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# GIACOMO CASANOVA: LOVE IN THE TIME OF INDIVIDUALITY

## Introduction

Academic research on the life and works of Giacomo Casanova (1725-1798) most often kicks off with a justification and/or rehabilitation of the object of investigation. Most recently Helmut Bertram expounded that “down to the present day the world is passing on an incorrect image of Casanova” (154), and that the self-proclaimed Chevalier de Seingalt was far more than an erotomaniac: namely, a sophisticated man of letters whose interests were “more far-reaching and whose knowledge was far more comprehensive than we can imagine” (148). This has been a general tendency of Casanova scholarship ever since Gustav Gugitz’ attempt to debunk the *History of my Life* as a concoction of lies (Gugitz 1921): to prove not just the veracity of the Chevalier’s memoirs, but also their poetic and intellectual value. The German author Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), for one, identified the *History of my Life* as Europe’s “most valuable record of eighteenth century life” (9). This became the creed of the so-called Casanovists and a key incentive for their continuing publishing efforts.<sup>1</sup>

These efforts are admirable, and the results are both fascinating and insightful. At the same time, this battle against the “incorrect image” of the Chevalier raises an intriguing question: If Casanova’s memoirs are indeed a literary work of the first rank, then why have they been consistently ‘misconstrued’ as the confessions of an incorrigible philanderer, as pulp fiction? The answer seems self-evident: Because the *History of my Life* does in fact detail a wide variety of erotic exploits. Yet to leave it at that would mean cutting short a significantly more complex and quite interesting reception process. To be sure: The ‘lover’ Casanova has been the focus of most representations of the Chevalier since he first began to publish his memoirs. But just as ‘love’ has taken on a variety of meanings in modern European history, so has the idea of the ‘lover’ – and it appears

that 'Casanova' was able to make meaningful these changing ideas. Or rather: The theme was able to adapt to these shifting paradigms and thus maintain its prominent place in European cultural memory. This, in turn, means that the 'Casanova' theme has great potential to serve as a heuristic tool for the field of cultural history: By analyzing the theme's reception history one can gain detailed insight into changing attitudes towards love in modern European history.

The following analysis will thoroughly investigate the historical changes in the Casanova theme and consider their respective significance from a socio-historical point of view. But even before engaging in this discussion, one may conjecture in which way the motif had to be adapted after the publication of the *History of my Life* in the early nineteenth century (a first, abridged edition appeared in German 1822-1828). The fact of the matter is that the historical Casanova is an elusive figure when it comes to socio-historical categorizations. It is impossible to consider him a member of the feudal world, as his actions – not least his unmerited adoption of a noble title – subvert the status of this caste. Yet one would be equally hard pressed to co-opt the Chevalier de Seingalt for the emerging burgher class: The gambler, adventurer and promiscuous womanizer stands too much at odds with bourgeois ideals of industry, steadfastness and marital fidelity. The latter group nevertheless went on to canonize the Italian adventurer. One may assume that this to a certain extent presupposed 'taming' the unruly character. Tellingly, Casanova shared this fate with the other great erotomaniac of Europe's literary tradition: Don Juan.

### **An Approximation: Casanova and Don Juan**

The past two centuries have witnessed numerous intersections of the traditions of Don Juan and Casanova. Hermann Hesse's *Casanovas Bekehrung* (1906) is a particularly remarkable example. The short story recounts an episode from the *History of my Life* (Vol. VI, Ch. 3 and 4) and opens with the Chevalier's advances on a young chambermaid at a Zurich inn. She shows herself wary of the stranger's advances, to which Casanova replies: "But child! Do I look like a Don Juan? At my age, I could be your father" (498). The irony in this scene is evident, and the reader cannot but ask if Casanova's motives at all differ from those of the notorious Spaniard. But this seeming congeniality of Casanova and Don Juan is in fact not inherent to the respective motif. Rather, the conflation of the two

is owed to the reception process leading to their respective canonization. Even if one disregards the fact that Casanova is an historical character whereas Don Juan sprang from the literary imagination of the Siglo de Oro: Considered in their original manifestations, both are worlds apart.

