culture and politics of the Romantic period, especially in view of its controversial reception in the English world. The political implications of Byron's stylistic options have been further pursued by recent scholarship which sees *Beppo* and *Don Juan* as an important part of Byron's transnational poetics.² However, we need to be reminded that Byron's fashioning of the new hybrid style—part direct but eclectic borrowing, part creative impulse and assimilation—and his ingenious anglicisation of the *ottava rima* is primarily a *poetic* act (an act of making or synthesis, from the Greek word from which the English term *poet* derives, *poiein*) which deserves attention in its own right and which has much to tell us about Byron's developing literary sensibility. Literary critics such as Lindsay Waters, Roberto Sangiorgi, Peter Vassallo and Peter Cochran³ have addressed some fundamental questions in this area: What are the qualities Byron takes over from the Italian poets and how does he transfuse them into his own verse? What are the adaptations and modifications he makes? How does he modulate the cultural and political resonances of the foreign rhyme?

In this paper I wish to take this discussion further by exploring Byron's connection to one of his Italian models, Giambattista Casti, in an attempt to illustrate how the poet engages with the particularities of Casti's narrative style in the *Novelle Galanti*, and how he turns them into the celebrated rhyme of *Don Juan*. As I will argue, Casti's novelistic universe, through its modes of light satire, meta-textuality, digression, lasciviousness, and compositional license, materialises an awareness of contingency and irregularity in poetic creation which compels Byron to accept it and use as a framework for his *ottava rima* works. On the other hand, Byron purposely chooses to tone up or tone down, modulate or rework the Castian features he brings into his verse, at times highlighting and at times controlling their radical potential.

But who was the Italian itinerant rhymester about whose works Byron was so enthusiastic? Born in 1724 in Italy, Casti had been a precocious student at the seminary of Montefiascone. In 1765 he moved to Florence, where he was created Poeta di Corte by the Grand Duke Leopold. Here he came to the attention of Joseph II, who invited him to Vienna and bestowed upon him several posts of honor. He visited most of the capitals of Europe and thus gained an inside knowledge of court life in several countries. In 1778 he took up his residence in St. Petersburg, where Catherine II received him cordially. This is the setting of his famous verse satire *Il Poema Tartaro*, a realistic and venomous portrayal of Russian society and politics that contains a violent assault on the **empress's character**. Later he returned

1: "Revisiting Byron's Italian Style," *The Byron Journal* 36.1 (2008): 19-29.

2: See Paul Stock's *The Shelley-Byron Circle and the Idea of Europe* (London: Palgrave, 2009).

3: Lindsay Waters, "The 'Desultory Rhyme' of *Don Juan*: Byron, Pulci and the Improvisatory Style", *ELH*, 45.3 (Autumn 1978): 429-42, Roberto Benaglia Sangiorgi, "Giambattista Casti's 'Novelle Galanti' and Lord Byron's 'Beppo'", *Italica*, 28.4 (Dec. 1951): 261-9, Peter Vassallo, *Byron: The Italian Literary Influence* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984), Peter Cochran, "Francis Cohen, *Don Juan*, and Casti", *Romanticism*, 4.1 (1998): 120-4.

to Vienna and was crowned Court Poet by the Emperor Leopold. The attraction of the French revolution drew him to Paris in 1796, where he lived until his death in 1804.⁴

Casti's greatest work, *Gli Animalì Parlanti* (1802), is an allegorical satire which fiercely attacks the reigning sovereigns of Europe as well as the ideology of republicanism. It is mainly this poem, which, translated into several languages, including English, branded Casti as a rebellious and dangerous Jacobin. Despite the popularity of his poems, Casti's ill-reputed character, his coarseness and vulgarity of style combined with his slovenly verse structure subjected him to much unfavourable criticism in Italy and abroad. Giuseppe Parini's disparaging portrait of the man and poet Casti in his famed sonnet, fixed the image of the *abate* as "un prete brutto, vecchio e puzzolente ... satiro procace e disonesto ... che scrive ... un poema sporco e impertinente" (an old, ugly and stinking cleric, an impudent and dishonest lecher ... who writes dirty and impertinent poetry).⁵ Ugo Foscolo, his countryman, in his famous article "Narrative and Romantic Poems of the Italians" translated by Francis Cohen and published in the *Quarterly Review* in 1819, speaks of Casti as a man who "laughs at all faith, and all patriotism, and all morality" (487) and criticises him for his impassioned style, graceless diction, abuse of satire and, above all, "for his deliberate intent of corrupting the morals of [his] readers" (488).⁶ **The same charges were leveled at Byron.**

