

# A Poetics of Confusion: Casanova's *Histoire de ma vie* as Bildungsroman

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## Abstract

Casanova warns readers in the preface of the *Histoire de ma vie*: “I do not write a novel or the story of an illustrious person.” Casanova refuses to characterize the written story of his life as novel or memoir, and he borrows from the poetics of these two genres, which are situated at opposite ends of the social spectrum. Following the ups and downs of its author’s chequered career, the *Histoire de ma vie* embodies a poetics of confusion and merges competing literary models. One of these models is the Bildungsroman or “roman de formation” illustrated in ancien régime France by such works as Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut* (1731), Marivaux’s *Le Paysan parvenu* (1734), and Voltaire’s *L’Ingénu* (1767). Studying Casanova’s account of his two Parisian sojourns of 1750–52 and 1757–59, which he describes as “mes années d’apprentissage,” this article investigates the author’s borrowing and eventual undermining of Bildungsroman poetics.

The concept of fusion is placed by Giacomo Casanova at the forefront of his *Histoire de ma vie* when he observes in the 1797 preface: “Je n’écris ni l’histoire d’un illustre, ni un roman. Digne ou indigne, ma vie est ma matière, ma matière est ma vie.”<sup>1</sup> By melding his life and his literary work, Casanova alludes to the reciprocal effects of writing on experience and experience on writing. While the very act of producing an autobiographical work obviously implies a continuity between living and writing—one’s experience becoming the object of a literary text—the reciprocal movement from writing to experience is another effect of this confusion, existence becoming as it unfolds the material of a retrospective narration. Life is lived in the present as the narrative it will become, a current moment experienced as a future autobiographical

1 Giacomo Casanova, *Histoire de ma vie*, ed. Jean-Christophe Igalens and Érik Leborgne (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2013), 1:7. References are to this edition.

chapter.<sup>2</sup> This back-and-forth between experience and writing, writing and experience signals the voluntary confusion between a text registering the adventures of a past life and a life that is lived in the present as a text to be eventually written. Admittedly, Casanova asserts in the preface that his autobiographical project was belatedly conceived (1:7). And yet he prepared the redaction of his memoirs for decades by taking extensive notes on the events of his life and producing a variety of autobiographical pieces before the *Histoire de ma vie*, most notably *Le Duel* (1780) and *Histoire de ma fuite des prisons de la République de Venise* (1787).<sup>3</sup> Taken more broadly, the concept of confusion has complementary implications for Casanova's work: it is the foundational concept of his poetics and the key to understand a sweeping intellectual change across the age of Enlightenment.

As noted by John C. O'Neal, eighteenth-century French philosophers and novelists used the concept of confusion to "call attention to the need to combat dogmatism, to blur or mix the boundaries between categories, and to recognize the importance of embracing complexity."<sup>4</sup> O'Neal draws on the etymological meaning of the French word "confusion," and points out that it derives part of its meaning from the verb "fondre" or "melt." Admittedly, the concept of confusion is not devoid of negative connotations since it often describes a disturbed state of mind, if not an innate intellectual weakness; it is used to indicate that the mind that fails to see boundaries between concepts lacks the ability to create order, and thus to navigate the world and act on it. It can also be argued, however, that the dissolving of categories allows for the observation of continuities that would otherwise go unnoticed. This view was held by a number of prominent French philosophers, in particular by d'Alembert, who declared in the article "Cosmologie" of the *Encyclopédie*: "Tout est lié dans la Nature; tous les êtres se tiennent

2 On this question, see Benjamin Hoffmann, "La Loterie et la ruse," in *Les Paradoxes de la postérité* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2019), 61–80.

3 See, for example, the 1797 preface: "L'ayant faite [ma vie] sans avoir jamais cru que l'envie de l'écrire me viendrait, elle peut avoir un caractère intéressant qu'elle n'aurait peut-être pas, si je l'avais faite avec intention de l'écrire dans mes vieux jours, et qui plus est de la publier" (1:7). Casanova, *Le Duel, ou essai sur la vie de J.-C. Vénitien*, trad. R. Vèze (1780; Paris: Allia, 1998); and Casanova, *Histoire de ma fuite des prisons de la République de Venise, qu'on appelle les Plombs* (1787; Paris: Allia, 1999). On the genesis of Casanova's autobiographical project, see Gérard Lahouati, "Le Long travail (le manuscrit de l'*Histoire de ma vie* de Casanova)," *Genesis* 34 (2012): 97–122, <https://journals.openedition.org/genesis/943>.

4 John C. O'Neal, *The Progressive Poetics of Confusion in the French Enlightenment* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 18.

par une chaîne dont nous apercevons quelques parties continues, quoique dans un plus grand nombre d'endroits la continuité nous échappe."<sup>5</sup> Seen in this way, confusion may be a liberating practice that allows us to break free from artificial separations and to embrace the fundamental lability of things.

According to O'Neal, this concept became the paradigm of a new understanding of the world during the age of Enlightenment, by promoting such principles as homogeneity and impermanence, in contrast to the Classical Age that was firmly established upon concepts of hierarchy and separation, especially in the literary domain. The lingering influence of the Classical Age on literature is demonstrated throughout the century by the widespread reverence for Aristotle's *Poetics* and its clear-cut distinction between genres.<sup>6</sup> Insisting on the far-reaching impact of a new way of thinking derived from the idea of confusion, O'Neal argues that it functioned as a "method for breaking down barriers, mixing or blurring distinctions between metaphysical categories or other social and cultural divisions; and as a challenge to narrowly defined established standards of morality and taste."<sup>7</sup> The reorganizing effect of the concept of "confusion" may be observed in a wide range of fields, including metaphysics, epistemology, morality, and aesthetics.

This article focuses on the last of these fields, by studying Casanova's voluntary blurring of the categories of memoir and Bildungsroman. While O'Neal does not mention Casanova, his work deserves to be studied as a telling example of the provocative effect of confusion between neighbouring genres. By calling his work a "story," Casanova implicitly declines to characterize it as a novel or as a memoir and lays claim to the freedom to borrow from the poetics of these two genres situated at either end of the social spectrum. In his classic study, Georges May shows that the eighteenth-century French novel was often criticized for representing characters belonging to the bourgeoisie and the lowest ranks of society. Eighteenth-century French novelists attempted to distance themselves from the work of their predecessors (in particular d'Urfé, Scudéry, and La Calprenède), who authored gigantic novels with

5 *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and d'Alembert (Paris, 1754), s.v. "Cosmologie," by Jean Le Rond D'Alembert, IV:294a, Édition Numérique Collaborative et Critique de l'Encyclopédie (ENCCRE). For another outlook on the interrelation of objects, see Denis Diderot, *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*, ed. Colas Duflou (1754; Paris: G-F Flammarion, 2005), 67–68.