Until the late eighteenth century, viz. until the end of Giacomo Casanova's lifetime, Don Juan was principally conceived as a moral and physical threat to society in general and to women in particular. Cases in point are Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla* (ca. 1620), Molière's *Don Juan* (1660), and da Ponte's libretto to Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787). In each of these texts, the hero surreptitiously obtains access to a young lady's bedroom and subsequently kills her guardian in a duel. In Molière's play, Don Juan's servant Sganarelle declares his master to be "the greatest scoundrel who ever walked the earth, a mad dog, a demon, a Turk, a heretic who doesn't believe in Heaven, or Hell, [who] lives like a brute beast [...] closing his ears to all reproaches and treating all our noblest credences as nonsense" (9-10). Don Juan's indifference to social norms is particularly strong when it precipitates an amorous encounter. "You mention", Sganarelle lectures a servant of the betrayed Doña Elvira, "that he has married your mistress; believe you me, he'd have done more than that if necessary. For the sake of his passion, he'd have married you too" (10). Any sign of affection coming from Don Juan is but a means to bend others to his will.

The historical Giacomo Casanova in this regard makes for a stark contrast. In love, he promises nothing but gives everything – although he does draw the line at marriage. Yet this is not out of the ordinary for an epoch that considered love and marriage discrete concepts (cf. Garnot). Accordingly, the *History of my Life* distinguishes the sober companionship of spouses from the excess of lovers. "What if you do not love him?" Casanova asks of Miss Roman, who is convinced that, "to be happy", she requires but "a kind husband well enough off for me not to go without anything I need". "If he is honourable and kind", the Roman explains, "how could I help loving him?" – "I see that you do not know love", Casanova retorts as he abandons hope to gain the lady's favor (7: 41-42). Similarly, the Chevalier reproaches Veronica for turning him down on the grounds that "neither of us can be sure of anything about the other." This kind of petit-bourgeois thinking reaffirms the Chevalier's decision to "never marry until I shall have become my mistress's friend". – "In other words, when you have ceased to be her lover." – "Precisely" (7: 124-125).

In the context of the eighteenth century, love, to reach its full potential, must be detached from everyday considerations.

Lovers, unlike spouses, must disregard the mundane problems of their existence in order to become generous to the point of spiritual and material exhaustion. Casanova, as Zweig nicely observes, “gives himself to the uttermost, to the last drop of lust in his body, to the last ducat in his purse; always and unhesitatingly, he is ready to sacrifice everything else to a woman” – not because he is obliged, but “because she is a woman” (56). These women know that the Chevalier de Seingalt drives a fair bargain, that he “exchanges pleasure for pleasure, the bodily for the bodily, and never runs into debt in the spiritual sphere” (58). His material generosity equally transcends the boundaries of bourgeois courtship, and Casanova more than once makes the fortune of a former lover: Mariucca receives a generous dowry that enables her to marry and to open a small shop (Vol. VII, Ch. 9); Mademoiselle P. P. is rescued from an ill-fated elopement and reconciled with her family (Vol. VIII, Ch. 10 and Vol. IX, Ch. 1 to 3); and Mariucca, who had foolishly run off with Casanova’s brother Gaetano, is secured an honorable return to Venice (Vol. IX, Ch. 5).

Giacomo Casanova and Don Juan, although both notorious seducers, could not have been more differently engaged in the art of seduction. When the Spanish rogue leaves his lovers, they feel that they have been victimized.

They are ashamed of their weakness; they rail at the villain who has deceived them; and in his person they loathe the whole male sex. Doña Anna, Doña Elvira, and all the rest, having once yielded to his calculated impetuosity, remain thenceforward embittered, poisoned in spirit. The women, on the other hand, who have given themselves to Casanova, thank him as if he were a god, glad to remember his ardent embraces, for he has done nothing to wound their feelings, nothing to mortify them in their womanhood; he has bestowed upon them a new confidence in their own personality (Zweig 66).

Casanova and Don Juan – in their original manifestations – seem as distinct as Jekyll and Hyde. There may be similarities in appearance, yet it would be impossible to attribute the actions of the one to the other.

Nevertheless the two traditions began to overlap in the course of the nineteenth century, as for instance in the legend of Casanova’s contribution to Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. This legend took its lead from the historically



verified friendship between Casanova and da Ponte,<sup>2</sup> and received further fuel from the discovery that the Italian adventurer indeed resided in Prague in the weeks leading up to the opera's premiere. Famously, *Don Giovanni* was completed mere days (some argue: hours) before its first staging in the Bohemian capital. The librettist was hard pressed for time to finish the text when, suddenly, Antonio Salieri recalled him to Vienna. The story then goes that da Ponte "asked his friend, Casanova, to give Mozart any assistance he could" (Hussey 472).<sup>3</sup> Other variants of this legend suggest a less immediate, but in no way less significant influence of the Chevalier on the libretto. Assuming that da Ponte was quite familiar with Casanova's personal anecdotes,<sup>4</sup> scholars have sought to discover considerable similarities between *Don Giovanni* and the *History of my Life*. "The memoirs", Stoneham for example explains, "describe two incidents which have significant parallels to the opera. It seems a serious possibility that Da Ponte based key sections of his libretto on these two events in Casanova's life" (531). In the end, the truth of the matter is for others to decide and of no heuristic value for the investigation at hand. Rather, the popularity of this legend – of this connection between Casanova and Don Juan – is in itself significant.

