

# Casanova

THE IRRESISTIBLE



Philippe Sollers

Translated and with an introduction by  
Armine Kotin Mortimer

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## Translator's Introduction

*Armine Kotin Mortimer*

People think they know Casanova, but they are wrong, Philippe Sollers writes in the opening of this book. The man has become a myth, a circus animal, a mechanical lover, a more or less senile or ridiculous marionette. Let's instead see what he really wrote about himself, says Sollers.

His 1998 *Casanova l'admirable* stems from a fresh, idiosyncratic reading of the thousands of pages of Casanova's memoirs, *Histoire de ma vie (Story of My Life)*, written in French between 1789 and 1798 and now published in twelve volumes. This remarkable work, the chief source of information about Casanova, has been subjected to abridgment and bowdlerizing as well as incomplete and inaccurate translations, the objects of Sollers's critique. He corrects these depredations by retelling the story and interweaving into it exposition, observations, analyses, and opinions of his own. His tactic is to seek the "truth," and he directs his scorn at those biographical accounts that distort the story for their own purposes, mostly because of Casanova's sensational descriptions of his relations with women. Serious Casanovists have shown that the writer fictionalizes only a little, and that the inevitable errors such as a memoirist might make are mostly minor. Sollers wants readers to know the plain realities of this crafty, cunning, colorful human being: "Let us rather conceive of him as he is: simple, direct, courageous, cultivated, seductive, funny. A philosopher in action."

Giacomo Casanova wrote his memoirs in a castle in Dux (now Duchcov) in Bohemia during a period of nine years at the end of his life. Their 4,545 manuscript pages are immensely detailed. Casanova made notes, kept documents, and wrote out events soon after they happened. He left these accumulating materials with friends or carried them with him everywhere—and he moved

around constantly, eventually ending up in Dux, where he was employed by Count Waldstein as a librarian for the last thirteen years of his life. The story he wrote can be compared to the excellent 1961 biography *Casanova* by James Rives Childs (1893–1987), who drew heavily on archival sources. Rives Childs's augmented *Casanova: A New Perspective*, published in 1988, remains the most authoritative reference.

Casanova was born in Venice to two actors. Raised by a grandmother, he was launched on his various careers (if they can be so called) in his mid-teens. Destined at first to the priesthood, he lacked the vocation; lawyering didn't take, either. Throughout his life, in the absence of noble birth and secure finances, he used his wits and his chameleon qualities to fashion himself into whatever identity was needed. For instance, he sees a patrician collapse in a gondola: "Giacomo happens to be there, he takes charge, takes him back to his palace, prevents people from taking bad care of him, turns himself into a doctor, takes it seriously. Fortune guides him. 'Now I have become the doctor of one of the most illustrious members of the Venetian Senate,'" he notes, and he is rewarded by being adopted. He had no fixed profession, and one might even say no fixed address. (The title of Ian Kelly's recent *Casanova: Actor, Lover, Priest, Spy* is suggestive.) Though he was "homeless," Venice remained home for him, the place to which he yearned to return during his years of wandering. But he spent very little time there and was in fact exiled from the Most Serene Republic more than once. No doubt that is why he has usually been called an "adventurer," a description that covers all the activities in which Casanova engaged in the hope of sustaining himself: soldier, theater violinist, magician, alchemist, mathematician, doctor, matchmaker, assistant to various political entities, employee of the Inquisition, financier, manufacturer of silk fabrics, historian, gambler, and more—not to forget librarian at the end. He was curious about everything and was constantly in motion.

Love was of course Casanova's chief pleasure in life. Sollers, however, is among those writers on his subject who object to a common image of the *Story of My Life* as the narrative of a repetitive, obsessive series of mechanical and superficial sex acts. Repetitive, yes, but neither mechanical nor superficial, nor truly obsessive. The Casanova experiment is scientific, Sollers wants to show, and as such gains by being repeated, because new insights accumulate with each event—and also because, in good scientific practice, an experiment should be repeatable. The actions of his body brought him knowledge about the nature of the human being; he behaved like a scientist who is curious to discover whatever he can about the world in which he finds himself. Such is the persona Sollers presents: a fearless experimenter with his body, even when it brought him pain instead of pleasure.

Most important, and Sollers insists on this, Casanova was a *writer*. Besides his memoirs, he wrote books, pamphlets, and articles in three languages, including a multivolume science fiction novel. This focus on the writing may surprise readers who know that Sollers frequently writes about women and sexuality. Not just a great lover who took the experiences of his body as his primary subject, Casanova was a great writer who *composed* much as a musician might, as Sollers writes more than once, to achieve an ensemble greater than the sum of its parts or of its notes: “Casanova is a great composer. In life as in writing. His intent is to show that his life unfolded as if it were being written.” A great deal of Sollers’s admiration for this “irresistible” narrative rests on the fact that this Italian living in German-speaking Bohemia chose to write the story of his life in French. For Sollers, French is the revolutionary language, the language of freedom.

People of the eighteenth century enjoyed a freedom that was, Sollers writes, so concentrated that they seem perpetually in advance of us. “Listen to Mozart—you will hear it right away. Same fresh air effect when we read Casanova.” The eighteenth century is alive for Sollers and exemplified by the key figures he writes about: Mozart, Vivant Denon (founder of the Louvre Museum), Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Jean-Antoine Watteau, Denis Diderot (in a rarely seen video in which Sollers acts the part of this important Enlightenment intellectual). So vitally does he feel their qualities, it’s as if those men never died; so alive are they in his mind that the eighteenth century superimposes itself on the twenty-first.

As a result, there comes a moment in Sollers’s writing about them when the eighteenth-century figures appear in his presence and blend with him: eventually, where Sollers himself *is* the earlier figure. *Casanova the Irresistible* is, it turns out, also about Sollers. It’s a textual strategy of self-identification, a way of stating his stance, similar to the unique way he has of writing about himself in his novels from 1983 on. In those novels, Sollers builds an image of a consistent narrator persona across multiple first-person characters with common characteristics: an omnipresent speaker, the focal point from which everything is seen; a writer of keen intelligence; and always a marginalized social critic—in sum, through all the “Multiple Related Identities,” an image of the author himself. In Sollers’s view of Casanova, those characteristics of the autobiographical persona are present in a more subtle, not to say surreptitious, way.

This somewhat devious (though perfectly clear) substitution is most visible at the end of *Casanova the Irresistible*, where we will see “another” Casanova strolling around Venice on that key date of June 4, 1998, while all around him celebrations mark the fact that the city’s favorite son has been dead for two



hundred years. “I wanted to speak about another Casa. The one who on this very day, in Venice, picks his way among the Japanese tourists near the Doge’s Palace. No one pays attention to him. Two hundred years after his death, he seems to be in excellent shape. Hale and hearty as when he was thirty, just before his arrest.” At this point, Sollers has entirely identified with Casanova; the superposition, the subtle substitution, are complete. But in style and manner, in artful undercurrents, the reader comes to recognize how the author has “updated” his subject throughout the essay as well. In the very manner of writing about Casanova, Sollers seeks to make him present among us as a model from which we should glean lessons unavailable from the majority of those who speak and write now.

Sollers has said that he wrote this book to shame society for what it has repressed or neglected and for its failure to be cognizant of its failings. In it he affirms a philosophy of life stemming from Casanova’s admirable qualities. His reasons are thus quite personal as well as social. Casanova comments that his body and his soul are one: “I have never been able to conceive how a father can tenderly love his charming daughter without at least once having slept with her. This conceptual impotence has always convinced me, and still convinces me all the more strongly today, that my mind and my matter form a single substance.” Apart from the astonishing affirmation of father-daughter incest, the importance of this passage lies in the philosophy it expresses: the sameness of body and soul, or of mind and matter. Sollers proposes in Casanova “un homme heureux,” a happy man. Here was a man who had fun in life, motivated throughout by his desire to enjoy himself, simply put; the happiness of his soul was no different from the happiness of his body. Authors rarely deign to describe themselves as happy people, but Sollers affirms it for the one he calls Casa, and more importantly, through him, for himself.

This attitude is typical of Philippe Sollers. He has always maintained his independence from any trend, critical fashion, style, or adherence. Born near Bordeaux in 1936, Sollers made his brilliant entry onto the Parisian intellectual scene in 1958–1960 with back-to-back publications and the founding, with others, of the journal *Tel Quel*, destined to become the arbiter of French thought for the next two decades and the spearhead of what became known in the United States as “French theory.” A leading exponent of the avant-garde, Sollers wrote novels reputed as “difficult” and “experimental” during the sixties and seventies (*Drame*, translated as *Event*; *Nombres*; *Lois*; the two punctuation-less books *H* and *Paradis*, the last appearing in 1981 and 1986 after serial publication), then suddenly began writing novels in a “readable” style with the publication in 1983 of the brilliant *Femmes*, translated by Barbara Bray as *Women*. He continues

to publish novels as well as book-length essays and extended interviews on many topics, in art, literature, music, photography, biography, and social history. In addition to his tremendous written output, Sollers maintains a striking media presence as well as a blog and “Interventions” on his website, making him one of the most widely known authors in France. He lives in Paris with his wife, Julia Kristeva.

In France, this man, often misunderstood by casual readers, is nevertheless a touchstone of intellectual life, a person of considerable erudition who has chosen to express himself via a verbal art unique to him. From his self-defined stance as a marginalized thinker on humanity’s behalf, he is a gadfly who pricks the conscience of his country. William Cloonan describes Sollers as a “public intellectual” considered on a par with Lacan, Barthes, and Foucault. Michel Braudeau calls Sollers a “remarkable critic, partisan of the Enlightenment and of happiness, love, and music, egocentric and very generous, the most agile runner on every sort of track, always the first to arrive.”

“Happiness, love, and music” characterize all of Sollers’s writing, not unlike Casanova’s. This is especially evident in the novels written since the “turning point” of 1983, when Gallimard, the publisher Sollers called the “central bank,” brought out *Femmes*. That bestseller was followed by fifteen novels, among them *Portrait du joueur*, *Le Cœur absolu*, *Le Lys d’or*, *La Fête à Venise*, *Le Secret*, *Passion fixe*, *L’Étoile des amants*, *Une vie divine*, *Trésor d’amour*, *Médium*, and the 2015 *L’École du mystère*. His book-length essays include the autobiographical *Un vrai roman: Mémoires* and *Portraits de femmes*. Many of his books, including ones from before 1983, have been released in paperback editions, and a few of the novels have been translated into English. Among the nonfiction books, the most recent translation into English is *Mysterious Mozart*.

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## A Note about the Translation

Translating Sollers calls for judicious choices at every turn. To convey Sollers's voice in English, a translator might think of herself as *channeling* him. The task is to retain the unique qualities of his writing by finding ways to render them in a language quite foreign to French and without losing nonlexical aspects such as rhythm, voice, internal rhyme, and other poetic effects of sound and sense. Rhythmic strategies Sollers uses regularly include lists, comma-spliced sentences, and deliberate changes of register (levels of speech). His lists follow a rhetoric of accumulation, and they often achieve striking effects by combining items that aren't usually connected. Allusions further enrich the narrative.

Therefore, I believe a translation of Sollers should gently push the reader to sense that something *different* is happening in the language, as it does in the original French. His creative use of the French language is a matter of pride for him. At the same time, I strive to do what is possible to avoid distressing the Anglophone ear and eye. The objective is to make English sound like Sollers, which can be achieved by bending the syntax a little, so there is a degree of foreignness that nevertheless does not hinder comfortable reading and comprehension. Above all, I seek to avoid "flattening" Sollers's expressive prose.

I have translated all the passages Sollers quotes from Casanova's memoirs and other texts. It wasn't until Willard R. Trask's translation of *History of My Life* was published by Harcourt, Brace, and World in 1966–1971 that the complete, uncensored text of the *Histoire de ma vie* became available in English (reissued by the Johns Hopkins University Press in paperback in 1997). For this major work of French literature, this is the only translation to recommend. However, should the reader compare my versions with Willard Trask's, minor discrepancies beyond the differences one might expect from different translators would appear. That is because Sollers's quotations are sometimes

not letter-perfect; he occasionally relies on his excellent memory, resulting in minor variants. More importantly, to preserve the literary or poetic effects that Casanova occasionally achieves, perhaps unintentionally (as French was not his native language), I have bent good English through a looseness of syntax and lexical choice, resulting in different wording from Trask's.

On the few occasions when I felt that clarifications were needed, particularly for words that simply lost too much of their resonance when rendered into English, I have interpolated a word or two. The footnotes, brief identifications for the most part, are mine as well.

*“Nothing will have prevented me from enjoying myself.”*

—CASANOVA

*“I was right in all my disdain: since I’m escaping!  
I escape! I explain.”*

—RIMBAUD

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People think they know Casanova. They are wrong.

I open a dictionary, I read:

“CASANOVA DE SEINGALT, Giacomo (1725–1798), an adventurer born in Venice, famous for his novelesque exploits (particularly his escape from the *Piombi* of Venice) and his gallant exploits, which he recounted in his *Memoirs*.”

Casanova was indeed born in Venice near the beginning of the eighteenth century, he is inseparable from the great legend of that city, but he died far from there, at seventy-three, in Dux (now Duchcov), in Bohemia. *Why?*

The real title of the *Memoirs* is *Histoire de ma vie* (*Story of My Life*). It is an enormous volume loaded with adventures revolving around gambling, travel, magic, and sex, and very few people know that it was written in *French* before being published in German, then retranslated into French in a more “proper” version than the original. To read what Casanova really wrote, with his pen, we had to wait until the beginning of the sixties, in the twentieth century. (But only a few specialists or enthusiasts are interested in that publication.) It isn’t until 1993 that this essential text, along with a selection of other writings by the same author, are at last published in French in three volumes anyone can obtain.

This has to be our point of departure: the original version was deferred, and “subtitled.” *Why?*

Yes, why did people decide to forget that Casanova was also a *writer*? What can be done to unmask two centuries of injurious censure and repression alongside this willful ignorance?

*Seingalt* is an added pseudonym, forged by Casanova himself in 1760 when he is in Zurich. He calls himself Chevalier de Seingalt, he ennobles his signature. If one thinks of the meaning of the word *seing*, “signature,” it’s as if he wanted to say that his signature is high (*alt*) and ancient. One can imagine that Stendhal



(who called Casanova *Novacasa* in his *Journal*) remembered this move when he chose his pseudonym as a writer. Casanova in French is *Maisonneuve*, Newhouse in English. Jack Newhouse. No need to add that we are at the antipodes of that other Jack, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The century of Casanova is the century of Voltaire and Mozart (but also Sade). Mozart, Da Ponte, and Casanova met at Prague, incidentally, for the creation of *Don Giovanni* in 1787 (Casanova arrived from Dux). This scene has never really been depicted. *Why?*

There are two known autograph folios by Casanova, the examination of which shows that they are the drafts of interchangeable variants for scene 10 in the second act of the opera. The author who made this discovery writes: “Few nonmythical beings were as much the man of the instant, of the pure present, as Casanova. And also the man of the catalogue. . . . It is not out of the question to imagine that in listening to:

*Un catalogo gli è che ho fatt’io*

sung in this Bohemian autumn of 1787, the old adventurer could believe that it was time to copy over the list of his own love affairs. Thus *Don Giovanni* may well have had a part in bringing us the *Story of My Life*, which remains, after all, the immortal *catalogo* of Giacomo Casanova, though it is far from being only that.”<sup>1</sup>

In September 1787, then, Mozart is in Prague at the Three Lions, Lorenzo Da Ponte at the Hotel Plattensee. The two hotels are so close that the musician and his librettist can speak to each other from the windows. Casanova arrives. At the time, he is seeking to publish a long science fiction novel.

But the real science fiction novel is actually the encounter of these three men. Casanova has known Da Ponte since his stay in Vienna two years earlier, when he was secretary to the ambassador from Venice (whom he doesn’t like). It’s easy to imagine that he met Mozart. Note that, not insignificantly, our three characters are Freemasons.

One evening at the Villa Bertramka, Casanova is in dialogue with Mozart about his escape from the Leads in Venice. There’s a friendly plot developing, which ends up locking the composer in his room. He won’t be liberated until he has written the overture to his opera, already composed in his head but still not written out.

Do we *see* all this?

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1. Alfred Meissner made this suggestion in 1876 in his book *Rococo Bilder*.

And do we see how fascinating it is to reflect on the fact that Casanova starts writing the story of his life *during the summer of 1789*?

In music, then: Vivaldi and Mozart. In painting, Fragonard, Tiepolo, Guardi. The cities? Venice, Rome, Paris, Vienna, Prague, Saint Petersburg, Berlin, London, Naples, Constantinople, Cologne, Amsterdam, Stuttgart, Munich, Zurich, Geneva, Berne, Basel, Vienna, Paris again, Madrid.

We find ourselves in the great Europe of the Enlightenment, the epoch from which an obscure force of violence has attempted and still attempts to divert us.

It goes without saying that Venice is the center of this variable geometry. Everything stems from there, everything returns there, even if Casanova died in exile in Czechoslovakia. But when he writes, it's Venice that writes.

In French.

People didn't want to think of Casanova as a writer (and let's say it calmly: one of the great writers of the eighteenth century). They have made him into a circus animal. They are relentless in drawing a false image of him. Producers have projected themselves onto him and presented him as a puppet, a mechanical lover, a more or less senile or ridiculous marionette. He haunts people's imaginations but makes them anxious. They are happy to recount his "gallant exploits," but on condition of depriving their hero of his depth. In short, they are jealous. They treat him with a diffuse, uptight, paternalistic resentment. Fellini, in a remarkably stupid comment, went so far as to say that he found Casanova stupid.

Let us rather conceive of him as he is: simple, direct, courageous, cultivated, seductive, funny. A philosopher in action.

He enjoyed himself a great deal, he saw human behavior from behind the scenes, he studied the nervous system of credulity. He sometimes deceived certain partners, but, as he explained it, it was their will, not his, and someone else would have tricked them in any case, *less well*. He doesn't always portray himself as a hero; he doesn't embellish, he describes with precision, he is quick. He is as amusing to read as Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. In short, his *Story of My Life* is a masterpiece, the record of a man who affirms his truth.

He had an exceptional body. He followed it, listened to it, spent it, *thought it*. That, basically, is what the eternal spirit of bigotry reproaches him with.

In April 1798, at Dux, Casanova falls ill. He stops revising his manuscript. On May 27, his nephew, Carlo Angiolini, arrives in Dux to take care of his uncle, who dies on June 4. Angiolini takes the manuscript to Dresden.

In 1820, the Angiolini family sells the manuscript to the publisher Brockhaus in Leipzig.

From 1822 to 1828, the first edition of the *Story of My Life* appears in German translation, “cleaned up.”

From 1826 to 1838, it’s the first French publication, “revised” (the Laforgue version, the one Stendhal reads in 1826, still available in the Pléiade edition).

In 1945, the manuscript of the *Story of My Life* narrowly escapes destruction and is transferred from Leipzig to Wiesbaden. Only in 1960 does the publication of the original text appear (the Brockhaus-Plon edition), republished in 1993 in three volumes by Bouquins (Robert Laffont).

It is obvious that Casanova has been “forgotten” a lot, even if he has also been quietly looted. He is forgotten, rearranged, costumed in keeping with Ancien Régime–type fantasies (as they say). They don’t want him to make History. Life should not be confused with History, and even less with sexual freedom and writing. Fortunately, against all these obscurantisms, admirable “Casanovists,” mostly amateurs, have worked to provide a multitude of verifications. Aside from a few errors, mostly of dates, everything Casanova writes is *true*. That is probably what is most explosive about him. Keep in mind, finally, that the text itself, Casanova’s hand, has had its full effect for only five years. Just a beginning, then.

I like to picture this clandestine transfer of 1945 in a Europe on fire under intensive bombardments and destroyed by human madness. At that time, the death drive is everywhere; an unprecedented savagery seems to have annihilated the very idea of civilization. Thousands of pages of small black handwriting, piled into cases transported by trucks, recount an unimaginable life.

Fire from the heavens has not succeeded in destroying this writing. Nor have hypocrisy, censure, pictorial deformations, indifference, malevolence, and publicity. But what are we to make of it now? Are we free enough to read it?

Casanova: man with a future.



Jean Laforgue was a professor of French in the nineteenth century.

He is a scrupulous and serious layman of the kind that used to be produced at the time. He is asked to rewrite Casanova. He does.

He comes upon this sentence about women: "I have always found that the one I loved smelled good, and the stronger her perspiration, the more intoxicating it seemed to me."

Laforgue thinks about it for thirty seconds. No, in the nineteenth century (no more than today, by the way), a woman does not *perspire*.

So he corrects this incongruity and writes: "As for women, I have always found intoxicating the odor of those whom I loved."

It is *better*, after all, right?

Laforgue blows his nose.

After smell, taste. Casanova does not hide what he calls his "gross tastes": game, red mullet, eel's liver, crabs, oysters, rotting cheeses, all accompanied by champagne, burgundies, Graves.

Laforgue (a bit like Leporello) finds this appetite barbaric, exaggerated, slightly degenerate, and even frankly aristocratic. So he abbreviates and writes, in a more bourgeois vein, "delicious suppers."

Now for touch. At one point, Casanova describes himself in action at night, barefoot so as not to make any noise. Barefoot? Laforgue immediately gets cold feet and puts "lightweight slippers" on his hero.

These slippers, you understand, are an entire program. The body too raw, too present, too three-dimensional: that is the danger. Try to imagine the man in Fragonard's *The Bolt (Le Verrou)* wearing slippers: it's no longer the same painting. Laforgue is a specialist of the fig leaf (each period has such "restorers").

But lay prudishness has two visages (that's one of its charms). For example, the word "Jesuit" makes it shudder. So when Casanova uses this word ironically,

Laforgue piles on the sarcasm. Same thing whenever it's a question of the monarchy. How can one reconcile the fact that Casanova is openly hostile to the Terror with the fact that his adventures (as tempered by censure) put him in phase with History? An irritating paradox, that. Laforgue will let the praise for Louis XV stand ("Louis XV had the most handsome head one can imagine, and he carried it with as much grace as majesty"); after all, that Louis didn't have his head cut off. On the other hand, better to suppress the diatribe against the people of the French who massacred their nobility, the people who, as Voltaire said, "are the most abominable of all" and who resemble "a chameleon that takes on all colors and is susceptible to anything a leader can make it do, good or bad."

Women perspiring, odors, food, political opinions: it all needs to be kept under surveillance. If Casanova writes "the low people of Paris," he'll be made to say "the good people." But obviously it is the details about sexual desire that are the thorniest. About a woman who has just fallen, Laforgue writes that Casanova "repairs with a chaste hand the disarray that her fall had caused in her clothing." How gallantly these things are spoken! Casanova, however, is more explicit: he says he went to "quickly pull down her skirts, which had displayed all of her secret marvels before my eyes." Not a chaste hand, as you see, but a prompt glance.

Professor Laforgue "fears marriage like fire." Is it because he doesn't want to shock his mother, his sister, or his wife—or his wife's numerous women friends—that he rejects Casanova's wording: "I fear marriage more than death"? More abruptly, one mustn't show two of the main heroines of the *Story of My Life*, C. C. and M. M. (the two friends in one of the happiest periods of Casanova's life in his *casino* in Venice), in a scene like this: "They began their labors with a frenzy like that of two tigresses who looked like they wanted to devour each other" (picture Marcel Proust blushing while reading this sentence). In any case, it is out of the question to print this: "We were all three of the same sex in all the trios that we executed." (Only quite recently, a nice young woman writing about Casanova wondered what sex might be in question here. One cannot really explain it to her *in writing*.)

After an orgy, it seems natural to Laforgue to make Casanova feel "disgust." Nothing of the sort; Laforgue is making it up. It is true that in his time the flesh is supposed to be sad and all books read, that ennui and melancholy, doubt and despair increasingly overwhelm the mind.

If Casanova writes: "Sure of a complete orgasm at the end of the day, I let myself go with all my natural gaiety" (that's how he is), Laforgue corrects him

and has him say: “Sure of being happy. . . .” The word *orgasm* (*jouissance*) is banished. A woman, according to the professor, cannot be represented lying on her back while “masturbating.” No, she will be “in the act of deluding herself” (understand it if you can). That, at least, is how a hand remains chaste. He will, however, dare to say “onanism” (a medical word) where Casanova forges this marvelous neologism: “*manustupration*”—a hand for *stupre*, debauchery.

You can verify this: a clever woman with a hand for *stupre* is hardly deluding herself. That’s what Professor Laforgue probably didn’t have a chance to observe. Too bad.

More censure: it is not decent to speak, as Casanova does, about the “ferocious viscera that give this woman convulsions, drive that one crazy, make another devout.” Casanova loves women; he describes them as he loves them, without devotion. But Laforgue is already a feminist—he respects women, he fears them, he is prefiguring legions of prudish professors, especially philosophers, a new clergy that will replace the old. Casanova is the bad boy in the class. If he speaks of suspect spots on his pants, he is quickly sent to the boys’ room to get that cleaned up. From time to time, moral formulas will be interpolated into his text (they are lacking). These professorial corrections sometimes reach great heights. Here, for instance, is M. M., of whom Casanova writes that “this religious woman, a keen thinker, playful and libertine, was admirable in everything she did.” One day she sends a love letter to her Casanova. Laforgue version: “I send a thousand kisses that disappear into the air.” Casanova had actually noted (and it is so much more beautiful): “I kiss the air, thinking you are there.”

Mere details? Surely not. Love is the science of details.

“My life is my matter, my matter is my life,” says Casanova. Usually literature and novels serve to imagine the life one did not have, here it’s the opposite: here is someone who *realizes*, like a last judgment, that his life has been woven like a book, an immense novel: “In remembering the pleasures I have had, I renew them, I enjoy them a second time, and I laugh about the suffering I have endured and that I no longer feel. Member of the universe, I speak to the air, and I see myself as giving an account of my management the way a butler does to his master before disappearing.”

An admirable formula: “Member of the universe, I speak to the air. . . .” The air listens. The personage called Casanova (who existed and is going to die) regards himself as a butler with respect to himself. He has faithfully accompanied himself, cared for himself, served himself. As a butler he can disappear from the great mansion of life. He does not, however, say that the master

disappears. Jacques is not a fatalist. His double is his secretary. The body goes away, the mind judges. The mind is a narrative.

Such is Casanova. He organizes a party for himself at every moment; nothing prevents him for long, nothing constrains him, even his illnesses and his fiascos interest or amuse him; and always, everywhere, without warning, women are there to join him in his magnetic whirlwinds. He comes, he goes, and especially he *escapes*. He is without a doubt the most consummate technician of escape. (And what is the *Story of My Life*, written in a distant corner of Bohemia, if not an immense escape from space and time?)

The women who act in his camp are often, as if by chance, sisters or friends, if not mother and daughter. Let us rub our eyes and read: “I have never been able to conceive how a father can tenderly love his charming daughter without at least once having slept with her. This conceptual impotence has always convinced me, and still convinces me all the more strongly today, that my mind and my matter form a single substance.”

And the blasphemer insists: “Incest, eternal subject of Greek tragedies, makes me laugh instead of making me cry.”

Are we dreaming? Is it possible the Commendatore in *Don Giovanni* is nothing but an incestuous father, furious in his eternal home that the other man, the devil, has consummated his dream with his daughter? Didn't Jocasta know, at bottom, that Oedipus was her son? And as for Oedipus, wasn't he gropingly ambiguous and aroused with his daughter Antigone, who was also his half-sister? Stop, or you will disappear into the eternal fire. You have to hear this *defiance*, this formidable declaration of incest proclaimed (and furthermore practiced and narrated, during a famous night in Naples).

There's enough here to upset or forever scandalize all societies, whatever they may be. The question is then the following: how could a society have let this confession *pass*? We oughtn't to read this sort of discourse (and today no doubt less than ever, given the return to power of the moral order). That is often the impression one has in traversing the eighteenth century: we find there human beings as if cut off, detached from humanity, so to speak. Such is the concentration of their freedom that it appears perpetually ahead of ours. Listen to Mozart—you will hear it right away. Same fresh air effect when we read Casanova. If he is right, and if he has proven it, nine-tenths of the ruminations of humanity collapse. People have therefore decided that he was boasting. But nothing could be less certain.

“My mind and my matter form a single substance.” Casanova’s adventures and the polarity they give off no doubt stem from this “substance” that constitutes him, and which no metaphysics can take into account. Because of this substance and the hatred of servitude and death that follow from it, doors open, walls pull apart, enemies disappear, lucky chances multiply, getting out of prison is possible, games of chance turn out well, suicide is suspended, madness is utilized and conquered, reason (or at least a certain superior reason) triumphs.

Casanova is a cabalist, he is a magician, but contrary to common sense (even one that claims to be reasonable), he doesn’t believe in it. He is constantly making fun of the credulity of the elite of his time. A Cagliostro or a Count de Saint-Germain makes him laugh.<sup>2</sup> His business with the Marquise d’Urfé (who expects the sexual super-sorcerer Casanova to turn her into a man upon her rebirth) is one of the most astounding stories ever lived (or at least ever recounted). A charlatan, Casanova? If you like, when necessary, but a charlatan who *admits* it, example without precedent and without sequel, who each time specifies the true, sexual cause of superstitions. He is like Freud, in the end, but more comical. Freud is the outcome of a century of repression; Casanova is the narrative of a century of liberation, which did, after all, produce the only Revolution people still talk about.

He meets the stars of his time? No problem. Voltaire? You recite Ariosto to him, make him cry. Rousseau? Lacks charm, doesn’t know how to laugh. Frederick of Prussia? Jumps from one subject to another, doesn’t listen to your replies. Catherine of Russia? You travel with her while discussing the calendar. The Cardinal of Bernis? He is your friend in debauchery in Venice and later a protector in Paris. The pope? He gives to you, from the start, the same decoration as to Mozart.

Apropos of the pope, Casanova’s position might surprise you. He begins his *Story* like this: “The doctrine of the Stoics and of any other sect on the power of destiny is an illusion of the imagination that holds with atheism. I am not only a monotheist but a Christian fortified by philosophy, which has never spoiled anything.”

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2. Giuseppe Balsamo, known as Cagliostro (1743–1795), was an occultist and adventurer. The Count de Saint-Germain (ca. 1696–1784), according to Willard Trask, was an “adventurer extraordinary, whose real origin is unknown.” Casanova maintains that he was an Italian violinist.



Worse, he apparently died while murmuring: “I lived as a philosopher, I die as a Christian.”

Providence, he also says, has always granted his prayers (particularly at the time of his escape from the Leads). “Despair kills; prayer makes it disappear, and when a man has prayed, he feels confident and acts.” Casanova, praying? What a scene. You can see how badly he has been misunderstood.

An astonishing profession of faith, in any case, for a man who at the same time flies in the face of his cohorts with this sentence destined to be understood by those who “as a result of remaining in the fire have become salamanders” (clearly an alchemical allusion): “Nothing will have prevented me from enjoying myself.”

Such is the fundamental tone—the positive tone—of the first detailed apology of irreversible time.

Casanova is present; we are the ones who have drifted far from him, evidently into a fatal impasse. One evening in Paris he is at the opera in a box neighboring Madame de Pompadour’s. High society is making fun of his approximate French, for example when he says he is not cold at home because he has “felt up” his windows. They are intrigued, they ask where he’s from: “Venice.” Madame de Pompadour: “From Venice? Are you really from down there?” And Casanova: “Venice is not down there, madame; it is up there.” This insolent comment (which the marquise will remember later, when he has got out of the Leads by the *rooftops*) strikes the spectators. That very evening, he is received in Paris society.



You say “Prague,” and right away the twentieth-century clichés appear: the city must be dark, medieval, demoniacal, stagnant; the clock of time has stopped; it’s the city of the Golem and Kafka, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, the absurd, a tenacious plot by the forces of darkness. Even knowing the Berlin Wall has fallen and the “velvet revolution” has taken place, you first think of the successive invasions, German, Russian, and the deep “socialist” sleep cornered between the police and the army.

Looking for Casanova in Prague therefore seems a joke, a provocation, and in any case an impossible wager. And yet he is there somewhere, not far. The narrator comes from New York after once more passing through Venice. It’s the first time he’s come here. Here? A total surprise, because here in Prague, it’s still Italy. He wonders if he didn’t get off in Naples by mistake. The colors are flamboyant, they’re repainting the city, they’re putting it in perspective for the tourists, its palaces and churches vibrate in the sun, pink, pale green, ochre, white, yellow. Here the baroque is at home, and therefore the Jesuit Counter-Reformation (look out, Professor Laforgue is going to delete the word “Jesuit”).

Aside from the hideous and massive monument to the memory of Jan Hus on the main square (one could happily dynamite it, along with the sinister statue of Giordano Bruno on the Campo di Fiore in Rome), everything is clear, magnificently proportioned, joyful, musical. The castle up on the hill? An enchantment of embedded structures (especially at night). The stairs, the terraces? A dream of symphonic scores. What is more, red posters practically everywhere, as if winking at me, announce an imminent performance of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*.

The narrator doesn’t speak, he walks, he threads his way, he takes note of the fact that soon, all around, there will be concerts (Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart again), he goes back to his hotel, he sleeps a little, he goes out again. Of course he goes

to see the Jewish cemetery and its tombs chaotically erected in the silence of writing and faith, but the pressures of tourist consumerism chase him out in a hurry. He makes it his business to admire the Loreta (now it's as if he is in Florence or Pisa).<sup>3</sup> He takes the precaution of having himself photographed here and there, particularly in front of the *Kafka* café and the *Casanova* fast-food place. It's all getting a bit mixed up in his head; he gets the impression that he is himself the location of a strange but luminous and true fusion: he is looking for Kafkasanova.

Strange? No. Kafka, this seducer in times of distress, signals to him, shows him the way, which is the reversal in time speaking silently in a secret language of resurrection and renaissance. *Shh!* It is probably too soon to say it—it is necessary to remain very cautious, even if the proof is calmly self-evident. And yet, beware—the thinking that always denies, the thinking of cynicism and despair, is probably still active, hiding in a corner. Nevertheless, no doubt about it, the color of innocence is here. “Pentiti! No! Si! Si! No! No!” One circumvents the Commendatore, one does not repent, one has learned to live in the midst of the flames, like a salamander. Here for the first time in October 1787 (exactly two hundred ten years ago) someone was right for all time in singing about liberty, women, good wine—and the rest. Kafka, still elegantly standing, is a hero of this liberty, made prisoner by the nineteenth century's deafness. One has come like a cabalist to defy the Terror on his behalf. One invites him to tonight's performance along with Jacques Casanova. There will be musicians, women singing, the only humanity saved *a priori* from the shipwreck, it's obvious.

The next morning early, the traveler is impatient to take a car and go to Duchcov, where Casanova lived. Is Duchcov the Dux of the past, where the former castle of the Waldsteins was, in which Casanova played the part of librarian for thirteen years? Over there, yes, on the road to Germany, toward Dresden? That's it. Does Duchcov by any chance mean something in Czech? Oh yes, says the driver in English, it's “the ghost's village,” the village of the phantom.

That's promising.

*Dux*, “guide” in Latin (with the regrettable significance taken on later by *Il Duce*), has thus become a haunted name. As we know, Casanova was an excellent Latinist. *Dux*, *Lux*, those similarities didn't escape him. Where are you at this time? In Dux, in a castle, in Bohemia. What *address* (and what *an* address) for writing and ending his days!

3. The Loreta is a large pilgrimage destination in the Hradčany district of Prague.

It's raining a little. The car is traveling through a strangely deserted countryside, collectivized and therefore uninhabited. It's a very beautiful country. Forests of beech and silver birch; soon little mountains, and everywhere the golden beauty of autumn (it's October). On the left all of a sudden, a baroque monastery, half destroyed (communism *oblige*), undergoing renovation. The narrator stops in the rainy wind, he contemplates levitating stone Virgins and angels among the floating leaves. No one's about. The silence is complete. They leave, and soon there comes the first incident in this memorable day.