The underlying concerns of the *Quarterly* article are not so hard to discern: English imitators of the *ottava rima* are cautioned against the use of Casti as a model, and urged towards a purification of the foreign style and its careful adjustment to national taste. In other words, the *Quarterly* article seems to be concerned less with its announced topic of Italian narrative and Romantic poetry and more with those English poets who ventured to adapt the Italian serio-comic form and satiric mode into English—John Hookham Frere, William Steward Rose – and Byron. Even the seemingly harmless collection of Casti's witty society verse tales *Novelle Galanti* does not escape Foscolo / Cohen's scrutiny and censure. As he contends, "There are few men so graceless as to confess that they have read the book" (489).

Not surprisingly, Byron was one of them. In 1816 he wrote to Major Pryce Gordon, referring to a copy of Casti's *Novelle*, which the latter had presented to him at Brussels, "I cannot tell you what a treat your gift of Casti has been to me; I have almost got him by heart. I had read his 'Animalì Parlanti,' but I think these 'Novelle' much better. I long to go to Venice to see the manners so admirably described."⁷ The *Novelle* praised so highly by Byron consist of forty-eight tales in *ottava rima*, a voluminous work of more than 30,000 lines, printed together in 1804, although at least thirteen had been completed by 1778 and published in 1793. Most of these tales are adaptations of stories told by Italian and French writers, most famously Boccaccio and Voltaire. The stories relate with gusto but also with coarseness and satirical temperament the indiscretions of unscrupulous priests and monks, the infidelities of unfaithful wives, the pains of jealous husbands, farcical bedroom and discovery scenes and "the secret and devious machinations of the female mind."⁸ Casti's shrewd and acute analysis of the sexual mores, social interactions, customs and institutions of the times is believed to derive from his lifetime experience in the courts of Europe, where he witnessed the hypocrisies, corruption, deceptions and facetiousness of the courtiers, as well as the political and religious intrigue of a decadent and unheroic society.

In their entirety, the *Novelle Galanti* produce a colorful mosaic of the society of Casti's time, commenting now laughingly, now sardonically on social vices and on people's (serious or minor) lapses from virtue. Casti, therefore, departs from Ariosto's noble plan in *Orlando Furioso* to sing "of loves and ladies, knights and arms ... of courtesies, and many a daring feat" and parodies the pretensions of Greek, Latin and modern epics which focus on the lives of valiant heroes, on violent battles and on sublimated and idealised passions. Casti advertises his intention to take leave of all this and gleefully sing, instead, his "piacevoli novelle"⁹ by way of which, as he states in the opening lines of *La sposa cucita*, he aims to "reveal the canvas of human passions and of all that happens in the

4: See Claude M. Fuess, *Lord Byron as a Satirist in Verse* (New York: 1912) 128.

5: Parini's sonnet entitled "Contro G.B. Casti" is cited from Cesare Cantù, *Della letteratura Italiana: L'Ottocento*, vol. II (Torino: 1894), 971. Unless otherwise stated, the translations of texts from Italian into English are mine.

6: Ugo Foscolo, "Narrative and Romantic Poems of the Italians," trans. Francis Cohen, *Quarterly Review* 21 (1819): 486–556. See also the version of the text in Italian: "Sui poemi narrativi e romanzeschi italiani," *Opere edite e postume di Ugo Foscolo: Saggi di critica storico-letteraria*, raccolti e ordinati da F.S. Orlandini e da E. Mayer, vol. I, (Firenze: Felice le Monnier 1958): 135–224.

7: *BLJ* V 80.

8: Vassallo 78.