The two traditions again appear conflated in Lord Byron's *Don Juan* (1819-1824), in this instance on a structural rather than a biographical level. To begin with, Byron's hero is no longer confined to the world of the Western Mediterranean. Like Casanova, Juan has become a cosmopolitan traveller who explores Constantinople, St Petersburg, and London.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he no longer embodies the stereotypically arrogant Spaniard who sacrifices the happiness of others for his own pleasure. Quite the contrary:

His manner was perhaps the more seductive,  
 Because he ne'er seem'd anxious to seduce;  
 Nothing affected, studied, or constructive  
 Of coxcombry or conquest: no abuse  
 Of his attractions marr'd the fair perspective,  
 To indicate a Cupidon broke loose,  
 And seem to say, "resist us if you can" –  
 Which makes a dandy while it spoils a man (Canto XV, Stanza XIII).

Don Juan's desire no longer appears an unruly force that dovetails with aggression and violence; and to seduce for him no longer means to

dominate. At times – and this is easily the most remarkable shift in the tradition – Juan even emphatically resists seduction. This occurs, for instance, when he is summoned before the Sultana Gulbeyaz, a woman “so fair/As even in a much humbler lot had made/A kingdom or confusion any where” (Canto V, Stanza CXXIX). The lady is certain that the young man will instantly submit to her charms. But Juan’s character has evolved since it first emerged as a stock piece of burlesque comedies. Byron replaces the erotomaniac with a tragic hero who alternately seeks and mourns the loss of his “beau ideal” (Canto II, Stanza CCXI). Until the final canto, the island beauty Haidée remains the focal point for Juan’s affection, so that when Gulbeyaz makes her advances,

Juan, who had still his mind o’erflowing  
 With Haidée’s isle and soft Ionian face,  
 Felt warm blood, which in his face was glowing,  
 Rush back upon his heart, which fill’d apace,  
 And left his cheeks as pale as snowdrops blowing:  
 These words went through his soul like Arab-spears  
 So that he spoke not, but burst into tears (Canto V, Stanza CXVII).

Only towards the end of the epic poem will young Aurora Raby reawaken in Juan “some feelings he had lately lost/Or hardened; feelings which, perhaps ideal,/Are so divine, that I [the narrator] must deem them real” (Canto XVI, Stanza CVII). Thus, Byron’s *Don Juan* modifies the principal theme of the literary tradition: The singular lover expresses himself no longer in a haphazard sexuality but in his search for an equally singular love.

Maybe surprisingly, this focus on a love which transcends all others can also be found in the *History of my Life*. In the same way that the loss of Haidée shatters Juan’s world, the forced separation from the mysterious Henriette leaves Casanova without the “slightest ability to do anything toward living” (3: 78-79). For a while, he withdraws from life, feeling that he has forfeited his one chance for happiness. Of course, such hyperboles are characteristic for eighteenth century *amour passion*, and the Chevalier might simply be following rhetorical convention.<sup>6</sup> Still, Henriette is the one lover Casanova frequently recalls throughout the memoirs. “No, I have not forgotten her”, the old man reminisces, “and it is balm to my soul every time I remember her” (3: 77). To be sure, this is not the central theme of the *History of my Life*. The text is neither an elegy on the loss

of Henriette, nor is the search for bourgeois happiness its structuring principle. The nineteenth century, however, will increasingly focus of this thematic potential, both in Don Juan and Casanova.

A case in point is Albert Lortzing's operetta *Casanova* (1841), in which the Chevalier no longer appears a serial, but a very bourgeois lover.<sup>7</sup> The object of his affection, young Rosaura, is to be married to the wealthy Gambetto. This scenario would hardly have troubled the Casanova of the *History of my Life*, seeing that he was always well pleased to see former lovers well provided for. Lortzing's hero, in contrast, takes offence at the thought of Rosaura in the arms of another, especially since – unlike her fiancée – he truly loves the girl. In the end, Casanova manages to break off the wedding, although it remains unclear whether he indeed intends to stay with Rosaura. Foremost, this seems eloquent of the librettist's desire not to raise the question, given that the literary tradition would force an inconvenient answer.