It's at a turn in the road. Already from afar, on the right, ancient fortifications have appeared, dark red. A military city, no doubt, a strategic point, a garrison center. Yes and no. It's Terezin, Theresienstadt, the phantom city par excellence. Terrible site of Nazi barbarism and ruse, site of sordid exploitation of "resettled" Jewish populations, site of suffering, encampment, triage, blackmail, torture, murder. Lined up in a large open space are twenty-eight thousand little tombstones with red roses planted next to each one. They look like children's graves. In the distance, the main fort. A tall cross standing, with a crown of thorns, and a Star of David, behind, farther off, near which hundreds of flower bouquets have accumulated. People must come here from around the world. The narrator gets out of the car and walks in the field of the dead. He is soon petrified in the face of—what? The unnamable. We are no longer in normal historical time, which is calculable, but in another stormy substance that we don't need to define—what Claude Lanzmann, referring to the Shoah, calls "the immemorial."

For the traveler, Terezin is like a warning: if he speaks of resurrection, of renaissance, of pleasures, colors, Mozart, that doesn't in the least signify an exotic "return" to the eighteenth century. He has not come here to make a decorative costume drama, thus adding a misreading to all the ones that have plagued (and continue to plague) Casanova. No, the point is to rise to the level (if possible, but is it possible?) of the death drive *right here*. It makes me think of someone (who happened to be a surrealist poet) who thought Casanova lacked a "sense of the tragic." On the contrary. The sense of time, of the instant, the sensitivity to each *situation* of time imply an acute perception of the negative. Stefan Zweig also found Casanova lightweight: "Light as a mayfly, empty like a soap bubble." Such superficial comments of a pseudo-profundity are very widespread and ultimately clerical. Mozart is heart-wrenching *and* lightweight. Love, as strong as death, exists to triumph over it.

We just need to be attentive and serious, that's all.

The trip continues, but it is understood now that it is taking place in a space other than the space of geographical maps, as if it had crossed an invisible

high-tension line. The driver is silent and indifferent; he has probably passed by there a hundred times. After Terezin, the city of mute horror, the car is headed northwest, toward Dux—Duchcov, the phantom village.

Here it is at last, this village. Nothing remarkable, except for the beautiful baroque castle as we arrive on the square, ochre and white, flanked by a church, and placed as if inadvertently right in the center of town. We're here.

It's deserted. But suddenly, horns, cars driven at top speed, tumbling out of god knows where. It's a wedding. The people of the castle have been gone for a long time, you can get married there. The narrator has stopped being astonished by anything, he knows today is special, that there will be a certain number of signs, of omens like this. So it's a peasant wedding (and it happens that the narrator has in his suitcase a book by Kafka entitled *Wedding Preparations in the Country*). Would the pretty bride, tall and dark haired, agree to have her picture taken with a French traveler, in front of the castle gate? Her fiancé and her father see no problem with that? No, not at all. And everyone goes in.

So I'm arriving at Casanova's for a wedding. Just like that. His castle has become the city hall, one could have guessed it (but that would very much astonish Count Waldstein if he were here, and even more the Prince de Ligne). What's strange is that right away, Giacomo had a troublesome adventure here with a young peasant girl from the area who he says constantly came into his room to serve him. She becomes pregnant, they suspect this bizarre stranger who never stops writing, he defends himself, the anger of the populace increases, it's another *Don Giovanni* scene. Finally a guilty party denounces himself (true? false?), the young folks are married, the incident is closed.

Phew, that was close.

The wedding party is waiting for the mayor. I tour the castle. Casa's apartment, transformed into a museum, is not very big (two rooms), but not bad at all. The windows look out on the front courtyard and the statues that line its edges (among others a giant Hercules). It's here that the librarian, badly paid (but that's not what counts now), wrote the *Story of My Life* at the rate of twelve or thirteen hours a day (and night). The only piece of furniture worth remembering is this pink Louis XV armchair near a window, in which he died.

The young red-headed woman who serves as a guide speaks only Czech or German. A little English after all, but it's mostly Germans who come to see the monster's lair. In any case, she recites the classic banalities. Beautiful castle, beautiful park, rows of well-maintained sitting rooms, paintings of battles,

portraits, chandeliers, antique furniture (all that must have been reconstituted after the war). Here we are again in the library of Monsieur le Chevalier de Seingalt. The guide leans against the books. She seems to be falling, as if suddenly ill. No, she is simply engaging a secret mechanism, she *pushes*. A hidden door then opens, and there. . . . No! Yes.

A dimly lit room. A wax mannequin dressed in “eighteenth-century” fashion, with a wig. He is writing, a goose quill pen in his hand, on a desk cluttered with folders, under a red lamp (real presence). A Musée Grévin staging. There he is! Casa! The phantom of the castle! From the Ancien Régime! Don’t, above all, bring in the bride!

The guide is pleased with her effect. A stuffed Casanova in an obscure recess, should have thought of it. Imagine what follows: in the evening, the castle, nationalized, closes. No one’s around. Up there in his tiny room, the vampire, immortalized and in curls, continues his work of social demoralization. These Czechs have a sort of humor.

Sometimes we almost wish the walls could speak.

A mummified mannequin, fine, but where is the body? Not inside the castle or the park, in any case, nor in the closed church next door. So? “Over there, farther away.” Where? In the woods? I come to a lake above which (premonitory signs recur) there rises at that very moment a magnificent rainbow. I have rarely seen one as beautiful. I am not making anything up, of course—not the wedding, nor the wax phantom, nor the double rainbow that now serves as my guide. No more, no more, it’s too much. But finally here is the Santa Barbara church (also closed), on the façade of which (is it encased in the wall?) one can read the following plaque:

JAKOB CASANOVA  
 VENEDIG, 1725  
 DUX, 1798

*Jakob* for Giacomo, *Venedig* for Venice.  
 Casanova was buried in German.

In the end, German will have been the daily drama for Casa. He speaks Italian, he is writing nonstop in French, and his busy existence resonates anew in this language. But at Dux he lives surrounded by domestics who speak only German and, as Francis Lacassin writes in his preface to the 1993 edition of *Histoire de ma vie*, “peasants who speak only dialect—today we would say Czech.”

So things aren't going too well. The year is 1791. A librarian, moreover a superfluous one, who spends his time writing in an incomprehensible language with a bad reputation (the Revolution), necessarily awakens distrust, jealousy, hatred among the narrow-minded. The funny thing is that Casanova sees the distant hand of the "Jacobins" against him in this hatefulness. From the start, one has the impression that he has to fight on two fronts: the arrogance of the nobility on one side, popular aggression on the other. Chateaubriand's witticism comes to mind: "For the Royalists, I loved freedom too much; for the revolutionaries, I had too much contempt for crime."

Casa's persecutors at the castle are the steward Feldkirchner and his accomplice (Giacomo even calls him his "minion"), the messenger Wiederholt. Count Waldstein will later fire them. But it is easy to imagine, from day to day, the meanness, the contempt, the mockeries that took the graphomaniac librarian for their object. Casanova takes revenge in his writing by deforming the steward's name, but with little satisfaction: "Courage, then, Monsieur Faulkircher. Reply to these letters. But do at least be so honorable as to send me your replies in French, or Latin, or Italian, or even Spanish, as I am to send them to you in German. I pay a translator, pay one yourself and do not be ashamed to publish your ignorance—you, of all the languages of the universe, I, of German."

That is the declaration of a southerner who already knows he is in a historical position of inferiority. This state of affairs is going to last two centuries, it is still lasting. The French Empire, outcome of the Revolution, actually served only to prepare English domination, then German (German will replace French in Russia after Pushkin), then Russian, then American. Greek? Latin? There's nothing to be said about them, or less and less. Italian is quickly marginalized, Spanish will wait a long time for its South American recovery, and as for French, after having been the first language in the world, it yields its place to English, itself reduced, via the internet, to its basic elements. The North has a powerful organization, the South (for now, at least) is beaten.

No surprise, therefore, if after his death Casanova quickly appears as a vaguely ridiculous dinosaur. A different organization of the world, including the cinema, demands it. Once again, what he *wrote* doesn't count; he is automatically turned into a spectacle.

Letter from Casanova to the steward of Dux: "Your scoundrel of a Viderol, truly an executioner's valet, having torn my portrait out of one of my books,

scribbled my name on it with the epithet that you taught him and stuck it on the door of the privy with his feces or yours, for an infamous commerce makes mixing them easy.”

Every writer is paranoid, granted, but that scene, with its anal coloration, is nevertheless highly revelatory of a certain *climate*. It’s no surprise that a little later the messenger Wiederholt (“Viderol”) beats the librarian with a stick in a street in the village (the date is December 11, 1791, Casanova is over sixty-five, he immediately begins judicial proceedings that come to nothing).

So much for the ground floor. But let us reach the floors above and observe the behavior of the aristocracy toward Casanova. No doubt the best example is the Prince de Ligne. Ligne is a nobleman of high rank, an important diplomat, an intellectual who vaunts his libertinage and atheism, and, what is more, an excellent writer (in French). He knew Casanova well in Bohemia; he admires him and is envious; he is fascinated by his reading of fragments of the *Story of My Life* (which he secretly hopes will never be published). Of course he has all the prejudices of his class with respect to an individual who has risen from nothing. His behavior is therefore two-faced.

His letters to Casanova, with a perhaps muted irony, are burning declarations of love (“I am tenderly attached to you”): “Enjoy yourself, keep busy, my dear Casanova, let all your reflections about the magic lantern of life be comical. . . .” “Why would you want your works to be castrated when you have been quite satisfied not to be so yourself?” “When I meet a fool, I tell myself, what a shame not to spend my life with the man who terrorizes him!” “A third of this charming second volume, my dear friend, made me laugh. A third gave me a hard-on, a third made me think. The first two make you madly lovable, and the last admirable. You win out over Montaigne. That is the highest praise, in my view.” “My heart tells me loud and soft that it belongs to you; and moreover it is not pure in this sentiment, for there is pride in loving and being loved by a man like you, the rearguard of the most famous people who existed in the past. . . .” Etc., etc.

Such praise! Such passion! I’m taking a bet, however: the Prince de Ligne surely didn’t think his letters to Casanova would be published one day, nor that Casanova, the new Montaigne (even in disguise), would be more famous than he. He loved Casanova. Perhaps. But when he writes about him for the public, the tone changes (and the social prejudice, the lover’s spite, and his literary jealousy explode).



First a portrait *à clef*, easy to decipher, in which Casanova appears with the name *Aventuros*: “He would be a quite handsome man if he weren’t ugly; he is tall, built like a Hercules; but an African complexion, lively eyes full of wit, it is true, but always presaging susceptibility, anxiety, or rancor, give him a somewhat ferocious air, easier to anger than to amuse. He laughs little but makes one laugh; he has a way of saying things that hark back to the dull-witted Harlequin or the Figaro, which makes him very amusing. The only things he does not know are those that he claims to know: the rules of the dance, of the French language, of taste, of worldly behavior, and of etiquette.”

Poison barely sweetened with “rejected lover.” Along the way, the calumnious insinuation: “Women and little girls especially are in his head, and it is impossible for them to leave and go elsewhere. . . . He takes his revenge for all of that on everything that can be eaten or drunk; no longer able to be a god in the garden, a satyr in the woods, he is a wolf at the table. . . .”

Casanova as sex maniac, and mainly a pedophile? Embittered by impotence and reduced to eating? Thank you, dear friend, my reader, my prince!

And also this: “Do not fail to bow to him, because a mere trifle will make him your enemy. His prodigious imagination, the vivacity characteristic of his country, his journeys, all the professions he has exercised, his fortitude in the absence of all his moral and physical goods make of him a rare man, valuable to meet, even worthy of consideration and of much friendliness by the very small number of people who are in his good graces.”

A little consideration all the same. Commiserative consideration, to be sure. You never know. Elsewhere, Ligne specifies that Casanova was the son of an unknown father and a bad actress from Venice. But here is the essential point: this adventurer’s memoirs are “dramatic, rapid, comical, philosophical, full of new, sublime, and inimitable things.” *But*: “I will do what I can to remember these Memoirs, the cynicism of which is, among other things, their greatest strength, but which for this reason will never see the light of day.”

A regret, or a wish? What follows allows one to get some idea. Casanova was basically ridiculous: “He spoke German, they didn’t understand. He became angry, they laughed. He showed some of his French poetry, they laughed. He gesticulated while declaiming his poetry in Italian, they laughed. He bowed on entering, the way Marcel, the famous dance master, had taught him sixty years earlier, they laughed. He did the courant step in his minuets at each ball, they

laughed. He put on his white plumes and his drugget of golden silk, his jacket of black velvet, and his garters with strass buckles on silk stockings, they laughed.”

And who is this “they” who laughed?

The Prince de Ligne is in agreement with the domestics at the Dux castle. Masters and slaves get along more often than one thinks, you might say.

And it continues: “The mothers in the village are complaining that he wants to teach all the little girls nonsense. He says they are democrats. . . . He gives himself indigestion and says they are trying to poison him. He is knocked down, he says it’s by order of the Jacobins. . . .”

Not only ridiculous, this Casanova, but also unhealthy, and to put it bluntly, seriously *deranged*. The proof: “He claimed that each thing he had done was by order of God, and that was his motto.”

A pathetic madman, this Casanova, who did not want for wit and courage, although always agitated, disconsolate, moaning. Women? Come, come, at the very most some little girls.

In the letter to Casanova in which he says that a third of the *Story of My Life* had given him a hard-on, Ligne adds: “Like a skillful physician, you convince me; like a profound metaphysician, you subjugate me; but you disoblige me like a timid antiphysician, scarcely worthy of your country. Why have you refused Ismaël, neglected Petrone, and were you much relieved to learn that Bellisse was a girl?”

You have to read beyond the play on words that amuses the paradoxical but often strangely frivolous wit of the Prince. The story about Bellisse (Bellino) concerns a boy whose charm is so compelling that one could be persuaded to love him, but who turns out to be a girl disguised as a man.

“Antiphysician” is the word for a homosexual at that time. Frederick of Prussia, for example, is a notorious “antiphysician,” which sheds some light on the highs and the lows of his relationship with Voltaire. Read between Ligne’s lines: come, dear friend whom I adore, be less *timid*. It’s a *spiritual* proposition, to be sure, but also physical.

It’s an old tune: if Casanova was so interested in women, it’s no doubt because, without admitting it to himself, he was homosexual. Besides, these stories about women are dubious, we’d have to get *their* versions. In any case, what is

a man seeking in his multiple feminine adventures if not the unique image of his mother? Wasn't Don Juan basically homosexual and impotent?

People talk a lot about *homophobia* now, but never about *heterophobia*. How strange.

Come now, it's useless hiding behind those masks. You are pursuing the Only-One woman through all these Alls. Your catalogue doesn't fool us: it's an alibi, a rampart, an inverted confession. Your relentless insistence on saying white proves that you mean black. You think you are alert, you are an *invert*. You are in fact a woman in search of men. And if that's not the case, that's how it *ought* to be, etc.

Moreover, a female psychoanalyst confirms this: Casanova was "at the mercy of female desires" (false: sometimes, not always); "women are his masters, he is fascinated by the feminine to the point of wanting to be included in it" (not at all); "he is the *plaything* of women's pleasure" (the Fellini marionette version). And also: "Imprisoned [*sic*] by his identification with the all-powerful maternal and having no sufficient paternal support to detach himself from it" (Why become a psychoanalyst? To finally be a *good father*), Casanova thinks that "if God exists, he is female."

Not homo enough for one, too enslaved to women for the other; speaking bizarrely about God for the first (who doesn't care), transforming God into a woman for the second. Poor Casanova. They will constantly apply devotional, worldly, popular, Marxist, psychoanalytical criticism—and he will end up in commercials for beauty products or in recipes, for sure.

At one point, Ligne advises him to secretly entrust his *Story of My Life* to his own publisher, who would pay him income on it until his death: "Say you have burned your memoirs. Get in your bed. Have a Capuchin monk come, and let him throw some reams of paper into the fire, saying you are sacrificing your works to the Virgin Mary."

In other words, be a hypocrite. But that's just it, Casanova is *not* a hypocrite (even if he will be an agent of the Inquisition in Venice for a time).

The Prince de Ligne is a star of the Congress of Vienna in 1814 along with Talleyrand and Metternich. The purpose is to redefine Europe after the Napoleonic tornado. This prince will die during the congress. I picture him somewhat somnolent during the sessions, asking himself this question: what in fact has become of *Aventuros's* three thousand seven hundred manuscript pages?

Burned by a Capuchin monk, no doubt. Too bad. Or fortunately. A world has come to an end.

*Sequere Deum*, follow God: Casanova's motto. The *male*, not *female*, God (Deum) is not a woman and is only half man, contrary to what many humans think. What woman wants, God wants? If you want.

If God were a woman, he would have less success with women (to the extent that men wish to become women for him, as religions prove). A harsher version: Casanova denies Oedipus and castration. We note that Oedipus makes him laugh (scandal), and as for castration, it chiefly concerns the censors of his narrative.

What does he really say? Very simple, very direct things: "My sanguine temperament made me very sensitive to all sexual pleasures, always joyful and always eager to go from one enjoyment to another, and ingenious at inventing them."

The "sanguine" temperament is his youth. But the animal claims to have studied the question by successively having "the four temperaments": the pituitary in childhood (implausible childhood), the sanguine, the bilious (he is tormented, it is true, at age thirty-eight), and finally the melancholic, excellent for recounting all the rest. (And the "little girls" can go to the devil, then!)

Let's listen to him: "Cultivating the pleasures of my senses was my principal business throughout my life; I never had any more important. Feeling myself born for the sex different from mine, I have always loved it, and I have made it love me as much as I could. I have also loved good food with a passion, and passionately, too, all objects able to excite curiosity."

I am because I feel. I am very curious about differences. I love difference passionately, and I get it to love me.

Difference loves to be different, but not with just anybody. Otherwise, boredom—to flee from like death.

Death? I detest it, "*because it destroys reason*" (a sublime formula). "I sense that I shall die, but I want it to come in spite of myself; my consent would smell of suicide."

Casanova almost killed himself in London, at the midpoint of his life. He knows what he's talking about. But then too he affirms, as in his miraculous escape from the Leads, that he *followed God*. Why not believe him?



“My mother brought me into the world in Venice on the 2nd of April, Easter, in the year 1725. The night before, she had a strong desire for crayfish. I like them a lot.”

It’s an old man of seventy-two who writes these lines, probably among the last he penned. He is answering the silly questions of an amorous correspondent of twenty-two, Cécile de Roggendorf, whom he will never actually meet. The handwritten copy of his text, entitled *Précis of My Life*, was found among the Dux papers. It’s only a few very dense pages long, and it ends like this: “This is the only précis of my life that I have written, and one may make whatever use of it one wishes. ‘*Non erubesco evangelium.*’ Dated this 17th of November, 1797. Jacques Casanova.”

I’m not blushing about this gospel? In Latin? Signed J.C., like Jesus Christ? Sir Cabalist, you exaggerate.

That first sentence deserves to be considered one of the most extraordinary ever written. It’s Easter Day, therefore, implicitly, Resurrection. The gross April Fool’s–joke Casanova emerges in the midst of a blush of crayfish. He is born out of a strong desire of his mother’s that occurred the night before his birth, and he will fulfill it, this desire, until the night before his death.

Ironically, of course.

His mother, Zanetta, an actress, is about to leave for Dresden, a city quite close to the castle where her son will one day die (or rather disappear as a body). She communicated something to him, but what?

Let’s read: I like crayfish a lot, or rather women who have or inspire desires that others could blush about.

In his handwritten manuscript, Casanova writes *écrivisse* instead of *écrevisse*. Which gives: “The night before, she had a strong desire for *écrivisse*.” *Écrivisse*,

*écrivisse: écrit* (writing), *vice* (vice). The excellent crustacean (*écrevisse*) is not the only thing evoked here, but also writing “backwards,” the writing of memory itself. Zanetta, my mother, by having a strong desire for crayfish the night before my birth, also without realizing it gave birth to a writer. And a cabalist attentive to words and to letters that change into figures.

However, Casanova does not fall from the sky. Let’s get to Venice near the beginning of the eighteenth century, it’s time.

Whom shall we take as an intermediary? A singular character, a poet with a very bad reputation who plays a “paternal” role in Giacomo’s existence: Baffo.

Zorzi Alvise Baffo (1694–1768) is a patrician, a member of the Great Council, of noble origin but poor. He is a friend of the Casanova family, a scandalous libertine poet who writes in Venetian dialect and is known as “the child of the Adriatic.” Here is his epitaph:

The promptness of his wit  
In traversing in many ways  
All the facets of his subjects  
Excuses to a degree  
The extreme lubricity of his poetry.

We could have replaced the word *excuses* with *explains*.

To explain the freewheeling life in Venice at the time of Casanova’s birth, Baffo’s poems are important. Poems—or rather narrative verses: it works just as well to recount them as to translate them, as long as one doesn’t rub out the obscenities.

Example: One day he is melancholy, he is out walking, he sees a girl’s pretty face at a window. He bows, she smiles, he goes right up to her room, she is alone, he proposes “to fuck her.” She sweetly replies no, that she’s a virgin, but she could jerk him off if he wants. “She wanted to make me come against her cunt, and I swear she masturbated as adroitly as any whore.”

That’s just one example out of a hundred. And I’ve chosen one of the more decent (look out for Professor Laforgue).

Baffo describes Venice as a paradise of gaiety, a center of pleasures devoted to Venus. An abrupt acceleration occurred, then: “Married women no longer keep out of sight, and you see them about the city day and night. . . . You can

meet them easily in their beds, and the husband knows nothing about it, or if he knows, it doesn't bother him."

In the past, the cafés were frequented only by whores and madams (those are Baffo's words), but today "they are filled with city women, female storekeepers, noble ladies, and adulteresses who are dying of hunger. . . . In the evening they go out onto the square with an air, a brio, that makes one want to pinch them."

The noble ranks are "dressed in the French manner," and they consume everything they possess. The casinos are full and the stakes are high: "Money flows from all sides; the city therefore becomes more beautiful; but vice empties all the purses.

"Without all these vices, artists would be entirely ignored and would soon disappear.

"Without ambition, gourmands, and lovers, huge treasures would remain buried in a corner.

"It is regrettable that there are not more whores in this city; but married women have made it their task to replace them."

Let us not forget that Venice is the city of Aretino, Titian's friend, whose pen is redoubtable. Baffo carries this tradition forward, worsening it. Very young, Casanova read all that.

"There are also scores of female virtuosos, singers and dancers, spritely mounts that it is a pleasure to ride. . . .

"The singers and dancers live the grand life and are now the queens who trail penises in their wake.

"Those women exert great power over the men; their manner is free, and they are an honor to their sex.

"They have a charm that attracts; they never wear anything torn and are just as clean underneath as on the outside."

Do I need to mention that the musician who is enchanting Venice at that time is named Antonio Vivaldi? The red priest? And that one can hear freedom itself breathe in his music?

"What happiness, what joy, to hear a virtuoso sing while you are screwing her!

"What pleasure can be compared to the pleasure of feeling your beloved dance under your penis?"

“Their conversation is generally full of charm, and the fuckable ones can defy all comparison.”

The old French word *vit*, penis, has a certain charm. Sade uses armloads of it, so to speak. The *vit* has its own vitality, it vibrates. It remains masculine, contrary to its modern equivalents. Casanova will call it *thunder*, *steed*, *principal agent of humanity*, and even, in moments of great demonstrative exaltation, *the Word*. As for the liquid that comes out, now increasingly stocked in laboratories under the name sperm, he calls it *liqueur*, *nectar*, *humid radical*. Isn't that better?

The word *fuck* remains employed. But rumor has it that joblessness is augmenting in its scope of activity. Slang, though, still uses it.

In any case, we can assess, through Baffo and his student, to what extent the Venice of tourism has been wiped clean of these turpitudes. A sinister, commercialized parody of the magnificent disorders of the past remains: the Carnival. As for the program of the North, it is well known: death in Venice.





The world described by Baffo is the one in which Giacomo Casanova was *conceived*. We know that Casa let it be understood that he was the illegitimate son of a Grimani, patrician of Venice (the theater where his father and mother performed, San Samuele, belonged to the Grimani family). That would explain a lot of things: incomprehensible protections, serious troubles, prison, exile, the return, spy activity, another exile after a pamphlet in which he attacks the entire Venetian nobility, the wish to become noble (“Chevalier de Seingalt”), etc. His mother, Zanetta, was beautiful. They say she had an affair in London with the Prince of Wales, from which was born another son, Francesco, the well-known battle painter.

The official father, Gaetano, is perhaps also the genetic father. At the time, pre-DNA, they were rather unconcerned about this matter. And yet it’s true that an individual who is exceptional necessarily provokes legends of this sort, which also come from his own imagination. Me, the son of actors? Just a minute. My family goes back to the fifteenth century, here are my father’s records, because if he is the one who engendered me, see his work: “In the year 1428, D. Jacobe Casanova, born in Saragossa, capital of Aragon, illegitimate son of D. Francisco, abducted D. Anna Palafox from the convent the day after she had taken her vows.”

Not bad, is it, for the start of an opera. By his father, then, Giacomo is Spanish, and among his ancestors one even finds a Don Jouan [*sic*], master of the sacred palace in Rome, who becomes an assassin and then a sort of corsair with Christopher Columbus.<sup>4</sup> There is also a Marc Anthony, a “poet in the style of Martial,” and even a Jacques Casanova, a soldier operating in France against the future Henri IV.

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4. Slight confusion: the Don Juan Casanova who was the master of the sacred palace was actually the father of the Don Juan who sailed with Columbus and died on his return journey in 1493.

A hidden patrician? Given this cinema, why not the poet Baffo himself, who, like a great friend of the family, so strangely accompanies the very young adventurer's beginnings?

This is what Casanova says about Baffo: "Mr. Baffo, sublime genius, poet in the most lubricious of genres, but great and unique, was the reason it was decided to put me in boarding school in Padua, and to whom as a consequence I owe my life. He died twenty years later, the last of his ancient patrician family; but his poems, though dirty, will never let his name die. The State Inquisitors of Venice, out of a sense of piety, will have contributed to his fame: persecuting his manuscript works, they made them valuable."

Am I not right to emphasize "I owe him my life"?

The second paragraph of the *Précis of My Life* is as follows: "At my baptism, I was named Giacomo Girolamo. I was imbecilic until age eight and a half. After a three-month hemorrhage, I was sent to Padua, where, cured of my imbecility, I devoted myself to my studies, and at sixteen they made me Doctor and gave me the clothes of a priest to go seek my fortune in Rome."

Hold on, what's this business about "imbecility" and "hemorrhage"? In the *Story of My Life*, Casanova tells us that his existence "as a thinking person" began only at eight years and four months: "At the beginning of August 1733, the organ of my memory developed. . . . I remember nothing of what may have happened to me before that time."

Strange amnesia. Here we have a man of Memoirs who admits that his memory has a black hole of more than eight years (hello, Freud!); who distinguishes the corporeal from the thinking being, thereby informing us that he had to construct a confused memory for himself. Here, then, is his first memory, his *awakening*, as if he had just landed on an unknown planet, fallen from another galaxy, absurdly cast into this world: "I was standing in a corner of the room, leaning toward the wall, supporting my head and keeping my eyes fixed upon the blood that flowed copiously from my nose to the floor. Marzia, my grandmother—I was her beloved—came to me, washed my face with fresh water, and without telling anyone in the house took me in a gondola to Murano. This is a very populous island a half-hour away from Venice."

This child's condition is desperate. They resort to the drastic measures of the past; they consult the dark science of witches. Here's one, in fact, sitting on

a pallet surrounded by black cats. Giacomo must finally be born, or reborn. There has to be a ceremony.

So the old witch takes this bloody child and locks him, dazed, in a trunk. Then she launches into her big number: laughter, tears, cries, chants, blows struck on the trunk-coffin. She gets him out, he is bleeding a little less, she caresses him, undresses him, lays him on a bed, burns drugs, collects the smoke in a sheet, wraps him in it, and gives him sugared pills with a pleasant taste. After which she rubs the nape of his neck and his temples with an unguent “with an agreeable odor.” Then she puts his clothes back on, predicts the decline of his hemorrhage on the condition that he speak to no one about this, or else his blood will empty out completely and he will die. Finally, she announces that a charming woman will visit him the next night, but be careful, total silence.

Little Giacomo goes home and goes to bed, and he sleeps. “But waking a few hours later, I saw, or thought I saw, coming down the chimney, a dazzling woman in large panniers, clothed in a superb fabric, wearing on her head a crown strewn with precious stones that seemed to sparkle with fire. In a majestic and gentle manner, treading slowly, she came and sat on my bed. From her pocket she took little boxes, which she emptied on my head while murmuring some words. After a long speech, of which I understood nothing, she kissed me and left the way she had come. And I went back to sleep.”

One could call this scene the Queen of the Night stunt. On so strange an eight-year-old child, the effect will be very successful.

Giacomo bleeds less and less, his memory functions, he even learns to read. In recalling this episode, he only notes that, whether dream, masquerade, or hallucination, it had healing powers, especially because of the imposed silence of death: “The remedies for the worst illnesses are not always found in the pharmacy, and every day a phenomenon shows us our ignorance. There were never sorcerers in the world; but their power has always existed with respect to those whom they had the talent to make believe in them.”

Casanova will often play the sorcerer, astonished each time by the human being’s desire to believe. Common sense is not so common.

For the time being, little Giacomo is dull. He is living apart, no one speaks to him. They believe he has a “passing” existence. His destiny as a passenger commences.

After the rebirth with the witch, the discovery of lying.

His father is busy one day with some optical work. Giacomo sees “a large diamond-cut crystal with facets” that fascinates him because the view of objects is multiplied through it. He puts it in his pocket. His father wants it; Giacomo slips it in his brother Francesco’s pocket, who’ll get beaten for this robbery. I was stupid enough to tell my brother this story later, says Casanova; he has never forgiven me, and he has seized every occasion for revenge.

Indeed.

Upon which, as if by chance, the father dies. Giacomo coldly notes the facts, just as, later on, another departure, by his mother, will make his other brother cry, but not him (what’s tragic about that?). Have people noticed that hyper-sensitive individuals are not sentimental? And that sentimental individuals are hardly sensitive? The current opinion claims the opposite. It’s the world in reverse.

For all that, the hemorrhagic illness is not over. “I looked wild,” says Casa, “my mouth always open. . . .” Doctors scratch their heads in bewilderment (we too), but finally they decide he should have a change of air. Baffo insists on this; he will accompany him to Padua with Zanetta, Giacomo’s mother, and an abbot from the Grimani family.

They leave in a *burchiello*, a “little floating house.” Seeing the trees silently slip by, Giacomo, for whom all this is new, concludes that the trees are moving. His mother sighs at his stupidity and tells him that it’s the barge that is moving, not the trees. Giacomo understands, and his thoughts develop right away: therefore it is possible, he says to his mother, that the sun also doesn’t move, and that it is we who roll from West to East. The mother cries that he is stupid, the abbot deploras his imbecility, but Baffo, the lubricious libertine poet, embraces him with tenderness: “You are right, my child. The sun does not move; be brave, always reason in consequence, and let them laugh.”

The mother and the abbot on one side (obscurantism). The scandalous poet on the other (reason). I emphasize the “my child.”

Baffo continues to talk to Giacomo, paying no attention to the two other companions. He offers him the beginnings of a theory made for his reason, purely and simply: “That was the first real pleasure I tasted in my life. Without Mr. Baffo, that moment would have sufficed to debase my intelligence: *the cowardice of credulity would have affected it*. The stupidity of the two others would certainly have dulled the sharp edge of a faculty in me, by which I can’t say if

I have gone very far; but I do know that to it alone do I owe all the happiness I enjoy when I find myself face to face with myself.”

Few people *feel* that like the earth they are turning around the sun. And very few have the audacity to think that they find their mothers *stupid*.

Giacomo Casanova was the idiot of the family. He will be its genius.



“Those to whom age gives increasing subtleness and sweetness, as to a noble vintage, also relive their amorous experiences in their thoughts.”

Nietzsche may have been thinking of Casanova when he wrote this sentence. I could cite many others. Nietzsche liked Stendhal, hence Casanova.

Casa often describes his amorous experiences in alchemical terms, with added flippancy and irony, of course. He is on the point of achieving the Grand Œuvre, or else he is in too much of a hurry, he fails, he falls ill, he has to start over with his maneuvers. The war of love (doing, speaking) is like a royal art, a musical art.

In the end there is only one principle: *follow the God*.

The God is what appears, shines, sends a signal. Casa, with his desires, is available. He has intuition, a good eye. If not here, it will be there. Or there. He moves forward, through thunder and lightning.

Humans have trouble knowing how to deal with God. They can't do without him, they know he strikes where he wishes in spite of their calculations, they dream about him, but they embellish him, they charge him with abstract pronouncements, systems, smother him with relics or useless sacrifices, misunderstand him to his face, whereas he is as plain as day. Compare this to Freud's astonishment when Charcot whispers in his ear, at the Salpêtrière in Paris, that with hysterics, it's always the sex thing that is to blame. No doubt, Freud says to himself, but why then does he never speak about it publicly? Right.

Take Bettina, for instance, one of the very young Giacomo's loves. She is intensely worked up over the thing, but they prefer to think she is crazy or

possessed by a demon. They're always exorcising her, without success; the devil is really tenacious. Those are tiresome, ridiculous scenes. Young Giacomo, informed by his readings and his own temperament, feels sorry for her. The clergy gets involved in the phenomenon, that's what it's made for (the clergy changes with time, but they always play the same part, which consists in speaking against the physical evidence).

Giacomo is destined to the priesthood (he's poor, social advancement may come from it). But what does he have in common with this priest who cuts his hair while he's sleeping, censures a sermon he is supposed to give because he quotes Horace; or later on, with that punctilious supervisor obsessed by nocturnal encounters between boys and the "manustuprations" that follow? Nothing.

In Padua he lives the free life of the students at the time, the "schoolboys" in Villon's sense, gamblers, quarrelers, liars, cheaters, and sometimes even murderers.<sup>5</sup> It is his second initiation, after the one by the witch (the third, which one would expect to be more serious, was his affiliation with Freemasonry in Lyon in 1750, at age twenty-five). What counts above all for him is to *feel*, to learn to read "the proud book of experience." No, he won't be a priest, his feelings don't lead him there. Become a lawyer? No, he has an "invincible aversion" to the study of laws. We guessed as much: "Lawyering ruins far more families than it supports, and those who die killed by doctors are much more numerous than those who recover. The result is that the world would be much less unhappy without these two clans."

You would think you are reading Molière, and even Antonin Artaud: "If there had not been doctors, there would never have been patients."

Such a declaration would seem insane to a twentieth-century reader, especially an American. Doesn't one constantly live in relation to one's doctor and one's lawyer? As for Casanova, he is an outlaw in his own way, with ethics supported by casuistry. It is possible to cheat if you are dealing with a fool (it is even a duty). There is something necessary about ruses: "Deceit is a vice, but an honest ruse is nothing but the mind's prudence. It is a virtue. It does, I admit, resemble roguery, but you have to accept that. He who does not know how to exercise an honest ruse is a fool. This prudence is called *cerdaleophron* in Greek. *Cerda* means fox."

5. The poet François Villon lived in the fifteenth century and wrote about the rowdy life of students at the time.

It's a wink to Ulysses the wise, the man of a thousand tricks (Casanova will be a translator of the *Iliad*). In Latin, he would be the man of *sollertia* (from the Greek *holos* and the Latin *sollus*, altogether; and *ars*, art). In short, you have to be armed for the defense: "Everyone in this world tries to handle his affairs as best he can and to learn weaponry not with the intention of killing but to prevent being killed."

Giacomo, after all, felt he had a "medical" vocation. He will mostly be his own doctor, by resisting, sometimes with weapons in hand, the unconsciously murderous precipitation of doctors (those, for instance, who want to cut off his hand after a duel in Poland). Moreover, with his own eyes he had actually seen the distracted incompetence of a doctor kill his father.