9: *La comunanza* 299, st.4. All references to Casti's novels are to the following edition: *Le Novelle Galanti e Il Poema Tartaro* di G. B. Casti. In un Solo Volume. Bruxelles: Presso H. Tarlier 1827.

world.”¹⁰ Casti’s insistence on facts and things and on a materialistic conception of the universe governed by physicality, reality, sexual desire and an easy-going tolerance towards human passions determines the atmosphere of the *Novelle* and eschews any kind of metaphysical or moralising concern. As the author admits in one of his many digressive moments,

La musa mia che tutta è per la fisica,
E che s’occupa sol della materia,
Ama il real nè favellar si risica
Di cosa astratta, o sia scherzosa o seria,
E quella appunto è tutta metafisica,
Onde a parlarne solo e un miseria;¹¹

(My muse is absolutely physical / and deals with material things only / she loves reality and doesn’t run the risk / of talking about abstract things, be they funny or serious / and this is precisely metaphysics / of which merely to speak is a miserable thing)

Casti’s “physical muse” brings to mind Byron’s “pedestrian muses” (*DJ* Dedication) and the latter’s obsession with truth and the reality of life itself as the source of great poetry:

Besides, my Muse by no means deals in fiction:
She gathers a repertory of facts,
Of course with some reserve and slight restriction,
But mostly sings of human things and acts—
And that’s one cause she meets with contradiction;
For too much truth, at first sight, ne’er attracts;
And were her object only what’s call’d glory,
With more ease too she’d tell a different story.¹²

The influence of Casti here is evident; yet Byron’s version displays more vitality, wit and subtlety in the lines, which bitterly criticise his contemporaries’ dislike or fear of truth. Byron was painfully aware of the fact that “too much truth ... never attracts” and of the challenges and pressures presented to an author, like himself, who insisted on the primacy of fact. Indeed, one of the controlling arguments of *Don Juan*, as it reads in the poem’s epigraph from Horace, is that it is difficult to talk of common things in an appropriate way (“*Difficile est proprie communia dicere*”). Both Casti and Byron set out to do just this. Furthermore, Byron’s cynicism about the “contradiction” his muse meets through the fact that “glory” is not her main objective has a great deal to do with the negative reception of *Don Juan* and with Byron’s recurrent claim in the course of the poem that his motives, this time, are neither commercial success nor fame.¹³ The poet’s emphasis on fact also explains his averred dislike for metaphysics, into which, however, he’s apt to slip over and over again. The following lines are highly amusing in their implementation of the Pulcian mixture of the comic and the serious, which aptly conveys the poet’s struggling though vain efforts to extricate himself from the binds of speculative reasoning:

But here again, why will I thus entangle
Myself with metaphysics? None can hate
So much as I do any kind of wrangle;
And yet, such is my folly, or my fate,
I always knock my head against some angle
About the present, past, or future state:¹⁴

This stanza is typically Byronic, or *Don Juanesque* if you wish, in the sense that Byron’s feelings intrude into the poem in spite of himself—by way of the utterance “such is my folly, or my fate”—moderating the narrator’s habitually detached and cynical perspective.

But if the author’s role is not to introduce metaphysics or some noble topic, then what is his task? Again, Byron comes off as “divided” between having no plan at all, “but, note or text, / I never

10: “Di tutto cio che avvien nel mondo e delle / Umane passioni d’espervi il quadro / é il mio pensiero in queste mie novelle” (213, st.1).

11: *Endimione e Diana*, 296.

12: *DJ* XIV st.13.

13: Cf. Canto XII, 55: “My Muses do not care a pinch of rosin / About what’s called success, or not succeeding: / ... / ’Tis a ‘great moral lesson’ they are reading.”

14: *DJ* XV st.91.

know the word which will come next / So on I ramble, now and then narrating, / Now pondering,”¹⁵ and serving what he perceives to be a moral purpose. Notice how the slow-paced though heavily alliterative first line builds up expectations which are perforce undermined as the stanza proceeds:

But politics, and policy, and piety,
Are topics which I sometimes introduce,
Not only for the sake of their variety,
But as subservient to a moral use;
Because my business is to *dress* society,
And stuff with *sage* that very verdant goose.¹⁶

This is a telling instance of the “scorching and drenching” effect of Byron’s Italian-derived style, registered in the forced parallelism of morality and politics with gastronomy. The last two lines convey irony because of the *double entendres* of words to which the poet draws attention visually. According to Peter Cochran, “*sage* implies sagacity, and *verdant goose*, foolish innocence” (note to *DJ* text online). It is therefore implied that, if *Don Juan’s* role is to educate and “moralise,” this is to be done on the poem’s own terms.