6 See Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny (London: Penguin, 1997).

7 O'Neal, 22.

numerous and lengthy digressions from the framing narrative, often situated in a distant and imaginary past, and accumulating an endless series of implausible twists and turns.<sup>8</sup> In order to overcome a perceived aesthetic flaw (the lack of credibility of such novels as *L'Astrée*; *Artamène, ou le Grand Cyrus*; and *Cléopâtre*), eighteenth-century French novelists tried situating their narratives in a more realistic setting, which in turn led to criticism of an ethical nature: by refusing to idealize the world they depicted, they were perceived as agents of corruption.<sup>9</sup> Caught in a double bind between undertaking aesthetic innovations and complying with ethical injunctions, eighteenth-century French novelists looked for ways to earn new levels of recognition in favour of a literary genre regarded as minor, if not lowly.

Conversely, the memoir was firmly associated with the aristocratic class. Since this genre contributed to the creation of a collective memory, it had to be practised by members of the social class that made history on the battlefield and witnessed its construction at the king's court.<sup>10</sup> This close-knit relationship between memoirs, the aristocracy, and History is underlined in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*: "Mémoires, (*Littér.*) terme aujourd'hui très usité, pour signifier des histoires écrites par des personnes qui ont eu part aux affaires ou qui en ont été témoins oculaires. [...] Ainsi avons-nous les *mémoires* de Comines, ceux de Sully, ceux du cardinal de Retz, qui peuvent passer pour de bonnes instructions pour les hommes d'état."<sup>11</sup> By giving the example of three noblemen—Philippe de Commines (1447–1511), Maximilien de Béthune, Duke of Sully (1560–1641), and Jean-François-Paul de Gondi, Cardinal of Retz (1613–79)—the *Encyclopédie* implies that memoirs are the preserve of the social class involved in the kingdom's public affairs, while their main function consists in serving as sources of documentation and inspiration for aristocrats preparing themselves to take on high offices one day. Needless to say, the memories of a mere

8 For more on late seventeenth-century French narratives, see Thomas DiPiero, "Unreadable Novels: Toward a Theory of Seventeenth-Century Aristocratic Fiction," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 38, nos. 2–3 (2005): 129–46, <https://doi.org/10.1215/ddnov.038020129>.

9 Georges May, *Le Dilemme du roman au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Étude sur les rapports du roman et de la critique (1715–1761)* (Paris: PUF; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

10 On aristocratic memoirs, see Jean-Marie Goulemot, "Les Pratiques littéraires ou la publicité du privé," in *Histoire de la vie privée*, ed. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby (reprint, Paris: Seuil, 1999), 3:359–94.

11 *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Diderot and d'Alembert (Neuchâtel: Samuel Faulche, 1765), s.v. "Mémoires," X:228b, ENCCRE.

commoner were not only useless to serve in that role, they were also unbecoming of this prestigious genre.

Going against the clear separation and social hierarchization of genres, the beginning of Casanova's autobiography indicates a voluntary confusion between the aristocratic memoir and the plebeian novel. *Histoire de ma vie* starts with a fictional genealogy that derides the aristocratic practice of presenting one's ancestors in the first pages of the memoir in order to claim the legitimacy of undertaking an autobiographical work, since it was the nobleman's social standing that gave him the right to write his own story. While imitating his aristocratic models who proudly introduced their ancestors to the reader, Casanova subverts this literary prerequisite by inventing a fanciful cast of forefathers: the illegitimate son of a nobleman who eloped with a nun, a poet forced to leave Rome because of a bold satire, an adventurer who fought in a duel then passed away as he was travelling with none other than Christopher Columbus (1:21–23). The confusion between the memoir and the novel appears in plain sight as the aristocratic practice of situating oneself in a lineage becomes the assertion of one's freedom to *invent* one's past, as well as a literary device foreshadowing the key events in the writer's life. It is no coincidence that one of his so-called "ancestors" spent "a year in jail," while another killed "an officer of the King of Naples," since Casanova's major claims to fame were his 1756 escape from the jail in Venice and his 1766 duel with the Polish count Franciszek Ksawery Branicki. Paradoxically, a fictional genealogy proleptically announces the autobiographer's bravura pieces, thus confusing the poetics of memoir and novel in the very first pages of the work.

In the text as a whole, a traditionally aristocratic genre is regularly invigorated by numerous borrowings of elements taken from the Bildungsroman, which typically describes the hardships of an underprivileged young man discovering the truth about his own self, until he finds his place in the world. My definition of the Bildungsroman is borrowed from Susan Rubin Suleiman:

Syntagmatiquement, on peut définir une histoire d'apprentissage (de *Bildung*) par deux transformations parallèles affectant le Sujet: d'une part, la transformation *ignorance* (de soi) → *connaissance* (de soi); d'autre part, la transformation *passivité* → *action*. [...] Les aventures où le héros triomphe sont les moyens par lesquels il « découvre sa propre essence », remplissant ainsi la fonction classique de l'épreuve, mais elles sont également la preuve qu'il a atteint à la connaissance de soi, condition

préalable pour toute action authentique à venir. C'est au seuil de « la vie nouvelle » du héros que se termine l'histoire d'apprentissage. Cela explique pourquoi, dans le *Bildungsroman* classique, le héros est toujours un homme jeune.<sup>12</sup>

Admittedly, the concept of *Bildungsroman* is posterior to *Histoire de ma vie* (1789–98). It was first used in 1819 by the critic Karl Morgenstern during his lectures at the University of Dorpat, and it is not before the second part of the nineteenth century that it gained wide critical acceptance, when the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey applied it in his *Das Leben Schleiermachers* (1867–70).<sup>13</sup> In addition, the two major texts associated with the birth of this genre—Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96) and Hölderlin's *Hyperion* (1797–99)—had no influence on Casanova, who undertook the redaction of his memoirs in 1789 and passed away in 1798. In any case, Casanova did not speak German (which was quite impractical, as he spent the last decade of his life in Dux, a small town in German-speaking Bohemia). Nonetheless, novels displaying *Bildungsroman* characteristics were published before this concept was coined by Morgenstern. In French literature, the tradition of the “roman d'apprentissage” largely prefigures Dilthey's definition of the *Bildungsroman* as a text tracing “the progress of a young person toward self-understanding as well as a sense of social responsibility.”<sup>14</sup> An avid reader, Casanova was familiar with this tradition, which included such works as Lesage's *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* (1715–35), Prévost's *Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (1731) and *Histoire de la jeunesse du commandeur* (1741). Although he came to literary existence almost nine decades before Morgenstern's lectures, Prévost's chevalier des Grieux is the epitome of the *Bildungs*-hero, who breaks with his family, undertakes an initiatory journey in an urban underworld, and ultimately reintegrates into his original social milieu (I will return to the circular diegetic structure of the *Bildungsroman* and its underlying political conservatism later in this essay).<sup>15</sup> The very title of Casanova's autobiography might have been influenced by these examples

12 Susan Rubin Suleiman, “La Structure d'apprentissage, *Bildungsroman* et roman à thèse,” *Poétique*, no. 37 (February 1979): 24.