Not priest, not lawyer, not doctor. What, then? Writer, it's better than all three at once.

The God one follows is a God of desire. On to the battlefield, then, which is the bed, and if possible with two girls. Plunging into intermediary states between sleeping and waking to disarm reproach, here are Marton and Nanette in bed with him. First one (the other, out of emulation and rivalry, will be bolder): "Little by little I disengaged her, little by little she opened up, and little by little, through continuous and very slow though marvelously natural movements, she put herself in a position from which she could not have offered me another without betraying herself. I set about the work. . . ."

One studies situations and occasions, one acts accordingly. A "pretty farm wife," in a carriage, is afraid of the storm, and her husband is right nearby? No problem, one covers her with a coat, one seats her on oneself, the driver will pretend not to notice anything: "She asks me how I can defy thunder and lightning with such villainy; I answer that thunder and lightning are in agreement with me."

God does not like superstition. Proofs, on this matter, may well be innumerable.

God does not like superstition, but he can very well use it, and even libertinage, to achieve his purpose. That is what the Chevalier de Seingalt, alias the mysterious Mr. *Paralis*, will amply experience later on.





Casanova is an excellent raconteur. That is his weapon. His interlocutors listen, they are surprised, seduced, swept along. You read him, it's the same. Several times he mentions the effectiveness of his tales on his listeners; his escape from the Leads becomes a bravura set piece dispensed throughout Europe. In the face of adversity, telling the truth the way it happened (not all of it, obviously, chaste ears must be spared) is a way to prevail. Especially, of course, if one has a pleasant appearance. One finds allies, one pleases.

For a time, Giacomo plays at being a soldier. They first put him in a fort near Venice. He escapes one night to beat up an insulter in the city. Impossible to prove anything: during the day he took the precaution of simulating a sprain and colic. A woman from Greece has burdened him with the clap? He is careful not to infect his partners, he recovers, he finds another Greek woman, very beautiful, with whom he caresses himself through a hole in the floor: "Our pleasures, although sterile, lasted until dawn." Once freed, he comes and goes, he counts on whatever shows up. And *something* always shows up. "I smell the odor of woman," says Don Giovanni, while hypocritical prudes pinch their noses. The height of insolence finds him even at Our Lady of Loreto, the famous sanctuary (where Montaigne came to say his prayers): "I took communion in the very place where the Holy Virgin gave birth to our creator."

He is eighteen.

But here is Rome and its ecclesiastical corridors. The qualities needed to survive in this city (otherwise "one has to go to England") are, according to him, the following. One has to be "chameleonesque, supple, insinuating, dissimulating, impenetrable, accommodating, often demeaning, falsely sincere." One has to "always pretend to know less than one knows, have only one tone of voice, be patient, master of one's physiognomy, cold like ice even if one is burning, etc." It's being Machiavelli and Mazarin, but even more cynical, since the sexual coloration is present. "I don't know if I am bragging or confessing about all these

qualities,” says Casanova. “I was an interesting scatterbrain, a quite fine horse of good breeding, though untrained, or badly trained, which is even worse.”

Donna Lucrezia—Lucretia—is probably his first passion. He starts the ambush in the carriage, continues in the grass where snakes are crawling, concludes in a garden on a grassy bank: “Standing face to face and serious, looking only into each other’s eyes, we unlaced, we unbuttoned, our hearts were palpitating, and our rapid hands hastened to calm our impatience. . . . Our first combat made the beautiful Lucretia laugh, who admitted that genius, because it has the right to shine everywhere, was out of place nowhere.”

Casanova uses her first name Lucretia very consciously (it’s the memory of a rape, it’s one of the most beautiful paintings by the Venetian Titian).

This love for Lucretia did not prevent him from desiring a marquise, who is the mistress of a cardinal. We are most certainly not in a Protestant country: “She was pretty and powerful in Rome, but I couldn’t convince myself to crawl.” He gives it a go on a terrace, but without success. That scene, however, leads to the pope, Benedict XIV (people tend to forget that he was the dedicatee of Voltaire’s play *Mahomet*), “a man of learning, witty, quite amiable.” Casa talks to him and charms him: “I asked him permission to read all the forbidden books, and he gave it to me in a benediction, saying he would send it to me in writing for free; but he forgot.” (We therefore regret to say that we cannot publish this explosive document here.)

Lucretia has a seventeen-year-old sister, Angélique. One night they sleep in the same room, it’s an opportunity: “I think I have never undressed more quickly. I opened the door and fell into Lucretia’s open arms, while she said to her sister: *this is my angel, be quiet and sleep.*”

“She couldn’t say more, because our mouths glued together were no longer the organs of speech or the channel of respiration.”

As you will have gathered, the session will continue in the morning with Angélique, who has only to *turn over* (she didn’t sleep a wink). And Lucretia encourages her sister: “The fire of nature made Angélique deaf to any pain; she felt only the joy of satisfying her ardent desires.”

Lucretia’s imperturbable conclusion: “I brought the light into my sister’s mind. Instead of complaining, she must approve me now, she must love you, and as I am about to depart, I leave her to you.”

Such is Casanova's flowery style. He can also be dry. His narrative is effective because of the sexual precision and the metaphor that veils the pornography (though not entirely). The reader is caught in the trap, he has to furnish certain physiological details himself. One of two things may happen: either he knows what's going on (and enjoys himself) or he has only a very vague idea and is changed into a female reader ("you can tell everything, but not a word too many"), and is thus kept in suspense. We are at the antipodes of Sade. Repetition is the law of the genre, but Casanova's code is never criminal (on the contrary, it's the pleasure he procures that interests him). He is doing white magic, not black magic (death and necrophilia have no part in his life; he is the opposite of a "Satanist"). At times, you would think it's the Harlequin collection subverted by the deviation in the description itself. A very subtle art that counts on the ineluctable persistence of the clichés about love.

For crudeness and violence to "age" well requires genius (Sade's or Céline's). Casanova has an immense picaresque talent, another form of genius. Everything seems calm, but in the next room, unbeknownst to all, two sisters and a man are "bringing the light" to each other. What happened? *That*. The same thing as nothing. And not nothing, naturally, but the essential, *as though nothing happened*.

All of Casanova could be called *Précis of Clandestinity*.

"As a consequence of these reflections, I devised for myself a system of reserve in my conduct as well as my speech, which may have made people think me suitable for affairs of some consequence, more than I could imagine myself to be."

Illusion is necessary, appearances have a right to deceive. A new truth emerges, always.

Example: this magnificent young castrato with the black eyes, met at Ancona: Bellino (what a name!). Is it a boy, as he obstinately claims, or isn't it more likely a girl? Casa tells us he *wants* it to be a girl, but arranges to make us doubt his true desire. This episode about a transvestite to be unmasked is going to last a fairly long time, and here is where the narrator's skill as a novelist shines: he is asking the question of questions, the one that is at the source of all curiosity (hello again, Freud!), and he defers the answer as much as possible. Here too the reader, male or female, has to situate him/herself as a function of her/his own uncertainties: what sex is the other really? And I?

Bellino has two young sisters, Cécile and Marine. They are accompanied by a devout mother whom Providence rewards all the better now that Giacomo is

looking after them, nocturnal money won by pleasure. That said, it is Bellino he wants, but not without first being dispassionately assured of his sex. Bellino promises to satisfy his curiosity but constantly puts off the inspection until the next day. Some spice on the side: the waiter at the inn is a male prostitute who offers himself to Casa; he obviously refuses, all the while praising Italian tolerance on this subject, in comparison to English repression at the time.

Refusals, rejections, reticence excite the libertine—it's well known—instead of discouraging him. Everything is always so easy that the obstacle, far from being dissuasive, works like an aphrodisiac (this will cost Casa dearly later, in London). The more Bellino keeps his (or her?) distance, the more desire grows. The *Story* is onto a sure thing.

Let's spice up the adventure some more: here is the beautiful Greek woman he had been groping earlier. Now she is in a boat in the port, the wife of a Turkish merchant captain (to whom she was sold). Casa makes some purchases with Bellino, who has no idea that those two know each other: "She throws herself upon me and, pressing me against her bosom, says to me, *here is the instant of Fortune*. No less courageous than she, I sit, adjust myself to her, and in less than a minute, I do to her what her master hadn't ever done in five years."

All that in front of Bellino, of course, while the husband is out for five minutes. He would have needed one more minute, says Casanova.

All the same, he is happy. Here is the founding philosophy (unfortunately not widely shared at all) of the *Story of My Life* at this time: "Those who say that life is only a conglomeration of misfortunes mean that life itself is a misfortune. If it is a misfortune, then death is good fortune. Those people did not write in good health, their pockets full of money, with contentment in their souls, just after holding in their arms Céciles or Marines, and being sure of having others later. It is a race of pessimists who can only have existed between scoundrel philosophers and roguish or atrabiliar theologians. If pleasure exists, and if one can enjoy it only when alive, life is therefore good fortune. Aside from that, there are misfortunes; I am one to know it. But the very existence of these misfortunes proves that the mass of goodness is the stronger. My happiness is infinite when I find myself in a darkened room and I see light through a window facing a vast horizon."

Bellino, that admirable boy so like a pretty girl, still refuses a *perquisition*. To his great annoyance, Casanova is transformed into a pesky policeman. *Penis or not penis?* Such is the question by which the *Story of My Life* leads us up the garden path, with a very conscious orchestration. Most of the time people forget

this art of composition in Casanova. They look for the “erotic” passages, make up anthologies; they probe his so-called weaknesses or his illnesses; they endow him with a retroactive unconscious that corresponds to the frustrations he unveils in us; they take no account of his demonstrations, his gradations; they evacuate History (with a big H and a little h) from the *Story*. They act as though the society he describes is not *also* the society of all time. As if women, for instance, were not always more or less *detained* and confined in the ignorance of their own bodies (with a few exceptions, always the same ones). After the corset of religion, marriage, chancy reproduction, aren't they further confined in the requirements of beauty, of the permanent spectacle, of compulsory genetic control? Obscurantism changes its clothes, not its purpose: *to control*.

That is one of the reasons why Casanova, in the general confusion, needs Providence. He doesn't hide it, all the while recognizing that his conduct is at the very least unregulated: “Those who adore Providence independently of everything can only be of a good sort, although guilty of transgression.”

Even robbers in the time of Horace, for instance. Providence or Fortune, either word will do. A throw of the dice can abolish chance. What is decisive is the *encounter*, including with oneself.

While groping Bellino more or less against his will, Giacomo has felt something. An indubitable protrusion. A monstrous clitoris? Maybe. He wants to carry this “incendiary illumination” to the end. Riding in a carriage with the castrato, he begs him to lift the veil at last (negotiations, digressions, actions often take place in the movement of a carriage). If Bellino is a man, Casa says he will let it drop. If he is a girl, nature will take care of the rest. Bellino points out to him, quite intelligently, that nothing is certain and that he, Giacomo, could on the contrary come down on the side he seems to reprove so categorically and become a man loving another man.

The situation is exacerbated. He has to be done with it.

Well, to the great disappointment of the Prince de Ligne as well as of X, Y, or Z, Bellino is actually Teresa. She is wearing a prosthesis, which a great castrato musician taught her to attach. She shows the thing to Casa, she gives herself to him, his pleasure is complete (understandable, after such a long preparation). It is at this point that the old narrator writing in Dux specifies that “the visible pleasure that I gave always composed four-fifths of mine.” Interesting admission.



So Casanova *composes*, he is a philosopher whose boudoir is everywhere. In counterpoint, he is always telling us what negative forces he encounters: stupidity, fanaticism. Stupidity, he says, is worse than meanness. Meanness can be punished and corrected, but stupidity stupefies, it takes your breath away. Such as his cleaning woman, who has just thrown out an entire chapter of his manuscript because the papers she saw on his table were *used*, crossed out. She left the blank paper. He has to start over.

Are people mean because they are stupid or stupid because they are mean? You could change your mind about it three times a day (after all, his cleaning woman was maybe meaner than Casa thought).

Besides, writing is inherently diabolical. Someone who writes all day long is doing magic, that's for sure. When you add characters that can't be understood, the inquisition kicks in. Casa is on a boat, a storm rages, a priest on the bridge exhorts the sailors to pray and to repent their sins. Casa gets a kick out of contradicting him, saying there is nothing demoniacal about the phenomenon. Challenged, the priest calls him an atheist; the crew is superstitious, and they're planning to throw the atheist into the sea. Casa has to fight back (he fights like this from time to time, with lucidity and courage). After which the priest burns a parchment that Giacomo has bought from a Greek, which can only be an infernal *grimoire*. The proof: it curls up in the flames.

“The parchment's supposed virtue was to make all women fall in love with the man who had it. I hope the reader will have the goodness to believe that I gave no credence to any sort of philter and that I had bought the parchment for a laugh.”

You can see that Casanova writes for a future reader freed from all superstitions. Does such a reader exist today? I doubt it. Will he exist tomorrow? Nothing could be less certain. For that to happen, religious limitations would have to cease, and one cannot perceive their end as of yet (not even among scientists or convinced rationalists). And just as Proust discovers sadism and snobbism from top to bottom in the society of his time, so Casa underscores the persistence of chimerical illusions at all levels of society. Some believe in the devil, others are seeking the philosopher's stone. The only difference is in the more or less modulated use of sexuality. But how bizarre—it's a sexuality *that doesn't know its own sexuality*.

In Corfu, there is a very wise Turk, Yusuf. He naturally thinks that Islam is the best religion and that Venetian Catholicism, with its bread and wine, is a local joke. The Quran is more universal, that much is obvious, and to convince this lost traveler, Yusuf offers him his fortune and his daughter, on the condition, of course, that he learn Arabic and become a Muslim. Become rich, why not, but getting married and changing religion do not enter into our passing adventurer's projects.

The veil or the chador, no. The only lubricious note in this episode is a masturbation session with an accomplice while observing, from their hiding place, naked young women bathing in the moonlight.

But the veil is also internal. Madame F., for example, obstinately rejects Giacomo's desires. Now he's a bashful lover, a troubadour, a morose Cherubino: "The lover who does not know how to grab fortune by the hair is lost."

The more he desires, the more he is punished, classic cycle. He has to pretend to be sick to get a bit of attention. And it works. Women like to nurse, it's their tendency. Madame F. grants him her mouth (and here the clichés abound: "nectar," "divinity," etc.). Casa when frustrated becomes almost tedious. At last there are some fleeting caresses, fingers that go where they shouldn't. Then stop: "My dear friend, we were about to damn ourselves." We suppose the reader is familiar with these incidents in the alarmist style.

When he is vulnerable like this, Casa generally succumbs to the venomous charm of a courtesan. He gets infected by a certain Melulla. It's almost as if he looked for microbes to refresh his spirits. It's done. Well, he won't be a soldier, either. Return to Venice—as a violinist.

 9 

It's the great turning point.

After a period of various disturbances with friends as disorderly as he (frightening the bourgeois of Venice at night), luck smiles on him. Its name: Bragadin, a patrician in his fifties, a bachelor. The occasion: Bragadin has an attack of apoplexy while getting into a gondola. Giacomo happens to be there, he takes charge, takes him back to his palace, prevents people from taking bad care of him, turns himself into a doctor, takes it seriously. Fortune guides him.

“Now I have become the doctor of one of the most illustrious members of the Venetian Senate.”

A *quid pro quo* emerges. Bragadin, with his two friends Dandolo and Barbaro, is into “abstract sciences,” in other words, a passion for esoterics. And yet all three are religious, austere, ascetic, very unfriendly to women (that was a good bet). This young Casanova has risen like an angel, he is surely more knowledgeable than he seems, perhaps he is being sustained by a supernatural force. Bragadin asks the question.

“At that moment, in order not to hurt his vanity by saying he was mistaken, I made use of a bizarre expedient and, in the presence of his two friends, confided falsely and insanely that I possessed a numerical calculus by which, when I wrote a question and changed it into numbers, I would receive, also in numbers, a response that told me everything I needed to know and that no one in the world could have told me. M. de Bragadin said it was the key of Solomon.”

So there you have it. Casa declares that he received his “numerical calculus” from a Spanish hermit, but it hardly matters, the others want nothing so much as to believe him. His new life as an inspired prestidigitator has begun. His “cabala,” which consists in rapidly transforming letters into numbers and inventing, almost blindly, a reversion of numbers into words, is actually based



on a strenuous exercise of memory. Here we are at the heart of Casanova's nervous system, in his mental gymnastics, his laboratory of metamorphoses. As if the incessant skirt-chasing and gambling are preparations for fundamental psychological activity, for the penetration characterizing a medium.

The *Key of Solomon* is a book of magic that teaches how to control spirits from hell and elementals (gnomes, undines, sylphs, salamanders). It was printed in Hebrew, then Latin; Goethe mentions it in his *Faust*. Casa has read other books, to be sure, and they will be seized at his house later on at the time of his arrest. He is borrowing particularly from Agrippa von Nettesheim.<sup>6</sup> But mainly he has understood that the demand for magic is general and that he has within him something, an "occult power," that meets the demand. He has sudden inspirations, inexplicable movements of intuition, he feels a magnetic power (for good reason). We also understand why, in making "lay" use of his numerical operations, he will be interested not only in the limited play of his power but also in its public extension: the lotto, the lottery, all sorts of other schemes. Casa is a structuralist before the fact. Thus he conceived a very bold international project, a "grammatical lottery," capable of providing a source of both State income (what State doesn't need money?) and bank exchanges, but also a sort of "school" developing democratic aptitudes for writing and reading.

Prophetic Casanova. Don't we constantly see popular television programs with numbers, letters, spelling, a wheel of fortune, dictionary questions, frenzies of culture?

In this, too, the power of writing. Casa is in contact with a genius, a demon or an angel. His name is *Paralis*—paradise, lyre, lily—and he appears in the writing itself. You are written without knowing it, it's written, it gets written; spirits express themselves in numbers, but that can be translated into oracles, even into verses. The patricians can't believe their eyes and ears. Since every question, when well formulated, is already an answer, it suffices to organize the perspective (the pyramid shape isn't random). Unheard-of truths, unsuspected by the magician himself, rain down. Casa admits it. He replies just about anything at all, and yet the trick is turned: it's not at all anything at all.

This Casanova is a living treasure. He becomes Bragadin's "son," the Hierophant of the palace, paid, lodged, fed, and laundered. A violin player without a future, now he is a lord.

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6. Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535) was a German magician, alchemist, theologian, astrologer, and occultist.

Giacomo is very conscious of his fraud, but what's most astonishing is that he describes it, which no charlatan has ever done and will ever do after him. He explains it quite naturally: "I made the finest and the noblest decision, the only natural one: to put myself in a position to never again lack for my needs."

In other words: I am poor, I have a gift, I exploit it so I can live as I like; I could have done worse, like many others, and ruined my protectors. Or rather, more subtly: humanity believes and will always believe in fairy dust, and the most dangerous charlatans are perhaps those who tell you that it can free itself from this drug. The dust changes form, the fairy, no. A philosopher should know that and carry on regardless. Who said the Enlightenment was optimistic? That would be failing to read Voltaire or propagating Homais's falsification of him.<sup>7</sup>

The patricians are a contradiction—wise and yet credulous? Nothing surprising about this fact. Everyone (except Casa) will nevertheless be astounded by this unnatural association: "They all-heavenly, I all-worldly; they very severe in their mores, I addicted to the greatest libertinage."

The good life at last.

A portrait of the artist and gambler by himself: "Rich enough, gifted by nature with an imposing exterior, a determined gambler, a big spender, a great and always trenchant talker, not at all modest, intrepid, running after pretty women, supplanting rivals, recognizing as good company only that which amused me, I could only be hated."

Objectivity.

"What forced me to gamble was a feeling of avarice; I liked to spend, and I regretted it when it wasn't gambling that had supplied the money for my spending. I felt that money won at the gaming tables had cost me nothing."

Lucidity, frankness.

"People are astonished that there are devout villains who implore their saints and who thank them after the success of their villainy. They are wrong. This sentiment can only be good, because it wages war against atheism."

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<sup>7</sup> In *Madame Bovary*, the pharmacist Homais exemplifies everything Flaubert detested about the bourgeoisie.

Insolence, humor.

Casa tells us that old Bragadin, in his youth, “was madly extravagant about women, who were also mad about him.” He also “gambled and lost a lot.” He is “handsome, smart, facetious, and of the sweetest disposition.” He is therefore the ideal father for this adoptive son of twenty-one. All the same, this protective father reasons with “a bizarre mixture of worldly politics and false metaphysics.” Well, let’s not complain: he loves his Casa, forgives him everything, looks the other way, pays his gambling debts. The son continues his adventures, his predominant passion remaining the young debutante. Here’s one right now, Christine, helped, enlightened, seduced, and then married by her seducer to another. Casa likes those amicable arrangements. Everyone is happy, the comedy continues.

But Giacomo overdoes it (he’s quick to be bored). For instance, to get revenge on someone, he cuts off a dead man’s arm and puts it one night in the arms of the sleeper, who nearly dies of fright. It’s a delicate case, people are murmuring. Best to go spend some time elsewhere.

“Follow the God” requires a great many detours. Some clowning? Okay. One time he traffics in a fake relic, the rusted knife with which Saint Peter was supposed to have cut off the ear of one of the servants of the grand priest. All he has to do is manufacture a sheath coming from that time period, and the object works. Another time, a peasant is searching for a treasure buried on his property. No problem, he’ll find it by a magic trick, all the more because the peasant has a pretty daughter with a charming name, Javotte. On the pretext of some purification ritual, he’ll have her take a bath, after which he pulls out all the stops: a circle on the ground, conjuration of spirits, abracadabra, storm, lightning, etc. (Lightning actually does strike, and it’s one of the rare moments when Casanova admits he is afraid.)

This is all idiotic, and it doesn’t measure up to love. Love, therefore, comes forward. And love, as one might expect, is French, even *provençal*. Is it a man? It looks like it. But no, you have again been fooled; here is “an unkempt, laughing figure,” a woman of *wit*. Also beautiful, and from an excellent family. What could she be doing traveling the roads disguised as a professional gambler, in the company of an old officer?

Inflamed, Giacomo dreams of her, thinking he isn’t dreaming, he is “in love to the point of perdition.” You will have recognized Henriette, a quite real and enigmatic person who has fascinated the Casanova specialists.

“What a night! What a woman, this Henriette whom I loved so much! Who made me so happy!”

A self-censure here. Modesty. No physical details. He is totally submerged, subjugated. The magician is magified. Casa’s *Sequere Deum* has just found its equal in the Virgilian motto of Henriette and her family: *Fata viam invenient*, fate guides our life.

Social class differences have a large effect, even more so Henriette’s culture and intelligence. An aristocrat turned adventurer for a season, she will soon be returning to her rank and her proprieties. They settle in Parma, where Casa registers under the name of his mother, Farussi—no more need be said. Henriette had only men’s clothes; he dresses her luxuriously as a woman and considers her his wife. At that time, Parma was awaiting the arrival of the bride of the *infante* Duke Felipe, Louise-Elisabeth, eldest daughter of Louis XV, known as Madame de France. The city is full of French and Spanish people. The climate is one of French intoxication. “Those who believe one woman is not enough to make a man happy all the twenty-four hours of a day have never known a Henriette.”

They talk, they laugh, they enjoy themselves. Henriette philosophizes about the perfection of happiness: “A man cannot be happy unless he recognizes himself as such, and to recognize himself he must be in a state of calm.” What a dream: a woman who advocates *calm*. Order, beauty, luxury, calm, voluptuousness. So Casa exclaims: “Happy the lovers whose wit may replace their senses when they are in need of rest!” Good counsel for all time, but rarely realized.

This mixture (modesty, gaiety, levity) seems new for Giacomo. It reaches its culmination one evening when Henriette surprises him by playing the cello like a virtuoso. A woman on the cello—that was forbidden by the convent, because of the indecency of the position. This time it is too much. He is overwhelmed on hearing her, he runs into the garden, he weeps. The love doctor is also the musician doctor. Too often people forget that *amour libre*, free love (wonderful expression), is also the title of a piece of French music.

Henriette has to go home. Giacomo accompanies her as far as Geneva. It’s a sentimental adieu, with a strangely detached letter in which she asks him not to attempt to see her again. There is also the famous inscription scratched into a window with a diamond: “You will also forget Henriette.” No, he won’t forget, nor will she (she’ll keep an eye on him from afar). Nevertheless, here

he is, well and truly *abandoned*, hence depression, another venereal disease, and even a brief attack of devout conversion. The writer in Dux concludes, in the course of his narrative: “I find that my life has been more happy than unhappy, and after having thanked God for this, cause of all causes and sovereign director of all combinations, though we don’t know how, I congratulate myself.”

Casanova’s God is the following: one thanks him, and then one congratulates oneself.

Syphilis is treated with mercury, devoutness with irony.

Henriette was the messenger from France, a character in the manner of *The Charterhouse of Parma* (Stendhal publishes his novel in 1839, forty-one years after Casanova’s death). The full visa for France (at last) comes first via Lyon and Freemasonry: “There is not a single man in the world who is capable of knowing everything; but every man should aspire to know everything.”

The results of this affiliation can be observed in Casa’s later encounters, even if many intrigues remain obscure. In the case of the Duchess of Chartres, with whom he will *cabal*, there is no doubt. For the time being, we are immersed in the discovery of the Paris of Louis XV, who “was great in everything and would have had no defects if flattery had not obliged him to have some.” When Giacomo writes these lines, he doesn’t mean that he is a monarchist. In reality, he isn’t anything. His position at the end of his life, disgusted as he is with the excesses of the Terror, is to wonder if the sometimes enlightened despotism of a king is not preferable to a popular despotism that chops off heads. The question remains open. But for him, in Paris, the moment (he is twenty-five) is that of the Opera, the offstage maneuvers, the bordellos (for example, the excellent one in the Hotel du Roule). Louis the so-called Well-Beloved sets the tone with his *Parc-aux-Cerfs* (stag parks), which the world’s cinema still likes to fantasize about. Little girls of thirteen are exchanged, which would make people scream criminal pedophilia today. Is the young Marie-Louise O’Murphy the famous model of the Boucher painting? In any case, under the king’s keeping, she will soon give birth to a bastard.

But Casa’s first stay in Paris seems only marginally significant. The Duchess of Chartres, libertine and esoteric, consults him and has him treat her (she has venereal pustules on her face but doesn’t want to follow a course of treatment). Casa impresses her with his pyramids and his angel, and he manipulates her

adroitly. He says the duchess, interrogating his Oracle, “found truths that I didn’t know I possessed.”

Fine, but now he has to decamp once again, toward Dresden (experienced but cold professional prostitutes), then Vienna. “Everything in Vienna was beautiful, there was a lot of money and a lot of luxury, but a great difficulty for those devoted to Venus.”

Who is waging war against Venus? A man? No, a woman. Empress Marie-Therese drives the repressive delirium to the point of creating a special police, including “chastity commissioners” [*sic*]. She has prostitutes and adulterous women deported, and even women unaccompanied in the streets (otherwise they must have a rosary in their hands to prove they are going to mass). Round-ups are sent to an unhealthy place, Temesvar, now Timisoara in Romania (of recent sinister memory). In compensation, gambling becomes more widespread, but it will also be the object of sanctions by the Queen of the Night.

It is in Vienna that Giacomo seriously comes to grips with death for the first time. He has indigestion, he is very ill, a doctor absolutely wants to bleed him, he senses that this intervention will be fatal, he refuses. The doctor insists and is about to prick him by force. Casa has just enough energy to grab one of his pistols on his night table and shoot the doctor. He gets better by drinking water, and he notes: “I went to the Opera, and a lot of people wanted to be introduced to me. They regarded me as a man who had defended himself from death by shooting off a pistol.”

Sexual repression and death-dealing doctors? The *Story of My Life* is composing again. Philosophy is proved by narrative. And the narrative is existence itself.

In the meantime the news arrives: his “disorders” are forgotten, he can return to Venice. He arrives home: “I was eager to take up my old habits again, but more methodically and with more reserve. In the room where I slept and wrote, I had the pleasure of seeing my papers veiled by dust, a sure mark that for three years, no one had entered there.”

“Dust is my friend,” said Picasso.

We see our adventurer, his heart going a bit fast, open his door, look at his bed, his desk, his notebooks, and verify, with the tips of his fingers, the dust. That is what the Spectacle wants to avoid at all costs: the representation of a young, courageous, free, *moving* Casanova.

# 10

She's fourteen. Today we know that her name was Caterina Capretta. She is going by in a carriage near Casa on a road, the carriage tips over, he rushes to her, helps her up from her spill, and for an instant glimpses under her skirts "all her secret marvels" (the sentence censured by Professor Laforgue, if you recall).

She is the famous C. C., who, along with the no less famous M. M. (Marina Maria Morosini), is going to be one of the stars of this grand opera that is the *Story of My Life*.

Let me note in passing that the identity of M. M. was the object of much impassioned research on the part of Casanovists, and that it was established only in 1968 (the coincidence of this date enchants me).

M. M. and C. C. are soon going to be together in the convent of XXX. He chose to write these names with these letters. Let's cabal a little like him:

M.M.C.C.X.X.X.

Perhaps the *Story of My Life* will be readable, openly so, only in 2230. Let us not forget that Stendhal hoped to be read around 1936.

C. C. has a very dubious brother, P. C., who sees right away the profit he can make from a connoisseur of secret marvels (Giacomo is twenty-eight, he is of marrying age). So he wants to sell his sister to this suitor. Rather stupidly, for example, he tries to push her into debauchery. Casa, who is taken for a novice, is furious and reacts as a defender of innocence. His incipient love for C. C. becomes "invincible."

He takes his charming little friend to a garden on an island east of the Giudecca. They run around in the grass, they have races with little caresses for

prizes, nothing serious, she's a child: "The more I discovered her innocence, the less could I determine to take possession of her."

Get married? Why not, after all? But let's get married in the face of God, that insatiable voyeur. That will add spice to the scene. They then return to an inn on the island, it's the Monday of Pentecost. In bed: "Ecstatic with an overwhelming admiration, I was devouring everything I could see with fiery kisses, rushing from one spot to another and unable to stop anywhere, possessed as I was by the cupidity of being everywhere, regretting that my mouth had to go less rapidly than my eyes."

Here Giacomo is throwing ten clichés at us, but they are well-studied clichés, since they serve to describe him as a voracious animal and predator. (And it is clear to what extent the classic thesis about a Casanova as nothing but a plaything of women's desire is false, although quite motivated to keep itself alive.)

Let's be serious. It's a matter of taking her virginity, a question that shocks a lot of mothers (even feminist ones) and makes men hesitant or else convulsively jealous: "C. C. became my wife like a heroine, as any girl in love should, because pleasure and the fulfillment of desire make even pain delicious. I spent two full hours without separating myself from her. Her continual swoons made me immortal."

We read that right: no "little death," but well and truly a sensation of immortality. God is obviously in on the game. A Greek god, no doubt, that would not be surprising. At the same moment, in Venice, the solemn ceremony was taking place in which the Doge, on the Bucentaur, departs for the open sea to wed it (a perilous exercise, the weather mustn't turn bad).

A little later, however, "Remaining as if dead, we went to sleep."

And the next morning: "Nothing could have been more indiscreet than my angel's eyes. Darkly shadowed to the point where it looked like she had received blows. The poor child had sustained a combat that had positively made her into another person."

Here then is Giacomo, "married" (only before God, thank god). Of course the novice immediately goes to extremes and wants to get pregnant (she will be, but not for long). In the continuation of their session, they have together attained "the accord of this death that is the source of life" (a philosophical formula). The pimp brother smells a good deal, borrows money from Casa but ends up in prison for debts. Giacomo, as serious as a pope, asks his protector Bragadin to intercede for his real marriage. Fortunately, C. C.'s father becomes



angry and sends his fourteen-year-old daughter to wait for a decent age in the convent of Saint Mary of the Angels.

Casa is interrupted in the midst of his idyll. All for the good, since another novel is starting, the title of which could be *The Angels of Murano*. It is one of the most famous passages in the *Story of My Life*, which contains at least twenty excellent novels and a hundred novellas, each one better than the last.

A change of scenery. They no longer see each other, they write clandestine letters, carried by special bearers. They are in despair, they dream of an abduction, but it's difficult. Time takes on another dimension, since surveillance at the convent "measures time *at the weight of gold*." Which doesn't prevent certain accommodations: "She reported, in a most amusing style, that the most beautiful of all the nuns in the convent loved her madly, that twice a day she gave her lessons in French, and that she had forbidden her to have any acquaintance with the other women. . . . She said that when they were alone, she gave her kisses that I would have been right to be jealous of, if she had been of a different sex."

The reader knows Diderot and maybe Sade. He has already jumped to conclusions, but he will be wrong. This is the affair in which Casanova shows himself the most inventive and the most ambiguous. In what is about to happen, we will never exactly know if he masters the rules of the game or not. Probably both.

It was to be expected. C. C. has a miscarriage (unless it's actually an abortion). At the time, in a convent, even one adapted to secular life, this is not a minor incident. From now on, the only messages Casa receives are the consequences of his little mistress's hemorrhage, from his "wife" who still considers him her "husband." They send him packages of linens soiled with blood, a strange present (blood: the theme of his entry into existence). A go-between brings all that to his home: "I shuddered when this good woman showed me, mixed in with the blood, a little shapeless mass."

As a child, Giacomo had himself been this shapeless mass, bloody and stupid. Since then he has what could be called a body of borders, always very attentive to its excretions and its fragile envelope. He would not have such pleasure otherwise. Gambling, libertinage, writing form the apparatus of this unstable porosity.

Giacomo now goes to mass in the chapel of the convent of the Angels, in order to be seen by his beloved, who nearly died. What he sees, above the altar, is an Annunciation depicting a Virgin with open arms. Soon his frequenting

the services makes him “the enigma of the entire convent.” The nuns pretend not to look at anything, but they see everything. They are very curious. In town, Casa loses weight and is bored, even though he wins at gambling.

Hence the establishment of his *casino* near Saint Mark’s Square, a studio in the style of the discreet patricians or the profligates of the time. Baffo has described for us this type of “*petites maisons*” (as they used to say in Paris) where one smells, from the entryway, the scents of lemons, oranges, roses, violets, and where the walls are blanketed with lascivious paintings. Casanova in his *casino*, a play on words: Casinovo.

His turn to be seduced now, literally.

As he is leaving the convent after mass, a nun, in a letter, proposes a rendezvous. He can see her in the parlor of the convent or in a *casino* in Murano. She can also go to Venice in the evenings.

M. M., still anonymously, has just arrived on stage. Naturally she is “the prettiest of the nuns,” the one who is teaching C. C. French. Has the latter been indiscreet? Giacomo does not want to believe it, and this possible blindness of his is going to provide all the interest of this narrative, starting now.

He replies to the letter, chooses the parlor for fear of “the snare”: “I am Venetian and free in all the meanings of this word.”

Casa has been selected solely on the basis of his physical appearance (at least if C. C. has not spoken, which to us readers seems highly doubtful). He is not easily astonished, but all the same: “I was very surprised by the great freedom of these saintly virgins who could so easily violate their enclosure.” If they can lie to such an extent, there’s no reason why they wouldn’t also lie to him, in accordance with the unshakable war of the sexes. It is very easy to imagine M. M. confessing little C. C., especially after the episode of the bloody linens. All this based on learning the *French language*. The rest of the novel will confirm this hypothesis.

M. M. shows herself in the parlor. She is beautiful, rather tall, “white inclining to pale,” “a noble, decided air, reserved and timid at the same time,” “a gentle, happy physiognomy,” etc. Her hair can’t be seen for the moment (it is chestnut). She has big blue eyes. C. C. is blonde with very dark eyes.

Her hands are particularly striking, and her forearms, “where no veins were visible and, instead of muscles, there were hollows.”

She is twenty-two. She is *plump*.

He returns, she doesn’t come. He is humiliated, baited. He decides to give it up: “M. M.’s face had left me with an impression that could only be effaced by the greatest and the most powerful of abstract beings. By time.”