This gradual transfiguration of Casanova and Don Juan, but in particular the seeming convergence of the two themes raises the question of influence: Was the libretto for Mozart's opera inspired by the Venetian adventurer? Does the spirit of Casanova breathe through Byron's Juan? Did Lortzing amalgamate contemporary developments of both traditions? Ultimately, the pursuit of these questions is interesting only for the literary historian. As indicated above, for a discussion of Casanova's canonization it is far more important to investigate the socio-historical factors that induced and made meaningful this shift in the literary tradition. By exploring the respective changes in the audience's 'horizon of expectations' (Jauß), one can fully appreciate how the motif maintained its relevance as part of the canon by adjusting its pragmatic nexus.

The evidence surveyed thus far suggests that, in the course of the nineteenth century, the Casanova motif adjusted to innovations in the coding of love. Most generally speaking, one can attest a shift from seduction to commitment: It is no longer the quest for perpetual orgasmic excitement, but the longing for enduring intimacy that drives the hero. Of course, this is a momentous break with tradition, a break Stefan Zweig fervently rejected. "Nothing", he declared, "could be more fallacious than the way in which many of our imaginative writers who choose Casanova as a hero of a play or a novel depict him as endowed with a thoroughly alert intelligence, as being a reflective type" (44). Zweig will not allow for variations for fear of forfeiting the essence of the Chevalier: "Instil no more than a drop or two of sentimentality in his blood, burden him with

self-knowledge and a sense of responsibility, and he will no longer be Casanova" (44). Yet it would appear that this essence – or at least parts of it – had gradually lost its appeal. The unreflecting erotomaniac, it seems, no longer resonated with audience expectations. Rather, the focus shifted on the motif's potential to discuss the problems of initiating and maintaining intimacy.

### **Modern Aporias of Love**

With this novel focus, Casanova gradually evolved into a metaphor that effectively conceptualizes modern aporias of love. Conceptual metaphors fundamentally structure social perception and thus enable communication. In fact, communication itself is largely understood in metaphorical terms. The ubiquitous concept COMMUNICATION IS A CONDUIT suggests that "the speaker puts ideas (objects) into words (containers) and sends them (along a conduit) to a hearer who takes the idea/objects out of the word/containers" (Lakoff and Johnson 10). Of course, communication is a significantly more complex process than the simile allows for.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of the metaphor, however, is simply to help conceptualize the action in everyday discourse. ARGUMENT IS WAR, TIME IS MONEY, and THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS are just a few of nearly infinite possibilities to structure one area of experience with the help of another. Admittedly, the concept LOVE IS CASANOVA is less intuitive, not least due to the elusiveness of both parts of the equation. Love, in particular, in the modern era has taken on the air of something that is wholly subjective, meaning that it cannot be articulated in an objective, generally intelligible manner. It is precisely this kind of ambiguity that calls for metaphorical conceptualization.

From a sociological point of view, then, love today presents itself as a communication problem, as the challenge to communicate subjectivity. This became a pressing matter with the functional differentiation<sup>9</sup> of European society in the modern period. In this context, love developed into a self-contained system that generates its own code. This meant that, as a social phenomenon, love no longer found its expression in valorizations that are not specific to love. Rather, it evolved into a reflexive process that followed its own logic: "Love", Luhmann explains this shift, now "targets an I and a You, *inasmuch* as both are connected through love, meaning that they reciprocally enable such a relationship – and not because they are good, or beautiful, or noble, or wealthy" (175). Thus, love becomes

a matter of reciprocated 'feeling.' For a person to love means "that a corresponding feeling is emotionally sought and confirmed; that one loves oneself as lover and beloved, and that one also loves the other as lover and beloved, meaning that one's feelings are directed precisely at the coincidence of this feeling" (Luhmann 175). Love, then, is the reciprocal amplification of the self and the other.

Giacomo Casanova in his memoirs already encodes love within these novel parameters. The Chevalier's reflections on his affair with Tonina, for example, indicate that he was as much in love with the girl as with the feelings she inspired in him. "Considering her at once my wife, my mistress, and my servant", Casanova recalls, "I congratulated myself on being happy so easily" (4: 153-154). In a similar tone, the memoirist muses on his adventures with the Hanoverian sisters. As always, the Chevalier had overextended himself to please the young ladies. The recompense, however, was plentiful: "The rays which shone from the faces of the two girls in the intoxication of their delight were fiery", Casanova recalls. "I adored them and adored myself" (10: 18). This kind of love, we see, is not a reaction to objective qualities of the beloved. It is a process in which feeling is reciprocally valorized and amplified.