13 On this topic, see Giovanna Summerfield and Lisa Downward, *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 1.

14 Summerfield and Downward, 1.

15 Alison Finch presents *Manon Lescaut* as one of the French works that “pave the way for the great European *Bildungsromane* of the nineteenth century.” Finch, “The French *Bildungsroman*,” in *A History of the Bildungsroman*, ed. Sarah Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 38.

of the Bildungsroman *avant la lettre*, after he refused to call his memoirs *Confessions*, a title he considered then decided to move aside in order to manifest his refusal of the Rousseauian autobiographical model.<sup>16</sup>

In order to demonstrate the merging of memoir and Bildungsroman under the cover of *Histoire de ma vie*, I will analyze two episodes in Paris, the first between the summer of 1750 and the winter of 1752, and the second between the winter of 1757 and the fall of 1759. Casanova clearly suggests the kinship between these autobiographical episodes and the poetics of the Bildungsroman by entitling the chapter describing his discovery of the French capital “Mon premier apprentissage à Paris l’année 1750” (1:112).<sup>17</sup> The word “apprentissage” reveals that the aged writer remembering his past life saw Paris as the place where the former embodiment of his self underwent a transformative process that made him the man and the writer he finally became. But what exactly did Casanova learn in Paris during these two periods? And is the fusion between “memoir” and “Bildungsroman,” what we might call the “Bildungsmemoir,” the random mixture of two poetics or the paradoxical space where the confusion of these genres leads to their reciprocal subversion?

### *1750–52: A Literary “Bildungsmemoir”*

Casanova came to the French capital in the aftermath of two painful experiences that gave him an intense thirst for pleasures and oblivion. His first stay was immediately after his break-up with the mysterious Henriette, a French aristocrat with whom he lived what was probably his most intense love story.<sup>18</sup> His second stay also happened after a

16 “Ou mon histoire ne verra jamais le jour, ou ce sera une vraie confession. Elle fera rougir des lecteurs qui n’auront jamais rougi de leur vie, car elle sera un miroir dans lequel de temps en temps ils se verront, et quelques uns jeteront mon livre par la fenêtre; mais ils ne diront rien à personne. Elle ne portera pas le titre de confession, car depuis qu’il a été profané par un extravagant je ne peux plus le souffrir; mais elle sera une confession si jamais il y en eut.” Fragment quoted in Francis Lacassin, preface to *Histoire de ma vie*, by Casanova (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1997), 1:2. On the differences between the autobiographical projects of Rousseau and Casanova, see Hoffmann, “La Scène du vol dans l’enfance de Rousseau et Casanova,” *Revue Littératures*, no. 27 (2012): 93–115, <http://litteratures.mcgill.ca/article/view/37>.

17 This subtitle of chapter 10, book 3, was used by Chantal Thomas as the title of her edition of Casanova’s Parisian episodes: *Casanova: Mon apprentissage à Paris*, ed. Chantal Thomas (Paris: Rivages poche, 1998).

18 On Henriette, see J. Rives Childs, *Casanova: A Biography Based on New Documents* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), 59.



key moment in his life, following his escape from the jails of Venice. Chantal Thomas rightly observes that Casanova's "two stays correspond to a return to freedom" (1:756),<sup>19</sup> by which she means an escape from both the metaphorical trap of monogamy, and the very literal Venetian prison where he was sent as punishment for atheism and excessive libertinage. To cure him of his most recent sufferings, the French capital places at his disposal an epicurean lifestyle, which is described in the following terms by one of his Parisian hosts: "Vous êtes en France Monsieur où l'on connaît le prix de la vie, et où on tâche d'en tirer parti. Nous aimons les plaisirs, et nous nous croyons heureux quand nous pouvons les faire naître."<sup>20</sup>

Beyond their intrinsic sensual value, the pleasures of Paris are also learning experiences for Casanova, who organizes the narration of his story around one major theme: the progressive mastery of the French language, that is to say, his own birth as a Francophone writer. Roland Barthes famously describes Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27) as a "narrative about the desire to write,"<sup>21</sup> or the Bildungsroman of a literary vocation. Seen in this light, Proust's main character is confronted with a series of obstacles that prepare him for the literary endeavour he finally undertakes at the novel's conclusion. In much the same way, Casanova's Parisian section is a literary, self-reflexive narrative, reconstructing the various steps allowing him to realize his full potential as a writer. In that respect, it belongs to the Künstlerroman category: a subgenre of the Bildungsroman that focuses on an artist's growth to maturity.<sup>22</sup> While *À la recherche du temps perdu* centres on the evolution of someone who does not yet write (or who writes only very occasionally) but eventually will achieve a full-fledged work, *Histoire de ma vie* retraces the steps of a young man who has no hesitation about his capacity to eventually join the ranks of the Republic of Letters, but has to become proficient in writing French, a language "more widespread than mine" (1:17), spoken by people who are more "knowledgeable of the human heart, and more expert in the tribulations of life" (1:1329,

19 Thomas, "La Roue de la Fortune," in *Casanova: Mon Apprentissage à Paris*, 13.

20 Regarding the culture of pleasures in eighteenth-century France, see Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightened Pleasures: Eighteenth-Century France and the New Epicureanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

21 Roland Barthes, "Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure," in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 5:459.

22 On this topic, see Roberta Seret, *Voyage into Creativity: The Modern Künstlerroman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).



my translation). In Casanova's case, it is less the "desire" to write that is problematic than the challenge of writing well, which requires the mastery of a foreign language that will become the material the author will use to build his masterpiece.