Not to worry, everything is fine, the clandestine correspondence resumes. At this point in the text there appears a personage whose identity we will soon know: M. M.'s lover. Then she already has a lover?

“Yes, rich. He will be charmed to see me tender and happy with a lover like you. It is in his character.”

Far from being discouraged, Giacomo's ardor increases: “It seems to me I have never been happier in love.” Poor little C. C.! To have such a faithless “husband”! But wait, she will be back when the present opera wishes it.

Casa reasons coldly: the human being, as an animal, has three essential passions, which are nourishment, the instinctive desire for coitus ensuring the reproduction of the species with a premium of pleasure, and hatred prompting the destruction of the enemy. The animal is profoundly *conservative*. Once endowed with reason, it may indulge in variants. It becomes gluttonous, voluptuous, and more intent on cruelty: “We suffer hunger the better to savor ragouts, we put off the pleasures of love to make it more vigorous, and we suspend our revenge to make it more murderous.”

Our adventurer is perfecting his education.

The Venetian nuns of the time constitute a famous hotbed of gallantry. A large number of young women, not at all religious, are there “waiting.” Though under surveillance, they can slip out at night if they have money and relations. Wearing a mask is essential. They must return very early in the morning, with complicit help. The gondoliers know this, and the State Inquisitors also. It's a matter of modulating the indecencies, no scandal, no waves. When the papal nuncio arrives in Venice, for example, three convents are in competition to provide him with a mistress. There is information in the air; that creates emulation. One takes a nun the way one takes a high-class courtesan or a deluxe geisha. Diplomats are interested, and that is the case with M. M.'s lover, since he happens to be the ambassador from France, the Abbé de Bernis.

Bernis is a learned libertine (he appears in Sade's *Juliette*). He is also a minor poet, although an ecclesiastic (or because). He is rather handsome, his pseudonym is “Belle-Babet.” Voltaire calls him *Babet the Flower Maiden*. Voltaire (*Memoirs*): “It was then poetry's privilege to govern States. There was another poet in Paris, a man of breeding, very poor but quite amiable, in a word the Abbé de Bernis, since then cardinal. He had begun by writing verses against me, and later had become my friend, which was of no use to him, but he had become Madame de Pompadour's friend, and that was more useful for him.”

Such is M. M.'s lover, who will not be angry if she takes Casanova as a lover. Bernis will soon be famous in all Europe for the treaty he is going to sign with Austria, which directly attacks Frederick of Prussia. It is a kind of revenge, because Frederick, as Voltaire malevolently reminds us, had written this line of verse: "Avoid Bernis's abundant sterility."

Madame de Pompadour, as is well known, will directly intervene in the signing of the treaty. Her shadow is thus "up there" somewhere in Venice. We can understand Casanova's enthusiasm for such a ceiling.

M. M., then, invites Casa to dine in the *casino*-studio furnished by Bernis in Murano. This first time, all they do is flirt: "All I could do was continually swallow her saliva mixed in with mine."

The next time will be more penetrating. Giacomo is actually somewhat surprised to see the place full of antireligious and erotic books. Moreover, the beautiful, ardent nun is philosophical: "I began to love God only after I had rid myself of the idea that religion had given me of him."

That disc is worn out now, and I wonder what today's declaration of a truly libertine temperament might be. Perhaps this: "I began to love my sexual pleasure only after I had rid myself of the idea that sentimental or pornographic commercializing had given me of it. It is not easy to escape this new opium. Positive vice requires a lot of discretion, refinement, taste. Come tomorrow evening, and we will laugh at the general ugliness, the mafia, money, the movies, the media, so-called sexuality, artificial insemination, cloning, euthanasia, Clinton, Monica, Viagra, integrist (bearded or not), sects, and pseudo-philosophers."

Each historical moment has its transgressions. A libertine nun would hardly be imaginable in our time (but you never know). In the eighteenth century, on the contrary, the time of the glory of Catholicism, *therefore* of the Enlightenment (everything hinges on understanding this *therefore*), this apparent contradiction could flourish unabated. Soon M. M. will propose to Casanova to let her prelate-ambassador, hidden in an invisible closet, see him in action with her. He is to play his natural part. They are both excellent actors. To the point that at one moment Giacomo *bleeds*. They later learn that the future Cardinal de Bernis was very pleased to have had, for his private viewing, this pornographic live cinema.

The program that follows will not be long in coming. C. C., the little fourteen-year-old marvel, has well and truly been "initiated into the Sapphic mysteries"

(the very ones that will obsess the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*). M. M. has also introduced her to “great metaphysics,” and she has become a *freethinker*. As for M. M., she doesn’t hesitate now to come to Venice in the evening and to show herself, masked, with Casa at the Opera and in the gaming rooms. Moreover, they are in the midst of Carnival, the tempo speeds up: “I spent two hours playing all the little banks, running from one to the other, winning, losing, and acting the fool in all the freedom of my body and my soul, sure of being recognized by nobody, enjoying the present and scorning future time and all those who play at maintaining their reason in the sad employ of predicting it.”

One could hardly be less protestant. Giacomo plays the fool, disguised as Pierrot, but he is going to get a lesson in libertinage.

In principle, he has a rendezvous with M. M. at night. But C. C., dressed like a nun, is there in her place. Pierrot is petrified. He cries a little. Bernis and M. M., hidden voyeurs, are, of course, watching the scene. C. C. reasons with him, explains that none of it is serious, that they both love him, and that this joke is in reality a surprise gift. They thought to bring him pleasure, that’s all. She’s cleverly preparing him for the following scenes.

Casa is no longer astonished. He lets things develop, reconciles with M. M., who invites herself to dine with him along with an unhidden Bernis. Anyway, why not a supper for four, M. M., C. C., Bernis, and Casanova? Rendezvous set, Bernis cancels at the last moment. Finally we are allowed to see the main tableau: Casa and his two mistresses: “I compliment them on their mutual attraction and see that they are charmed not to find themselves required to blush about it.”

Together, they leaf through some erotic engravings, notably *The School of Women*.<sup>8</sup> Then action: “They began their labors with a frenzy like that of two tigresses who looked like they wanted to devour each other.” (Remember the intervention of Professor Laforgue’s scissors in this text.)

“All three of us intoxicated by pleasure, transported by continual furors, we brought to waste everything visible and palpable that nature had given us, vying to devour what we saw, and finding ourselves all three transformed into the same sex in all the trios that we executed. A half-hour before dawn, we separated, exhausted, weary, fatigued, sated, and humiliated to have to admit it, though not disgusted.”

8. *L’Académie des dames*, written in French and published in Venice in 1690, was a book of erotic writings by Nicolas Churier.

At that moment, who is controlling the game? M. M., to satisfy Bernis's desires? Bernis, to amuse himself? C. C., who can expect a social promotion from Bernis? Casanova, who no doubt has the same expectation? The attentive reader notices that, during the "frenzied" session, each of the two women asks Giacomo not to "spare" her, which means they each have taken the risk of becoming pregnant. Casa as a stallion at Bernis's back? All of that, all of that. With this quartet, over whom the image of Madame de Pompadour hovers, we are truly in the heart of existence as a secret diplomacy.

Of course M. M. has told Bernis everything, and he also wants to enjoy a trio with the two angels. Casa doesn't like the idea, but, he says, they have reasoned well, I owe them something, I am obliged to "swallow the pill" [*sic*]. Bernis obtains his mimetic session, and there will be another one in which the M. M.-Casa couple will be on one side and the C. C.-Bernis on the other (Bernis does not like to be seen in action). Bernis's money circulates, the more or less simulated swoons of the two girls also, as well as the "humid radical" of the two men. There are preservatives (condoms), but they could be mistaken. Is either one pregnant? It doesn't seem so. Phew, the roulette was close.

It's a good bet that this whole show began with C. C.'s miscarriage in the convent. M. M. finds out, makes her talk, seduces her, sets up an active competition with Casa, increases Bernis's curiosity and his gifts, consciously or unconsciously hopes to find herself pregnant like C. C. at the start of the plot, whereas C. C., who hasn't given up on a new attempt with Giacomo, no doubt dreams of taking M. M.'s place with the ambassador.

Are the two men the dupes of this show? Not really. Nor are the girls. What remains the most certain is the pleasure taken, and that is major.

It's impossible to go further. The ending comes by itself: Bernis has to leave for his new functions in Versailles, C. C. will marry a man outside the network, the pretty and intrepid M. M. will disappear.

A carnival? Yes, but also a battle of powers.

As for Casa, who suspects nothing, a thunderbolt is about to land on his head.

# ❁ 11 ❁

Casanova has crossed an invisible line. A patrician nun (M. M., of the powerful Morosini family), a foreign ambassador who is furthermore an ecclesiastic, those are dangerous liaisons that concern State security. Who is this amateur, this former violin player, son of actors, meddling in our affairs? What does he know, exactly? What did he learn? Bragadin protects him, granted, but he's an old madman, victim of a charlatan, gambler, and libertine without scruples. What more can we say about this troublemaker? *Atheist*, there. A very good motive for indictment. The Most Serene Republic knows how to defend itself.

Casanova has already noticed that a certain Manuzzi, a spy of the Inquisition, is hanging around. One day, he asks him to lend him his magic books. The storm is approaching, Bragadin in vain warns his adoptive son, advises him to flee, nothing doing, Casa doesn't consider himself guilty, he stays. Destiny knows how to guide us? Follow the God? The cabalistic pyramids? The angel Paralis? Silence.

On July 25, 1755 (he has just turned thirty), he is arrested by order of the Tribunal: "My secretary was open; all my papers were on the table where I wrote. . . ."

They immediately seize everything that is written or printed. Both *The Key of Solomon* and *The Porter of the Carthusians* (an obscene book), as well as Ariosto, Horace, Plutarch.<sup>9</sup>

No explanation, no judgment. Directly to the Leads (*i Piombi*).

Today we know that Casa was *already* condemned to five years in prison for atheism. He was informed of nothing.

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9. The anonymous *Histoire de Dom Bougre, Portier des Chartreux* is an erotic French novel from 1741.

His life seems broken, but it's the opposite. His imprisonment, his interior revolt, his escape will be like a redoubling of adventure and freedom for him.

The ways of Providence are impenetrable. The proof: God is protecting his favorite atheist.

They lock him under the Leads from the end of July 1755 to November 1, 1756. More than fifteen months. Five seasons in hell. It's a very hard physical and moral ordeal. He begins, he says, by "making water in large quantity." That detail shocked the women readers in Prague on the first publication of the story of his escape, but that's how he is, Giacomo; he has a body, a particular one, he observes it, he examines it. Same thing for the locations, with a keen sense of detail. Orientation, dimensions, more or less resistant materials, nothing escapes him. And in the long preparation for his escape, he will show himself to be an excellent worker.

He is surrounded by rats, eaten by fleas. At first, locked in without food and water, he remains standing for eight hours in a row without moving, leaning against a small window. The roof is lead, hence extreme heat in summer and glacial cold in winter. To stand his ground—probably, but how? By thinking. First observation: "I believe most men die without having thought."

Everything he recounts is exact. We have the jailer's record of his food. He says he can't stand up straight; he is one meter eighty-seven. A handsome man with a very dark complexion—"African," says Ligne; "my dear Brownie," M. M. called him.

"I realized that a man imprisoned all alone and rendered incapable of occupying himself alone in a mostly dark place, where he sees and can only see once a day the one who brings him food and where he cannot walk upright, is the most unfortunate of mortals. To see himself in company, he desires hell, if he believes in it. In that place I came to desire the company of an assassin, of a madman, of a stinking sick man, of a bear. Solitude under the Leads is despairing; but to know that, you have to have had the experience of it. If the prisoner is a writer, let them give him a writing desk and paper, and his misfortune diminishes by nine-tenths."

He asks to read. They give him *The Mystical City of God* by Sister Mary of Jesus of Agreda (that will teach him to make boum-boum with nuns) and the work of a Jesuit about the Sacred Heart.<sup>10</sup> It's an instance of humor as heavy-handed

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10. Sister María de Jesús de Ágreda (1602–1666) was a Franciscan nun and author known for reports of bilocation between Spain and New Mexico and West Texas in the seventeenth century. Her life of the Virgin Mary was published in 1722.



as proposing, later, that a Gulag prisoner meditate on *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* by Lenin. And if Casanova were put in prison today, the black humor would be to want to reeducate him by making him study the complete works of Pierre Bourdieu in depth, for example.<sup>11</sup>

“I read everything that the extravagance and heated imagination of an extremely devout, melancholy Spanish virgin, shut up in a convent and having ignorant directors and flatterers, could engender. All these chimerical and monstrous visions were decorated with the name of ‘revelations.’ In love with the Holy Virgin, her very intimate friend, she had received the order from God himself to write the life of his divine mother. The information that she required and that no one could have read anywhere had been furnished by the Holy Ghost.”

The heat rises: “The sweat that filtered out of my epidermis streamed onto the floor to the right and the left of my armchair, in which I sat completely naked.”

The fleas, the permanent sweating, hemorrhoids, fever, and, on top of that, debilitating mystical readings—why not, while they’re at it, a collection of sermons by the Dalai Lama?

He asks them to sweep his cell, which is buried in dust: “I took advantage of those eight or ten minutes to walk around violently; the rats, terrified, didn’t dare show themselves.”

Still no word from the Inquisitors, and for a reason: total arbitrariness. “The guilty person is a machine who does not need to be involved to cooperate in the matter; he is a nail who needs only the stroke of a hammer to enter the floor.” (The Moscow trials will take a step forward: the accused will cooperate with their accusers by declaring themselves guilty.)

One day his cell trembles, a rafter sways. It’s an earthquake, actually the one in Lisbon on November 1, 1755 (hello, Voltaire!). For a moment, Casa thinks that the Doge’s Palace could collapse. He would be free among the rubble. It is as a consequence of this vision that his single thought now becomes to escape (he will do so exactly one year later).

“I have always thought that when a man gets it into his head to accomplish any sort of project, and if he thinks only about that, he must succeed in spite of

11. Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist and the author of *Distinction* (1979).

all the difficulties. This man will become grand vizier, he will become pope, he will upend a monarchy provided he starts early. But a man who has arrived at the age scorned by Fortune no longer succeeds at anything, and without help one cannot hope for anything. It's a matter of counting on her and at the same time of defying her reversals. But that is a most difficult political calculation."

Fortune? Here she is, she appears in the shape of a *bolt*. A Fragonard libertine is going to use a bolt to escape from prison—it's surrealistic. He finds the thing in a pile of debris in a corner of the hovel where he is let in for a brief walk. He grabs it, starts to sharpen it, he works relentlessly ("the hollow of my hand had become a huge wound"), little by little he transforms it into a stiletto or small spear. He is already seeing where to dig in the floor. The exit must be there, somewhere, in the defects of the wood.

From time to time they bring in cellmates, of whom he sketches savory and cruel portraits. He has to control them, make them keep silent, sometimes terrorize them. In fact, he has to pray because prayer turns away doubt and despair and gives strength. An atheist who prays? He dares say so. He is putting all the chances on his side.

But in the end, let's dig that floor. On August 23, by persistence, Casa arrives above the room of the Inquisitors. The way is open. But on the 25th, he is suddenly moved to another dungeon. They don't send him to the *Wells*, fortunately (that would have been the end), but rather higher up, even with a view onto the Lido. They think they are doing him a favor. He has to start all over.

If he cannot get out through the floor, it will be through the ceiling. The jailer, who has found the hole in the old cell, is afraid that Casanova will accuse him of incompetence, also because he has used him, without his knowledge, to fabricate a little lamp from salad oil and tinder. "Who helped you make all that?" "You." The scoundrel is afraid, that's perfect. The regimen is suppler. Perhaps a distant complicity, in the Council, has pleaded for a relative softening? They aren't judging Casanova, they aren't assassinating him, they aren't condemning him, like countless other poor wretches, to rot away *down below* up to his waist in water, in an interminable agony. The ceiling, the ceiling, there's the exit.

The magic of writing and of books, always. Casa has a neighbor (Father Balbi, a monk), a prisoner too, but then religion imposes. This Balbi reads. He is willing to exchange books with the atheist next door. In the books, one can hide messages, even entire letters. Still, one needs something to write with: "I had let the nail of my little finger on my right hand grow in order to clean my

ears, I cut it in a point, and I used it for a pen, and instead of ink I used the juice of blackberries.”

He has to be cautious with this Father Balbi. He lays a trap in the correspondence. It's okay. So he can speak to him about the bolt, the “stiletto,” requesting his complicity to dig a hole in the floor of his cell (through which he can pull Casa) as well as his ceiling, which opens onto the roof (and from there, good luck).

But how to pass the bolt to him? Good god, well of course, it's in a folio Bible, which includes the Vulgate and the Septuagint. The bolt in the binding of the Bible lent to Father Balbi, impeccable. But the bolt sticks out a bit on both sides. Idea: make a dish of macaroni for the next-door neighbor and have the guard take it all, the macaroni preventing him from seeing the bolt sticking out from the binding of the Bible.

The Bible, a bolt, a dish of macaroni: what freedom hinges on, you could say.

So Father Balbi gets to work, floor and ceiling for him, ceiling for Casa. To hide his work, the monk has asked for some pious illustrations to cover his walls.

The prison has become a kind of church where an odd sort of mass is being prepared. A cell companion, a former spy, having been put in with Casa, he has to terrify him with metaphysical speeches. Fortunately, he is as superstitious as the devil. A traitor, but trembling with fear. That's what he needs.

If he is not good, an angel will come and punish him, and besides, the Holy Virgin can appear from one minute to the next.

And that works: “On October 16, at six in the afternoon, in the moment where I was passing time by translating a Horatian ode” (Casanova's dandyism) “I heard steps above my dungeon and three little taps of a fist. . . .”

That is the agreed-upon signal with the burrowing monk.

Everything was decided upon in writing. He had to learn to write “the dark way” for that, as well. See if you can write a translation of Horace using the nail of your little finger on your right hand, with blackberry juice, in the dark.

Until now, Casa hasn't spoken about cabalas or pyramids. It's time. For his prognostication, in answer to his own question, he has to choose a book. Which one? Ariosto, whom he adores. He asks what will be the date of his deliverance—in which canto of the *Orlando Furioso* is it indicated, in which stanza, in which line.

Letters, numbers, calculation. Result: canto IX, stanza 7, line 1:

*“Tra il fin d'Ottobre, e il capo di Novembre.”*

In other words: “Between the end of October and the beginning of November.”

That can only be the night from the 31st to the 1st. That is indeed the moment when Casanova, replicating Dante, will exit the Leads to see the stars. God is signaling to him in poetry or music (Venice is also the *Orlando Furioso* by Vivaldi, which must be heard as sung by that sublime M. M. who is Marilyn Horne).

We understand that it is really a matter of convoking a maximum of rescuing magnetism: “I am recounting this because it is true and extraordinary, and because if I hadn’t paid attention to it, I might not have escaped.”

The great night has come. Father Balbi pulls Casanova through the ceiling of his cell. The roof above is open. It is eight o’clock in the evening. Giacomo goes out, he sees the moon. Too much light. The strollers in Saint Mark’s Square would see them. Better to act at midnight, but to do what? Complete uncertainty.

Casa has prepared his rope. Sheets, towels, mattress, everything was used. The most important are the knots. At weaver’s knots he is an expert: “In vast enterprises there are elements that determine everything, and regarding which the leader who deserves to succeed is the one who relies on nobody.”<sup>12</sup>

The monk Balbi is suddenly full of objections. Everything suggests he is right. Escaping seems impossible, except by breaking one’s bones down below. “He was not desperate enough,” Casa notes, “to defy death.”

They keep vigil. Giacomo takes advantage of this to write a very insolent letter to the Inquisitors, which, in a master stroke, ends with a verse from the 117th Psalm in the Bible: “I shall not die, I shall live, and I shall sing the praises of the Lord.”

And he takes pains to specify: “Written one hour before midnight, without a light.”

But the hardest part remains—a performance of high acrobatics. That, says Casa, is the moment when he has to be “audacious without imprudence.” He crawls, studies the more or less rotting edge of the roof, sees a dormer window below from which he may be able to detach the grille with his bolt “with

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12. “Weaver’s knot” is another name for a sheet bend, a kind of knot capable of hitching together ropes of different dimensions.

pyramidal facets.” He lets himself down with his rope, manages to open the window, sends Father Balbi before him, maneuvers somehow with a ladder, is seized by a cramp at the decisive moment, waits for it to go away, calculates everything as a function of the art of levers and balances, nearly falls ten times, and finally comes out into a sort of attic where he falls asleep, exhausted.

Casanova specialists have verified all of this, which reads like a miracle of non-Euclidian geometry. You have to believe that the Great Architect, at that precise moment, had his eyes more or less shut.

After breaking down several doors, the two accomplices arrive in the Archives of the Palace, then in the Chancellery of the Duke, “the heart of the State,” the offices where they keep the laws, decrees, ordinances. Are we dreaming? No, it’s still God having fun. Nevertheless, soon they will have to make a hole in the wall, going through which Casa painfully cuts his legs. He is covered with blood. From there to the royal staircase, the “Giants’ Staircase” (which everyone knows about from postcards).<sup>13</sup> But the large doors are locked and impassable. They will have to wait till morning and once again put themselves in God’s hands. While his companion laments, Casa opens the bag he has taken care to keep with him and undertakes to simply *change his clothes*, to make his entrance: “My appearance was that of a man who, after having been to a ball, had been to a place of debauchery where they had messed up his hair. The bandages visible at my knees were the thing that spoiled all the elegance of my personage.”

Now to tempt the Devil: “Thus decked out, my fine hat with Spanish lace of gold and white plumes on my head, I opened a window.”

In the courtyard of the Palace, “loungers” who happen to be there see him and think that someone was shut in by mistake the night before. They go get the guard, who opens the door. Casa has his stiletto-bolt and is ready to cut the guard’s throat if he resists. But the guard is petrified. The two escapees go rapidly out and then to a gondola, neither slowly nor at a run. Father Balbi would like to go to a church, but Casa knows that they have to leave the territory of the Republic immediately.

They embark, are soon floating on the Giudecca: “I then looked at the whole beautiful canal behind me and, seeing not a single boat, admiring the most

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13. The Scala dei Giganti was so called because of two giant statues at the top, of Mars and Neptune.

beautiful day one can wish for, the first rays of a superb sun rising above the horizon, the two young barcaroles who rowed with powerful strokes, and reflecting at the same time on the terrible night I had just spent, on the place where I had been during the preceding day, and on all the combinations that had been favorable to me, the feeling that rises toward merciful GOD seized my soul, animating the wellsprings of my gratitude, moving me with an extraordinary power, and so much so that my tears suddenly opened the broadest pathway to relieve my heart, which excessive joy had smothered. I sobbed, I cried like a child being taken to school by force.”

The monk Balbi tries to calm him down, but he’s so inept at it (“this monk was stupid, and his meanness came from his stupidity”) that he provokes a convulsive laugh from Casa, to the point that he believes him mad.

Is it really the same Casanova who, much later, shortly before his death, in the *Précis of My Life*, will say that the State Inquisitors put him under the Leads for “just and wise” reasons? Is it the same one who, after his return to Venice, will for a time be the “confidant,” which is to say the paid spy, for these same Inquisitors? We have his denunciation reports; they are staggering.

In 1775: “The excesses of luxury and the women’s lack of restraint, their complete freedom to dispose of themselves in contradiction to indispensable family duties, such are the causes of the increasing extension, every day, of corruption. . . .”

In 1780: “Women of ill repute and young prostitutes, in the loges on the fourth floor of the San Cassiano Theater, commit the offenses that the government suffers but does not wish to expose to the gaze of others. . . .”

In 1781: “The works of Voltaire, impious productions. . . . The horrible *Ode to Priapus* by Piron. . . . By Rousseau, the *Emile*, which includes numerous impieties, and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, which proves that man is not endowed with free will. . . . *Thérèse philosophe*, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*. . . . The poem by the impious Lucretius . . . Machiavelli, Aretino, and many others. . . . The impious books by the heresiarchs and the falsifiers of atheism, Spinoza and Porphyry, are found in all the good libraries. . . . Many books of wild libertinage seem to have been written, with their voluptuous and lubricious narratives, to reawaken slumbering, languishing depravities. . . . By misfortune, a book is never so well read as when it is declared infamous because a principle has been implemented, and a proscription often makes the lawless author a fortune. . . .”

1781 again: “In San Moisè, at the end of the Pescheria, near where one goes from the Grand Canal to the *calle* del Ridotto, there is a place called the Academy of Painters. Drawing students assemble there to make sketches, in diverse poses, of a naked man or a naked woman, depending on the evenings. This Monday evening, it is a woman who will show herself, exposed to be sketched by several students.

“At this academy of the naked woman, they admit young drawing students aged barely twelve or thirteen. In addition, many curious amateurs, who are neither painters nor drawing students, participate in this spectacle. This ceremony will start at one at night and will last until three.”

Yes indeed, these “reports” are well and truly signed Giacomo Casanova, ex-escapee from the Leads, notorious libertine for all time. He needed money? Granted. He was ready to do anything to get himself recognized in Venice? Maybe. He never recounts anything important? Obviously. Furthermore, these ruses will not be of much use to him, since he will again be in exile, as of 1782, because of an extremely virulent pamphlet written against all the polite society of the city. Whence his wanderings, once more, and the end in Bohemia. Whence, in fact, a writing that he had perhaps never envisaged before, the writing of the *Story of My Life*, begun in 1789—his triumph.

Complex and obscure, Casa. He is not a saint (but who knows?), he is not a martyr (although . . .). His temporary job as a spy may have appeared to him as a masterpiece of black humor. A pleasure of this sort is perceptible in Sade when he plays at being an exalted revolutionary in the Section des Piques during the Revolution. The author of *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* as eulogist of Marat—you pinch yourself. Casanova as a denouncer of impious books—you scratch your head. We could, however, risk a quite simple hypothesis: neither the one nor the other had anything to expect, as they knew, whether in substance or in form, from any regime or any society whatsoever. They are traitors to the first person plural. They never say *we*. It's *I* in depth and once and for all.

At one point in his *Story of My Life*, Casa speaks of those “Venetians of times past, as mysterious in gallantry as in politics.” He is one of those.

## ❁ 12 ❁

So here's Casa rambling, wandering, determined to cut the throat of any individual who tries to hinder his flight. He has taken the longest route to the border, knowing they would be looking for him along the shortest routes. He's walking, walking. He sees a house, an obscure impulse tells him to go there. It's the home of the local police chief—might as well enter the lion's den: "I went straight there, and the truth is I know I didn't go of my own will. If it is true that we all possess a beneficent invisible existence that pushes us toward our happiness, as it happened to Socrates, though rarely, I have to believe that what drove me there was this existence. I do think that I have never in my life taken a bolder step."

God is still having fun. In the courtyard a child is playing. A pregnant woman appears and, in spite of his wild appearance, takes him for the hierarchical superior of her policeman husband, who has left, she says, for three days in search of two prisoners who have escaped from the Leads in Venice. But you are covered in blood, dear sir? Yes, I hurt myself hunting in the mountains. Come in, come in, my mother will look after you, we'll give you something to eat. He goes in, he is served like a prince, he goes to sleep, he wakes up cured, dresses, and leaves the way he came, perfectly naturally. The most incredible thing is that the policeman's wife took him for the godfather of her future child.

A "beneficent invisible existence"? Absolutely. We live, we have a destiny, we die, and the invisible existence is there, as it was, as it will be, even lacking someone to sense it. We are saved from birth, or even without being born, which in the end is of little importance. To be born is really a matter of luck: "I know no other grace than to be born. An impartial mind finds it complete" (Lautréamont).<sup>14</sup>

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14. Isidore Ducasse, pseudonym Lautréamont (1846–1870), the author of *Les Chants de Maldoror*, was an important poet of great influence on surrealists and modern poetry.



He walks. He sends for money from Venice, from Bragadin. At one point he's on a donkey. Onward, onward. Here he is in Munich, Augsburg, and finally Strasbourg. The goal is obviously Paris, the capital of Fortune, the blind goddess. He makes it there in a carriage on the morning of January 5, 1757, two months after having taken French leave. This popular expression for "escape" says it all.

He stays with his friends the Ballettis, Italian actors. They treat him like a hero. Silvia, the wife of Balletti, is Marivaux's famous actress. There is a daughter, Manon, seventeen (Casa says fifteen), who loves him sincerely while hoping he will marry her. Vain expectation, we need hardly say, but it prompts the most beautiful love letters Casa ever received. Letters he preserved in Dux and that Manon wrote to him in secret, usually around midnight, in a spontaneous and fresh French. She calls him her lover, her husband, her friend. They never made love together.

The first person Casa wants to see is of course Bernis, who has just been named Minister of State, having his entrée into the secret Council of Foreign Affairs. He goes to Versailles, but it is not an ordinary day: Damiens has just attempted to assassinate the king. One thrust of the knife but much ado, and soon for the regicide a fearsome torture.

"At that time the French believed they loved their king, and all their expressions showed it; today we have succeeded in knowing them a little better. But basically the French are still the same. It is the nature of this nation to always be in a state of violence. Nothing is true there, everything is appearance. It is a vessel that only asks to move and looks for the wind, and the wind that blows is always good. And a ship is on the heraldic arms of the city."

Casa has decided to be serious and to put his "system of reserve" into practice. To be sure, he is still being supported from afar by Bragadin, but it is not enough. He has one card to play right away—the narrative of his escape. Bernis welcomes him kindly, gives him money, has him recount his adventures, and orders him to write them down so he can show them to the Marquise de Pompadour. He recommends him to Choiseul and to the comptroller general M. de Boulogne, and pretends he's a financier. "Find something for the royal coffers."

Aplomb, coldness, audacity, improvisation—using his intuition, Casanova has turned himself into a specialist in mathematical calculus to establish a lottery. From the cabala and the pyramids to the chancy management of the

fortune of a nation, there is only one step. His plan, reread today, teems with errors? It's of no importance. He's in cahoots with an Italian, Calzabigi, who has a peculiar brother who writes in bed, sick. The lottery is to take as its model the insurance companies, which are beginning to be very rich throughout Europe. There are millions on the horizon, and Casa is playing with the Royal Treasury. ("The lottery shall be royal or it shall be nothing.") The manuscripts of the *Story of My Life* are strewn with numbers. From sequins, we go on to *louis*, to ducats, to *écus*. Today, Casa would be a virtuoso of the euro, somewhere behind the scenes. His reputation is still good, the marquise has read the narrative of his escape and found it good. The lottery is inaugurated, and Giacomo opens its bureaus; he is rich.

Life is a lottery, a permanent wheel, the world itself is nothing but a game based on nothingness. Casanova is convinced of it, but instead of succumbing to melancholy or depression, like others, he goes to the gaming table, he bets, he accepts gains and losses. He follows his god, which is his desire. In contradiction to the conventional image people cloak him in, the sexual activity he submits to is not of the order of an obsession but of a wager. He always plays the same card, but in constantly changing situations. God doesn't ask him for sacrifices but for a lot of attention and determination. The abyss between him and Pascal is imperceptible. No beyond for Casa, a different way of *being there*.

A Venetian called Tiretta arrives in Paris; he is twenty-five, he is on the run. Casa receives him, presents him to his acquaintances, and soon Tiretta is famous for his "organic" exploits. La Lambertini, an Italian woman who uses him, calls him "Count of Six-Times." This is an eminent member whose performances Casa follows with amusement. It is a wider, longer, and more limited version of himself. Casa uses it for a distraction, which allows him one evening to seduce the pretty niece of a fat woman during a card game. She is seventeen, just out of the convent. Only thing is, she's *curious*. Here Giacomo is playing the part of instructor.

They are in a corner of the living room. She comes to talk with him by the fire. She wants to know what the expression "Count of Six-Times" refers to, etc. Casa shows her what part of the man's body is involved. She takes offense, but wants to know more. Here the lesson speeds up and ends in a handkerchief. The student, who is neither stupid nor innocent, feigns indignation, but not much. "You have taken me on a voyage in less than an hour that I did not think it possible to complete until after marriage. You have made me as knowledgeable as possible about a matter on which I have never dared focus my mind."

So Giacomo has only masturbated in front of her. Today, if all he did was ejaculate on the cocktail dress of this young girl who wants to learn, he would perhaps be accused of sexual harassment, with an analysis of his “bodily fluid” (as the American media so elegantly put it) to prove his guilt in DNA terms. Large amounts of money would be involved, the lawyers and the newspapers would grab hold of the story. Scandal in Paris: an associate of the Minister of Foreign Affairs is convicted of fluid aggression against a defenseless adolescent girl. His fate would be sealed. Bill Casanova would be forbidden from doing harm. His victim would rake in a few million dollars in book sales by recounting the sordid details of this adventure.

Casanova engaged in an odious action? No doubt, but wait: the niece has written to him immediately to ask him to marry her, to avoid being sold to a rich merchant. “I don’t know if I love you; but I do know that I must prefer you to anyone else for the love of myself.” Her aunt, she says, “is pious, taken with gambling, rich, miserly, and unjust.” She wants to dispose of her niece the way families do at the time: in a convent or married, nothing in between. Marry me, says the young girl to Casa, and you will have *this much*. Harshness of the female condition, of which Casanova is the first and the most precise exposé, whatever one may think. If only for that reason, the *Story of My Life* is an extraordinary document: nuns, unfaithful wives, sold-off daughters, prostitutes, courtesans, crazy old women, low-class women, marquises, bourgeois women, countesses, virgins, or housewives, it really is Mozart’s catalogue, but aggravated by an acute sociological gaze. No generalizations: concrete narrations. A flood of details that has more to say than a thousand and three academic volumes.

The fat hypocritical aunt will soon be treated as she deserves. It is the day of Damien’s execution by drawing and quartering. Casa has reserved some *windows* for his little company. There is a crowd for the spectacle: “At Damien’s torture, I had to look away when I heard him screaming, with only half of his body left. But the Lambertini woman and Madame XXX did not look away, and it was not out of the cruelty of their hearts. They told me, and I had to pretend to believe them, that they loved Louis XV so much that they could not feel the slightest pity for such a monster. Nevertheless, it is true that Tiretta kept Madame XXX so singularly occupied during the entire time of the execution that it is possible it was only because of him that she never dared to move or turn her head.”

The public dismemberment of Damien lasted four hours. Madame XXX, the fat devout aunt, having alleged some lame, after-the-fact pretexts, adopts Tiretta and becomes the most satisfied of women. As for Casa, he will perfect

the niece's education, clandestinely and at night. He claims, and why not believe him, that she doesn't have any complaints.

Casanova as *professor*: his bad reputation, the jealous tensions he unleashes among men, the dissimulated affection women grant him (even when they say the opposite), the whole legend, in the end, comes from that, assuredly. Professor of physical evidence and of History. The torture of Damiens prefigures the industrial-strength beheadings during the Terror. The French pretended to love their king. But: "And yet it was the same population that massacred the entire royal family, all the aristocracy of France, and all those who gave the nation the fine character for which it is esteemed, loved, and even taken as a model for all the others. A chameleon that takes on all the colors, susceptible to everything a leader can make it do, good or bad."

These lines date from before Napoleon; they are prophetic. They no doubt also explain a profound element of the "French malaise" and its permanent "civil war" character. Frenchmen, yet another effort if you wish to once again become the envied model for Europe and the world. A Venetian in exile wrote this in French two centuries ago. A message in a bottle for an impossible task? Not so sure.

Employed by Bernis for "secret orders" (for instance, the examination of French warships in Dunkirk), Casa had the time to evaluate the bad state of the administration at the time. Disorder everywhere, useless expenditure as plain as day, the State is indebted, the population fooled. "A revolution was necessary." But the rest is not brilliant: "Poor people dying of hunger and of misery, or about to be massacred by all of Europe for the enrichment of those who have deceived them."