In Europe's modern era, this new potential of love evolves into a vital means to consolidate self-hood. Hitherto, a stratified superstructure had organized the relationship between society and the individual. Functional differentiation, in contrast, perpetually challenges the individual to synthesize the distinct roles it plays within discrete social systems into a coherent narrative. The result is a contingent self-projection that love, however, may legitimize. "If self-projection as formation [*Bildung*] of one's own identity is given free reign by society, viz. if it is contingent, it is precisely this self-projection that requires social bracing" (Luhmann 208). This brings about the search for a significant other, for "someone who believes in the unity of appearance and reality or at least makes this part of his own self-projection which, in turn, the other must believe" (Luhmann 208). This, then, is the socially formative function of love: to consolidate self-hood by enabling individuals to mutually validate and uphold their respective interpretation of the world and their place therein.

This makes for a precarious equilibrium between lovers, given that every communication of the beloved is scrutinized in light of an elusive ideal of complete correspondence – even if (or maybe precisely because) a communication has no discernible relevance for the relationship. Indeed, it is a hallmark of modernity that "personal relationships are overburdened

by expectations for correspondence with the other, which precipitates the breakup of, but at the same time intensifies the quest for personal relationships” (Luhmann 205). In extreme cases, love may even seem to offer compensation for other aspects of existence that are found wanting. Such “hopes and expectations to find something that is missing in life, to fulfill something that has remained unfulfilled can create expectations that are impossible or unlikely to be met” (Luhmann 196). Arguably, this is why love in the modern era has become a hot topic. Success or failure in love may decide over success or failure of the individual self-projection.

### **Love is Casanova**

This problem, the struggle to consolidate self-hood by establishing enduring personal relationships, has gradually emerged as the dominant feature of the Casanova motif. Or rather: The fact that the motif was open for a discussion of this problem as it proliferated in the nineteenth and twentieth century secured for Casanova a place in the functional memory of European society. This thematic potential was already present in the *History of my Life*. Tellingly, it is brought to bear at the height of Casanova’s love to Henriette: “Enduring happiness”, the Chevalier muses, “could be realized only in the case of two people who, living together, were in love with each other, healthy, intelligent, sufficiently wealthy, with no duties except to themselves, and having the same tastes, more or less the same character, and the same temperament” (3: 59). These considerations quite unmistakably invoke the ideal of complete correspondence. To be happy means to be ‘the same,’ and Casanova was “happy with Henriette, and she no less happy with me; never a moment of ill-humor, never a yawn, never did a folded rose petal come to trouble our content” (3: 59). Bearing in mind Casanova’s later exchange with Miss Roman,<sup>10</sup> it may come as a surprise to hear him express such bourgeois sentiments. And to be sure, in the grand scheme of the polyphonic *History of my Life* this is but an undertone that is easily absorbed by larger themes. However, over the course of the past two centuries, the search for lasting intimacy has gradually moved to the center of the Casanova motif.

Modern aporias of love determine, for example, the pragmatic nexus of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s play *Der Abenteurer und die Sangerin* (1899). This pastiche of various episodes from the *History of my Life* opens with the Chevalier’s secret return to Venice. A chance encounter reunites him

with his former lover Vittoria who sixteen years ago, as Casanova now learns, had borne him a son. Vittoria's husband Lorenzo begins to suspect as much and fears that his wife's love for him is not uncontested. In the end, Casanova and Vittoria dissuade him and thus salvage the marriage. At the same time, they must acknowledge that their shared happiness is lost to an irretrievable past.

Another case in point for the shift in the tradition is Arthur Schnitzler's treatment of the Casanova theme in this short story masterpiece *Casanovas Heimfahrt* (1918). After spending years in exile, Casanova is about to receive his pardon and return to Venice when he encounters Olivo, whose fortune he had made by providing him with the means to marry and found a household. Olivo insists that his benefactor spend some time on his estate, not knowing that the Chevalier in fact was the first lover of his wife Amalia. The lady is still very much infatuated with Casanova who, however, desires only to lie in the arms of her niece Marcolina. When the young lady proves insusceptible to his advances, Casanova transforms into a Don Juan of the old tradition.<sup>11</sup> Disguised as Marcolina's lover Lorenzi he enjoys her caresses, but must flee after being discovered and killing his rival.

Hofmannsthal's play and Schnitzler's novella have been convincingly described as expressions of fin de siècle decadence. On the eve of the First World War, an increasingly neurasthenic Europe (cf. Radkau) reinterpreted Casanova's existence as a final, ill-fated uprising against the spiritual desolation caused by social standardization. "For the authors of the turn of the century, he represented the antithesis to the calculating bourgeois and his struggle for security within the rising industrial order [...]. For the rationally structured and elaborately organized world of modernity, those who [like Casanova] lived for the moment became objects of longing" (Pankau 137-138). Like Salomé or the syphilitic dandy, it seemed, the Chevalier celebrates excess in the face of social decay. Both in *Casanovas Heimfahrt* and *Der Abenteurer und die Sängerin* he embodies the intellectual struggles of a society that feels it has passed its zenith and is due to expire.