In *Histoire de ma vie*, the quick succession of new characters and the fast-paced telling of anecdotes reflect the intense social life Casanova enjoyed. These anecdotes often play a strategic role by introducing key themes that become principles of organization according to which the rest of the narration is structured. In that respect, it would be easy to underestimate the significance of the very first Parisian memory Casanova shares with his readership. As though in passing, he mentions that, on his first night in Paris, he made the acquaintance of an Italian writer, Elena Balletti alias Flaminia, who treated him disdainfully.<sup>23</sup> Casanova observes: "Elle me fit comprendre qu'elle savait qu'illustre dans la république des lettres elle parlait à un insecte; elle avait l'air de dicter, et elle croyait d'en avoir le droit à soixante et dix ans vis-à-vis d'un garçon de vingt-cinq ans qui n'avait enrichi aucune bibliothèque" (1:712). By underlining the arrogance of his compatriot, a woman of letters whose previously lauded work is nearly forgotten, Casanova warns his reader that the story of his first Parisian stay will be a revenge story set in the Republic of Letters, whose title could be "He who laughs from beyond the grave laughs best."

Casanova puts much emphasis on the various milestones of his linguistic journey. The most important one is his meeting with the French playwright Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, or Crébillon père (1674–1762). The author of numerous tragedies, Crébillon plays a role in the first Parisian episode that is inseparable from Bildungsroman poetics: the mentor.<sup>24</sup> Casanova becomes his student after meeting him at a dinner party hosted by Silvia Balletti (1701–58), Marivaux's favourite actress. During their first encounter, Crébillon gives the following warning to Casanova:

Vous parlez Français à vous faire parfaitement comprendre; mais tout ce que vous avez dit, vous l'avez prononcé par des phrases italiennes.

<sup>23</sup> For more on Elena Balletti, see Aurore Évain, "Elena Virginia Balletti," in *Dictionnaire des femmes de l'Ancien Régime*, SIEFAR (Société internationale pour l'étude des femmes de l'Ancien Régime), 2008, [http://siefar.org/dictionnaire/fr/Elena\\_Virginia\\_Balletti](http://siefar.org/dictionnaire/fr/Elena_Virginia_Balletti).

<sup>24</sup> As Esther Kleinbord Labovitz puts it: "Every male hero of the Bildungsroman is guided by a mentor." Kleinbord Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine: The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century* (1986; New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 24.

Vous vous faites écouter, vous intéressez, et vous vous attirez par cette nouveauté une double attention de la part de ceux qui vous écoutent: je vous dirai même que votre jargon est fait pour vous captiver le suffrage de ceux qui vous écoutent car il est singulier, et nouveau, et vous êtes dans le pays, où l'on court après tout ce qui est singulier, et nouveau; mais malgré tout cela vous devez commencer demain, pas plus tard à vous donner toutes les peines pour apprendre à bien parler notre langue, car dans deux, ou trois mois les mêmes qui vous applaudissent aujourd'hui commenceront à se moquer de vous. (1:732)

Crébillon then offers to teach French to Casanova, and the two men continue meeting three times a week for a year. Learning French from an esteemed man of letters is the main objective of Casanova's efforts in Paris: indeed, he does not apply himself to anything but the progressive mastery of a language and the social codes organizing its use. This linguistic training is not entirely successful. Casanova observes that he never managed to become truly fluent in French: "Je n'ai jamais pu me défaire des tournures italiennes: je les connais quand je les trouve dans les autres; mais lorsqu'elles sortent de ma plume je ne les connais pas, et je suis sûr que je n'apprendrai jamais à les connaître, comme je n'ai jamais pu voir en quoi consiste le vice qu'on impute à Tite-Live dans sa latinité" (1:734). The authority of Titus Livy is regularly invoked by Casanova in order to make a case for his Italian imports into the French language, as the ancient author wrote his *History of Rome* in Latin with a distinctly Paduan style.<sup>25</sup> In much the same way that Livy's work could be appreciated by the Romans despite its provincial accents, Casanova believes his style may be enjoyed by his French readership. Alas for him, an ardent purist, Jean Laforgue, found much to say about Casanova's use of the French language and transformed *Histoire de ma vie* into a pale copy of itself with overzealous editing, before the rediscovery of the original text and the modern critical editions that followed.<sup>26</sup>

Casanova's observation about the difficulty of moulding an acquired language to the structures of one's native language resonates with the

<sup>25</sup> In addition to the previous quotation, Titus Livy is also mentioned by Casanova in *Histoire de ma vie*, 1:17, 1:739, and 1:1330.

<sup>26</sup> Written in French between 1789 and 1798, Casanova's memoirs were published during the 1820s in a version significantly altered by Jean Laforgue. On Laforgue, see Charles Samaran, "Jean Laforgue, 'arrangeur' français des mémoires de Casanova (Marcillac 1782–Dresde 1852)," *Annuaire-Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de France* (1970–71): 75–86. The original manuscript of *Histoire de ma vie* was purchased in 2010 by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

debate between prescriptivists and descriptivists. While prescriptivists emphasize rules and the existence of a correct usage (defined, in France, by the decrees of the French Academy), descriptivists consider language as an ever-changing system of conventions and choose to record its manifold evolutions rather than recommending specific linguistic practices over others. In eighteenth-century France, the intellectual circles were overwhelmingly in favour of prescriptivism, as exemplified by Voltaire, who firmly believed in the existence of a *bon usage* whose mastery was the prerogative of the elite. As demonstrated by Michael Mulryan, Voltaire saw the French spoken by the intellectual elite as naturally superior to that of both the people and the uncultivated members of the bourgeoisie.<sup>27</sup> In particular, Voltaire feared a progressive corruption of the French language due to provincial and popular imports: “selon Voltaire, pour parachever une langue, il faut détruire certaines expressions barbares qui apparaissent à cause de l'évolution linguistique, un travail que seuls les auteurs renommés peuvent réaliser.”<sup>28</sup> The author of *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763) was particularly biased against barbarisms and solecisms, and he firmly condemned anyone, who, according to him, was guilty of lexical and syntactical improprieties.<sup>29</sup>

Overall, Casanova's relation to the French language is in complete opposition to Voltaire's, and this incongruity is particularly striking as they shared a common desire to be recognized as members of the French elite to which they did not belong by birth. Voltaire's fierce defence of the *bon usage* cannot be separated from his social aspirations, notably from his desire to become a member of the temple of French grammatical correctness, the French Academy, a project he finally realized in 1746 after several unsuccessful attempts.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, Casanova shows his embrace of linguistic descriptivism in the 1797 preface of *Histoire de ma vie* when he asserts that purists will be right to criticize his Italianisms under one special circumstance only: “Les puristes qui trouvant dans mon style des tournures de mon pays me critiqueront auront raison, si elles les empêcheront de me trouver clair” (1:17, emphasis added). In other words, prescriptivists have no grounds from which to chastise his

27 Michael Mulryan, “L'Attitude de Voltaire vis-à-vis de ‘par contre’ et d'autres expressions plébéiennes: Ambition sociale et prescriptivisme grammatical se croisent,” *French Studies in Southern Africa*, no. 48 (2018): 122–40.