Louis XVI was "virtuous" but "misinformed." In a recently discovered and published text, Casanova writes: "The monarchy of France had to perish under a weak king and incapable ministers, with the exception of Vergennes, who couldn't do anything alone. The entire nation mocked a government whose flanks were exposed on all sides. Secrecy of State had been lost at a time when they should have covered everything with the thickest veil, for it was a matter of hiding from the entire nation that affairs were in such disarray that they should fear bankruptcy. It is true that they should fear it, but it was the ministers' duty to bring to bear resources that could not have been unavailable, since they were not unavailable in much more difficult times."

And then there are the more or less occult, or even occultist, plots. Casanova knows what he is talking about (his animosity toward Cagliostro is well known).

He is especially very violent against the Duke d'Orléans, "Philippe-Egalité." "One can consider this prince one of the principal causes of the Revolution." Equality? "Nothing is more unequal than equality," Casa affirms. Fraternity isn't his strength, either. What remains is liberty, for which he needs no lessons from anyone.

## ❁ 13 ❁

Young Manon Balletti loves Casa with all her heart, and he likes her *a lot*. That doesn't change anything about the nature of our seeker of adventures, who doesn't hesitate, in the magnetic Paris of the time, to have recourse to those "mercenary beauties who blossomed on the broad sidewalks and prompted commentary." And as usual there are also the actresses, singers, dancers: "Very free, they enjoyed their rights and gave themselves either to love or to money, and sometimes to the one and the other at the same time. . . . I had made my way with them all quite easily. . . ."

The body outpaces sentiment.

Camilla is an actress and a dancer at the Comédie Italienne. For her second-best lover she has the Count de La Tour d'Auvergne, who for his part keeps a little mistress. Evenings are brilliant. Casa is there. He returns home with the count and his young mistress, goes to fondle her a little, is mistaken in his groping, caresses the count, who jokes about it. They laugh. Thereupon, as one might expect, the two men become friends, fight a little duel over a money matter, are reconciled, spend time together. La Tour d'Auvergne is sick; he has *sciatica*? No, Casa tells him, it's just a "humid wind" that I'm going to cure you of right away by applying "Solomon's talisman" and pronouncing on it "five words." The count and Camilla think it's a joke, and Casa himself jokes about it internally, but joking aside, let's be serious. He orders saltpeter, sulfur blue, mercury, and a *brush*. Forces the patient to give him some of his urine. Mixes it all up ("amalgamates it"). Forbids grins and grimaces. Traces a five-point star on La Tour d'Auvergne's thigh while pronouncing pretend magic formulas in an incomprehensible language ("I didn't understand what I was saying myself"). Isn't all this comedy *comical*? Staged by Molière, surely. But done with an imperturbable gravity, in reality? A few days later, says Casa, when he

is no longer thinking about this farce, La Tour d'Auvergne comes to see him: he is cured.

There has never been an esoteric charlatan who writes his memoirs to recount his deceptions and the credulity of his dupes; and yet, Casanova, a true Enlightenment man, is that man. Unconcerned about “the black tide of occultism” (as Freud says one day to Jung, whom he makes promise, to combat occultism, never to renounce the theory of sexuality), Casa dives in and swims with ease in the sea of illusions. Sex he knows about, he trains just about every day. *Therefore* he can judge the occult market at first glance. And god knows that in the eighteenth century it is booming, just like in our time. There are all sorts, of course, but very cultivated, very intelligent people who also meddle in “abstract sciences.” The Count de La Tour d'Auvergne, who believes in nothing, wants Casa to meet his aunt, “known as knowledgeable in all the abstract sciences, a great chemist, a woman of wit, very rich, sole mistress of her fortune.” Casa doesn't accept right away, he doesn't want to appear like a music hall magician; it's an elementary cleverness that can only strengthen the bait.

The Marquise d'Urfé has a famous name. She is still beautiful, although old, and nothing connected with chemistry, alchemy, or magic is foreign to her. She receives Casanova, who right away perceives the extent of the problem. He is a long way from the little cabala games with pyramids, question and answer, numerical genius with absolute knowledge (though that game could still serve in the future). Here, in the capital from which one day the transformation of the historical calendar will emerge, they get to the bottom of things. Grand Œuvre, philosopher's stone, first-class library, fully functioning laboratory, Casa makes a tour of the house, and we with him, as if he is entering a science fiction film. The marquise had been the mistress of the Regent, who was well-known as a maniac of alchemy, to the point that, as Saint-Simon tells it, he wanted to meet the devil in person. Let us not forget that in the secondary parts of all these matters it is also very much a question of poison.

Shoulder shrugs on this subject are in no way convincing, on the contrary. By their reflex refusal of it all, they could very well participate in the augmentation of the phenomenon. Believing or not believing in it is not the problem. *In any case*, you have to see how it functions.

It is obvious that the Marquise d'Urfé is crazy, and Casa does not hide his immediate diagnostic from us. But as with Bragadin, he sees the opportunity of the situation, he has no desire to work or to be serious, he improvises his character as needed. He is well-read, intuitive, he knows how to speak and to

be silent, and especially to connect, displace, surmise, insinuate, quickly look at a document or a manuscript over a shoulder, pretend to know more than he does, guess right. He is a cryptographer, he goes straight to the cipher.

“From the library we went to the laboratory, which positively astounded me. She showed me a substance she had been burning for fifteen years and needed to burn for four or five more. It was a powder of projection, which would perform the transmutation of all metals into gold in a minute. . . .”

In a breathtaking dialogue, Casa and the marquise have a duel of wits: knowledge, allusions, hidden meanings. She wants to pronounce the “ineffable names” better? Perhaps, but does she know the theory of the planetary hours? Not enough. Casa suddenly tells her she has a Genius and that he must learn his name. “You know that I have a Genius?” says the marquise. “You must have it if it is true that you have the powder of projection.” “I have it.” “Give me the oath of the order.” “I don’t dare, and you know why.”

Well played. The Rosicrucian oath is indeed difficult to concretize between a man and a woman, especially if they are seeing each other for the first time. The marquise immediately recognizes this, and the matter is settled: “When we find this oath announced in the Holy Scripture, she tells me, it is masked. *He swore*, says the Holy Book, *while placing his hand on his thigh*. But it is not the thigh.<sup>15</sup> Therefore one never finds a man swearing an oath to a woman in this way, because the woman does not have a Word.”

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh. You can see that Casanova doesn’t mince words in his totally personal interpretation of Scripture. Besides, the marquise would very much like to be endowed with a Word—that is to say, be reborn in a masculine body. She senses that Casanova is the man she needs for this vast operation, for this difficult and very singular cloning. For her, Giacomo is a mutant, a superior sorcerer who, to avoid being hampered or arrested in his temporal passage, is hidden under a borrowed identity (for example, under the cloak of the current lottery). “These extravagances came from the revelations that her Genius made to her during the night and that her exalted fancy made her consider real. Explaining this to me one day with the greatest possible sincerity, she said that her Genius had convinced her that, as she was a woman, I could not make her obtain intimate

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15. Genesis 24:1–9. The King James Bible has the hand placed *under* the thigh; the suggestion is that it is placed on the male genitals, hence the impossibility for a woman to swear an oath in this manner.



colloquy with the Geniuses, but that I could, by means of an operation that I must know, make her soul pass into the body of a male infant born from the philosophical coupling of an immortal man with a mortal woman, or of a mortal man with a female being of divine nature.”

Transmutation, transmigration, rebirth with a change of sex, we see, do we not, that this goes to the heart of the constant fantasies of mortals? The annoying thing, though, is that one has to die. But the Marquise d’Urfé is ready to “abandon her old carcass” by using a special poison, known only to Paracelsus (who wasn’t capable of using it, for that matter). Here Casa is flabbergasted, he is silent for a long time, looks out the window. She thinks he is weeping: “I let her think it, I sighed, I took my sword and I left. Her carriage, which was at my disposition every day, was in front of her door, ready for my orders.”

To be continued, then. Casanova makes a point of noting that he abused the Marquise d’Urfé: “Every time I remember it, I feel pained and ashamed, and I am now doing penance for it by obliging myself, as I am, to tell the truth in writing my Memoirs.” The day he made her believe in his personal communication with the Geniuses, he departed, “carrying with me her soul, her heart, her wit, and all that remained of her common sense.” It is important to note that, while very rich, she is also very miserly, but that she is ready to give everything she has to become a man. It was, says Casa, impossible to disabuse her: “If like a truly honorable man I had told her that all her ideas were absurd, she would not have believed me, therefore I made the decision to let myself go. I could only please myself, continuing to let myself be considered the greatest of all the Rosicrucians and the most powerful of all men. . . . I could clearly see that if need be, she could not have refused me anything, and although I had not formed any plan to seize her wealth in whole or in part, I nevertheless did not feel I had the strength to renounce this power.”

A classic *pro domo* argument with Casa. The society in which he finds himself makes no place for sons of actors like him. He has nothing to hope for, except on his own merit—merit very rarely rewarded and always at the mercy of aristocratic arbitrariness. Well, that’s how it is, and he is not going to wait to be reborn in two or three centuries. It’s now or never. Unlike most human beings, he does not dream of being a different man or woman. He is seeking neither resurrection nor immortality. A very rare quality—he knows what his sex is, and he has no desire to change. He’s in a hurry.

Casa also met the great sorcerers of his time. The Count de Saint-Germain would dine with the Marquise d’Urfé. Dine is saying too much, he doesn’t eat,

he talks: “No one could talk better than he could. He claimed to be prodigious in everything, he wanted to cause astonishment, and positively he did astonish. He had a decisive manner that nevertheless was not unpleasant because he was knowledgeable and spoke all languages well, a great musician, a great chemist, a pleasant face, a master at making all women his friends, because while he gave them makeup products, he beautified their skin, he flattered them not by making them younger, because that, he said, was impossible, but by keeping and preserving them in the state he found them in, by means of a water that cost him a lot but which he gave them as a present. This very singular man, born to be the most brazen of impostors, said without impunity and as a matter of course that he was three hundred years old, that he possessed universal medicine, that he did anything he wished to nature, that he melted diamonds and made a large one out of ten or twelve little ones without their weight diminishing and with the most beautiful clarity. Mere bagatelles for him. In spite of his boasts, his disparities, and his obvious lies, I didn’t have the strength to find him insolent, but I also didn’t find him respectable. I found him astonishing in spite of myself, for he did astonish me.”

We don’t have the Count de Saint-Germain’s memoirs, nor those of Cagliostro, but we have Casanova’s. In his *Soliloquy of a Thinker*, a little book published in Prague in 1786, Casa makes fun of Cagliostro; it could pass for a warning addressed to the French monarchy, which is about to be pulled down by the queen’s necklace. In it, he portrays the typical impostor, whose credit “is based only on the fact that people have only a precarious and abstract knowledge of all those extraordinary things he promises. . . . What men believe the most strongly is what they know the least.”

Casanova promises nothing, commits to little. They endow him with a power? Fine, let them. He is more interested in his life than in humanity’s. No doubt it is an error on his part, unless his greater error is knowing how to recount what deserves to be told and, through all the lies, to make it true. *Astonished*, for him, is a very strong word. In passing, you will have noticed his lucidity, before Freud, about the ineradicable feminine desire for a penis (or the desire for a child, which comes to the same thing), as well as about the omnipotence of the proclaimed miracle of beauty products. To be a woman requires reparation, it’s a fact. And Casa is a repairer, a transitory one, to be sure, but of the first rank. So the marquise is crazy? No doubt, but she is “sublime.” She would have preferred to be a man? Yes, and so? As for the Count de Saint-Germain (“I have never in my life known a cleverer and more seductive impostor”), Casa will soon meet him again in Amsterdam on a secret mission. A lot of money is involved, and History is shaped by it without our being

able to tease out its threads, most of the time. Here's Saint-Germain settled in Chambord by Louis XV, in the same dwelling that the king had given the Maréchal de Saxe for his lifetime. He even has his *laboratory* in the Trianon. The clandestine utilization of impostors has the advantage of not requiring that they be reported to anyone, neither government nor police. If needed, one can disavow, but the last thing one does is have them arrested; one assists in their escape. There are bank transfers, no one's the wiser. Later, sometimes much later, ghostly black holes appear in the accounts. They go up in smoke, papers burn, memories are erased, witnesses have disappeared. A rolling philosopher's stone gathers much moss of silver and gold. Nothing new under the money sun while people are talking here and there about this and that.

## ❁ 14 ❁

Casa the financier is in Holland. Numbers occupy him, speculation solicits him. Venice is far away, and who would recognize this lovely Lucie of the past turned old and ugly, in an Amsterdam brothel? On the other hand, Teresa Imer reappears.<sup>16</sup> She is a singer; she is accompanied by her children, including a little girl of six, Sophia. She looks a lot like Giacomo: she's his daughter.

Adventures are not in fashion in the North. Esther, young and very *bourgeoise*, is charming, but she wants to learn the cabala instead of penetrating the true mysteries of her composition. They go out, they go to a concert, they return, they talk. More and more it is a question of money, of love less and less. Casa is getting old. "I left after giving my daughter a watch."

Teresa does not leave him her daughter, but she does entrust her twelve-year-old son to him. The Marquise d'Urfé will think him a gift from the heavens to assist in her secret program. She calls him Count d'Aranda, puts him in a high-class boarding school.

"I let her believe that the little d'Aranda belonged to the Great Order, that he was born as a result of an operation that was unknown to the world, that I was only his temporary holder, and that he was to die without ceasing to live. That all came from her brain, and the best thing I could do was to agree with it. But she maintained that she knew nothing without the revelations of her Genius, who spoke to her only at night."

Madame d'Urfé's nights are agitated, but only psychically. The physical did not convince her. She is not the only one of this sort, and psychoanalysis does not yet exist (and we may well wonder if it would be efficacious in this case).

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16. Teresa Imer, known as Teresa Cornelys (1723–1797), was a soprano opera singer and impresario who hosted fashionable gatherings at Carlisle House in Soho Square.

Casa is rich, hence the old-man behavior: he is making gifts, to Silvia Balletti, to Manon, his heartfelt lover who will soon give up and get married in the most conventional manner. What does one do when rich? Take a residence in the country, and here we are in *Warsaw-in-Open-Air* at La Petite Pologne in the environs of Paris. The cook is called *The Pearl*: “My style of life made La Petite Pologne famous. People were talking about the fine cuisine there. I kept rice-fed chickens in a dark chamber; they were white as snow and of an exquisite flavor. I added to the excellence of French cuisine the most seductive of everything that the remainder of the cuisines of Europe had for the connoisseurs. . . . I matched choice company to delicate suppers in which my guests saw that my pleasure depended on the pleasure I procured for them. Women of distinction and gallantry came to walk in my gardens in the morning, accompanied by inexpert young men who did not dare to speak and whom I pretended not to see. I gave them fresh eggs and butter. . . . After that, quantities of maraschino from Zadar, etc.”

Please note: people will soon open scores of *Casanova* restaurants pretty much everywhere in the world. I even saw a fast-food restaurant with this name in Prague. There will be books for sale in the supermarkets, recommended by magazines, bearing the title: *The Cooking of Casanova*. Casanova is becoming a *brand name*. To such an extent that he opens a factory making printed silk cloth, with twelve female workers who end up in his bed, of course, hoping to make their fortunes. Women in general speak more and more about *placing* themselves. It is easy to understand them. There is even a somber matter of a failed abortion, recounted in detail, in which Giacomo assists a Mademoiselle XCV, Giustiniana Wynne, an Englishwoman whom he calls “Miss,” with the intention of seducing her. A midwife will bring charges against him; to free himself, he is obliged to have his relations intervene. The wife of a shopkeeper amuses him for a time (“we spent three hours in delicious follies”), but here too money is in play: “The life I was leading was the life of a happy man, but I wasn’t happy.” He speaks of the homosexuality of the Duke d’Elbeuf, without admitting everything, since among his papers in Dux were found the following unused notes: “My love for the minion of the Duke d’Elbeuf.” “Pederasty with Bazin and his sisters; pederasty with X in Dunkirk.” Which shows that he is not the mechanical heterosexual he has been made out to be, and that is precisely why it is interesting that he is what he is in full knowledge of himself. Scandalous, exceptional Casa.

Business, in the end, goes sour (you would think he does it intentionally). Giacomo is arrested for unpaid bills of exchange—once again, he has to pull

strings behind the scenes. “My imprisonment, though of only a few hours, made me disgusted with Paris and inspired in me an invincible hatred for all trials, a hatred I still possess.”

Money and power are no doubt desirable, but they are *disenchanting*. Casa’s philosophical tone is far from the *Sequere Deum* at this time: “Everything is mixed, and we are the authors of events in which we are not complicit. Therefore, everything of the greatest importance in the world that happens to us is just what must happen to us. We are nothing but thinking atoms that go where the wind blows them.”

## 15

Germany is not a success for Casa. To be sure, there is a certain Madame X in Cologne who is worthy of the beauties of the Olympus by Ariosto, but joining her requires ruses worthy of the Sioux: letting himself be locked in a church crouching in a confessional, then waiting in a staircase that leads from the sacristy to her apartment in a corner filled with rats where he has to remain for five hours. Furthermore, he mustn't wake the husband who is sleeping next door. He gets his recompense, but dearly paid. In Stuttgart he constantly loses at the gambling tables. No good. Let's try Switzerland.

In Zurich, a stock-taking: "A perfect peace is the greatest good of all."

"With this thought in mind I go to bed, and very pleasant dreams bring me happiness, in peaceful solitude, in abundance, and in tranquility. It seemed to me that, in a beautiful country setting of which I was the master, I enjoyed a freedom one seeks in vain in society. I was dreaming, but while dreaming I said to myself that I wasn't dreaming. Waking suddenly at daybreak, I am undeceived. I'm angry and, determined to realize my dream, I get up, dress, and go out, not caring where I was headed."

The tone here is almost Rousseauistic. It's not too surprising to see Giacomo come upon a church and a tranquil monk who shows him a superb library. Perhaps the true life is there, after all. Become a monk? Get married? The troubled libertine has to protect himself on the right and on the left. These questions return from time to time in the *Story of My Life*. "At my age," thinks Casanova later, "my independence is a kind of slavery."

"If I had married a woman clever enough to give me direction, to make me submit without my being able to notice my subjection, I would have looked after my fortune, I would have had children, and I would not be alone in the world, as I am, with nothing to my name."

The fact is he does have children, but they are entrusted to others. This is the old librarian in Dux who is speaking, and who continues: “Since I am happy with my memories, I would be crazy to create useless regrets for myself.” True, he is alone and has nothing, except his pen.

Just as each time he has doubts about himself, Casa will get sick, but this time it’s an organized revenge by a woman, a veritable assault. He calls this character “la F.” She pulls him in, it’s dark, he thinks he’s working on another woman, and the next day she writes him: “You should know, Monsieur, that for ten years I have had a slight indisposition from which I have never been able to be cured. You did enough last night to have contracted it; I advise you to take remedies immediately. I am warning you about it so you will not communicate it to your mistress, who could, in her ignorance, give it to her husband and to others, which would make her unhappy, and I would regret it as she has never done me any hurt or harm.”

In vain does Casa reply to this exquisite woman straight out of Laclos that she infected not him but his valet, it’s still a bitter pill. These sorts of diseases, he says, are the scars one obtains in combat. He gets well, of course (no AIDS yet), and he does not become a monk. As for marriage, it might have been with the Dubois woman, whom he calls “my good wife” or “my governess.” But just as he does from time to time, with true generosity he will marry her to another man, but not without fabricating for her, at her request, a son along the way.

Switzerland is a masked country: Calvin on one side, the baths at La Matte on the other.<sup>17</sup> In that house of true debauchery, two lesbian servant girls offer Casa and the Dubois woman a spectacle: “They began by doing together the same things they saw me doing with la Dubois. La Dubois watched, very surprised at the frenzy with which the servant I had taken played the part of the man with the other one. I also was a bit astonished, in spite of the frenzies that M. M. and C. C. had presented to my eyes six years before this time, nothing more beautiful than which could be imagined. . . . I turn around, and the girl, seeing me curious, puts before my eyes a clitoris, monstrous and rigid. . . . It looked like a fat finger without a fingernail, but it was bendable. The wench, who desired my beautiful governess, told her it was erect enough to put into her, if she agreed to allow her to. And that would not have pleased me.”

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17. La Matte was a section of Berne, on the Aar River.



Another time, perhaps. For the time being, a bit of hypocrisy: “The copulation of these two young women, although comical, nevertheless excited the greatest sexual pleasure in us.” Why “comical”? What reader is Casa humoring here?

But Switzerland means especially Geneva, which is to say the Temple of Reform and Reason. Stage right, the pastors; Casa has fun making them blush by reproaching them for believing, like Calvin, that the pope is the Antichrist of the Apocalypse. Stage left, the scientist Haller and of course Voltaire.<sup>18</sup>

For the pastors, Casa will amuse himself by giving a lesson in concrete metaphysics to a young woman of genius, a theologian, Hedwig. With Voltaire, he will deliver a demonstration of poetry. Offstage, it will be a nonstop orgy. The painting of this situation could be entitled: “Venice Seizes Geneva, Thanks to One Man.” Or “Rome, under the Mask of Libertinage, Conquers Protestantism.” Or “The Secrets of the Counter-Reformation.” This old war is actually much more current than people think.

At Lausanne, Casa chances to reflect on Beauty and Form (his reference is Plato’s *Phaedrus*): “Nothing extant has ever exerted as strong a power upon me as a beautiful female form, even that of a child.”

He thinks of Raphaël, of Nattier’s portraits. What is beauty? “You know nothing about it, you know it by heart.” Great painters are rare. “The painter who is not made so by God does it by force.”

Sex is like art: if it’s forced, it’s a bad painting; and if it’s prevented, there is no painting at all.

Casa arrives, then, in Geneva. He stays at the Les Balances Inn. His heart is throbbing because he is occupying the room he was in with Henriette during their last night. He goes to a window, he sees the inscription scratched with a diamond on the glass: “You will also forget Henriette.” He simply comments: “The hair on my head stood on end.” His hairs don’t often stand on end. But okay, no superstitions, let’s go see Voltaire.

Monsieur de Voltaire does not have a good reputation here. His caustic mood irritates the Swiss. The actors he employs are unhappy—he reproaches them for pronouncing badly, for not laughing properly, for pretending to cry. In short, he is “insolent, brutal, unbearable.” The wise Haller tells Casa that

18. Albrecht von Haller (1708–1777) was a Swiss anatomist, physiologist, naturalist, and poet, often referred to as “the father of modern physiology.”

Voltaire is greater from a distance than up close. And since Voltaire praises Haller in front of Casanova, Giacomo points out to him that the great scientist is not as kind to him. “Ah,” says Voltaire, “it’s possible we are both wrong.”

Voltaire at home always finds the right words, has the laughers on his side and a bevy of admirers at his command. People visit from all over, they write to him from the whole of Europe. Casa introduces himself as Voltaire has finished dinner and tells him he has been “his student for twenty years.” Very good, says Voltaire, continue for another twenty years, and don’t forget to send me my wages.

After that, they dialogue (and Casa is a marvelous writer of dialogues). The discussion is mainly a literary one. Giacomo unsheathes his favorite weapon, Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*. He wants to prove to Voltaire (and to us, hypothetical readers from a distant future) that the greatest writer of his time is not at the level of the elevated models of the past in poetry: Homer, Dante. The author of the *Oedipus* (Voltaire) doesn’t like *The Divine Comedy* or Shakespeare. That’s a mistake. Poetry, my dear Master, is not conventional tragedy, versification, or witticisms; it’s first of all passion, enthusiasm, love, in short, a very physical matter. The proof? Listen to the twenty-third canto of the *Orlando*, I’ll recite it, and by the end I am truly weeping. Let me also remind you, for what it is worth, since we are in Geneva, that Pope Leo X once decided to excommunicate any individual who did not like Ariosto.

Casa, in sum, has the pretension of broadening Voltaire’s taste, an attitude that is not just “patriotic.” He insists on this panegyric of inspiration and fire, it’s easy to understand why. The fact is that he is *ahead of his time*, as nearly always.

The other discussion with the philosopher who is going to become official is of a political nature (Rousseau is out of this race; Casa and Madame d’Urfé went to see him, he seemed embarrassed, gloomy). The tone turns harsher. Should the government of Venice be criticized? No, Casa replies, to our great surprise (and I have to say he has a point). Voltaire: can one free humanity from superstition, that “ferocious beast” that devours it? Casanova: you will never succeed in destroying it, it is inevitable and perhaps necessary, that is what is taught by philosophy proved in the boudoir. Voltaire says that a people without superstition would be philosophical. Yes, says Casa, but that would mean they would no longer obey (understood: that everyone would have become lucid in the sexual dimension). Popular sovereignty, which seems just and desirable, is perhaps only a demagogic illusion perpetrated by bad philosophers and thus

a further deception by the clerisy. Your first passion, says Casa to Voltaire, is love of humanity. This passion blinds you. (In reality, Voltaire is much more pessimistic, and here Casa is attacking later “Voltaireism.”) Be careful not to become a Don Quixote in reverse—reason absolutized could be another instance of folly. You say that the government of the Most Serene Republic is despotism? Fine, but I, Casa, “had exaggerated.” The freedom Venice allows is what is most bearable under an aristocratic authority.

This shows the distance covered by Casa since he has been traveling across Europe (France, Holland, Germany, Switzerland). He is on his guard and informed as well by the continuing events, that is, by the victory of moral Rousseauism and regressive prudishness. He is the one, the escapee from prison, condemned for atheism, who warns the two centuries to come. The realization of desires has reasons that reason has to learn to recognize. Ariosto allowed me to escape, but are you sure you are not being locked in by not knowing Ariosto? This is what Casa says between the lines to the author of *The Maid*, an enjoyable work, no doubt, but certainly not at the level of the *Odyssey* or *Hamlet*. Casanova’s point of view is all the more interesting in that he is not a fanatic of Joan of Arc, as one might expect. Okay, fine, I’ll be content to prove to Voltaire that I can recite the totality of Horace’s works. The Prince de Ligne notes that no one knows the classics better than Casanova. And we can say that after having appeared old-fashioned (or outmoded), he is suddenly, today, and for that very reason, *avant-garde*.

Poetry, orgy. The one should not be separated from the other. Evenings in Geneva, with a local accomplice (a voyeuristic *bon vivant* agent), Casa shuts himself in with three pretty girls, one of whom is called Helena. They use prophylactics, of course, for fear of pregnancy. Voltaire in his chateau is a great man, he is “sarcastic, cynical, caustic,” and his bourgeois niece and mistress, Madame Denis, is very sweet, but for a young man like Casanova, the nights would lack for poetry. One is better off in a converted brothel with three nymphs. No poetry without orgy. And likewise, no successful orgy without poetry (otherwise one falls below the level of prose, and everything becomes realistic, which is to say miserable). The art of orgasm is an *ars poetica*, and vice versa. Audacity, taste, fire, table, food, wine, a bed, and a sense of rhythm.

Which is why the superficial discourse about “Casanova and pleasure” or “the libertinage of the eighteenth century,” in movies and magazines as well as among writers or mediocre academics (whom you wouldn’t want for partners in an orgy, just look at their behavior), misses the boat so badly. Such language

serves only to highlight *today's* sexual poverty and its nostalgia for a “golden age,” when this same language would have cut a sorry figure. People write bad, sinister novels, they circle the interior castle without entering its mansions. There is a clerisy of eroticism now as heavy and ridiculous as the clerisy of censorship. An entire body of bad literature flourishes in this controlled market of dupes whose purpose is to make people believe that everyone has a gift for sexuality, as for painting and music. That's called clouding the issue, and in this case the issue is called Casanova, or Laclos, or Sade. Men and women set themselves up in their fantasy sex shops, which are generally narrow and prescribed by all-pervasive beliefs. Thus there are merchants and functionaries (not to mention policemen) who sincerely believe that Casanova is a sex author (as they say). An atmosphere whose clouds are lacking issues, a leaden sheen of ignorance and stupidity.

Out of his escape from the Leads, Casanova made the gold of his prose. He can be what he wants to be: seducer, masturbator, screwer, flirt, penetrator, climaxer, but with him everything seems natural, normal. We are the ones who make a big deal about it. We are the ones who separate, fix, label, limit, hinder. We are the ones who pretend to like Casanova while detesting him, the way kitsch photography envies painting.

What good are libertines in times of distress? They are like departed poets, of whom not a single one remains, as far as we know, bearing the Dionysian fire in the sacred night. But let's be serious. From now on, the question is resolutely clandestine, or it is nothing. One could, if need be, for the sake of peace, let people believe one is ribald, obsessed, perverse—such is society's demand. Let us rather close the shutters and the doors and return to the art of *composition*.

## ❁ 16 ❁

The Enlightenment is Bach, Mozart, Sade, Casa, all at the same time. These people have *forever*, a never-ending duration. They repeat themselves, they fugue, they vary, they accumulate, they skip, they are in what Heidegger calls, in a magnificent formula, “the inexhaustible beyond of every effort.” Like rivers, like nature, instantly. They throw money or genius out the window, “bodily fluid,” too. Have they seen the Word become weary? Humans, yes, never they. Nothing is less fussy, ruminating, *economical*. One gets the impression that at least fifteen earlier centuries suddenly wanted to unburden themselves. What is happening is an orgasm of Time, which is logically manifested by the triumph of individuation, the influence of an intense plural minority.

Nietzsche saw this in the French way of celebrating at the time: a splendid sunrise *for nothing*, the return and even the transcendence of the Greek miracle. Party, brothel, intrigue, wit, love, humor, incessant displacement, rapidity, courage, lightness, the deep seriousness of enjoyment and experience. People wanted to punish this overflow—it’s done. It was aristocratic and popular, that is to say, actually, *feminine*. What they’re usually selling today under the name of woman would have bored Mozart’s contemporaries to death or made them die laughing.

When Casa tells us he “sealed with his blood” a last coitus (how horrible, says the woman beside me), or that he spent five hours making love (how horrible, how horrible), he is maybe joking a little; he’s piling it on, just a bit. The bed as the theater of operations? Enough to unleash cyclones of resentment. “Let’s go to bed,” Casa says to his female partners, who generally are just waiting for that (how horrible). The next day, money and departure. Jewels, sequins, *louis*, ducats, florins, guineas, euros—feel how they flow. The world is a roulette of words, of money, of music, closer to the crackling of computers than to the coffers of the bourgeois or petty bourgeois. There is no reason at all to follow the different apocalyptic propagandas: the twenty-first century will be

Enlightened, or it won't be. In view of human history as a whole, we can expect an immense irony. Also love. It is not a matter of derision or debasement but of being worthy of the novel.

Casa is having fun with life, which is having fun with him. In Chambéry he meets a nun who resembles M. M. and whose first name is the same. So now in his narrative there are an M. M. 1 and an M. M. 2. Casa gives M. M. 2 M. M. 1's portrait. You can see that the equation gets complicated.

M. M. 2 is resolutely lesbian. She flatters Giacomo in these terms: "I love you so much that I am sorry you are not a woman." Nevertheless, she tries out a few prophylactics on him, things are advancing. This time it's twelve hours in a row in bed, understandable for an M. M. *squared*. Later on Casa will return to Chambéry, sees his second nun at the grille of her convent, and notes that she is getting along just fine with a young girl of twelve who lets him touch her through the enclosure before curiously examining his Word and taking *communion* with it: "Out of a feeling of gratitude, I glued my lips to the delicious mouth that had sucked the quintessence of my soul and my heart."

Here a police report would speak of fellatio. A contemporary writer would write: "She sucked my cock" or "She gave me a blow job." No connection.

(In Washington, interrogated by the Grand Jury, an intern admits to having had "sexual relations of a certain type" with the president of the United States of America. Apparently she gives the details. Consequently, I am going to send her the *Story of My Life*, as well as this book.)

Casanova, like a good composer, is gradually discovering the power of the fugue. Just as he has granted himself two M. M.s, there will also be two Teresas. Teresa 2 is none other than Bellino, encountered fifteen years later in Florence. Literarily speaking, this is the *Human Comedy* or the *In Search of Lost Time* effect: the device of recurring characters masters duration through writing.<sup>19</sup> And in this case, the surprise is of stature. Recall that Teresa 1 has a six-year-old daughter by Casa, Sophia. But Teresa 2 (ex-Bellino), who is married, appears with a fifteen-year-old son, Cesarino. He looks terribly like his father, Giacomo Casanova himself. This son is a musician, he plays the harpsichord; he is being raised in Naples. It's a cheerful dinner for all, and "there you have one of the happiest days of my life," notes this peculiar bachelor, already the genitor of

19. Balzac's *Human Comedy* employed the device of reusing characters in different novels; Proust employed a similar strategy in his novel *In Search of Lost Time*.

three children, at least (counting the one he has just made with la Dubois). On this point it seems to me that researchers still have a lot of work to do: *what has become of the genetic descendants of Casanova?* Where are they now? Whom did they engender, then and up to the present?

In fact, it would be difficult to be more surrealistic than Casa. This philosophical libertine, masked patriarch, is now in Avignon in quest of Laure de Sade: “An Italian who has read, heard, and enjoyed Petrarch must be curious to see the place where this great man fell in love with Laure de Sade.” Whereupon he quotes this line from Petrarch, which he finds one of the most beautiful ever written: “*Morte bella pareo nel suo viso*, on her face death appeared beautiful.”

Let us imagine (it’s chronologically possible) a young man of twenty, also in pilgrimage to this site: the Marquis de Sade. The two visitors greet each other and pass by. In prison, Sade recounts that he saw Laure, his ancestor, in a dream, coming to console him for his misfortunes. Casa and Sade never speak of each other, but they could very well have met in Paris or elsewhere. In any case they are present here and now in writing, side by side in the sun, on my table.

“On her face death appeared beautiful.” A beautiful woman is also taking part in this excursion, but she thinks to make herself interesting by putting on a sad face (in reality, as someone murmurs, she is an “infatuated whore”). Casa addresses her with this compliment: “Madame, gaiety is the lot of the blessed, and sadness is the horrid image of those spirits who are condemned to eternal suffering. Be therefore cheerful, and earn thus the right to be beautiful.”

Another formula, from Casa to a young friend: “Be joyful, sadness kills me.”

*Outcasts* are sad. Secretly they want to kill you, sometimes killing themselves as well. They are morose maniacs of the will to will: better to want nothing than to not want anything.

Giacomo is rarely “nil” in love—in a state of *fiasco*, as Stendhal will say, who was often troubled by his physique and the effects of crystallization in love. However, “at thirty-eight I started to notice that I was often subject to this fatal misfortune.” A Viagra pill, Casa? Tigra+Men? No thanks, I still have a few chapters to write.

## ❁ 17 ❁

The pope returns, too, but this time with a different name. Clement XIII instead of Benedict XIV. Casa goes to see him, is decorated by him with the Order of the Golden Spur (Mozart also obtains this recognition), a less and less significant decoration but one that he is very proud of. The pope assures the Chevalier de Seingalt of his “singular affection” and listens benevolently to his wish to be allowed to return to Venice. It is in fact a moment of self-examination. Go back? Get married? With the little Mariuccia, for example? Oh no, here is another conquest, Leonilda, about whom he will learn, a little later, in Naples, that she is his daughter. Well, the children are coming out of the woodwork! Time is passing, there were three, here’s another. A female, with whom incest was consummated without their realizing it.

Leonilda is the daughter of Lucretia, whom we have already met. Casa’s desire for the mother reignites, we are treated to an inevitable scene. It begins with this sublime recitative from the mother to the daughter: “He is your father. Give him a kiss, and if he has been your lover, forget your crime.”

Here are the three of them immersed “in the sweetness of a laughing silence.” (Now a Mozart aria, taken from *Così fan tutte*, for example.)

A still desirable former mistress and her daughter, who is also mine, whom I’ve just made my mistress? To bed.

Leonilda watches curiously while her parents make love: “So that’s how you did it,’ she said to me, ‘when you conceived me eighteen years ago?’”

No, not exactly like that. The fact is that to “spare” Lucretia, Giacomo has just pulled out: “Leonilda, moved to pity, with one hand helps the passage of her mother’s little soul, and with the other puts a white handkerchief on her father, who was distilling.”