At the same time, both texts adapt the motif to review the modern aporias of love. Already in the exposition of Schnitzler's novella, the central significance of these problems is evident: Amalia tellingly juxtaposes her marital commitment to Olivo – she considers it "duty", maybe "even pleasure" – to the "bliss" she once experienced with Casanova, and which she longs to experience once again (171). Similar musings befall Casanova

when he finally consummates his love for Marcolina: "Here at last was the reality which he had often falsely imagined himself to be on the point of attaining, and which had always eluded his grasp. Fulfilment was here at Marcolina's heart" (231). The signal words here are 'bliss' and 'fulfillment:' They connote complete correspondence, and thus the transcendence of the modern individual's dissociation. The experience of love instates the self as the absolute point of reference for its environment. "Were not life and death, time and eternity, one upon [Marcolina's] lips? Was he not a god? [...] Home and exile, splendor and misery, renown and oblivion [...]; had not these words become senseless to one who was Casanova, and who had found Marcolina?" (231). Love, as Luhmann points out, offers the modern individual a transcendental home.

In order to fully achieve this potential, however, love must be amplified through reciprocation. Casanova's triumph is incomplete as long as Marcolina is ignorant of her bedfellow's identity, whom she in fact believes to be Lorenzi. Therefore, although fully aware that this is a desperate attempt, the Chevalier decides to gamble for the highest wager: He has Marcolina discover his identity, hoping that – in the aftermath of their bodily union – she will validate his love and, by extension, his person. "With the infallible conviction that he must be the bringer of delight even as he was the receiver, he felt prepared for the venture of disclosing his name, even though he knew all the time that he would thus play for a great stake, the loss of which he would have to pay for with his very existence" (231). Casanova is certain that this moment of anagnorisis will decide not only the outcome of the night, but indeed "his fate, even his life" (231). Thus, Schnitzler's novella considers 'homecoming' – *Heimfahrt* – in more than one way. The story is just as much about the Chevalier's return to his native Venice as it is about finding a transcendental home in love. Ultimately, both endeavours fail to meet the challenge of temporality. After more than two decades spent in exile, Casanova returns to the Most Serene Republic as an outsider, unable to recognize the home town of his youth. And when Marcolina awakens in the morning, she is not infuriated by the audacity of the Chevalier, but simply repulsed by the old man lying in her bed.

The problematic nexus between love and identity similarly structures Hofmannsthal's play *Der Abenteurer und die Sängerin*. The plot develops from two interrelated areas of conflict: The first is Vittoria's sustained attraction to Casanova, and the second is Vittoria's precarious relationship to her husband Lorenzo. The arrival of the mysterious newcomer makes



Lorenzo not simply jealous, but painfully aware of his spiritual dependence on Vittoria: “You are everything to me”, he implores his wife, “in this or that way, for better or for worse. You are the only gift life has given to me, a gift that includes all others” (147). Vittoria safeguards nothing less than the coherence of Lorenzo’s identity. “You are the reality of my life”, he asseverates, “the stronghold upon which I build my world” (147). As Luhmann would correctly predict, this is a most precarious construction.<sup>12</sup> To be sustainable, it must establish and maintain the illusion of perfect congruence. To both the lover and the beloved it must appear that the other is not simply responding and adjusting to one’s own behaviour – a therapist may perform this task –, but that one’s own world view is already included in that of the other. Paradoxically, this precludes communication about self-hood, given that such communication by nature creates a sense of difference: Communication that fails to account for the world view of the other is an affront to the code of modern love (Luhmann 154-156).

For the spouses in *Der Abenteurer und die Sängerin*, Casanova’s intrusion makes this Achilles’ heel of love painfully evident. With only a few words, Lorenzo manages to put into question the very essence of his marriage to Vittoria: “You are my wife”, he states, “and husband and wife, people say, are one. It seems to me that this isn’t so.” Vittoria gloomily replies: “You are a whole and I am also a whole, and I can only give myself as a whole; I cannot dissolve the wreath that is my being” (145). In effect, love cannot transcend the incommensurability of individualities. To displace this fact is costly and painstaking, yet it is even more distressing to face it headfirst. “Why do you torture yourself and me with such words?” (145), Vittoria finally reprimands Lorenzo. Better, it seems, he had not considered the matter at all.