28 Mulryan, 125.

29 Voltaire, *Les Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, dir. Beauchot (Paris: Garnier Frères), 19:561.

30 On Voltaire's ambitions, see Karlis Racevskis, *Voltaire and the French Academy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Department of Romance Languages, 1975).

infractions of grammatical rules since the clarity of his expression trumps his sporadic Italianisms and occasional ruptures with French linguistic norms. Casanova does not uphold an ideal of grammatical purity that, for Voltaire, functions as a sign of allegiance to the full-fledged members of the elite while simultaneously betraying his own insecurities and perceived lack of social adequacy. In contrast, the Venetian defends the integration of a foreign style into the structures and vocabulary of the French language and, far from seeing it as a corruption or a debasement, advocates for playful additions that he sees as ornaments.

In addition, confusing the structures of Italian with the terms and grammatical rules of the French language provides another example of the hybridization that was often, in the eighteenth century, promoted between seemingly heterogeneous systems. In order to express his disgust with those who oppose foreign imports into France, Casanova defends the mixture of Italian and French by using a fashion metaphor: “La langue française est la sœur bien-aimée de la mienne; je l’habille souvent à l’italienne; je la regarde, elle me semble plus jolie, elle me plaît davantage, et je me trouve content. Sûr en grammaire et certain qu’aucun lecteur ne me trouvera obscur, j’ai défendu à mon éditeur d’adopter des corrections que quelque puriste constipé s’aviserait d’introduire dans mon manuscrit” (“Préface de 1791,” 1:1330). The confusion of languages is defended as an aesthetic choice that adds surprising beauties to the use of French; it is simultaneously an ethical choice, since it promotes a subversion of fixed norms thanks to the introduction of foreign practices into a so-called pure system. By contaminating the French language with Italian sounds and structures, Casanova demonstrates that French is not a perfect system to be respected at all costs, but a changeable material that can be mixed with Italian words and syntagms for the pleasure of his readership. Casanova regularly uses neologisms such as “escogitables” (for “imaginables,” conceivable), “vaniloques” (for “radotages,” ramblings), or “lambi” (for “léché,” licked), and often moulds his French structures into Italian models (“en pointe des pieds”/“in puta di piedi”: on tiptoes; “à précipice”/“a precipizio”: at full speed).<sup>31</sup> As Jean-Christophe Igalens observes: “La langue de l’*Histoire de ma vie* est la manifestation la plus intime, la plus incorporée, la plus concrète d’un travail d’individuation en œuvre au sein d’un système de contraintes collectives qu’il vise moins à briser qu’à

31 For a list of these imports, see Jean-Christophe Igalens, “Casanova, écrivain,” in *Histoire de ma vie*, t. 1, LVIII–LXV.

subvertir.”<sup>32</sup> In that respect, Casanova's lessons about French are still relevant for today's Francophonie, since he demonstrates that being a French writer does not necessarily mean that one has to respect the French Academy rules. Against the model of integration into French norms defended by Vaugelas (1585–1650), Bouhours (1628–1702), Rivarol (1753–1801), Voltaire, and other prescriptivists, Casanova encourages subversion and a progressive hybridization of the French language thanks to the playful merging of foreign elements.<sup>33</sup>

Beyond the question of the French language itself, Casanova tackles the related issue of mastering the social codes of the Parisian elite. Indeed, he devotes much attention to the various blunders that taught him how to fit into French society. Narrated with a self-mocking kind of humour, these blunders are exemplary moments of a different kind of confusion, which he needed to overcome in order to become a well-adjusted member of French society and eventually an esteemed French writer. These blunders can be separated into two categories: situational and linguistic. To the first category belongs this anecdote when Casanova, at the opera, asks an unknown man besides him: “Qui est donc, dis-je à mon gros voisin, cette grosse cochonne?” The man replies, “C'est la femme de ce gros cochon” (1:738). Confused and dejected, Casanova learns a lesson about the spontaneity of language that can be applied to both the social and literary worlds he aspires to join: one has to be mindful of one's audience and know it well before saying anything, as the success of a young man depends largely on his capacity to tailor his speech to the cultural expectations of those who listen to him.

The category of linguistic blunders is illustrated by a wide array of anecdotes. In some cases, Casanova enjoys tremendous social success because he is accidentally witty. While admiring two actors on a Parisian stage, a French aristocrat asks him which one he finds prettier. When Casanova indicates the lady he prefers, his interlocutor replies that she has ugly legs. Casanova then says, “Dans l'examen de la beauté d'une femme la première chose que j'écartere sont les jambes” (1:776). Without knowing it, Casanova is employing a kind of syllepsis, the French verb “écarter” meaning “to set aside” but also “to spread out.” His social standing immediately improves after this accidental *trait*

<sup>32</sup> Igalens, LVIII.

<sup>33</sup> On the hybridization of French in the works of francophone African writers, see Odile Cazenave, *Afrique sur Seine: A New Generation of African Writers in Paris* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007).

*d'esprit*, as he observes: "Ce bon mot-là dit par hasard, et dont je ne connaissais pas la force, me rendit respectable, et fit devenir la compagnie de la loge curieuse de moi" (1:776). Nonetheless, the very same night, he mispronounces the word "calfeutrées" as "calfoutrées" (1:776), involuntarily contaminating an innocent word meaning "to caulk" with the obscene word "foutre" ("sperm"). The consequence does not take long to arrive; Casanova is ridiculed by the elegant company around him: "On rit alors beaucoup, et j'en fus mortifié parce que je me suis aperçu que j'avais mal prononcé le mot calfeutrées. J'avais l'air tout humilié" (1:776).

A few pages later, Casanova reports another dubious expression he used without intending its sexual undertone. During an Italian lesson, his student uses the expression "di vi vedere" instead of "di vedervi." When the young woman says, "Je croyais, Monsieur, qu'il fallait mettre le *vi* devant," Casanova answers, "Non Mademoiselle, nous le mettons derrière" (1:790). Unfortunately for him, "vit" means "penis" in French and, to make matters worse, he has used the word "derrière" (behind) instead of "après" (after). This salacious but involuntary wordplay makes him the laughing stock of the French capital, while teaching him a valuable lesson about the power of words: "Cet equivoque insolent courut Paris, et me rendit fameux; mais j'ai enfin connu la force de la langue, et pour lors ma fortune diminua" (1:790). Mastering the language is the key to controlling one's destiny among the French elite.