Clever of him to come up with that word *distilling*.



It is not over. Lucretia, probably piqued by this detour, wants Casa to start over and begs him to go right to the end (to the “blood”) to make “another Leonilda.”

Enough, enough. Let’s rest.

In Rome once more, Casa takes part in “the most infernal debauchery,” which, as he says, allows him to “become more amply acquainted with myself.” He has to keep his sword in his hand so as not to be sodomized. His distaste for this practice shows up on this occasion (nobody’s perfect). When he speaks of pederasty, we have to understand reciprocal or mutual masturbation. Certain devotees think there must be much more of that sort to uncover. But one can suppose that the other sort, in its incessant parade, must bother them. The scenes with two women, on the other hand, are very frequent, and if it were absolutely necessary to catalogue Casa’s tastes, one would describe him not as “lesbian” but as very much liked by lesbians. It’s a nuance, but it carries weight. Of course one must emphasize the periodic return of excitement provoked by disguises, a very common practice at the time (Mozart, again). Thus for a castrato: “You went to them, prestige had its effects, and you had to fall in love with them or be the most negative of all Germans.”

Homosexuality is “inversion.” Not a negative judgment, but a lucid glance into the bedrooms of the Roman clergy (and not into the Vatican cellars). Castratos, as is well known, were for a long time the messengers of the papal music of the spheres. Today the luminous return of baroque music bathes us in its aura.

Let’s summarize: pretty girls dressed like men, or castratos as dazzling as pretty girls. Add to that the “young novice” between twelve and eighteen, and you have the essential cast of Casa’s opera. I was forgetting the nun, henceforth a musty character, and the beautiful woman *per se*, so to speak.

Lacan said one is heterosexual when one loves women, whether one is a man or a woman. Many women, from this point of view, are not heterosexual, and neither are many men who think they are. On this point Casanova broadly clarifies the issue. He is a hero of knowledge. He knew it, moreover, or he would not have taken the trouble to be complete and precise to such an extent. In the history of metaphysics, he is the first to treat his body like an experiment. Metaphysics is very surprised—it was used to looking *elsewhere*.

One of Casanova’s ruses is to speak of the madness of the Marquise d’Urfé without telling us what he is doing during all the time he is locked in with her, feeding her wild imagination. Everything—cabala, pyramids, cult of the

planetary Geniuses—takes a lot of time, and as he doesn't believe in them for a minute, we could suppose that he is bored. To be sure, he is earning a living, since gambling doesn't cover his expenses. But in my view, he is above all *in training*—his moments of simulated seriousness, his exercises of memory and recitation, his particular asceticism. Under cover of alchemy, he is thus pursuing his own personal alchemy. The writer that he is, that he will be, owes a lot to this discipline.

Madame d'Urfé is getting impatient. How is that operation that is supposed to make her be reborn and change sex coming along? Ah, says Casa, bad luck, the head of the Rosicrucians is in prison right now, in the hands of the Inquisition. I have to go to Augsburg to the Congress that is supposed to be held there, but for that I'll need some letters of credit, some gifts to distribute, I don't know, watches, snuff boxes, to "seduce the profane." Passing through Paris, he is driving with the marquise in the Bois de Boulogne. A little earlier he had claimed that the Count de Saint-Germain was supposed to be in the area, and she didn't believe him. Well, surprise, there he is as they round a corner. He slips away. Madame d'Urfé checks with Choiseul: oh yes, Saint-Germain spent the entire night in the minister's office, they are using him as a spy in London. There is thus a correspondence between a total madwoman who dialogues with Anael, the Genius of Venus, and the summit of power. Sex, money, politics, espionage, crystal balls: does anyone dare to say that times have changed?

Germany, a negative country for Casa. But let's be fair: "I was in a state of crisis; it was a time when my fatal genius was waxing crescendo, from stupidity to stupidity."

"I was gambling every day and, betting on my word but losing, the difficulty of having to pay the next day brought me increasing sorrows."

Self-punishment comes fast: a severe case of syphilis, a fast, baths, mercury massages, an operation, a hemorrhage. From Munich to Augsburg, a Way of the Cross for Jacques Casanova. But soon he is off again like the devil: "Scarcely had my health been restored that, forgetting all my past misfortune, I began to amuse myself again."

He meets Lamberg, who will remain one of his most faithful friends (we have his letters).<sup>20</sup> An orgy at an inn with a woman from Strasbourg, and things are going better and better, since he is able to accomplish the "Magnum Opus."

20. Count Maximilian Lamberg (1729–1792) was an Enlightenment freethinker and a faithful friend to Casanova.

In Augsburg, a burgomaster asks him why he has two names, Casanova and Seingalt. According to this good official, one of the two names must be real, the other fake. Not at all, replies Casanova, the two are just as real as I am speaking to you: “The alphabet is everyone’s property; that is incontestable. I took eight letters and combined them to produce Seingalt. The word thus formed pleased me, and I adopted it for my appellative. . . .”

After all, what Voltaire did was no different. The Casanovists tells us that in renaming himself, Casa was thinking of the name of the erudite Dane Snetlage, to whom he addresses his famous letter about the French language in 1797. Seingalt is supposed to be an anagram of Snetlage. But I prefer my reading: *Seing*, sign, signature; *alt*, from the Latin *altus*, high. I am of high and noble signature as others are of high birth. I was born *also*, or *rather*, from the alphabet by a free act of my desire and my will. I cabalized myself, my dear official.

But after all, says the fellow, logically, your name can only be your father’s, right? To which Casa replies: “I believe you are mistaken, because the name you yourself bear by right of inheritance has not existed for all eternity. It must have been fabricated by one of your ancestors who did not receive it from his father, even if you are called Adam.”

But after all, after all, says the policeman, you agree that there are laws against fake names? “Yes, against fake names; but I repeat that nothing is more real than my name. Yours, which I respect without knowing it, cannot be more real than mine; for it is possible that you are not the son of the one you believe to be your father.”

The burgomaster smiles, perhaps he has good reason to. In reality, he is flabbergasted by the Chevalier de Seingalt’s aplomb. (Chevalier: *caballus*, cabal, and also chivalry of the Middle Ages.) Here Casa is telling us many things at once. First, that he no doubt has a different and higher birth than one believes. Then, that it’s of no importance, since genetics proves nothing and permits nothing *a priori*. Further, that a writer (in the very special sense he gives to this word) lies entirely within the name he gives himself, even if it is identical to the genitor’s name. To write is to *cut* into the biological or genealogical chain, an exorbitant, and for that reason highly suspected, act of liberty. French counts among its writers, not by chance, an impressive number of those who renamed themselves: Molière, Voltaire, Céline, Lautréamont, Nerval, Stendhal, among others.

Where do we come from? From our capacity to *name*. The rest is a mixture: illusion, Babelization, magma, traffic, nocturnal feminine lies, chance, laboratory

calculation, or back alleys of the clinic, risky cloning, identity card, fingerprint, obsessing about an existence delivered by others, quarreling about an inheritance, police verification, racial religion, forced tattooing, number filed, possible roundup, probable camp, inevitable mass graves, moonlit cemetery, scattered ashes, fable of a community. The only Knight of his Order, the Wiseman of Writing (like the man responsible for war in Venice), Seingalt is *also* called Casanova, who sometimes, let us not forget, has his mail addressed in the name of Monsieur Paralis. Your social security number, sir? Your diplomas? Your place of employment? Your wife? Your children? Your employer? Your religion? Your ethnic background? Your DNA? Okay, fine, disperse, you are giving me a headache.

On December 31, 1761, Casa disembarks in Paris, where the Marquise d'Urfé lodges him in a very fine apartment on the rue du Bac. They get down to serious business. Soon the marquise will be called *Seramis*, and Casa *Galtinarde* (taking off from Seingalt). The *Story of My Life* is also a fairy tale written by Casanova the Enchanter, an epic novel with evildoing demons and unexpected allies, sorcerers or protective divinities. Song of Roland, furious Roland, prurient Giacomo. But one may say that any well-considered life includes the Good Guys and the Bad Guys, the faithful ones, the felons, the honest ones, the con men, the traitors. Casa keeps his position always on the boundary between the marvelous and the real, the fantastic and the verifiable. Superior reason is a navigation by sight between madness and reason. Too much in one direction and it's a swerve toward chimeras. Too much in the other and it's boredom. Casa antes, "cuts," bets, reenters the game, constantly tries his luck. His success is a matter of intuition.

Without cracking a smile, Casa tells the marquise that the cult of the Geniuses of the Seven Planets will reveal the place where he can find a virgin, daughter of an adept, whom he is to impregnate with a boy "by means of a method known only to the Rosicrucian brothers." There's nothing like stories of impregnation to control the feminine imagination: "The son was to be born alive but with only a sensory soul. Madame d'Urfé was to receive him in her arms at the instant he came into the world and keep him with her for seven days in her own bed. At the end of those seven days, she would die with her mouth pressed against the child's, who would thereby receive her intelligent soul. After this permutation, it was going to be my task to care for the child with the magisterium known to me; and as soon as the child attained his third year, Madame d'Urfé was to recognize herself in him, and then I was to begin to initiate her in the perfect knowledge of the great science."

This kind of *permutation* and *regeneration* really takes us well beyond the *Astrée*, the pastoral novel by the genius of the family, Honoré d'Urfé. So this is

also a *literary* victory for Casa. One detail shouldn't be neglected: the marquise is to make a will to designate as unique heir this child for whom Giacomo will be the guardian until the age of thirteen. "This sublime madwoman found this divine operation completely obvious, and she burned with impatience to see the virgin who was to be her chosen vessel."

Casanova's magic flute is going to repair the great divine injustice of Christianity, which engendered a son in the Virgin Mary. Why not a daughter? That's the whole problem. The solution: be reborn as a boy, somewhere between Scientology and the Solar Temple, with the help of the Rosicrucians.

Having staged this scenario to gain time (and he'll change it along the way), he has this wonderful comment: "I saw that I needed a female miscreant whom I would have to indoctrinate."

This will be the Corticelli woman.

He knew her back in Florence: "She was thirteen and looked only ten; she was shapely, white, cheerful, funny, but I don't know how or why I fell in love with her."

Time has passed. Lolita Corticelli will play a major role in Casanova's opera. She accepts, there is money to be won. With a wave of a magic wand, she becomes the Countess de Lascaris, a descendant of the famous family that reigned in Constantinople. It's far away, difficult to verify, exactly what is needed.

The marquise receives the little gang in her chateau at Pontcarré. She marvels at the "virgin Lascaris" (she can't hear the *lascar*, "scoundrel," in Lascaris), undresses her, perfumes her, puts a veil on her, and is present at the organic operation performed by Casa that is supposed to make her be reborn. Nothing "sexual" in all that, *of course*, but the game is quite clever. Where do children come from? From the primal scene. Obscenity is erased, curiosity satisfied, pleasure taken in secret.

Obviously the operation is a failure. La Corticelli will attempt to blackmail Casa the charlatan, who is obliged to make out that she is crazy and perhaps "pregnant with a gnome," as in *Rosemary's Baby*. Everything la Corticelli will say to denounce Giacomo will only prove the extent to which she is possessed by the adversaries of the redemptive mission. Never mind, says Casa, we'll try it again in Aix-la-Chapelle. For the moment, the cabala is formal: you, marquise, you must write to the moon, which is to say the Genius Selenis. "This

madness, which should have brought her back to reason, filled her with joy. She was in a state of inspired enthusiasm, and I was convinced at that point that even if I had wanted to prove to her the nullity of her hopes, I would have been wasting my breath. At best she would have judged that an enemy genius had infected me and that I had ceased to be a perfect Rosicrucian. But I was far from undertaking a cure that would have been so disadvantageous to me without being of use to her. To begin with, her fantasy made her happy, and there is no doubt that returning to the truth would have made her unhappy.”

It is extraordinary that Casanova uses the word *cure* here. It is as if he is saying that Madame d’Urfé is definitely unanalyzable, or better yet, that something in a woman will forever remain outside any reason. All the religions know that, sects, too, like Society in its Spectacle. We can also see that he has decided to write a sort of *Don Quixote* in reverse: Sancho could be a philosopher who keeps the Knight Errant happy by sharing his illusions. He would propose giants in the form of windmills, and other such stories. The implicit lesson of this reversal goes far indeed.

The Chevalier de Seingalt isn’t errant. To be sure, his actions are irregular; he justifies them. He doesn’t specify the nature of his physical relations with Madame d’Urfé, but it’s as plain as day. Later on, he will actually give himself away by saying to Marcolina, his assistant in another scenario in which he is to make love with the marquise, that *this time* it is more difficult. This time: he has committed to making a male child with her, and she is seventy (in reality fifty-eight). Beautiful but old. What a job. For the time being, he is going to take her to bathe with aromatic herbs and conjurations, outside the city. He gets into the tub with her, hiding in his hand a letter “written in a circle and in silver characters on shiny green paper.” The letter is revealed in the water, it’s prodigious, the Genius of the Moon is answering in person and makes an appointment with the pilgrims for the following spring.

## 18

Let no day pass without gambling, without loving.  
Nor without meditation.

Look at him, this old hermit in Dux, still youthful in his restlessness, sitting down at his table to write. From morning to evening he writes, and again at night. Outside it's winter, it's snowing. Or the heat of summer invades the castle. Little by little, scenes arise and stand out in his narrative. How was that duel to the death one evening, at cards, at a time when he was so exhausted he thought he would fall off his chair? Oh yes, an idiotic comment was enough to destabilize the adversary upon his return from the restroom: "My trick worked because it wasn't planned and it couldn't be predicted. An army general is no different; a ruse in battle must arise in the captain's head as a result of circumstance, of chance, and of the habit of grasping at once the relations of opposition between men and things."

The repartee, the thrust, the witticism, the presence of mind. You lunge, you riposte, touché. It's lightning. He is reminded of this comment by Frederick the Great of Prussia: "We write to escape boredom and madness. No doubt the last line belongs to death, but it must be forced to ratify all the rest."

He dreams, sometimes. In his sleep, he sees a mass of light, "completely filled with eyes, ears, feet, hands, noses, mouths, genitals of the one and the other sex, and other bodies whose shapes were unknown to me. . . . The harmony emerging from this phenomenon gave me great pleasure. . . ."

Casa is full of joy, understandably—he sees God and starts to converse with him. God tells him splendid things, like: "I lie upon human reason like a perfectly spherical ivory globe that cannot roll on the plane on which it is pushed because the surface lacks cleanliness and evenness." Also: "If I believed myself, I would not be infinite." And also: "The examination of my attributes engendered incredulity, and pride allied with ignorance sustained and still sustains it."

From time to time, God tells the sleeper to turn over, and he continues his revelations. Thus we learn that he couldn't care less about atheism, no more than he cares about superstitions and human passions. Be just, he tells Casa, and that will suffice. For the rest, "since good philosophy pertains to only one out of a hundred thousand, it follows that moral evil in the world is a hundred thousand times greater than good." And physical harm? "There is no physical harm. It is a matter of the nature of the universe. Everything that appears bad is good. Turn the other direction." God, as you can see, is very much at ease, not in the least preoccupied by the present: "Matter being infinite like me, it is impossible for me to define it, because, matter not having had a principle, its principle must remain unknown to me. I am the eternal spiritual principle."

"But you are in space?"

"No, because I am not matter, and in my quality as a real immaterial spirit I have no desire to find myself in the void."

"Then we can't say that you are everywhere?"

"Everywhere except in the void."

God even adds a few aphorisms: "I am concerned equally with everything that exists because of the particular demands of each being."

Or: "Without the religions that humans invented, the plague of superstition would never have existed, and ignorance would never have been the principal lot of the *human genus*."

And this, finally, which like the other formulas should seem very wise: "Truth exists on its own, it is independent, but to no avail; for it becomes error as soon as one communicates it."

This last observation could be word for word that of a neighbor in Prague who will put in his appearance later: Franz Kafka.

Back to Switzerland with the "young female theologian" Hedwig. "This beautiful blonde," says Casa, "set me afire with the charms of her wit." Questions are asked, she replies. She asks for more and more difficult questions. For example: What would have happened if Jesus had consummated the work of the flesh with the Samaritan woman? In other words, of what nature would the fruit of their union have been?

Here Casa picks his way. Hedwig becomes a little flustered. She'll get a "show and tell" session. "Jesus was not susceptible of an erection," she is told in private.



What is it, asks the young theologian. Casa presses the demonstration: here is the Word, creator of men, and what comes out of it is the “humid radical,” etc.

We know our serpent’s methods. Here the interest is in the composition, once again. Casanova takes advantage of this episode to graft onto his narration the subjects that really interest him and his conviction that God is “incomprehensible.” People take him for an atheist, but they are wrong. Nothing that concerns God is foreign to him, taking his experience into account. The young theologian will prove particularly gifted. To lead her not to sin but to knowledge, Casa takes care to attack her not alone but with her cousin Helena. He delivers in passing one of the laws he has discovered during his “long libertine career . . . a few hundred women”: “What has constantly served me the best was the care I took not to attack novices—those whose moral principles or prejudices were an obstacle to success—except in the company of another woman. . . . The weaknesses of the one cause the fall of the other.” Three trumps, therefore: the draw of pleasure, curiosity, opportunity.

All three of them go to bed, “all the while philosophizing about shame.” Two deflowerings, the organ “crowned with a skullcap for insurance.” Hedwig is an “avid physicist,” interested in everything. Helena is more reticent, but also more abandoned in the act: “Having begun again, and knowing my nature, fooling them at will, I showered them with happiness during several hours, passing five or six times from the one to the other before exhausting my strength and reaching the paroxysm of orgasm.”

It is possible that if you have lived like that, God would end up appearing in your dreams. Casanova could be a kind of Copernicus or Galileo, of a new type—an eventuality that has not been adequately noticed, in my opinion.

However, we mustn’t think that everything always happens with this somnambulist facility. In Turin, we find a Spanish countess whom Casa rubs the wrong way. She will take revenge.

She invites him and requests that he try out an amusing sneezing powder with her. A powder that makes one *bleed*. She takes some herself, they bleed a bit together. A funny game.

The next morning, a Capuchin monk asks to see him and, betraying a confession, tells him to go to a certain address. Now we find ourselves with a witch who has the previous evening’s blood mixed in a bottle. Giacomo pays her and asks: “What would you have done with this blood?”

“I would have inducted you.’

“What do you mean by inducted? How? I don’t understand.’

“You shall see.’

“I was terrified; but the scene changed in an instant. The witch opens a case about a cubit long, and I see a wax statue lying on its back, completely naked; I can read my name and, though badly done, I recognize my features and see my cross draped on the neck of the idol. The simulacrum resembled a monstrous Priapus in the parts that characterize that god. At this too comical vision I am seized with hysterical laughter and fall into an armchair until I can catch my breath.”

Casa is not superstitious. But “in spite of all the gold this infamy cost me, I was not unhappy to have known about it and to have taken the advice of the good Capuchin, who sincerely thought I was done for. He must have learned about the business in confession with the very person who had brought the blood to the witch. Those are miracles that auricular confession in the Catholic religion very often brings about.”

He says nothing to the countess, of course. On the contrary—the next day he showers her with gifts. After all, she could have had him assassinated much more readily.

## 19

We should never forget that while writing, Casanova thought his *Story* would never be published. Aside from his Irish doctor who recommended this therapy, everyone more or less dissuaded him from writing his memoirs. It's not done. From time to time he glances at the papers piled on his table, rereads, revises a chapter, deletes pages, crosses out names, gets discouraged, thinks it would be better to throw everything in the fire. But no, he continues, *Sequere Deum*, the god is at the end of his quill.

He doesn't take it easy. His adventures are often miserable, especially the deflowerings paid for by the families. His cyclical illnesses are becoming tedious in the end. One often has the impression, which is justified, that he doesn't know where he is going. His route leads nowhere other than to the table where we see him writing. So what is his pursuit? What is his goal? The pains he is taking to tell all result in a mystery. And yet we read him as if he had conveyed a manuscript to us under the seal of secrecy. For a long time now, we have been able to dispense with most of the pseudo-books that are published like products in the global publishing market. Why waste any time where nothing is happening? In contrast, Casa has only to take us to a carnival in Milan, to a ball where he dances contra dances to exhaustion, to a new love where "five hours pass like five minutes," to a dinner where once again disguises change the rules of the game, for us to follow him with curiosity and joy. Will little Clementina, with all her reading, yield after lengthy gallantries? No? It's not important, the comedy turns away, retreats, starts over: "*Fovet et favet* (he cherishes and is favorable) was my favorite motto, and thanks to my good nature it still is, and will always be until my death."

Casanova's brother, a priest, has run off with a girl, Marcolina. Casa soon takes her over. In Genoa, surrounded by Rosalie, Annette, and especially his "niece," he is living a happy life. One senses that he likes to write sentences like: "My niece, having become my mistress, set me on fire." In the meantime, the

Marquise d'Urfé, changed into Seramis, is waiting for him in Marseille: "Preoccupied by libertinage and in love with the life I was leading, I took advantage of the folly of a woman who, had she not been deceived by me, would have wanted to be by another."

Always the same excuse. Some praise, all the same: "In spite of her folly, Madame d'Urfé did good."

The "oracles" are decisive: Casa is to "inoculate" Madame d'Urfé after they have both been purified in the bath. Giacomo's concern is to not find himself "unable" in the coming action. An undine? Here's a role for *Marcoline*. Besides, it rhymes. "The reader will understand," says Casa, "provided he is a magician."

Passano, a rival who attempts to take his place, betrays the inoculator.<sup>21</sup> But he too will be made out as possessed. The proof: he has syphilis.

Metal must be offered to the seven planets. Cases are prepared for this purpose, but they contain only lead instead of precious metals. They are thrown into the sea. Marcolina the undine is perfect. She presents Seramis with a note specifying: "I am mute, but I am not deaf. I have emerged from the Rhone to bathe you. The hour has commenced." The orders of Oromasis, king of the Salamanders, are executed. Madame d'Urfé is more and more excited. Casa: "I could not pity this woman, for she made me laugh too much." Under the name of Galtinarde, he is preparing to be both the husband and the father of Seramis. "I consummate the marriage with Seramis while admiring Marcolina's beautiful parts, which I had never seen so well."

The annoying thing is that the inoculation operation, to be credible, has to be repeated three times: "Encouraged by the Undine, I undertake the second siege, which was supposed to be the strongest, because the hour had sixty-five minutes. I enter the fray, I work for half an hour, sweating, scolding, and wearing out Seramis without reaching the outcome and ashamed to be cheating her. She was wiping from my forehead the sweat that came from my hair mixed with pomade and powder. The Undine, by caressing me most vigorously, preserved what the ancient body I was obliged to touch destroyed. . . ."

Take your pick: this scene is either comical or pathetic. In the end, Casa pretends to come, which requires more inventive simulation for a man than

<sup>21</sup> Giacomo Passano was an actor and rival adventurer who denounced Casanova to Madame d'Urfé.

for a woman. Men in general are scarcely aware of such faking in their female partners. Women are more suspicious, but one can fool them all the same (“Even Marcolina was fooled”).

A prisoner of his own stage directions, Casa now has to accomplish a third coitus, dedicated to Mercury. Marcolina gives it her all like a true Genius of the Rivers, which very much astonishes Madame d’Urfé-Seramis: “She asked the beautiful creature to lavish her treasures on me, and at that point Marcolina displayed all the doctrines of the Venetian school. At once she became lesbian, whereupon, seeing I was alive, she encouraged me to satisfy Mercury. But here once again I am not lacking for thunder, but without the power to make it burst forth. . . . I made up my mind to cheat her a second time by an agony accompanied by convulsions, which ended in immobility, the necessary consequence of an agitation that Seramis, as she told me afterward, considered without example.”

Ought we to translate, in modern language, that Casa had a hard-on but couldn’t ejaculate? Probably not. In any case, we can admire his professional conscience as well as his feminine gift for ecstatic acting. These days such a job would be advantageously replaced by an artificial insemination at the corner clinic. No Oromasis, no Mercury, no Undine, and no “thunder.” Masturbation in a closet, sperm, and inoculation with a syringe. It is true that the medical profession would advise the experiment for the Marquise d’Urfé, whom Casa ages excessively in his *Story*, saying she is seventy whereas she is only fifty-eight. Science has given hope even to women in their sixties. And after all, we can always imagine there are crazy gynecologists.

In short, it’s complicated. Cloning less so, and its application is well under way. Perhaps the Count de Saint-Germain or Casanova, right now, are hidden laboratory scientists, masked geneticists. Exceedingly rich American women, passionately interested in occult research, come and consult them for purposes of “regeneration” or immortality. Everything is possible in this expanding galaxy, we’re just at the beginning of the human comedy.

Madame d’Urfé asks the oracle if the operation went perfectly. Casa pulls himself together: “I responded that the Word of the Sun was in her soul and that she would give birth to herself with her sex changed at the beginning of February.”

For the time being, he sends her to her bed, where she is not supposed to move for one hundred seven hours. He is in a hurry to get together with Marcolina, who has become very enamored of him and lets him experience a night comparable to the times in Parma with Henriette and with M. M. in

Murano. (In Casa's classification, this is the highest rating.) "I remained in bed for fourteen hours, of which four were devoted to love."

The "Venetian school" has its charm.

Marcolina has just gained a magnificent necklace and six hundred *louis*. She doesn't want to leave her Chevalier de Seingalt. He: No, no, you'll find a husband. She: No, take me away with you, I am your loving woman; "I would love you like my soul, I would never be jealous, I would look after you like my child."

Now there's a declaration of love.

Madame d'Urfé is also very happy. "Marry me," she says to Casa, who gets out of it by pointing out that when she becomes a man, his son, she would be declared a bastard. Let us keep our wits about us and go back to questioning the oracle. Questions, replies, new questions, new replies; what a job.

The attentive reader of the *Story of My Life*, already alerted by the M. M.–C. C. episode, now observes a very distinct expansion of the motif of the lesbian during the course of the narration. You cannot help but think of Proust's obsession, in his analysis of time. Marcolina, for instance, makes no bones about admitting she has had such inclinations since age seven, and that in ten years she has had three or four hundred woman friends. In Aix, she is pursued by a countess (which is not surprising, since "Provençal women almost all tend toward such inclinations, and it makes them all the more lovable"). Casa is jealous, a little, not too much. Albertine, I mean Marcolina, calmly tells him the next morning: "We did all the crazy things you know women do when they sleep together."<sup>22</sup>

Why not, in fact. But since the "student of Sappho" has won a ring, she is quickly pardoned by her knight. Only thing is, there's a bolt from the blue: Marcolina gives him a letter from the nocturnal countess; there is only one signature: *Henriette*. Here you say to yourself that Casa is laying it on a bit thick. No, he only wants to say (and Proust's *Search* will say exactly the same) that the world of humanity is an immense orgy, a generalized incestuous exchange that time is in charge of proving. One cannot, however, imagine Proust's narrator in the situation Casanova describes between Marcolina and Irene: "I spent almost the whole night backing up the frenzy of these two bacchantes, who left only when they saw me reduced to nothing and giving no further sign of resurrection."

22. Albertine is the probably lesbian mistress of the hero of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the object of his intense, obsessive jealousy.

In the morning he finds them asleep, “wound around each other like two eels.” These flowers of evil provoke no feeling of culpability in him, not the slightest suggestion of “damned women.” Why, then, the later sulfurous, fatal shadows in Baudelaire, Proust, and all of literature? Why this legend of the centuries? The real question is whether we can read Casanova without hiding, or, worse, by pretending that we find everything he tells banal. There is one last solution, which one could call final: not to read anything at all, and no doubt it is toward that that the nihilism of the end of the twentieth century is heading. Which only goes to show that obscurantism can look forward to happy days. Unless we decide at last to understand this profound observation by the Chevalier de Seingalt: “I was pleased to learn that to put reason on the road to truth, one has to begin by deceiving it. Darkness must have preceded light.”



Casanova is in London. From the start, he admires the order and cleanliness of the English; he goes to see his daughter Sophia, who is now ten; he looks unsuccessfully for women to seduce; reduced to prostitutes, he sends away ten who don't please him. A bad sign.

What to do? He puts up a sign outside his apartment to say that above his there is another apartment for rent at a cheap price, "to a young lady who is single and free, who speaks English and French, and who will receive no visits either in the daytime or at night."

That's turning the street into a gambling table. And it works: here's Pauline. She has escaped from Portugal after the assassination of the king, which is attributed to the Jesuits. Suddenly Casa seems very up to date on the secret intrigues troubling the Catholic monarchies. Pauline tells her story, tumbles into his arms, and it's happiness: "A never-ending train of orgasms, to the point that we could no longer desire." Once again, the comparison with Henriette is imperative. But the storm is approaching; it will be as sudden as it is terrible.

Casanova often said there were three acts in the comedy of his life. The first, from his birth until London. The second, from London to his definitive exile from Venice in 1783. The third, from that exile to Dux, where, he says, "probably I'll die."

"It was on that fatal day at the beginning of September in 1763 that I began to die and that I finished living. I was thirty-eight. . . ."

The thunderbolt has a name: la Charpillon.



“She was a beauty that it was difficult to find fault with. Her hair was a light chestnut, her eyes blue, her skin of the purest white. . . . Her bosom was small but perfect, her hands plump but slender and a little longer than ordinary ones; her feet were adorable and her stride sure and noble. Her sweet, open physiognomy pointed to a soul distinguished by the delicacy of its sentiments and that appearance of nobility that ordinarily depends on birth. On those two points only, it had pleased Nature to lie about her face. It would have been better for Nature to be truthful only about her face and to lie about all the rest. This girl had premeditated the intention of making me unhappy even before having come to know me; and she told me so.”

She is seventeen. Apparently she is for sale.

The first question we ask (taking into account the misfortunes that are to follow) is the following: how can a professional like Casanova let himself be dragged into such a ridiculous and destructive business? How can this phoenix of the libido get himself plucked like a pigeon?

But that’s just it: the best players are sometimes also the weakest. They are subject to what one might call the virtuoso’s vertigo. Of course Casanova could have avoided telling the story of his gravest defeat “in the middle of the course of life” (he says himself, with a nod to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*). If he did tell it, it’s because this failure on his part led him to suicide, from which he escaped only by chance. Suicide is the negation of his vision of the world. Therefore it is a problem of knowledge. It’s as if he imposed this trial upon himself in order to see more clearly.

For some time now, Casa has been slowing down. One senses that he doesn’t care as much for adventure, that his heart isn’t in it, and especially his body. Is it the result of his move to the North? Not only. Quite simply, he is getting old; no longer does he obtain “suffrage on sight,” as he will write more and more often. He thinks of himself as free of charge or within the limits of ordinary negotiations. But with la Charpillon, he encounters a huge unseen difficulty. Those who are familiar with hysterical intrigue will have no trouble making sense of it, but for Giacomo the combination of systematic arousal and rejection, in a context of cynical exploitation, is a new, unforeseen strategy. At least as applied to him. The Charpillon woman basically resembles him, hence the virulence of the transfer—a gnawing identification that also excites, like everything that slips away with constancy and malignancy, therefore with character. La Charpillon never discourages Casa, on the contrary. As in poker, she raises the stakes each time. And like a good player, she plays to win, not to lose.

Giacomo is used to shared idylls (even if they require financial arrangements) or remunerated satisfactions. He's become accustomed to the idea of being desirable. Most of the time he forces the issue a little, the reply comes, all is well. But with la Charpillon, in England, at his age (the age for being settled), the terrain and the times have changed. The man becomes an experimental marionette. In fact, it was from this episode about la Charpillon that Pierre Louÿs drew his narrative *The Woman and the Puppet*.<sup>23</sup> (The number of writers that Casanova will have inspired, *as if he had written nothing himself*, is strange. Thus Apollinaire's sketch *Casanova, a Parodic Comedy*, which shows the lack of seriousness of the information about Casanova that has constantly been his lot.)<sup>24</sup>

Casanova has fallen upon a strictly matriarchal organization. A grandmother, a mother, two aunts, female servants, and the lure that supports the whole: a pretty, gifted girl of seventeen. She is negotiable, but as expensive as possible. This is the Augspurger family, with a specialist for an ancestor, née Brunner. A police report from the time describes this clan as "dangerous females; an abominable tissue of slander and lies." Casa will also end up speaking of a "bunch of females." They are assisted in their work by three male players, panders including the famous Goudar, the author of *The Chinese Spy*, a book Casa collaborated on in the form of letters.<sup>25</sup>

*Charpillon*: a predestined name. One hears within it *harpie* (harpy), *charpie* (cottony filaments), *pillage* (pillage), *haillons* (rags), *papillon* (butterfly). An entire program. *Charpillar* ought to be a French verb. In any case, Casa is going to be majorly *charpillé*. She's a coquette? Yes, but in addition *sincere*. With her, the true is a mere moment of the false.

Giacomo is turned on. He proceeds as usual, frontally, but la Charpillon disengages. Once. Twice: "I stopped pressuring her when she told me I would never obtain anything from her by money or by violence; but that from her friendship I might hope for all if she were to see me become as gentle as a lamb in private with her."

Be a lamb, you will be my lion. Proud and generous, to be sure. The lion in question takes umbrage, finds this summons beneath him, decides to forget this bad business, and takes some preserves to his daughter. However, the "lamb"

23. Pierre Louÿs's 1898 novel *La Femme et le pantin* is said to be based on this episode in Casanova's memoirs.

24. *Casanova* is a libretto in three acts written by Apollinaire in 1918, the year of his death.

25. Ange Goudar (1708–1791) was an adventurer, journalist, noted con man, and agent of the French government.

proposal is not without effect: it's the temptation of masochism, which, for a hardened libertine, can add spice because of its very incongruity.

Especially when they prod him. One of the aunts comes to protest that they never see him, that la Charpillon is complaining about it, and that she is in bed with a bad cold. Moved, our half-lion makes his call and, as if by chance, discovers his belle naked in her bathtub. He tries to have a go, without success. He is furious, but she prods him again and they dine together; he drinks too much, nothing works. He is in chains. She now has an "irresistible ascendancy" over him.

Let's not forget the context. Casa doesn't understand English; the laws of the country escape him; the secret mission he is engaged in (about which he doesn't speak) mustn't be going very well; at this moment he has no strong physical satisfactions. La Charpillon, the grandmother, the mother, the aunts, the servants, and the panders have gathered all that (including the "age thirty-eight"). The pigeon-lamb can also imagine that the poor delicious girl is being manipulated by her entourage. He decides to bring things out in the open. Goudar has just set a snare for him: the purchase of an armchair that would automatically imprison the object of his desire (hence rape and judicial pursuit). Giacomo is not yet that crazy. He therefore proposes, through Goudar, a hundred guineas to the mother of la Charpillon to spend a night with her daughter. He thinks he's settling matters. He's falling in.

La Charpillon gets haughty, as if it were an insult. You don't understand a thing, she says to Casa, now more and more a quarter-lion. I love you, but you have to make me love you more, deserve me, press your suit, come see me with my family, at least for two weeks. Then, a hundred guineas, okay. If you have been a good lamb. To tighten the noose, while talking love, she cries. She is magnificent, sentimental, *true*, overwhelming like a new Héloïse (not counting the matter of the money).

Heroic in his auto-criticism, Casa says: "This language seduced me." He's headlong into bad literature, which is endless, as he ought to know. The famous novel of the time is Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. A simulacrum of virtue inspired by vice acts on Giacomo like a magnet. He finds this whole setup a bit complicated, but nevertheless he goes. With *presents*, needless to say.

After two weeks, the anticipated night of love arrives. But then—he's dumb-struck: "Scarcely do I feel she is lying down than I approach to press her in my

arms, but I find she is worse than dressed. Curled up in her long nightshirt, her arms crossed and her head buried in her chest, she hears me say everything I want to and never answers. When I'm tired of saying and determine to get to doing, she remains immobile in the same posture and defies me. I thought this playacting was a joke; but I remain convinced in the end that it was not. I realize that I am deceived. I am stupid, I am the most despicable of all men, and the girl the most abominable of whores."