### **Alternative Approaches**

This raises the question of whether Schnitzler and Hofmannsthal offer their heroes alternative and viable means to consolidate self-hood. Hofmannsthal’s Vittoria, it seems, copes with love’s inadequacies by propagating an aesthetic existence and, ultimately, withdrawing into the world of art. This denouement is initiated in the central ballroom scene, when Vittoria observes a once great composer who has since degenerated into a geriatric simpleton. Although the doter is no longer moved even by his own music, Vittoria contends that the heartfelt passion he first

put into the compositions is preserved by and eternally realized in their performance. Analogously, Vittoria is certain that “wherever we love we create such an invisible, magical island” (155). Though the renewed departure of Casanova leaves her world in shambles, Vittoria’s existence as lover and beloved may carry on in a transcendental, aesthetic realm. “Am not I the music he [Casanova] created”, she asks. “Is there not a fire in me that once was the fire of his soul? Of what importance is the log on which it ignites itself – the flame is allied to the highest gods!” (176). With these words Vittoria bursts into a song more beautiful, her son attests, than anything she has sung in years. Only sublimation, it appears, can make love timeless.

An even more fatalistic tone pervades Schnitzler’s novella. From the start it is evident to the Chevalier that any attempt to win over Marcolina will be futile. Even as his “desires grew beyond measure, [...] the recognition that these desires were utterly foolish and futile reduced him almost to despair” (179). Still, the temptation to consolidate self-hood through love is too strong, which is why Casanova cannot content himself with Marcolina’s bed. He needs her to reciprocate, spiritually as well as physically. Thus, Casanova is certain, Marcolina’s love will conclude his struggle for an identity that is both complete and enduring. This, he imagines, will be the “the crown of his life”: That “he, by the overwhelming power of his unconquerable personality, would have won for himself and forever the youngest, the most beautiful, the most gifted of all women” (232). Yet the Chevalier’s own dreams of ‘bliss’ and ‘fulfillment’ are precluded as his ‘unconquerable personality’ is rejected and thus negated. For Schnitzler’s Casanova, love becomes a tragedy in the most literal sense. Fate has presented the hero with a decision situation in which either course of action will lead to disaster. No matter how Casanova proceeds – either he abandons the bedroom before sunrise or he reveals himself – his yearning for reciprocal love will remain unfulfilled. In a sense, this persistence in the face of inevitable failure may be understood as a heroic act. Casanova is willing to sacrifice everything, his pride, his honour, and, in the final duel with Lorenzi, even his life to attain the unattainable. At the conclusion of *Casanovas Heimfahrt*, the Chevalier leaves the stage as the tragic hero of modern love.

This notion has become a hallmark of the Casanova theme. The Chevalier, in a heroic and exemplary manner, traces the problematic nexus between love and self-hood. He is a modern Ahasuerus, relentlessly wandering the earth as a cautionary tale of love’s snares. *Fellini’s Casanova*

(1976) is a paradigmatic example for this development. The film's loosely connected episodes – each of them based on the *History of my Life* – are brought together by the hero's tragicomic struggle to find his place in the world, to formulate a meaningful identity. This desire is met with condescension, ridicule, and disbelief. In response, the Chevalier more and more vigorously echoes the mantra of the Casanovists: that he is not just an erotomaniac, but in fact “a philosopher, a man of letters”. This aspect of his existence, however, fails to meet with social recognition. It may express itself only in the hero's ill-fated love to Henriette.<sup>13</sup> Notably, this spiritual, ‘philosophical’ love is not consummated on screen, as if to not conflate it with the aggressive and grotesque (‘Casanovian’) carnality that recurs throughout the film. In Henriette, Casanova finds and tragically forfeits the transcendent existence he craves for.

Tellingly, the only time Fellini's Casanova may indeed prove himself to the grande monde of the eighteenth century, he is reduced to his sexuality: The illustrious guests of a party coax the Chevalier into settling a wager that he can outperform a coachman in the boudoir. The following scene's exaggerated choreography, which may stand in for all depictions of coitus in the film, reveals the mechanical nature of Casanova's sexus. It is a public spectacle that, although an expression of superhuman virility, cannot create or sustain enduring personal relations. This impression is reinforced by the mechanical bird that accompanies the Chevalier on his erotic adventures and that springs to life with the beginning of the ‘procedure.’ It is therefore a cruel yet fitting irony that Casanova ultimately finds bliss in the arms of a female robot. The film's eerie closing scene places the pair on a frozen canal in Venice, alone in the dark, oblivious of their surroundings, unmoving, but still turning in circles like figurines of a music box. The hero has found his significant other, but this resolution is twice removed from reality: by its artificial nature and by the fact that it is but a dream vision of the disillusioned, old Casanova.