Casti, on the other hand, proudly claims in *La Comunanza* that “Fama, ricchezze, e onor non cerco mica, / Nè vola fino al ciel la musa mia, / Nè s’impaccia co’ regi e cogli eroi; / Le Basta, o Donne, di piacere a voi” (I’m not looking for fame, riches or glory / and my muse does not fly up to heaven / nor is she obsessed with kings and heroes / The only thing she wants, oh Ladies, is to please you).¹⁷ The stated objective of Casti’s poetry is to oblige the ladies, whereas Byron’s alleged goal is to tell the truth. Regarding his relationship to metaphysics, Casti, as noted previously, deems metaphysics as improper material for his target audience—the pleasure-seeking, complacent and narcissistic women of the court whom he constantly flatters—and so he claims to abandon all discussion of the sort for their sake. In the story *l’Ossessa*, Casti capitulates on this point but also sees himself as lacking the ability to face the task: “Ma l’astratto lasciam tuon metafisico, / Poichè non è di nostra competenza; / E d’altra parte non vo’ correr risico / Di stancar la gentil vostra indulgenza. / Un fatto narrerò reale e fisico ” (But let us set aside the metaphysical tone / since it is not within our competence / and besides I don’t wish to run the risk / of tiring your gentle indulgence. / I shall narrate a real and physical fact).¹⁸ Nevertheless, Casti will not let his ladies leave the scene “unschooled”: most of his tales conclude with a moral of sorts, or some practical advice on how to deal with life’s problems: “E qualche utilità sempre trarrete / Da quelle cose che ridendo accenno; / Nè lo dico con aria cattedratica; / Ma quel che dico lo vedrete in pratica.” (You will always gain something useful / From the things I laughingly hint at / I’m not saying this with a professorial air / But what I’m saying you can see in practice).¹⁹

One of the most interesting features of the *Novelle Galanti* is the way Casti engages with the female sex. Women are the unquestionable protagonists of Casti’s book—as desiring subjects, as objects of desire and as a target audience. On the one hand, we see them figure as female readers whom Casti tries to take into his confidence. Casti affects intimacy and confidence but at the same time gallantry, respect and admiration, addressing them as “Donne mie Belle,” “Donne mie garbate,” “Donne amabilissime,” “Donne mie care,” “Donne mie vezzose.” The author of the *Novelle* is hyper-aware of his noble, sensible and select audience from the opening lines of the first tale, *Il Berretto Magico*:

Io non parlo alle rigide matrone,
Non parlo alle ritrose verginelle,
Non alle vecchie austere bacchettone;
Parlo a giovani, a spose, e parlo a quelle,
Che accoppian la virtù colla ragione:
In somma parlo a voi, Donne mie belle,
Che amate senza smorfia e ipocrisia
Gl’ innocenti piaceri e l’allegria.

(I’m not speaking to strict noble women / nor to shy virgins / nor to severe old hags / I’m talking to the young ones, to the married ones, and also to those who combine virtue with reason: / everything considered I speak to you my beautiful ladies / who love innocent pleasures and joy without affectation and hypocrisy)

15: *DJ IX* sts.41, 42.

16: *DJ XV* st.93.

17: 299, st.3.

18: 175, st.2.

19: *Il Rosignuolo* 70.

Casti often interrupts his narration to indulge in a gossipy conversation or chuckling aside to the lady-reader, never so long as Byron's digressions, but in much the same vein. In *Il Ritorno Inaspettato*, for example, a story of a young wife's infidelity, Casti dwells on Climene's growing attraction to a handsome schoolboy, Rosmin, who admires her from afar but lacks the courage to approach her and so contents himself with stolen glances and burning blushes. In a moment of rising passion and anticipation, Casti pauses and turns, in a dramatic manner, to his lady readers-confidantes to chide them gently for their presumed reaction—a knowing little smile—towards Climene's first step towards infidelity. Thus Casti pretends to be outwitted by his discerning female readers, whom he addresses in affectionate and teasing terms:

Qual, Donne mie, malizioso io scorgo
 Sorriso in voi, mentre Rosmin s'attrista?
 Ah! furbette, furbette, io ben m'accorgo,
 Che qualcuna di voi già s'è avvista
 Che Rosmino (e ragion fors' io ven porgo)
 Del racconto divien protagonista.²⁰

(What is this little mischievous smile I notice on your faces, my ladies, while Rosmin is pining? / Ah, little cunning creatures, I'm well aware that one of you has already foreseen that Rosmin [and I'll offer you a good reason] becomes the story's protagonist).