Here the lamb is enraged, recovers his tiger's claws, and begins to seek his reward through violence. He tears the back of la Charpillon's nightshirt, brutalizes her, but in vain. "I determined I was going to finish, but I found myself destitute of strength, and having with one of my hands seized her neck, I felt myself powerfully tempted to strangle her."

It's no longer the new Héloïse, it's Joan of Arc raped by one of her torturers: "Cruel night, distressing night, in which I spoke to the monster in all manner of tones: gentleness, anger, reason, remonstrances, threats, rage, despair, prayers, tears, meanness, and atrocious insults. For three long hours she resisted, without ever answering and without ever opening up, except one single time to prevent me from an act that in a certain sense would have avenged me."

No question—la Charpillon is right. We approve of her, we even applaud her. That guy is a cretin, a macho, a pig. His lamb-conversion is a long time coming, but his exasperation and his dazed distraction are promising. And the fact is, it's not over.

The "bunch of females" is holding a grand consultation. La Charpillon visits Casanova at his place. She makes him feel ashamed. She shows him her bruises. She tells him she accepted this transaction only at her mother's insistence. She offers to be his if he supports her completely in a house rented at his expense. She weeps, she speaks divinely, she is more and more pretty and *true*. Once again the lamb is seduced. He rents a house in Chelsea, they move in together. They go to bed, she is sweet to him, but, bad luck, that night she has her period. Casa calms down, waits for morning, and checks anyway, while she's asleep: she was lying. Hence, another scene of violence. La Charpillon takes a blow to the nose, she "bleeds profusely."

If you remember Casa's strangely hemorrhagic beginnings in life, all this business with blood is really too much. An essayist in a hurry would simply write *castration* here and go look at something else. The lamb-conversion of the

masculine element is inscribed in the order of Technique; no one would think to complain if he needs to avoid brutalities of this kind, multiple convulsions, rapes, even organized massacres. But Casanova's subtlety is great indeed: he is *exploring* this red and black continent. At his own expense, to be sure, but with a redoubtable lucidity—because in the end, everyone is cheating everyone in this affair, each with a self-interested lie: “What comes after a lengthy contempt for oneself is a despair that leads to suicide.”

The plot thickens. Goudar, the “Chinese spy,” warns Casa that the matriarchal syndicate, having recovered its lure bleeding from the nose, is considering hitting him with a slanderous accusation—probably pederasty, a fancy punishable by death at that time in England.

Made to feel guilty, Casa attacks once again. He brings gifts to the victim of his brutality, he entrusts her with bills of exchange. One more time he attempts sex and falls flat. Then it's la Charpillon who returns to see him; he is aggravated, doesn't know what to do with himself, rages.

And it starts again. The “young monster” is really very strong, and Giacomo very stupid. Is he still able to forget this hell and find distraction, if only for a minute, with a known prostitute? Not even: “She was charming, but she spoke only English. Accustomed to loving with all my senses, yet doing without my hearing, I was unable to yield to love.”

(Casa's sphere of erotic action is limited to French, Italian, and Spanish. That's already a handicap for the coming times. A large part of the “Charpillon effect” comes from the fact that she speaks French. Today a virtual Giacomo would have to learn Hebrew, Arabic, and Chinese quite young.)

However, Casanova wants to recuperate his bills of exchange. La Charpillon sends a reply to come get them at her house. During a dinner in company when he is not expecting her, she comes in, provocative, winsome, sits beside him, treats him ironically. Each time Casa sees her, he is again overcome with desire. It's idiotic, but that's how it is. They go into a garden, walk into a labyrinth, and there she throws him to the ground and “attacks like a lover.” He softens immediately (or rather the opposite), but it's out of the question to go all the way. Another scene of violence. He takes out a knife and threatens to slash her throat if she doesn't give in. “Go right ahead,” says she, “and I will tell everyone what happened.” A woman raped, what a scandal. She emerges from this altercation in all casualness, “as if nothing had happened.” Casa is in awe: “Her physiognomy had a prestige that I could not resist.”

Love is a sickness, as we know, or rather as we don't know enough. On this, Casanova has undertaken an exhaustive study. (Once again, we think of the narrator of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, whose true sexual organ is actually jealousy.) But Casanova *collaborates* with his pathology, he shows himself engaged in it, you would think he wants to exhaust its power. Thus we arrive at the ultimate explosion before the risk of depression, with an admirable description of maniacal possession. One evening he goes to la Charpillon's residence when she is not expecting him and surprises her making love with a young wigmaker on a couch. He beats the wigmaker, breaks the furniture with his cane, staves in the upholstery, breaks the chairs. The feminine syndicate screams, la Charpillon escapes into the night. The police intervene. Everyone is terrorized, and they accuse the madman, total hysteria. Casa of course sinks immediately into repentance: "But how could I be an idiot of such a high degree? It's because I needed to be."

I needed to be: it was inevitable but also necessary, to learn something more about human illusions and myself.

The Charpillon woman has disappeared, alone on the London streets at night. Poor little thing, what's going to happen to her? The lion becomes a lamb again. They learn she has returned in the morning, feverish, shocked, and stressed all the more because it was her "critical time" (her period; the wigmaker wasn't put off). The matriarchal syndicate amplifies the news: interrupting the critical time of a pretty young girl, how horrible. La Charpillon is very sick, she is suffering, she has convulsions, she is delirious, no doubt she is going to die. Only the action of a monster can have caused this distressed menstruation. And in her agony she names him, keeps on crying: "My torturer! Seingalt! He's trying to kill me!"

All these shenanigans (which are of course fake) are much more effective than an old-fashioned rite of sorcery. Casa feels like a criminal. The affair with the wigmaker was just a youthful fling (and Casanova is old), he was wrong to explode, it's his fault that an angel is going to leave this earth. And here is a minister of religion who replaces the doctor. "*Pentiti! Pentiti!* Repent! Scoundrel!"

Casa returns home, he stops eating, he has the chills, he vomits.

He says he is going crazy, and we readily believe him. He was the ideal guinea pig for this type of experimentation. He paces his room in a frenzy, talking to himself. That's it, la Charpillon is breathing her last, he feels "an icy hand press his heart." The Commendatore is not there, but it's as if he were. La Charpillon is an innocent, a saint, and he, Casa, an assassin who must be punished. He himself will pronounce the sentence (death) and execute it (suicide).

Okay, that's it, he no longer deserves to live. He has journeyed to the end of his stupidity, his blindness, his *bad tendencies*. The public agrees. They vote with raised hands or lowered thumbs: death. The condemned man approves.

He writes letters, he bequeaths all his possessions to Bragadin in Venice. He takes his pistols and, motivated not "by anger or love, but by the coldest reason," decides to go drown himself in the Thames at the Tower of London. For this he buys lead, with which he fills his pockets.

*Lead?* Like the prison of the *Leads?*

"The reader may believe me, that all those who have killed themselves were only preventing madness, which would have taken hold of their reason if they had not proceeded to execution, and that consequently all those who went mad could have avoided this misfortune only by killing themselves. I came to that decision only when deferring for a single day would have made me lose my reason. Here is the corollary: A man should never kill himself, because it could happen that the cause of his sorrow may cease before madness arrives. Which means that those whose souls are strong enough never to despair of anything are happy. My soul was not strong enough, I had lost all hope, and I was wisely going to kill myself. I owe my salvation only to chance."

An astonishing profession of faith, which makes death, contemplated cold, a disastrous remedy for madness.

But one can also summarize Casanova's position by this formula: rather death than lamb. Which doesn't lack for panache.

Chance? Yes, but mainly destiny. On Westminster Bridge, where he is going to drown himself, Casa encounters Chevalier Egard, "an amiable Englishman, young and rich, who was enjoying life by caressing his passions."<sup>26</sup> Chevalier *Egard!* God is guarding!

The other man, upon seeing how Casa looks, immediately understands that something grave is happening. He sticks by his side, takes him to a tavern, and forces him to amuse himself. Giacomo puts off his suicide for a few hours without renouncing it. He can't eat, except for oysters and a Bordeaux wine, a Graves. The girls Egard has picked up leave him indifferent, even when an orgy begins. "The pleasures of love are the effect, not the cause, of gaiety." The two chevaliers, Egard dragging Seingalt, continue their tour. They come to a place where people are dancing. And there, waltzing, is the Charpillon woman.

26. The man Casanova calls "le chevalier Egard" was Sir Wellbore Ellis Agar (1735–1805), according to a note by Willard Trask.

Casa has an epileptic fit. “A revolution took place in less than an hour throughout my entire person, it caused me to fear the consequences, for I was trembling from head to foot, and a very strong palpitation gave me to doubt that I would be able to stand should I dare to get up. The ending of the strange paroxysm appalled me, it seemed to me it would have to be fatal.”

Die so as to become.<sup>27</sup> Giacomo is suddenly cured: “What a prodigious change! Feeling myself becoming calm, I fixed my vision with pleasure upon the rays of light, which made me feel ashamed; but this feeling of shame assured me that I was cured. Such contentment! Immersed in error, I could realize it only after having emerged. One sees nothing in darkness. I was so astonished at my new condition that, not seeing Egard, I began to think that I would not see him again. This young man, I said to myself, is my Genius, who took Egard’s appearance to return me to my senses. . . . Men easily go mad. I always had a seed of superstition in my soul, which I certainly do not boast about.”

This was Giacomo Casanova’s second escape from the *leads*. There are prisons in concrete space, but also psychological prisons. It is very difficult to possess the truth, and freedom, in a soul and a body.<sup>28</sup>

Casa is cheerful, recovered, it’s time to get even. He has the mother and the aunts of la Charpillon arrested for misappropriation of his bills of exchange. The feminine syndicate counterattacks by having Casa arrested on the pretext that he wants to disfigure la Charpillon. He spends a few hours in Newgate Prison among the criminals and the death row inmates. His witnesses are more trustworthy than those of his adversaries. The pleasure of revenge is going to be a pleasantry: a joke.

He buys a parrot and teaches it to repeat the following sentence: “Miss Charpillon is more of a whore than her mother.” The bird is exhibited for sale at the London Stock Exchange. It’s a fantastic success. Enough said.

A moral about how little credibility one can lend to “testimonies”: “The ease with which one finds false witnesses in London is something quite scandalous. One day I saw a sign in a window on which one could read, in capital letters, the word *witness*, nothing else. That meant that the person living in the apartment worked as a witness.”

27. The expression “Stirb und Werde,” from the final lines of Goethe’s poem “Selige Sehnsucht,” comes from Masonic initiation rites or practices. It is the notion of a second birth upon initiation into Freemasonry.

28. Sollers is quoting a poem from the *Illuminations* by Rimbaud.



## ❁ 21 ❁

After these labyrinthine disasters and this second escape, more perilous than the one from Venice, it's understandable that Casa would need some relaxation. Just in time, here come five girls and their mother, the Hanoverians. At last he can rest in the shade of young girls in flower:

“I felt that I loved them not like a lover but like a father, and the thought that I was sleeping with them raised no obstacle to my sentiment because I have never been able to conceive how a father can tenderly love his charming daughter without having at least once slept with her. This conceptual impotence has always convinced me, and still convinces me all the more strongly today, that my mind and my matter form a single substance. Gabrielle would tell me, speaking to me with her eyes, that she loved me, and I was sure she wasn't deceiving me. Is it comprehensible that she wouldn't have felt this way if she had had what is commonly called virtue? For me, too, it's an incomprehensible idea.”

If you want to be loved by a woman, make her your daughter. If you have a daughter, make her into a woman, at least once. Many fathers are unable to truly become the fathers of their daughters; they are hampered by their difficulties with their own mothers. A daughter can also be cut off from her father by her mother, a frequent case (and it was probably la Charpillon's case).

Isn't this perfectly luminous? No? Too bad. Casanova will insist more and more on this point that seems “incomprehensible” (like God himself), and that is the reason why he chooses his vocabulary, maliciously: “conceive,” “conceptual impotence,” he knows what he's talking about, and how. True love, love that “conceives,” is the daughter's for her father. In the last instance, a daughter has children only by her father. And a mother always has a father, successful or not.

“My mind and my matter form a single substance”: it's hard to surpass that as a complete philosophy. And what proves it is the *philosophical novel* that life

becomes on the basis of these principles. Casa's first "escape" is *physiological* (his initial imbecility for eight years, his periodic hemorrhages). The second is *physical* (his loss of liberty in the Leads). The third is *psychical* (rejection, the temptation of suicide). The fourth and last will be *pneumatic* (the writing in high doses of the *Story of My Life*, moreover unfinished).

It's a striking demonstration, and one can understand that it should be unbearable to conceive of, except as a legend. Matriarchal religion works to deny this phenomenon with all its strength (and we have entered a new technical phase of matriarchy). What has been called patriarchy, for its part, is only the violent refusal of the father-daughter relationship, which is to say the necessity for human beings to exchange women among themselves, to avoid endogamy. Society, unbeknownst to it, is dominated by this law of masculine homosexuality. When such a tangle seems the looser, it's only because it's tightening in the shadows. Casanova does white magic, let's not forget it. He disentangles.

"If I had been rich, these Hanoverians would have detained me in their irons till the end of my life." Happily he is not rich. The adventure continues.

Casa's satisfaction as a lover-father is short lived. As he is also frequenting "bad company," he is once again infected with syphilis just as he is obliged to flee London because of an unpaid debt. Here he is in Dunkirk in bad shape, with a "frightening visage." From there he goes to Tournai, where, as always by chance, he encounters the Count de Saint-Germain, who is "working" in the area.

This gives him the opportunity to learn what's new with Madame d'Urfé, the Marquise Seramis, absent from the narrative. "She poisoned herself by taking too strong a dose of the universal medicine," Saint-Germain coldly tells him. "She thought she was pregnant."

Amen.

Saint-Germain offers to cure Casa (pills). (But after all, perhaps Casanova is *also* the Count de Saint-Germain?) He refuses (prudent). Thereupon the alchemist shows him certain of his results: "He let me see his archeus, which he called Atoeter. It was a white liqueur in a little vial identical to several others he had there. They were stoppered with wax. Telling me that it was the universal spirit of nature, and that the proof was that this spirit would instantly leave the vial if one made the tiniest little hole in the wax with a pin, I begged him to let me see it. He gave me a vial and a pin, saying I could do it myself. I pierced the wax, and in an instant I saw that the vial was empty."

Casa is astonished, but he asks Saint-Germain what use he makes of this substance. The other man replies that he cannot tell him. After which he transforms a twelve-*sou* coin into a gold coin. Casa is sure it's a sleight-of-hand trick (make the first coin disappear, substitute another). But he only remarks that Saint-Germain did not alert him to the transmutation to come: "He replied that those who felt they could doubt his science were not worthy of speaking to him. This was his characteristic way of speaking. That was the last time I saw that famous imposter, who died six or seven years ago." (So Casa is writing these lines in 1790 or 1791.)

Time, the universal spirit of nature, evaporates. Another marquise, an unforgettable one, has just died also: Madame de Pompadour, April 15, 1764.

Best make a serious effort to cure himself. This particular syphilis lasts a month. Bed, boredom. Casa arises cured but very thin.



It's clear that the Casanova we're dealing with now is *transmuted*.

He's traveling.

We find him in Brunswick in the famous library where Leibniz and Lessing found matter for reflection: "I spent eight days, never leaving the library except to go to my room, and never leaving my room except to return there. . . . I would have needed the support of only quite minor circumstances to be a true sage in the world, for virtue always held more charm for me than vice."

(Speaking thus is Mr. Librarian of Count Waldstein's chateau in Dux, today called Duchcov.)

In Berlin he sees Calzabigi, his former accomplice in launching the Paris lottery; he has to try to make him acceptable to Frederick of Prussia. Frederick receives Casa at *Sans-Souci*; begins by deciding that the Chevalier de Seingalt is a "hydraulic architect" because of one of his comments on the water features in his garden compared to the ones in Versailles; constantly jumps from one subject to another; and ends up looking his interlocutor up and down and pronouncing: "You are a very good-looking man."

Thank you.

Nothing to obtain from Berlin, let's leave for Saint Petersburg. In Russia, Casa buys a peasant girl (it's not proper) to serve as his servant. He calls her Zaire. She will be very jealous, she will even come close to killing him by throwing a bottle at his head. One evening he succumbs to the charms of a young Russian officer "as pretty as a girl." He suffers attacks of very painful hemorrhoids. He hears confirmation of Voltaire's fame practically everywhere. He finally sees Czarina Catherine II in her summer garden, where there stand statues each more ridiculous than the last. He speaks to her as a scientist about the

Gregorian calendar, which she ought to adopt for her Empire. What exactly does he sell to her? We don't know. In any case, he prefers her to Frederick of Prussia.

Nothing to report. Casa is bored. He falls back on documentary style. A few metaphysical digressions about sudden death and its consequences in the beyond, but that's about it. The only light in the eastern cold: a French actress, la Valville, who performed only once in Regnard's *Les Folies amoureuses*. She's been shelved, she wants to leave, she needs a passport. Casa fixes it up for her and leaves with her in a *dormeuse* (a vehicle in which they are as if in a bed). The French women? They are convenient: "They have neither passion nor temperament, and as a result they do not love. They are accommodating and have only a single project, always the same. Skilled at breaking up, they hook up with the same facility and always with a laugh. This is not the result of thoughtlessness; it is a true system. If it's not the best, it's at least the most convenient."

Casa may have invented this voyage. But he wanted to say that the French women are henceforth especially concerned to be *kept*: melancholy notation by a traveler, lucid prophecy.

Admirable, secret Casanova. You think he is lost among his anecdotes and then, all of a sudden, on the sly, he slips in a face card, he grafts onto or injects into his narrative a message or a document of the highest importance.

In the time of the narrative, he is in Augsburg, in May 1767. In the time of the narration, he is in Dux on the 1st of January 1798—six months before his passing. In the narration, he is seventy-three; in the narrative, forty-two.

In 1767 he needs money. So he writes to Prince Charles de Courland, who is in Venice, to ask him to send about a hundred ducats. "To prompt him to send them immediately, I sent him a fail-proof procedure to make the philosopher's stone."

That's how he says it, in the most natural way, in this *philosophical* (i.e., alchemical) novel.

This Prince de Courland is not just anybody. Adventurer, thief, he's a match for the famous Cartouche, according to the police. He has a thousand tricks in his bag, including this one: "The Prince de Courland had learned from an Italian named Cazenove the secret of a composition of ink that disappeared on the paper such that one would not imagine that there had ever been writing on it."

Invisible writing: that's Casa, all right.

We are reading *Historical and Authentic Memoirs about the Bastille*, published in 1789. It includes the alchemical letter sent by Casa to Courland. Here's why: "As my letter, which contained such an enormous secret, was not in code, I urged him to burn it, assuring him that I had a copy with me; but he didn't do it, he kept my letter, and they took it from him in Paris with his other papers when they put him in the Bastille."

This letter should never have seen the light of day. But in 1789, twenty years after Courland's arrest, "the people of Paris, roused by the Duke d'Orléans" (interesting detail), dismantle the Bastille, seize the archive, and publish Casa's letter, "along with other interesting items" later translated into German and English: "The ignorant people who exist in this country where I am now living (Bohemia), who quite logically are all my enemies, since the donkey never could be friends with the horse, exulted when they read this charge against me. . . . The Bohemian animals who reproached me thus were astonished when I replied that my letter brought me immortal honor and that, if they were not asses, they should admire it."

The horse? Of course—we understand: the *chevalier*, the *cabal*.

And here, with very neat handwriting, Casa copies his letter.

It's a classic alchemical text for making gold. Casa is a child of the sun and not of lead, which is Saturn. It's surprising that the alchemists, with their transmutation pretensions, these philosophers "with broad, studious brows" (as Rimbaud will say in his sonnet on the *Vowels*), died poor. The fact that they were subject to surveillance, pursued, and often executed in secret is an element of the answer. That all this is imposture and smoke, Casa never stops saying so, except when the "asses" applaud. The fact remains that Courland is a thief, whom Casa addresses in these terms: "The operation requires my presence as concerns the construction of the furnace and the extreme diligence of its execution, for the slightest error would make it fail. . . . The only request I have of you is to wait until we are together to do this operation. Unable to work alone, you cannot trust anybody; for even if the operation should succeed, the person who would help you would steal your secret. . . . I did the tree of projection with the Marquise de Pontcarré d'Urfé. . . . My fortune would now be of the highest degree, as concerns wealth, if I had been able to trust a prince who is master of a currency. This good fortune comes to me only today. . . ."

Technical indications follow that are supposed to result in the fabrication of true-false gold currency. "State Secret," fine, if this business is not a charlatan's

joke. But Casa is not telling (whereas he willingly does the rest of the time). Furthermore, he's contradicting himself: so he was the one who "worked" in Madame d'Urfé's laboratory? Doing what, exactly?

In addition to control of the work, Casa asks Courland to give him "the matter it pleases Your Highness to grant me, striking it with the die I will provide you. Do remember, Monsignor, that it must be a State Secret. You, Prince, must understand the force of this phrase."

Courland died in 1801 in Prussia, in straitened circumstances. He was seen often before, in Poland and in Russia. The only question is the following: although an imposing group of accusations were brought against him at the time, why was he freed on April 24, 1768, with a bond of fifty thousand francs deposited by the Bishop of Vilna? Wasn't Casa's letter damning? And why, instead of treating it like a bizarre parenthesis, did the Chevalier de Seingalt carefully copy it into the *Story of My Life*, a manuscript he couldn't even think would be published one day? Defiance? Seriousness? Nose-thumbing at the "asses"? All of the above?

Casa is headed to Paris. He passes through Spa, stops, admires his landlord's niece, who has a pretty first name that ought to be popular again, Merci. She sleeps near his room. He tries his luck, wants to touch her, and gets a fist in the nose. Frankly, he is getting old. He bleeds.

In Paris he is homesick, lost, hardly recognizes anything: "Paris seemed like a new world. Madame d'Urfé was dead, my old acquaintances had changed homes and fortunes. I saw rich people who had become poor, the poor rich; I found brand-new ladies of the night, those whom I had known having gone to perform in the provinces, where everything that comes from Paris is celebrated and praised to the skies. . . ."

In point of fact, Madame d'Urfé is not yet dead, but she no longer exists for him. There is still Madame du Romain, whose voice he once restored. There is an innocent death: Charlotte, a seventeen-year-old, during a failed child-birth that Casa had nothing to do with. It's the first time we see him affected, disinterested, and dispensing his time out of charity. And then, "up there" in Venice, Bragadin dies, the faithful among the faithful. He has left a thousand *écus* to his adoptive son, but it's sad. Casa gradually gets used to the idea that he is of a *certain age*. His tranquility is short-lived; a *lettre de cachet* orders him to leave the territory. "For such is our desire," kings would say back then.

He goes through Orléans, Poitiers, Angoulême, he heads toward Spain.

“I arrived in Bordeaux, where I spent a week. After Paris, it is the foremost city in all of France.” Stendhal will remember this sentence.

He is in Pamplona; he gets to Madrid.

Right away he is struck by the language. It contains a lot of *a*'s. Like Casanova. “One of the most beautiful languages in the universe—sonorous, energetic, majestic.” It's not as good as Italian, but almost.

He now calls himself Jaime (Spanish for Jacques). It's the Inquisition on one side, women on the other (nothing new under the sun, only the color of the Inquisition has changed): “The women are very pretty, burning with desires, and quite ready to lend a hand in any ploy whose purpose is to fool all those who surround them in order to spy on their thoughts.”

In Madrid, the envoy of the Venetian ambassador is very friendly with Casa (later on, he will try to have him assassinated). It's a small world: he is the son of Manuzzi, the spy who had Giacomo incarcerated in the Leads by denouncing him to the Inquisitors. He “swings left”; in other words, he occupies the role of “antiphysical mistress” of the ambassador (unless it's the other way around). A slippery terrain, difficult maneuvers, all the more since superstition and denunciations by false piety are everywhere: “The Spanish are edified by everything that demonstrates that in whatever they may do, they never lose sight of religion. No courtesan, finding herself with her lover and yielding to desire, determines to engage in the act without first covering the crucifix with her handkerchief and turning toward the wall any paintings that represent saints. Anyone who might laugh at this, any man who would call this ceremony absurd and superstitious, would pass for an atheist, and the courtesan would go denounce him.”

All well and good, but nothing prevents libertinage. Casa takes the plunge, that is, into the *fandango*: “I can't even describe it. Each man danced face to face with his woman, taking only three steps, striking the castanets held between the fingers, and accompanying the music with the most lascivious attitudes. The man's postures visibly indicated the act of felicitous love, the woman's the consent, the rapture, the ecstasy of pleasure. I thought any woman who had danced the *fandango* with a man had nothing left to refuse him. The pleasure I had in watching it made me cry out. . . .”

Don Jaime Casanova discovers bohemians. He learns fast: “So well did I learn the style of this dance in three days that even the Spanish admitted that there was no one in Madrid who could claim to dance better than I.”



The rest ensues. Casa goes into a church (the Soledad), sees a beautiful woman, follows her (she lives on the street called del Desengaño, “of delusion”); he goes up, introduces himself, and, as a foreign chevalier who knows no one, invites the beautiful woman to go to the ball. The family is obliged to accept. Could he possibly be taken for a sucker? Let’s see what happens.

Casanova’s amused. The beautiful woman is called Ignazia, and of course, next to her bed, she has a portrait of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, “young, beautiful physiognomy inspiring physical love.” A discreet homage to the Jesuits in the appropriate insolent manner. He starts his approach with the usual circumlocutions: seducing the innocent cousins, funny transvestite disguises, games in the manner of Goya in his luminous period. The corrida takes place in the bedroom. For him, it’s a matter of passes, changes of tone, dances with forward and backward motions: “Nothing is more true than this: a devout girl, when she engages in the acts of the flesh with her lover, feels a hundred times more pleasure than one who lacks this prejudice. This truth is too well anchored in nature for me to feel it necessary to demonstrate it to my reader.”

On the contrary, *do demonstrate* it for us, really. And tell us if the struggle against devoutness doesn’t have, as a hidden cause, the desire to prevent women from climaxing *too much*? The libertine finds himself in a strange position. On the one hand, the need to destroy all repressive superstition; but on the other, the impossibility of consenting to the flattening of desire. There are two forms of puritanism: the clerical and the anticlerical; the ignorant and the fake scientific; the religious and the technical; the prudish and the pornographic. What is it that makes the difference between a fake God and orgasm, between eroticism and sexual misery? Taste, representation.

It’s not by chance that Casa inserts here digressions about dance and painting. For example, there is a very beautiful painting of the Virgin with Child in a church in Madrid. The virgin’s open bosom excites sensuality. The devout stream in and leave lots of money in this church. One day, there is hardly anybody. Intrigued, Casa goes in and observes that the new chaplain has painted a scarf on the Virgin’s breast (“Hide this breast, I dare not see it”).<sup>29</sup> The priest is thirty; he is categorical: “Let all beautiful paintings perish if together they can cause the slightest mortal sin.”

In Venice, Casa tells him, you would have been immediately incarcerated in the Leads for this crime (and it is a crime). “I couldn’t say mass,” the young priest replies, “that beautiful breast troubled my fancy.”

29. “Hide this breast, I dare not see it” is a line from Molière’s famous play *Tartuffe* (1664–1669).

QED. What functioned in the priest's head was well and truly a porn photo, not a painting by Raphaël or Titian. Henceforth we live in a society where a porn photo does not hinder other merchandise in the least. In New York, you can go straight from an ascetic Lutheran church to a sex shop. Where is the problem with that? The fact is, there isn't any. Bucco-genital relations are perhaps not "sexual." And a young woman today can engage in multiple fellations, all the while simply continuing to knit and read romance novels. Like the society she lives in, she is a devout person for our time, that's all.

Ignazia is afraid of dying in a state of mortal sin while sleeping. That tends to affect the imagination. One day she is forced to choose between her confessor and Casa. Her confessor refuses absolution? It'll be Casa. Not too neurotic, it seems; she didn't need psychoanalysis.

The parodic inverse of the irreducible devout woman is the *andromaniac*. Example? The Duchess of Villadarias: "She would grab hold of the man who aroused her instinct, and he had to satisfy her. That had happened several times in public gatherings, whence those present had to flee."

Is the uterus an "absolute animal, unreasonable, uncontrollable . . . a ferocious viscus"? "*Tota mulier in utero*," as the theologians used to say? Is that what explains female saints and Messalinas? No more than that the existence of male saints or of obsessed men can be said to derive from the automatic nature of the penis, a phallus with eclipses. Casanova wrote and published during his lifetime an odd little pamphlet on the matter, *Lana Caprina: Epistola di un licanthropo* (Splitting Hairs: Letter of a Lycanthrope) (in Italian). In the *Story of My Life* he wonders, apparently seriously, if he would have liked to be a woman. His reply is categorical: no, because of the risk of becoming pregnant. But yes, if it's just a matter of living again: "Tiresias, who had been a woman, pronounced a true but laughable sentence, because it seems the two pleasures had been put on a scale."

Tiresias gave women the advantage in pleasure, but one can't put men and women on the same scale on this matter. Why is this evidence so little recognized? A calculation mania.

In Madrid, Casa had a stay in the Buen Retiro prison, a place infested with fleas, bedbugs, and lice. He spent his nights on a bench, fearing once again that he would go mad. Fortunately, he can count on the encyclopedia party (Aranda, Campomanes): the expulsion of the Jesuits is under way. The Inquisition, "whose masterwork consists in keeping Christians ignorant," is on the

defensive. But the king of Spain, Charles III, is devout. Similarly, in the past, “Louis XIV chatted with his confessors too much.” In short, Casa gets out, visits Toledo, Aranjuez; reads “Cervantes’s masterpiece . . . superb novel.” He reflects on Fortune. A blind goddess? Not at all: “It appeared that she wished to exercise an absolute dominion over me only to convince me that she reasons and that she is the master of all. To convince me of it, she employed striking methods entirely aimed at making me act by force, and to make me understand that my will, far from declaring me free, was only an instrument she used to do with me what she wished.”

Casa hesitates. Everything is predetermined, but man is free. Fortune (God, Providence, Fatality, Destiny, Necessity, etc.) exists, all-powerful—and yet it doesn’t. Sometimes he has a violent flu, fever, syphilis, a fistula; sometimes an unheard-of happiness. In spite of all, he insists on having us know that he is being led by a reasoning force. Freedom and truth (“the only god that I adore”) are perhaps not a matter of *will*. There is a reasoning about me that does not come from me, there is grace and disgrace. *Sum, quia sentio*. I am, because I feel. If I were to be reborn, says Casa, I would like it to be with my memory, otherwise I would no longer be me. So he is attached to himself. Reading him, so are we. He chooses his eternal return, gives himself the courage and the proof. To be “the instrument” of Fortune, what music could be more beautiful? You only have to know how to notate it, it’s a gift. Alchemy, let us recall, is “the art of music.”

## 23

Casa was indiscreet about the morals of Manuzzi and the Venetian ambassador. He gets a slap on the wrist. He has to leave with all haste. Killers pursue him. He evades them. After Saragossa, here he is in Valencia.

The *Lola de Valence*, for him, is called Nina.<sup>30</sup> She is the mistress of the general captain of Barcelona (which will cost our libertine traveler dearly). He does a few orgies with her. Nina is terrible: “Before me I saw a woman beautiful like an angel, atrocious like a devil, a horrible whore born to punish all those who to their misfortune would fall in love with her. I had known others of that ilk, but never an equal.”

She has him come to Barcelona, arouses her official lover’s jealousy, which for Casa will result in another assassination attempt. In the end he is arrested, taken to the “Tower,” prison again.

He asks for paper and ink and in forty days writes his refutation of Amelot de la Houssay’s *Histoire du gouvernement de Venise* (*History of the Government of Venice*). At this point his goal is clear: regain the favor of the government of the Most Serene Republic and return “up there,” the only livable place here below.

Farewell, Spain. He passes through Perpignan, Béziers, Montpellier; arrives in Aix-en-Provence, where the Marquis d’Argens lives. Sexual confession: he feels that his “prodigious time is past.” He falls ill, violent pleurisy, coughing blood. An unknown woman takes care of him, sent to look after him by the faithful Henriette. He has probably seen Henriette without recognizing her, in Aix. She apparently has put on weight. She still doesn’t care to see him again. Later, perhaps, for a tranquil conversation.

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30. *Lola de Valence* is an 1862 painting of a Spanish dancer by Manet.

“These are the fine moments of my life. These happy encounters, unpredictable, unexpected, altogether fortuitous, due to chance, and all the more precious.”

Another confession: “The more I advanced in age, the more what bound me to women was their wit. It was becoming the vehicle that my dulled senses needed to set themselves in motion.”

He encounters Balsamo (Cagliostro) disguised as a pilgrim and accompanied by his wife. He takes note of the man’s virtuoso gift for imitating handwriting. Fatigued, he very nearly gets into a sentimental novel with Miss Betty, an English woman. He could also write that sort of literature. But Fortune is keeping watch, she decides differently.

## ❁ 24 ❁

Casanova has returned to Italy, it's the return of Ulysses—to his country, but not yet to his city. The air speaks to him, the language bathes him, his body slowly redeploys. Don Juan is more comfortable as Don Giovanni, we'll see that later. Though a man of his age, Don Giacomo is nevertheless not at the end of his happiness, far from it. He feels he should go to the South, his South: Naples, Sorrento. An *odor di femina*? A gaze, rather: “This girl had eyes of such a brilliant black that it would have been impossible for her to prevent them from making those who gazed upon them fall in love, or to prevent them from saying more than they were saying, even in spite of herself.”

Her name is Callimena. Casa decides that her name means “furious beauty” in Greek (which can be maintained, etymologically), and even “beautiful moon” (why not). He gets excited. This beauty is fourteen, looks eighteen, the ideal young debutante. She plays the harpsichord. She resists a bit, not for long: “This pairing in Sorrento was the last true happiness I have tasted in my life. . . . That day Callimena gratified my ardor, after having fought herself for two days in a row. The third day, at five in the morning, in the presence of Apollo, who rose from the horizon, sitting one beside the other on the grass, we abandoned ourselves to our desires. Callimena did not sacrifice herself to interest or to gratitude, for I had given her mere bagatelles, but rather to love, and I could not doubt it. She gave herself to me and was angry with herself for having delayed so long in making this gift to me. Before noon we had changed altars three times, and we spent the afternoon going everywhere, walking, and stopping at once whenever the slightest spark made itself felt to give rise to the desire to extinguish it.”

In this passage, we have an example of Casanova's *flowery* style when his intentions are solemn. Apollo, the third day, five in the morning, three changes of “altars,” no doubt about it, it's a magic ritual. Free, hence rare. Casa had

somewhat lost the habit of receiving gifts. The girl's name is Greek. Not for nothing is Apollo mentioned; the scene is an Eden, Giacomo's taking a slice of the terrestrial paradise. One thinks of old Poussin's fresh and fabulous painting *Apollo in Love with Daphne*. Casa is about to saddle himself with a translation of the *Iliad*. Ariosto, Homer—serious allies! But who could fail to grasp that now he is sure to have his own Odyssey? While Fortune, with its favorable or hostile winds, determines navigation on the earth, among mortals, the hero of endurance with the “thousand ruses” dreams of returning home, to Ithaca, to Venice. The gods have him in their sights. In the *Odyssey*, Athena protects her “great-hearted” Ulysses, but Apollo does not disdain to lend a hand to Casa, in the grass, with his little musician with the dark eyes who finds herself *in tune* with him. *In tune*: it's unexplainable, that's the way it is, let's enjoy a happy moment in nature.

Quickly, because the game soon languishes and the keeper of the bank is anything but stable. There is still a duel to fight. Naples is, after all, a favorable spot. Casa has a look at the muddy courtyard of the chateau at Dux and writes: “The city of Naples was the temple of my fortune one out of every four times I stayed there. If at present I went there, I would die of hunger. Fortune scorns old age.”

The actor's old age, surely, but not the old age of the one holding the pen. Apollo will crown him in time.