In eighteenth-century France, ridicule was much more than an unpleasant but ephemeral sensation. It came with a most serious penalty: social death. As Antoine Lilti points out: "In the highly codified worldly society, ignoring the customs, arbitrary though they may be, was enough to render someone ridiculous ... [Ridicule was] a symbolic death even more terrible than physical death in the eyes of those who lived in high society and had taken on its values."<sup>34</sup> As illustrated by Patrice Leconte's movie *Ridicule* (1996), which portrays the French aristocracy under the reign of Louis XVI, social status rose and fell based on one's capacity to avoid ridicule at all costs. Observing the unclear definition of a term that yet played such a key role among the elite, French author and contributor to the *Encyclopédie* Charles Pinot Duclos (1704–72) felt the need to clarify this concept by situating it in the social context of his time: "Le ridicule consiste à choquer la mode ou l'opinion, et

<sup>34</sup> Antoine Lilti, *The World of the Salons: Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 168.

communément on les confond assez avec la raison [...] Comme la mode est parmi nous la raison par excellence, nous jugeons des actions, des idées et des sentiments sur leur rapport avec la mode. Tout ce qui n'y est pas conforme est trouvé ridicule."<sup>35</sup>

In this context, Casanova's standing in French society is quite startling. Antoine Lilti notes that "the way to avoid ridicule lay in imitation, which was the principal resource of foreigners, who always took care not to betray insufficient mastery of the codes" (168, emphasis added). In contrast, Casanova's social success is highly unusual because it does not arise from his capacity to imitate the rules but rather to subvert them. The most eloquent example of this practice is certainly his famous response to Mme de Pompadour's question regarding his hometown: "Elle me demanda si j'étais vraiment de là-bas.—D'où donc?—De Venise.—Venise, Madame, n'est pas là-bas; elle est là-haut" (1:774). Far from protesting against an answer that, in the eyes of a prescriptivist, would be nothing more than a grammatical mistake, the assembly around Louis XV's beloved mistress and Casanova reacts by ultimately accepting the latter's answer: "On trouve cette réponse plus singulière que la première, et voilà toute la loge qui fait une consultation pour savoir si Venise était là-bas, ou là-haut. On trouva apparemment que j'avais raison, et on ne m'attaqua plus" (1:776). Casanova's poetic use of the adverb "là-haut" is deemed superior to the correct usage of "là-bas" as it concisely expresses the divine nature, the enchanting superiority of the floating city. The Venetian hero imposes his original subversion of the French language upon those who normally act as protectors of its purity, a feat that resonates with his general attitude towards rules and authority: while seemingly accepting the Law, Casanova ultimately undermines it.<sup>36</sup>

Rising and falling in society because of situational and linguistic blunders, Casanova progressively learns how to integrate the social norms of the French aristocracy into his literary practice. His 1797 preface identifies the readership he has in mind while writing:

35 Charles Pinot Duclos, "Considérations sur les mœurs de ce siècle," in *Œuvres de Duclos* (Paris: Belin, 1821), 1:99.

36 On Casanova's ambivalent relationship with authority, see François Roustang, *Le Bal masqué de Giacomo Casanova* (Paris: Minuit, 1984). See esp. "L'Ordre social par l'inceste," (157–72), on the subversion of what Claude Lévi-Strauss called the "universal prohibition of incest," in *Les Structures élémentaires de la Parenté* (Paris: De Gruyter Mouton, 1967), 28.



Dans cette anné 1797, à l'âge de soixante et douze ans, où je peux dire *vixi* [j'ai vécu], quoique je respire encore, je ne saurais me procurer un amusement plus agréable que celui de m'entretenir de mes propres affaires, et de donner un noble sujet de rire à la bonne compagnie qui m'écoute, qui m'a toujours donné des marques d'amitié, et que j'ai toujours fréquentée. Pour bien écrire, je n'ai besoin que de m'imaginer qu'elle me lira: *Quaecumque dixi, si placuerint, dictavit auditor* [Si quelque chose peut plaire dans ce que j'ai dit, c'est ce que l'auditeur aura dicté]. (1:7–8)

In that respect, mastering the social rules followed by polite society, or “good company,” is another way of getting ready to charm those people, his intended readership, through his literary production. Little by little, Casanova learns to effectively use the French language and to integrate the social norms of the French elite into his literary practice. Thus, his first Parisian sojourn needs to be read as the Bildungsroman of a literary training, describing the various steps he had to take in order to learn both the linguistic and social rules obeyed by the French as well as the pleasure one can find in flouting these same rules.

*1757–59: Subverting the Bildungsmemoir*

During his first stay in Paris, Casanova helped several young women overcome hardships. In particular, he intervened in favour of a young compatriot (whose name is never disclosed), who came to the French capital with the idea of receiving financial support from the Ministry of Defence after her father, a former military officer for France, passed away in Italy (1:824–52). When her attempt is unsuccessful, and when she is seduced and subsequently abandoned by a French aristocrat, Casanova finds her a dance teacher, then a position in the royal ballet; this placement in society in turn allows her to meet the Count of Tressan, an aristocrat who supports her until the end of his life. While this story demonstrates the near-impossibility for women who lived during the eighteenth century to achieve financial independence without a man's support, it is nonetheless adopting the Bildungsroman structure where a character's attempt to escape poverty meets various obstacles followed by a fortuitous conclusion through the intervention of a benevolent character: “Elle fut avec lui [le Comte de Tressan] jusqu'à sa mort toujours heureuse, et le rendant toujours heureux. Elle vit encore à Paris n'ayant besoin de personne, car son amant lui fit un sort” (1:852). Casanova believed in the existence of “good” and “bad genies” influencing people's

lives, and he regularly presents himself as the “benevolent genie” who crossed women’s paths, sharing tender moments with them and becoming the cause of a future happiness they would have never experienced without his almost magical intervention.<sup>37</sup>

By including these stories inside the framework of his own memoirs, Casanova imitates the common practice among eighteenth-century writers of including multiple subplots within the main narrative.<sup>38</sup> In these various feminine Bildungsromane integrated in *Histoire de ma vie*, Casanova plays only a secondary role: he is merely the auxiliary who allows the heroine to reach some degree of financial security. Between 1750 and 1752, he was not doing for himself what he was trying very hard to achieve for the women he encountered. We just saw that he dedicated himself to the mastery of the French language, without ostensibly pursuing the goal of a social progression, which is often, in the Bildungsroman, the main goal of the hero’s quest. But according to the narrator, the stakes of his second Parisian sojourn between 1757 and 1759 are entirely different, something he underlines in the opening passage of the second volume:

Me voilà de nouveau dans le grand Paris, et ne pouvant plus compter sur ma patrie, en devoir d’y faire fortune. J’y avais passé deux ans; mais n’ayant dans ce temps-là autre objet que celui de jouir de la vie, je ne l’avais pas étudié. Cette seconde fois j’avais besoin de faire ma cour à ceux chez lesquels l’aveugle déesse logeait. Je voyais que pour parvenir à quelque chose, j’avais besoin de mettre en jeu toutes mes facultés physiques et morales, de faire connaissance avec des grands et des puissants, d’être le maître de mon esprit, et de prendre la couleur de tous ceux auxquels je verrais que mon intérêt exigeait que je plusse. Pour suivre ces maximes, j’ai vu que je devais me garder de tout ce qu’on appelle à Paris mauvaise compagnie, et renoncer à toutes mes anciennes habitudes, et à toutes sortes de prétentions qui auraient pu me faire des ennemis qui m’auraient facilement donné une réputation d’homme peu propre à des emplois solides. (2:3)

Casanova here anticipates the famous declaration of war with French society made by Rastignac at the conclusion of Balzac’s novel *Le Père*

37 On Casanova’s superstitious beliefs, see Marie-Françoise Luna, “Casanova et ses dieux,” *Europe*, no. 697 (May 1987): 59–67.

38 Alain-René Lesage consistently used this literary device, as demonstrated by the number of subplots within *Le Diable boiteux* (1707–26), *Les Aventures de Monsieur Robert Chevalier, dit de Beauchêne* (1732), and *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* (1715–35).

*Goriot* (1835): “À nous deux maintenant!”<sup>39</sup> The totality of his intellectual faculties will be oriented towards one goal only, namely achieving social success. Despite these liminary declarations, full of good intentions and practical wisdom, Casanova does precisely the opposite in the following chapters. Far from being oriented towards the accumulation of wealth and social capital, the story of his second Parisian stay entirely subverts what is expected of the Bildungsroman. Casanova starts where most Bildungsromane would end, since he dedicates the first pages of this new chapter in his life to the description of the steps he took to establish the royal lottery, which allowed him to have access to France’s highest circles and to make a tremendous amount of money in a short time.<sup>40</sup> The first draw alone provided him with winnings in the amount of forty thousand *livres*, roughly equivalent to 500,000 US dollars today (2:22). Then, after rapidly achieving a remarkable prosperity, Casanova soon deviates from the wise principles he delineated at the outset of his second Parisian sojourn. By undermining his own success, which recedes into the story’s background as soon as it is achieved, Casanova subverts the codes of the Bildungsroman as defined by Suleiman, in which teleological linearity towards the acquisition of knowledge and wealth is a structural principle.

In order to demonstrate this voluntary reversal of the Bildungsroman structure, I will focus on two characters who become central in *Histoire de ma vie* immediately after the description of Casanova’s success with the lottery. The first is Count Tireta, an Italian aristocrat who fled his homeland after committing an embezzlement. Tireta is Casanova’s doppelganger in many respects: he is an Italian in Paris who had to evade the authorities of his homeland; he is an energetic lover who rapidly earns the nickname “Count of Six Times” after making love six times to the same partner in one night; and he is also adept at stealing money from gamblers foolish enough to attend the private events he organizes at his mistress’s apartments. If Tireta is Casanova’s doppelganger, he is a somewhat degraded version of the original: he remains unable to speak French, whereas Casanova, as we have seen, strove to become fluent; and whereas Tireta merely cheats at cards, Casanova’s grandiose schemes led to the creation of the French lottery and involved sophisticated calculations of probability. Casanova does not have a compelling reason to

39 Balzac, *Le Père Goriot* (1835; Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 367.

40 On this topic, see Helmut Watzlawick, “Casanova et les loteries,” in *Être riche au siècle de Voltaire*, ed. Jacques Berchtold and Michel Porret (Geneva: Droz, 1996), 161–71.

help Tireta, whom he has never met before; he is simply recommended to him by a mutual friend. Nevertheless, his decision to protect him may be seen as the expression of an unconscious desire for self-destruction. Tireta operates within a network of less-than-reputable characters, gamblers, duellists, and prostitutes in the Parisian underworld, a social circle that is precisely the kind Casanova had previously sworn to avoid at all costs in order to focus on his own social success. Going against the structure of the Bildungsroman, the narrative describes how he jeopardizes the social success achieved in the first part of his narrative. It is less the story of an ascension of the social ladder than the anatomy of his self-sabotage.

The role played in the narrative by another character demonstrates the inversion of the Bildungsroman structure. This character, the young and witty Mlle de la M..., is living with a libertine aunt when she falls in love with Casanova (2:24–83). A wealthy aristocrat, she offers to marry him and announces she will inherit a considerable fortune. At this point, the autobiographical text breaks, once more, with the literary conventions underpinning the Bildungsroman. For when Casanova turns down this marriage proposal, he refuses to take a step which, in the genre in question, tends to conclude the hero's quest for financial stability and respectability. In the poetics of the Bildungsroman, marriage signals the hero's final integration into a social norm he had initially rejected by leaving his family at the outset of his initiatory process. As France Grenaudier-Klijn puts it: "Adopting a circular diegetic structure, the Bildungsroman frequently ends with the hero's return to the family home, after the acquisition of the necessary maturity and experience. This return, generally followed by a wedding, symbolizes at the same time the hero's reconciliation with an antagonistic world and the conclusion of his initiatory journey."<sup>41</sup> In other words, the Bildungsroman is by definition a socially conservative genre as it reaffirms the legitimacy of the social order to which the hero deliberately returns after a threatening but only temporary rupture with it. By contrast, when he voluntarily spurns an opportunity for social success through a marriage, an opportunity particularly remarkable for someone who was in jail only a few months earlier, Casanova continues to act contrary to the social expectations of his time and, ultimately, his own prosperity. This refused opportunity is echoed in his refusal of French citizenship (which he declines, around the same period, when

41 France Grenaudier-Klijn, *Une littérature de circonstances: texte, hors-texte et ambiguïté générique à travers quatre romans de Marcelle Tinayre* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 75.

his network of well-established friends is able to offer it to him), preferring instead an abstract, cosmopolitan identity better suited to this definition he gives of himself: “un homme libre, citoyen du monde, suivant les lois de tous les souverains sous lesquels il vit.”<sup>42</sup>