Casti's female protagonists, on the other hand, are in their majority beautiful, sensuous, resourceful women who are either initiated into the mysteries of love or lapse into infidelity because they cannot escape the overpowering passionate drive. According to Peter Vassallo, "Casti's philosophical outlook ... is not so much pessimistic as deterministic: the mysterious force which Casti considers to be the ruling amorous instinct is so overwhelmingly powerful that education, religion and even conscience are woefully ineffectual when pitted against it."²¹ The morality pervading the *Novelle Galanti* is one which sees the pursuit of pleasure and sex as central to life in society.²² Casti rejects Platonic love, an idea which is also developed by Byron, who ironically remarks that besides the idealised notions of love, "there are those things which Words name Senses ..."²³

Critics have pointed out parallels between Casti's *Il Ritorno Inaspettato* and the first canto of *Don Juan*. It has been argued, in fact, that Donna Julia was modeled on the character of Climene.²⁴ It is true that some similarities are too striking to be overlooked, for instance, Climene's conflicting feelings and second thoughts as her passion for innocent Rosmin begins to take over and to cloud her judgment. Julia is making a similar effort to curb her passion and rationalise the situation with young Juan "for honour's, pride's, religion's, virtue's sake."²⁵ After much faltering, both Climene and Julia succumb to their passions, even though they are firmly resolved to keep their marriage vows and their constancy to their husbands. Both Casti and Byron comment on the women's self-delusion and insincerity by cynically pointing to the duplicity of their acts.²⁶ Consider, first, Casti's reaction to Climene's lack of resolve and gradual surrender to passion in *Il Ritorno Inaspettato*:

—voglio inferire,
 E di provarvi sol l'impegno ho assunto,
 Che d'inesperienza egli è un errore,
 Volger prefigger limiti all'amore.

Ed in prova di questo io vi dirò,
 Che anche ad onta di quei proponimenti
 Quel loro baciucchiar continuò;
 Poi vennero bel bello ai toccamenti,
 Ed avanzando ciascun giorno un po',

²⁰: *Il Ritorno Inaspettato* 193.

²¹: Vassallo 68.

²²: For more on this, see Lucia Rodler's introduction to *Giovan Battista Casti: Novelle Galanti*, a cura di Lucia Rodler (Roma: Carocci, 2001).

²³: *DJ IX* st.74.

²⁴: Vassallo 71.

²⁵: *DJ I* st.75.

²⁶: On woman's inconsistency of mind, Byron has famously noted in Canto IX, "What a strange thing is man! and what a stranger / Is woman! What a whirlwind is her head, / And what a whirlpool full of depth and danger is all the rest about her! Whether wed, / Or widow, maid, or mother, she can change her / Mind like the wind;" (st.64).

Fur quasi presso a divenir parenti;
 Ma sempre con decise volontà
 Di non andare un briciolin più in là.

(I must infer / And have made it my task to prove / that it is an error of experience / to want to prescribe limits to love. / But as proof of this I will tell you / that in spite of those proposals / Their kissing went on / Then went on to touches / And little by little everyday it grew / until they almost became parents / But always with that determined will / not to go a little bit beyond.)