One traveler, among others (like Vivant Denon), is also very happy in Naples: the Marquis de Sade, in 1776 (by then, Casa has returned to Venice). Open that masterpiece called *Juliette*, and you will be convinced of it. Sade is a volcano, Casanova a garden. Sade cheerfully massacres the human race, Casanova civilizes it. The night is also a sun. Both darkness and light are at the antipodes of obscurantist grayness. Of course, the fact that night is also a sun is a Nietzschean formula. This extreme reasoning will always shock the ambient clerisy.

I won't waste my time talking about the amateurs who want to contrast Naples and Venice (*Against Venice*: you can picture Casa's smile).<sup>31</sup> All the sensations are welcome, from the strongest to the most nuanced. All the *ports*.

(I remember a lunch with François Mitterrand in 1988. He has just been reelected president of the Republic, he is discovering Venice late in life, he

31. Régis Debray, *Against Venice*, trans. John Howe (London: Pushkin Press, 2002). As the author of a *Dictionnaire amoureux de Venise*, Sollers, like Casanova, can only “smile.”

is tired of the Hexagon day in, day out. After indicating his curiosity about “the fearsome Monsieur Sollers” (laughter), he tells me almost immediately that he is reading Casanova (I should have asked him in which edition). Sitting beside me on a couch, he taps me paternally on the thigh and murmurs: “Watch out for your health, okay?” (I get the impression he is going to hand me some condoms.) Turning up his nose, Octavio Paz, who is also present, begins, somewhat harshly: “Lack of depth, of a sense of the tragic, etc.” Mitterrand interrupts, aggravated: “You think so? This sense of the moment, this frenzy for life? Do you really think so? What do you think, Monsieur Sollers?” I agree with the president, since he’s saying the obvious. The fact is, he is sick; everything bores him; he has no desire to continue his ridiculous and futile interviews with Marguerite Duras; he is like an insect attracted to the Venetian light; his more or less secret daughter Mazarine, the Antigone of his old age, must be about fourteen at that time.)

Casa took Naples early one morning in Sorrento.  
But Salerno is an opera in the nighttime.

Lucretia, his former lover, and Leonilda, his daughter, are there. Leonilda was sixteen when she saw her father “distilling”; today she is twenty-five; she is a “perfect beauty”; she has become a marquise by marrying Monsieur de la C . . . , age seventy, rich but suffering from gout: “A nobleman of seventy who could boast of having seen the light was a rare phenomenon thirty years ago in the Sicilian kingdom.”

In other words, the marquis is a Freemason. He and Casanova embrace: “While sitting beside him, beginning again these renewals of our divine alliance, we embraced, and the two women present, quite astonished, could not understand how this recognition could be taking place. Donna Leonilda was delighted to see that her husband was an old acquaintance of mine, she tells him that and kisses him, and the good old gentleman nearly dies laughing. Only Donna Lucretia suspects the truth. Her daughter doesn’t understand a thing and saves her curiosity for another time.”

Casa and the marquis are Brothers by “divine” alliance, which joins with a human alliance. Casanova deprives himself of nothing.

The Marquis de la C . . . (Giacomo is having fun) is an enlightened man who has traveled a lot and lived. His only reason for marrying was to have an heir. Though ill, he can still take the needed action with his wife (Leonilda), but



without being sure of the results of his action. He loves his wife, a “freethinker” like him, but in the greatest secrecy: “In Salerno, everyone lacked wit, and so he lived with his wife and his mother-in-law like a good Christian, adopting all the prejudices of his compatriots.”

Would the “liberated” reader of today guess what comes next? It’s not certain.

There will be a lot of talk about a “bill of exchange due in nine months,” which Leonilda will be responsible for paying. Casa is thus the “gold-stallion” who must fertilize his own daughter, for which, moreover, he will be remunerated. One can wish for Leonilda and the marquis “a fine son in nine months’ time.”

We have to read closely to understand—nothing is said the way I have just said it. This section in the *Story of My Life* is treated with extreme artfulness. Casa does not write: “I made my daughter a baby to serve as heir to the marquis.” He can suppose, at the outset, that the marquis does not know that Leonilda is his daughter, whereas he knows it perfectly well (and will singularly surprise Casa when he so specifies after the fact, while still giving him money).

Appearances are respected. The procedures will take place in a country home. The marquis will “visit” his wife during the night. But the “negotiation” has already taken place.

Giacomo, Lucretia, and Leonilda are in a grotto. They recall the night they spent together nine years earlier. Lucretia discreetly leaves her daughter alone with her father, recommending that they should not “commit the crime.” “These words, followed by her departure, brought an effect quite the opposite of the precept she gave us. Determined not to consummate the so-called crime, we verged so close upon it that an almost involuntary movement forced us to consummate it so completely that we could not have done more had we acted in consequence of an intention premeditated with all the freedom of reason. We remained still, gazing at each other, without changing our posture, both of us serious and silent, prey to reflections, and astonished to feel, as we said to each other later, neither guilty nor victims of remorse. We readjusted our clothing, and my daughter, sitting next to me, called me her husband while I called her my wife. With sweet kisses we confirmed what we had just done, and had an angel come just then to tell us we had monstrously outraged nature, it would have made us laugh. Absorbed as we were in this quite decent tenderness, Donna Lucretia was edified to see us so calm.”

The rest is mere circumstance, including the way Anastasia, one of Leonilda's servants whom Casa had fondled before, "intercepts" the father-gold-stallion and tries to redirect the bill of exchange for her own profit.

In the end, everyone is happy with the most innocent crime in the world. Casa obtains five thousand ducats, they celebrate before his departure, tears flow.

Picture a young marquis later on telling one of his mistresses: "I am the son of the daughter of my father, who was actually Casanova."

The son of the daughter of my father: that strangely resembles the theological formula "Virgin mother, daughter of your son" (as Dante condensed it at the beginning of his *Paradise*). We have entered the heart of the incestuous rose. Awkward silence.

Don Giacomo is now marching to Rome. We arrive at the home of the Duchess de Fiano, very strong personality, ugly, unfortunately not rich. "Having very little wit, she had decided to be gaily slanderous so people would think she had a lot."

Her husband is impotent, *babilano*. Stendhal took up the word (*babilan* in French) to describe this impediment.

But the big news in Rome concerns the suppression of the Jesuits. Yielding to pressures from the crown, Clement XIV (Ganganelli) has decided to dissolve the Society. Casa needs library work at that time; he is very well received by the Jesuits at the Vatican: "The Jesuits were always the most polite among the secular orders of our religion, and I would even dare to say the only polite ones. But during the crisis in which they found themselves at that time, their politeness was exaggerated to the extent that they seemed to be crawling."

This does not prevent Casanova from roundly accusing the Jesuits of taking revenge on Clement XIV by poisoning him: "That was the last proof they gave, after their death, of their attempts at power." In this connection let me note that, as if by chance, Don Giacomo is always more or less working in the wings as concerns the Jesuits. An old story, one that, starting in the middle of the eighteenth century, particularly occupies France, Portugal, Spain, Italy. The Jesuits' plot, the Masonic plot? No smoke without fire, even if there is a lot more smoke than fire. This is the context in which the Cardinal de Bernis logically makes his reappearance.

Bernis has remained in touch with M. M. (still a nun in Venice). He has a “mistress of tranquility,” Principessa de Santa Croce, “young, pretty, cheerful, lively, curious, laughing, always talking, asking questions and lacking the patience to hear the answer to the end.”

“In this young woman I saw a true plaything made for the amusement of the mind and the heart of a voluptuous and well-behaved man who had heavy matters on his shoulders and who needed distraction.”

Bernis sees the princess three times a day. They are both Casa’s accomplices in Rome.

Was it to amuse his friends? Don Giacomo is quickly implicated in a new intrigue in a convent, or rather a home for poor young girls. There he falls in love with Armellina, who “has a pale appearance and a sadness that seemed to be the result of a quantity of desires that she had to suppress.”

An understanding with the mother superior; furnishing of winter clothes, coffee, sugar. Self-interested charity participates in the siege, while the “ancient bigots” take offense. On the program is the liberation of the girls, and Bernis and the princess are only too happy to contribute to it. Why is it that this chapter seems repetitive, almost boring? Armellina is a good example of the power of education, and Casa has no inclination to be a “martyr of virtue.” And yet that’s the case. To be sure, he has recourse to his old technique: suppers with a friend of Armellina’s, oysters, champagne, pseudo-innocent games, travesties, dressing up, re-dressing up, it’s delicious, it’s idiotic, but one can still take some slight pleasure in gulping down an oyster on a breast: “When she saw me fixing my eyes on hers, as if stupefied, she asked me if I had had great pleasure in imitating a child at the breast.”

Old child, young breast. A virgin whose child is a little gaga. Casa admits his fantasy: he is a son suckling the breast of a mother who is his daughter. Okay. But in that case, he is taking his time going further. Blind man’s bluff, fleeting touches, caresses, badinage, froth, nothing serious. Casa is reinventing the wheel, but the fact is, these girls are thinking of marriage. You can understand them, after all; what’s the use of the rest. They need to get *settled*. Casa isn’t the right *case*, and young men are already on the prowl. Best of luck to all, goodbye.

Don Giacomo returns to the lap of the “family.” Here, for instance, is another of his supposed daughters, Giacomina. (In the meantime, bravo to Leonilda, who has indeed had a son.) Giacomina, daughter of Mariuccia, is more beautiful

than Sophia, who has remained in London. Time, for sure, is contracting. And as if that weren't enough, Giacomo's brother Zanetto (his mother's name in the masculine) arrives with his daughter, Guglielmina. It's fatal: at the word *niece*, Casa catches fire: "Upon hearing this, I told myself I would make love to this niece, and what I found amusing and extraordinary is that I found myself set on this little love affair out of a spirit of revenge. I leave it to physicians more knowledgeable than I to interpret phenomena of this sort."

Our response may be a Freudian smile, but Casa is actually making a discovery. All sexuality may be nothing more than a familial derivation or "revenge." Families, you excite me. Some claim the opposite, but they are lying. The incestuous lover reigns over the whole matter, including one who is seen as standing the farthest from the respect due to families. The pedophile, for instance, is a passionate familialist (too much so). Families, I hate you, because I adore you. One who is indifferent to the family (the Holy Family) would be a sort of god. Sexual solicitation, wherever it stems from and whatever its nature (and especially its obsessive repression), is an invitation to the familial, to the great biological promiscuity.

So we find Casa between his niece and his daughter (ages thirteen and nine). They are taking drawing lessons: copies of the Belvedere Apollo, Antinous, Hercules, Titian's *Venus* ("reclining, her hand at the very spot where I had seen the hands of these two little girls").

For he has *seen* them, in the bed where they are sleeping: "I see two innocent girls who, each with an arm extended across her belly, held their hands a little curved upon the marks of their puberty, which were beginning to show. Their middle fingers, a little more curved, were maintained immobile upon a small piece of round, almost imperceptible flesh. It was the only moment of my life in which I had proof of the true temper of my soul, and I was satisfied to know it. I felt a delicious horror. This new feeling forced me to cover up the two nudities; my hands trembled."

Mariuccia, who had pulled down the covers, lacks "a mind to comprehend the grandeur of this moment." "Those girls might have died of pain if they had awakened at the instant I contemplated their beautiful positions. An invincible ignorance only could have kept them from death, and I could not suppose them possessed of it."

So no betrayal. No assault on modesty, on the "security" of sleep or of another's autoeroticism. On the other hand, awake in the bed, they quickly get into "kisses galore." Casa does make love to Guglielmina in front of Giacomina,

who *asks* him, says he, to do the same for her (not recommended, taking her age into account). As for Guglielmina, Casa speaks of her in these terms: “I wanted to thank my brother for having created this jewel for the consolation of my soul.”

A surrealistic conclusion: there is a lottery, they all decide to play. Little Giacomina simply says “27.” Casa plays all the combinations of 27. He wins, and keeps his promise: he takes Mariuccia, Guglielmina, and Giacomina to Rome for Holy Week (they come from Frascati).

Even better: he was to compose an ode on the Redemption. Inspiration, lacking until then, appears, prompting him. He recites his ode on Holy Thursday. He cries and makes all the academicians cry. Bernis whispers to him: “What a clown you are!” Casa, surprised at this remark, tells him no, *it was real*. The cardinal contemplates him for a moment, pensive.

Another possible conclusion: “Vice is not synonymous with crime, for one can be full of vice without being a criminal. Such was I my whole life, and I dare to say even that I was often virtuous in the actuality of vice.”

In other words (a scandalous proposition), the happiness of vice can be reinforced by the happiness of virtue.

## 25

“When I left Venice in the year 1783, God should have made me go to Rome, Naples, Sicily, or Parma, and in all likelihood my old age would have been happy. . . . Today, in my seventy-third year of life, I need only to live in peace and far from any person who can imagine having rights on my moral freedom, for a species of tyranny must necessarily accompany such an imagination.”

In Casa’s case, God is Bohemian. It is a God who knows what he is doing by confining this adventurer in a library near Prague. He has to force him to write his memoirs. God is Time. Predicting what it is preparing is impossible.

So Giacomo feels old at forty-six. It seems to him that he should plan a “fine retirement.” He says he is dedicated “entirely to study.” In Florence, his translation of the *Iliad* takes him one to two hours a day. He reads, he writes. But his reputation follows him, and he is driven out of Florence: “The grand-duke only pretended to love literature. . . . This prince never read, and he preferred bad prose to the most beautiful poetry. What he loved was women and money.”

A portrait of everyman.

In Bologna, on the contrary, “everyone has a feeling for literature . . . and although the Inquisition exists, one can easily fool it.”

This is where Casa has his pamphlet *Lana Caprina* published. The horrible Nina is in the neighborhood, pretending to be pregnant by her Spanish lover. Infant trafficking, dead infant, the archbishop is angry, but Casa is not at all a player in this sort of con game (on the contrary). A courtesan has a pretty name: Viscioletta. All the same, Casa is morose. Only “cruel experience,” says he, provides instruction. Advice is of no use: “Man is an animal who can only be indoctrinated by cruel experience. The effect of this law is that the world will always exist in disorder and ignorance, because the wise constitute at the very most the hundredth part.”

The *hundredth part*? Clearly Casanova is an optimist.

## 26

Libraries multiply on Casanova's route. Here in Pesaro, Count Mosca's (hello, Stendhal!). In *bibliothèque* (library) there is *Bible*, and the biblical encounter is about to take place, in fact.

From time to time, Casa reminds us that he has a sort of Genius who speaks to him with a secret voice. A "daimon" like Socrates's. This voice speaks more to dissuade than to recommend. Abstain, rather than do this or that. But for once, just as he plans to return as quickly as possible to Trieste to be nearer to Venice, the voice tells him to go to Ancona. Why Ancona? There is no reason. Never mind, he leaves for Ancona.

Along the way, the driver asks him to give a ride in his carriage to a Jew who also wants to go to Ancona. Casa at first refuses, he doesn't want anyone in his vehicle, and "least of all a Jew." But (it's the voice) he changes his mind.

"The next day, in the carriage, this Jew, who had a rather fine appearance, asked me why I didn't like Jews.

"Because," I said to him, "your religion requires you to be our enemies. You believe you have a duty to deceive us. You do not look upon us as your brothers. You push usury to excess when, needing money, we borrow from you. You hate us, in short."

The Jew tells him he's mistaken, that he has only to come with him and he will observe that Jews pray for Christians, too, beginning with the pope: "At that I couldn't suppress a great burst of laughter because it was true, but I said to him that what should pray for God should be the heart and not the mouth, and I threatened to throw him out of the carriage if he didn't agree that the Jews would certainly not pray God for Christians if they were sovereign in the countries where they lived, and he was then surprised to hear me cite, in the Hebraic language, passages from the Old Testament in which they were ordered

to seize all the occasions to do all possible harm to all the non-Jews whom they cursed in their prayers. This poor man didn't open his mouth again."

You understand that this is the beginning of a friendship.

Casanova speaking "the Hebraic language"? That's the least of it for a cabalist. Is he prejudiced? He pretends to be.

Curious, Casa invites him to dinner. But the other man, of course, has his own food: "This superstitious man drank water, because, as he said, he was not sure that the wine was pure. After dinner, in the carriage, he told me that if I would come stay at his home and be content to eat only those foods not forbidden by God, he would have me eat more delicately and more voluptuously and more cheaply than at the inn, alone in a fine room facing the sea.

"Do you host Christians, then?" I said to him.

"Never, but this time, so as to disabuse you, I am willing to make an exception."

I repeat: Casanova is a great composer. In life as in writing. His intent is to show that his life unfolded as if it were being written. The "detour" via Ancona has a deep significance: "I stay with the Jew, then, finding it most singular. Had I not been comfortable there, I would have left on the second day. His wife and children were eagerly waiting for him to celebrate the Sabbath. On this day dedicated to the Lord, all servile activity is forbidden, I note with pleasure an air of celebration in the facial expressions, in the clothing, and in the cleanliness of the entire house. They welcome me as they would a brother, and I respond to the best of my abilities. . . ."

An astonishing passage in the history of European literature, especially for a man of the Enlightenment. Casa calls his host Mardoqué, and no doubt he means Mordecai, the biblical personality from the Book of Esther. One can expect him to have an interesting daughter. Here she is, she is eighteen. Casa calls her Lia.

He had already had an adventure with another Leah, also Jewish, in Turin. A difficult negotiation, with a deferred purchase of a vehicle, horseback rides, and finally a ring serving as irresistible argument—a horse-trader adventure he has no cause to be proud of. But here in Ancona, the tone changes. Casa is living in this house with pleasure. He even goes to the synagogue. Soon he is deploying his nets around this new Leah, who comes to his room bringing chocolate. But she doesn't go along, insolently defying him. It's as if Giacomo has at last encountered *someone*, and that astonishes him (usually he is in a great hurry).



Leah accepts a little song and dance from our libertine. He brings out his collection of erotic engravings, particularly “a woman lying on her back, totally naked, masturbating.” (You will recall that Professor Laforgue, in his rewriting, brandishes his scissors here and transforms “masturbating” into “in the act of deluding herself.”) But instead of the panic and blushing he expects, Casa hears Leah tell him that “all girls do that before their marriage.” She agrees to look at all the pornographic images (pornographic and quite beautiful) by Aretino, but he is not to make any obscene move, and above all not to exhibit the organic consequence of his excitation. He has to keep “the drawing in his hand.” Wonderful humor here by Casanova: “She didn’t want to see anything living.”

In short, Leah is giving him a lesson in self-control: “She philosophized about that much more knowledgeably than Hedwig did.” Leah, the young Jewess, surpasses the “young theologian” from Geneva. A bright light is cast on the carnal superiority of the unexpurgated Bible, of the synagogue over the Protestant church, of the original, in short, over the pasteurized version. Leah *knows all about it*. We thought so.

One night, Casa gets up and discovers Leah with a young lover. He watches them through the keyhole; they have no idea. She is executing all of Aretino’s positions with him, she’s doing *hands-on exercises*, including the most difficult ones (the “straight tree,” for instance, in which, like a real “lesbian,” she imposes a complete fellation on her partner). Our libertine is flabbergasted.

The next day, he thinks he has the upper hand, tries to blackmail her. Either she yields or he will denounce her. She coldly replies that she believes him incapable of such an evil act. He insists, and she is even more precise: “I don’t like you.”

Stung to the quick, our professional decides to ignore her. Good tactic. She then explains to him that her young Christian lover is a “libertine rogue” with whom she is in love, but who doesn’t love her and whom she *pays*. Now she tells him, Casa, that she loves him. He sticks to his refusal (each his turn). The more she attempts to excite him, the more he wants to humiliate her with his indifference.

Finally she comes to his bed one night and violates him (“I was a fool, she knew much more about human nature than I”). The fact is, she asks him to de-virginize her (as they say). What strikes Casa then is her “extreme sweetness”:

“On Leah’s beautiful face I saw the extraordinary symptom of a delicious pain, and I felt in her first ecstasy her entire person trembling with the excessive pleasure that inundated her. . . . I continued to hold Leah inseparable from me until three hours after midnight, and I stimulated all her gratitude by having her collect my melting soul in the hollow of her beautiful hand.”

The weather is bad for traveling. Fine, he is going to stay another month. But what does Mordecai think of his curious lodger?

“I have always thought that this Jew knew that his daughter was not refusing me her favors. Jews are not difficult on this topic, because knowing that a son we might give to a woman from their race would be Jewish, they think that by letting us do it they’re getting the better of us. . . . We slept together all the nights, even those during which Jewish law excommunicates a woman who lets herself be loved.”

Casanova knowledgeable about Leviticus, chapter XV: we can expect anything coming from him, but all the same.

That is the last love story, or more exactly the last *benediction*, that the Chevalier de Seingalt recounts in the *Story of My Life*. The introduction of this new tone comes as no surprise. The Knight of the High-Sign is writing his swan song.

At Trieste, Casa hopes to be in transit: he is awaiting his pardon from the Venetian Inquisitors, for whom he is soon going to work. He writes his *History of the Troubles in Poland*. In retrospect, he compliments himself on having discerned the troubles he is present at, from a distance, at the end of the century. Poland, France, Venice have collapsed. Another phase of Time is on the march. The consul of Venice in Trieste treats him well and is already entrusting him with some delicate matters concerning Austria. That said, life in Trieste drags on (but it will also drag for him in Venice, which is wallowing in decadence).

He reencounters an actress, Irene, whom he “loved in Milan, neglected in Genoa.” She organizes clandestine gaming sessions at her home. She cheats, she “has a card up her sleeve,” in short, she “makes a killing.” Casa realizes it, warns her of the danger she risks if she continues. Luckily for her, she has a charming little girl of nine whom she has taught to caress the gentlemen. Casa takes advantage of it (not good), and so especially does a certain Baron Pittoni, who will be Irene’s protector. Don Giacomo will see Irene later: “Three years afterward, I saw her in Padua, where I made much tenderer acquaintance with her daughter.”

The end.

The manuscript stops there.

The last word of the *Story of My Life* is *tendre*. Casanova couldn’t or didn’t want to continue his narrative. He is about to be fifty, and perhaps he felt that it was *enough*.

And also, great news has come. The State Inquisitors have just sent him his safe-conduct to return at last to Venice. The witness of this event is the consul, Marco de’ Monti, who sees Casanova open the document: “He read it, he reread

it, he kissed it many times, and after a short time of silence and concentration, he burst into a torrent of sobs.”

In the *Précis of My Life*, Casa writes: “Tired of running around Europe, I determined to solicit my pardon with the Venetian State Inquisitors. For this reason, I went and settled in Trieste, where two years later I obtained it. It was the 14th of September, 1774. My entrance into Venice after nineteen years allowed me to delight in the finest moment of my life.”

Casanova does not recount this finest moment of his life in the *Story of My Life*. It’s his stroke of genius. We are obliged to assess our capacity to imagine it (or not). The rest is silence.

## 28

One would have to write another book now; it would include sketches for fifty novels.

What happened between 1774 and 1785, the date when Casa takes up his job as librarian at Dux, and 1789, the year he starts his *Story of My Life*?

A thousand things. (Here I am following the chronology established by Francis Lacassin, *Casanova after the Memoirs*, in the third volume of the *Histoire de ma vie* published by Editions Robert Laffont, in the “Bouquins” collection.)

It is the chronicle of a disappointment.

Literary efforts? They don't work.

Love? In Venice he is living with a seamstress, Francesca Buschini, whose touching letters we have, written in Venetian dialect. After Casa's further exile, she will live more and more in retirement, writing to Casa even in Bohemia: “I hope you are cheerful and that you chase away melancholy.” “I wish you much amusement for my sake too.”

Secret missions in Trieste, in Ancona? The role of “confidant,” i.e., cop? Not interesting, the game is getting stale.

Casa founds a monthly magazine that he writes all by himself. He even becomes a theater impresario, with a weekly, *The Messenger of Thalia*.

He is the secretary of a dubious Genoese diplomat. It will go bad for reasons of money. Casa realizes there is nothing serious for him in Venice. Be resigned or make a stink? A stink.

He writes a pamphlet that pits him against the entire *nomenklatura*: *Neither Love nor Women, or The New Augean Stables*. The stables drive him out. Taking himself for Hercules, Casa has overestimated his strength—but the time of chivalry is past.

Here he is again in exile, in 1783, in Trieste. He writes to Morosini: “I am fifty-eight; I cannot leave on foot; winter comes suddenly. And when I think of becoming an adventurer again, I look in the mirror and laugh.”<sup>32</sup>

Casa goes a bit overboard. He announces the destruction of Venice by an earthquake. His only satisfaction is in provoking an incipient panic.

On June 16, 1783, he sneaks into his city, settles his affairs; it’s the last time he sees the Republic.

Is there a patron somewhere? Casa is on the road: Trento, Innsbruck, Augsburg, Frankfurt, Cologne, Aix-la-Chapelle. Nothing.

And then The Hague, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Brussels. Nothing. Nobody wants anything to do with his lottery or his other mathematical projects.

In Paris he stays with his brother Francesco, the painter, who has an official residence in the Louvre. Casanova in the Louvre: what a novel that would be, narrated by him.

All his projects are unrealizable: the creation of a gazette, an expedition to Madagascar, digging a canal from Narbonne to Bayonne. What an imagination, dear sir. Calm down.

What exactly is he doing in Fontainebleau for a week? A mystery.

On November 23, 1783, on the other hand, we know that he attends a session of the Academy of Sciences devoted to a report about the recent ascent in the Montgolfier balloon. Giacomo Casanova is sitting next to Benjamin Franklin and Condorcet, he listens to their conversation. But do they really know who he is? No.

In spite of the protection of Prince Kaunitz in Vienna, Casa wanders for sixty-two days between Dresden, Berlin, Brno, and Prague. Nothing, no work in the offing, unemployment.

He meets Da Ponte in Vienna and enters service with Foscarini, the ambassador of Venice, “to write his dispatches.” A little secret diplomacy, he must be quite good at that. It’s at Foscarini’s dinner table that he meets Count Waldstein, a Freemason like him, who finds him attractive, notably for his occultist erudition. The Dux chateau looms on the horizon (1784).

Still in 1784, we are happy to learn, he has spent the Carnival very joyfully “in the company of two ladies.” In May, somehow or other, he is taking the thermal cure in Baden.

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32. Morosini was procurator of Saint Mark’s.

He writes documented essays about the commercial litigation between Holland and the Most Serene Republic of Venice. But in April 1785, he speaks to his friend Max Lamberg about his fantastic novel *The Icosameron*, two-thirds of which he has already written in Italian (he is going to rewrite it in French). What a strange guy.

On the same date, Casa's last good card disappears: Foscarini dies, no more "dispatches." Don Giacomo thinks about becoming a monk in the convent of Einsiedeln in Switzerland. Gambling or the monastery: a consistent philosophy.

Last effort in Berlin: nothing.

In September 1785, in the spa town of Töplitz (Teplice), he accepts Count Waldstein's proposal: responsibility for forty thousand books and manuscripts as librarian in the chateau at Dux (which he will look after distractedly, for good reason, as he spends between nine and thirteen hours a day writing the *Story of My Life*).

In October 1787, a horseback rider joins Mozart and Da Ponte at night in Prague. It's Casanova. The world premiere of *Don Giovanni* will be soon, under the direction of the composer. Such a surrealistic event cannot be measured; it is sung.

Tired of recounting his exploit orally, Casa publishes the *Story of My Escape from the Prisons of the Republic of Venice, Known as the Leads*, in 1788. It is the germ of the memoirs, but he still has some illusions: he thinks his big fantastic but rather boring novel *The Icosameron* will be a success. It's a disaster. Waldstein, in an elegant move, buys up all his manuscripts.

1789 is the decisive year. Casa is sick; his Irish doctor O'Reilly suggests that he write the story of his life to chase away his gloomy thoughts. Strangely enough, that is the moment Casa chooses to declare that he has solved a mathematical problem posed since antiquity, the duplication of the cube: "to construct a cube whose volume doubles a given cube." He writes three studies on this subject and publishes them in Dresden. But the true *cube*, the philosophical stone that occupies him now, is the *Story of My Life*. It turns out the solution for him was neither the fantastic novel nor "severe mathematics." A totally different dimension is revealed to him: his life recopied, which has always been written between the lines, as a cryptogram.

On March 2, 1791, in spite of his troubles with the steward and the servants in the chateau (who must think he is crazy), we know from a letter that he believes he has written two-thirds of his manuscript. Simultaneously, he does

a lot of metaphysics. What's more, a *Letter to Robespierre* not found among his papers came to one hundred twenty pages. It's his *purloined letter*: where is it?

Count Waldstein has disappeared. In reality, he is on a secret mission in Paris for the purpose of rescuing Louis XVI and his family. It's a problem of *horses*. Having failed, he goes on to London, returns to Dux, and fires the steward who was persecuting Casa (who sees a "Jacobin plot" in the servile hostility displayed toward him).

1794: hard at work revising his *Story of My Life*, he nevertheless writes a funeral oration in Latin for the death of his three-year-old cat Mélanpyge.<sup>33</sup> Coup de théâtre: on September 11, 1795, at age seventy, he escapes from the chateau at Dux, goes through Tübingen (where one can picture him meeting Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling), visits Goethe at Weimar (apparently without much success), and finds himself in Berlin, broke. Waldstein brings him home at the end of December, but this episode remains no doubt the most mysterious of his existence.

The last text published by Casanova during his lifetime is the *Letter to Leonhard Snetlage*, recently republished by Éditions Allia under a strange but beautiful title borrowed from Casa's dedication to Count Waldstein: *Ma voisine, la postérité . . .* (My Neighbor, Posterity . . .). It's a reflection on the vocabulary in use after the French Revolution.

For instance, *Equality*: "In spite of the misery oppressing them, the people must be joking about it everywhere, all the time. They must be very curious about the signification of this word, as they see before their eyes at every moment nothing but inequalities."

For Casa, "nothing is more unequal than equality." He has his reasons, he speaks from the heart of the matter.

Same sarcasm about *Jacobin*. But in this case he has a precise motive: his name is Jacques (that's why it is striking to see his grave marker in Duchcov, where he is inscribed in German under the name Jakob).

On November 27, 1797, he asks Count Waldstein's permission to spend a month in Venice, "next spring." Venice has just fallen under Bonaparte; he has received some letters, he wants to go see the situation for himself (in the end, the earthquake he prophesied has happened).

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33. Mélanpyge was actually a dog; the correct spelling of its name was Mélampyge.



On November 17, he writes the *Précis of My Life* for his young correspondent Cécile de Roggendorf.

Finally, 1798: Casa has bladder troubles, interrupts the revisions of the *Story of My Life*.

April 12: the last letter to Cécile.

In May, very sick.

On May 27, Carlo Angiolini, his nephew, arrives from Dresden to look after him. Angiolini will leave with the manuscript, which his son will sell to the German publisher Brockhaus in 1821, for two hundred *thalers*.

On June 4, Casa dies, at seventy-three. His posthumous life begins.

Death in an armchair. Pink. It's there today in his rooms in the chateau at Duchcov. Behind the back of the chair they have engraved a little commemorative plaque in brass. I touched this armchair.

*U, cycles, divine vibrations of viridian seas;  
Peace of pastures sown with beasts, wrinkles  
Stamped on studious brows as if by alchemy.*

Or:

“I am the scholar of the dark armchair. Rain and branches hurl themselves at the casement of my library.”

Casanova gets up from the somber armchair where he is writing to go die in a pink armchair. That is life, backwards.

I have just quoted the sonnet of the *Vowels* and a sentence from the *Illuminations* by Rimbaud.<sup>34</sup> Another writer, who lived for a long time in Trieste, where he was working on a monumental *Ulysses*, wrote about one of his amorous adventures in that city with a pretty young Jewess, Amalia, to whom he was giving English lessons. He called his narrative *Giacomo Joyce*. A photograph from this period shows James Joyce, dressed as an Irish dandy, playing the guitar. Joyce rarely did anything haphazardly. The last words of this story are “*Love me, love my umbrella.*” I’m not translating this sentence, which stands, so to speak, on its own.

34. The lines from Rimbaud’s famous poem “Vowels” are from a translation by Wyatt Mason; the sentence from the *Illuminations* is from a translation by Eric Edelman.

## ❁ 29 ❁

An Italian essayist evoking the end of Casa's life entitled his book *The Twilight of Casanova*.

This recalls Nietzsche's title *The Twilight of the Idols*.

If Casanova is an idol, he is indeed going toward his definitive night. So much the better. For two centuries, the propaganda of stupid fascination, of derision, and especially of resentment has persisted in falsifying his memory, which is to say: *what he wrote*.

Above all, they don't want him to have written his life himself, nor that it should be magnificently readable.

I wanted to speak about another Casa. The one who on this very day, in Venice, picks his way among the Japanese tourists near the Doge's Palace. No one pays attention to him. Two hundred years after his death, he seems to be in excellent shape. Hale and hearty as when he was thirty, just before his arrest. He is the one who, under a different name, welcomes under the Leads this afternoon a team from French television, which has gone looking for him all the way to Czechoslovakia. He is the one whom the security people from the Palace prevent from climbing onto the roof to indicate the exact location of his escape. He is the one, also, who speaks in my place for a filmed interview in his cell (as for me, I have a bad fever this day, June 4, 1998, even though the weather is beautiful).

Casa walks past the mediocre spectacles organized pretty much everywhere to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of his death (really). He glances distractedly (as is his habit) at the beauty products he supposedly sponsors, the restaurants or cafés that have taken his name, the movie posters announcing yet another film about him, the magazines where he is used to promote such and such an actor or actress. He scarcely pauses by the large ridiculous statue erected in Saint Mark's Square—his, apparently. During the Carnival, sophisticated haute couture models paraded around it for the photographers.

The Spectacle, right?

All that is totally without interest, but these clichés are a mask. No one will go check on what is going to happen this evening in the *casino* he has rented in Murano, in Torcello, or better yet, on that little island that no one knows the name of, in the lagoon, out to sea.

He takes a boat. He takes with him two Japanese women, or two German women, or three Italian women, depending on the days. Sometimes it's a Spanish woman, an English woman, a Greek woman, and, why not, a French woman. American, rarely. Norwegian, Swedish, Russian? Whatever. An African? But of course! An Arab, an Israeli? With pleasure. A Chinese woman? No argument. But there are also the Argentinians, the Mexicans, the Brazilians, the Panamanians, the Venezuelans, the Chileans, the Uruguayans, the Paraguayans, and, suddenly, the Australians. It is easy to imagine Casa operating in all the great cities of the world, and even in the villages. He is the perfect counterterrorist. He is sighted in New York, Paris, Frankfurt, Geneva, London, Madrid, Barcelona, Tehran, Tokyo, Melbourne, Prague (of course), Shanghai, Beijing, Jerusalem, Moscow. They say he is in the neighborhood of Barcelona or Naples right now. He takes a running start, he leaps over two or four centuries, he has escaped dangers, he is always *wanted*, but his powder of projection makes him different and unrecognizable when he wishes. No fingerprints, no record of his DNA. He doesn't do dope, he's not on drugs, doesn't frequent the mob, has a clean record. The policemen trailing him drop it after a time and invent whatever for their superiors. Right away they have other things to do.

Yes, Casa has escaped.

What should have been written is *The Dawn of Casanova*. But hush, the time has not yet arrived. We are even at the point of facing a repressive impact—so what, we've seen it before, it's cyclical.

Casa had himself cloned? Of course. From time to time, with the greatest secrecy, *they* meet. No recordings, no notes, each has his passport, goodbye. People have tried to infiltrate them, what a joke. The best agents get sent back, the latest one, for example. She wanted to continue from Washington to Venice, the FBI was covering her, but there was no trace of Casa to be seen, in spite of the publicity.

The evening of June 4, 1998, in a quiet corner of Venice, I opened a notebook and wrote this title: *Casanova l'admirable*. I had the *Story of My Life* with me and notes taken for years. The rest followed. Perhaps it is not a bad idea to publish this, at the end of the twentieth century, in French, in Paris.

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