Far from aiming at the progressive acquisition of wealth and a permanent installation in one country, Casanova prefers to accumulate experiences and adventures that will later be told in *Histoire de ma vie*, which is the only treasure he wishes to increase. The underlying logic of the Bildungsroman is capitalistic by nature: it tells the story of an accumulation of experiences leading to increased knowledge, practical wisdom, and, in turn, to the progressive improvement of social status. Born near the time of the industrial revolution, during the historical rise of what Fredric Jameson describes as “classical or market capitalism,”<sup>43</sup> the Bildungsroman stages the development of an individual who embraces a social order where wealth is the defining criterion of symbolic pre-eminence, while justifying it through his own struggle to become part of it. However, Casanova favours an ethic and aesthetic of spending and diversion, something he underlines in the preface, written a few months before his death: “Je me croirais coupable, si aujourd’hui je me trouvais riche. Je n’ai rien; j’ai tout jeté, et cela me console, et me justifie” (1:16). This relationship with money is aristocratic by nature, the nobility manifesting its superiority towards the hard-working and earnest bourgeoisie by squandering the wealth they patiently accrued. Once again emulating the aristocratic ethos, Casanova ends up frittering away all the money he earned in the royal lottery by making numerous and lavish gifts to the young workers in his hosiery manufacture. Both Rives Childs and François Roustang underline that Casanova’s simultaneous involvement with several women working for him manifests an implicit competition with King Louis XV, who, in his famous Parc-aux-Cerfs, had created a personal harem.<sup>44</sup>

After provoking his own failure by trying to live above his means and social status, Casanova ends up leaving France a second time, and he wanders throughout Europe for years on end. Whereas a Bildungsroman traditionally begins with hardships and often ends with a marriage that signals the definitive integration of the struggling hero within

<sup>42</sup> Casanova, quoted in Luna, “Un ‘citoyen du monde’ à travers l’Europe: G. Casanova de Seingalt,” *Dix-huitième siècle*, no. 25 (1993): 217, <https://doi.org/10.3406/dhs.1993.1920>.

<sup>43</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Critical Theory: A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert Dale Parker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 469.

<sup>44</sup> Childs, 161; and Roustang, 142.

the society's fabric, Casanova does precisely the opposite. His Parisian Bildungsroman starts with success and ends in failure, thus opening the way to further experiences that will provide him with additional materials for his memoirs. The author's familiarity with the novel as a literary form allowed him to recognize the similarities between his life and the story of fictional characters when they manifested themselves. This familiarity with the novel genre also permitted him to anticipate and avoid the aphasia that eventually overtakes the narrator of a Bildungsroman, since nothing else needs to be said when the successful hero has nothing else to long for. Failing as a person is the key to succeeding as a writer since the *roman* continues only if the *Bildung* stays unfinished.

The voluntary confusion between Bildungsroman and memoir in *Histoire de ma vie* reflects the ambiguousness of Casanova's social position. The author-narrator is poised between the plebeian world from which he comes (the son of an actor and an actress, his origins are close to the bottom of eighteenth-century European society) and the aristocratic milieu in which he aspires to be recognized as an equal through, among other means, the adoption of a title he invented for himself ("chevalier de Seingalt"). In this respect, the fluid generic definition of *Histoire de ma vie* mirrors Casanova's own conception of a mobile identity that can be reinvented according to his whims and the needs of the moment. As Igalens observes, "être identifié, c'est être condamné; être reconduit à une identité antérieure, c'est perdre sa liberté. Tout au long du récit, être reconnu comme *le même* constituera un obstacle à surmonter par un subterfuge ou à éluder par la fuite" (XLIII). Viewed in this light, Casanova's confusion between memoir and Bildungsroman is the literary equivalent of his plastic representation of personal identity, whose fundamental openness to change allows him to be equally at ease with "postillion riders and kings,"<sup>45</sup> and to become *someone else* as he travels from one social sphere to the next.<sup>46</sup>

More broadly, this generic confusion also points to the lability of memoir as a literary genre. The Bildungsroman is not the only

45 "Je vous recommande instamment M. Jacques Casanova, homme à connaissances profondes, qui a vu autant de postillons que de rois [...] Je crois vous faire, Milord, un cadeau réel en vous procurant la connaissance [...] de ce cosmopolite clairvoyant, philosophe et mondain à la fois." Maximilien Lamberg to Lord Montagu, in *Pages casanoviennes* (Paris: Jean Fort, 1925), 1:1–2.

46 Casanova used various pseudonyms throughout his life, including Castelnovo, Kasanov, Neuhaus, Farussi, Seingalt, Sangalli, San Gallo, Kasanov de Farusi. See Luna, "Un 'citoyen du monde' à travers l'Europe," 216–17.

genre that Casanova decided to merge with his autobiography. The influence of theatre can be felt throughout *Histoire de ma vie*, as Casanova drew many parallels between his existence and the rules and aesthetic governing classical theatre. His meeting with La Charpillon in London—a courtesan whose rejection of his sexual advances eventually led him to the brink of madness—is described by Casanova as the conclusion of his life’s “first act”: “Ce fut la clôture du premier acte de ma vie. Celle du second se fit à mon départ de Venise l’an 1783. Celle du troisième arrivera apparemment ici où je m’amuse à écrire ces mémoires. La comédie sera alors finie, et elle aura eu trois actes. Si on la sifflera, j’espère que je ne l’entendrai dire de personne” (3:157). Even the experience of death reveals the baroque identity between the world and the theatre: “La mort est un monstre qui chasse du grand théâtre un spectateur attentif avant qu’une pièce qui l’intéresse infiniment finisse” (1:16). Theatre is much more than a metaphor regularly invoked by the son of a famous actress to describe the events of his life; it is a literary model from which he draws his inspiration to structure the retrospective narration of several events in his adventurous existence, as demonstrated by the narration of his simultaneous involvement with the nuns M.M. and C.C. that bears the mark of Marivaux’s *La Double inconstance* (1723).<sup>47</sup>

In this respect, Casanova’s memoirs can be seen as a hybrid collection of genres where autobiography merges with other forms—the Bildungsroman and theatre, but also the epic, the philosophical meditation, and the art of conversation.<sup>48</sup> These formal confusions create, prior to the letter, a Gesamtkunstwerk or “total work of art”: an all-embracing text that is the sum of a life and a bold experiment in literary synthesis.



<sup>47</sup> For more on Marivaux’s influence on Casanova’s writing, see Ilona Kovács, “Casanova et Marivaux: Deux cas de l’écriture du désir,” in *Casanova fin de siècle*, dir. Marie-Françoise Luna (Paris: Champion, 2002), 179–91.

<sup>48</sup> On Casanova and the epic (especially the influence of the sixteenth-century Italian epic poem *Orlando Furioso* by Ariosto), see Luna, “Le Monde enchanté de l’Arioste,” chapter 3 in *Casanova mémorialiste* (Paris: Champion, 1998), 477–94. On the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk, see *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork: On Borders and Fragments*, ed. Anke K. Finger and Danielle Follett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).