Casti's voyeuristic account of the couple's illicit acts of love accentuates Climene's self-delusion and obsessive prudishness. The concluding couplet suggests the strong hold propriety appears to have on the minds of the young lovers, but at the same time shows how weak and ineffective propriety and "determined will" prove when countered / outwitted by passion and desire. We can almost "see" the world-wise narrator laughing at the self-delusional, naive lovers. Let us see now how Byron adapts this textual and stylistic framework to comment on Julia's surrender to temptation:

And Julia's voice was lost, except in sighs,
 Until too late for useful conversation;
 The tears were gushing from her gentle eyes,
 I wish, indeed, they had not had occasion,
 But who, alas! can love, and then be wise?
 Not that remorse did not oppose temptation,
 A little still she strove, and much repented,
 And whispering 'I will ne'er consent'—consented.²⁷

Byron's dramatisation of Julia's faltering and final defeat by passion is couched in language which is inflected by stock phrases of amatory verse. Similar to Casti, the narrator interferes to offer his sympathy / advice and make worldly comments on Julia's situation. The strength of Byron's adaptation lies in how the stanza manages to keep the readers on their toes about the resolution of the episode, a fact intensified by the speed of the *ottava rima* and by the intentional breaks at crucial points, reflecting the breaks in Julia's thought process. The concluding line, interposing a dash rather than a comma, shows that Julia's "consent" happens on impulse, thus undercutting in a bathetic way the protracted agony and indecisiveness.

In a comparable satiric vein, some of the most cynical observations and witty descriptions in *Don Juan* may well be due to the influence of Casti. Despite the general lightheartedness which the *Novelle Galanti* evoke, they very often comment matter-of-factly on the corruptive mores of a degenerate society, such as *serventismo* (a tedious "mestier" as he notes in *Il Cavalier Servente*), nobility (which "si compra e vende"), the changes of fashion for which "nulla di fisso or non v'è più" and so "spesso il vizio per lei divien virtù, e ciò ch'era virtù vizio diviene" (for her [fashion] vice often becomes a virtue / and what was a virtue becomes a vice) (*La Scommessa* 260) and religion. Even though Casti lacks the vituperative vigor and "scorching and drenching" effect shown by Byron in *Don Juan*, the extent of the influence of his satiric mode on the English poet is certainly an issue that deserves further inquiry.

Casti's propensity to scoff at all things human, or, to remember Foscolo / Cohen's exact words "[to] laugh at all faith, and all patriotism, and all morality" (487) earned him the censure of most late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century critics. To his detractors, Casti would reply via the *Novelle Galanti* in a cavalier manner, defusing tension and reminding his readers in his defense that

Non tutti van per la medesima strada
 Nè la cosa medesima a tutti piace:
 Questi cinge la toga a quei la spada,
 Un la guerra desìa, l'altro la pace;
 A chi lo mare a chi la terra aggrada,
 E chi è di Bacco e chi d'Amor seguace;
 E chi è di tristo e chi d'umor giocondo:
 E solo è bello perchè varia il mondo.

Fintanto che avrò Pallade amica
 La bella e dilettevol poesia
 Seguir vo'sempre, e chi vuol dir, che dica;

27: *DJ I*, st.117.

Se udir non vuolmi, orrechio a me non dia;²⁸

(Not everyone follows the same path / Nor everyone likes the same thing / Others like the toga and others the spade / Others love war and others peace; / Others like the sea and others the land / And there are those who follow Bacchus and those who follow Cupid; / Others are sad and others jocund: / And the world is beautiful precisely because it varies. / So long as Pallas is my friend / beautiful and pleasant poetry / I will always follow her, and if someone wants to say something, let them go on and say it! / If you don't want to listen to me, don't lend me an ear).

Taking his bearings from Casti, Byron in *Don Juan* would answer those critics who accused him “of a strange design / Against the creed and morals of the land”²⁹ in a similarly nonchalant, capricious way, reminding them pungently of “life’s infinite variety,”³⁰ a line which strongly echoes Casti’s evocative line “E solo è bello perchè varia il mondo.” Despite the affinity in content and tone, however, Byron makes a more convincing case for life’s inconstancy and the contingencies of truth than his Italian model, by staging “mystifying” contingency – and the narrator wallowing in it – with exceptional verve, playfulness and subtlety, as the following lines aptly indicate:

I will not swear that black is white;
 But I suspect in fact that white is black,
 And the whole matter rests upon eye-sight.
 Ask a blind man, the best judge. You’ll attack
 Perhaps this new position—but I’m right;
 Or if I’m wrong, I’ll not be ta’en aback: —³¹

28: *La Comunanza* 299.

29: *DJ* IV st.5.

30: *DJ* XV st.15.

31: *DJ* XII st.71.