An elegiac undertone has come to pervade the Casanova theme. This, however, should not lead to the assumption that the motif simply expresses resignation over the fact that love, in the modern era, succumbs to exacerbating social pressures. To reach such a conclusion would mean falling short of the motif's full pragmatic potential. To begin with, one must bear in mind that love, like all social systems, is not an ontological given. It is not something that can exist outside of, and therefore fall victim to society. Love is generated by, and thus a function of society. Social functions cannot be conceived of as timeless and immutable ideas, as

objective goods that are threatened by external social pressures. Rather, they need to be considered the result of adaptations, of evolutionary, open-ended processes. They are not the source of conflict, but (albeit often incomplete) tools for problem solving. Love, in the context of modern Europe, has evolved into a means to alleviate the strains of functional differentiation on the individual. It is an imperfect means that nevertheless holds the promise to ease the burden of modernity. This notion is the heart and soul of the Casanova theme: It suggests that notwithstanding the troubles love entails, there is an inherent reward to intimacy, a reward that outweighs the setbacks and disappointments intimacy almost necessarily entails.

Meanwhile, poetological considerations preclude a conciliatory denouement for Casanova. The focus on the failure of intimacy in modern emulations of the motif is a structural necessity, due to the abstract nature of the subject. The spiritual remuneration of love can be explored but indirectly, most palpably by considering the sacrifices the hero is willing to make in its pursuit. Perseverance in the face of certain failure most emphatically testifies to the worth of the cause. This is, for instance, the structural logic of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: To prove that love is worth dying for, Juliet and her lover must indeed die for love. This is one way in which metaphors are born, metaphors which – as Lakoff and Johnson elucidated – are necessary to conceptualize complex social interactions. This doesn't necessarily rule out a happy ending for Casanova, although such an ending would dispossess the theme of the metaphorical potential it has accumulated over the years and which secured for the motif a place in European cultural memory. It has become difficult to imagine the Chevalier de Seingalt as other than the tragic hero of romantic love. Arguably, here lay the greatest challenge for Lasse Hallström's effort to integrate the motif into a Hollywood style narrative for a romantic comedy with blockbuster appeal. And indeed, *Casanova* (2005) – although anything but a future classic – is remarkable for how the film reconciles the complexity of the motif with a generic rom-com dramaturgy, granting to Casanova a happy ending without having to sacrifice the ideas that are central to the theme.

As typical for modern emulations, *Casanova* sees the hero deviate from his prototypical erotomania to pursue his significant other. In Francesca, he unexpectedly discovers the woman who may fulfill not just his sensual, but also his spiritual desires. The literary tradition naturally raises the question of the potential longevity of this relationship. This question is intentionally

reinforced by the film's opening scene, in which old Casanova reminisces about the 'Francesca episode' as he pens his memoirs. By thus aligning with the original tradition, the exposition seemingly precludes a positive outcome for the romance. However, this is but a narratological strategy to enhance the moment of surprise in which the happy ending is salvaged by a metafictional operation.

In the film's diegetic world, the Chevalier has already been transfigured into a motif that exists quite independent of the individual. A telling scene shows an ignorant Venetian assure Casanova that he would without fail recognize that famous adventurer, whom he, by the way, knew "very well." At the end of the story, this dissociation of signifier and signified makes it possible for the hero to pass on his literary identity to a friend who henceforth embodies the ideals associated with the name and who will later author the *History of my Life*. Meanwhile, Casanova and Francesca retreat to the countryside and become actors: professionals who assume different characters – characters like Casanova – in order to entertain, instruct, and edify their audience. Such moments of metafictional self-reflexivity pervade Hallström's film: His Venice is overflowing with theatre troupes that re-enact the amorous adventures of the Chevalier who, in turn, perpetually shifts roles to evade legal prosecution, to appease his debtors, and to win his bride. All the world's a stage, Hallström underscores, and Casanova has become one of its stock figures.

## Conclusion

The continuing attraction of Giacomo Casanova in part surely stems from his renown as a lover, from his potential to serve as a sensual inspiration. Yet "the interest in the eroticist alone", Pankau, too, insists, "cannot fully account for this fascination" (137). This is not to deny the central importance of these qualities for representations of Casanova in European cultural memory. Rather, it is an invitation to look beyond the evident manifestations of this fascination, and to explore their socio-historical foundations. The evidence presented here emphatically suggests that the Chevalier de Seingalt was canonized not only because of his formidable feats in the boudoir. The appeal of the Casanova theme not least lay in its suitability to conceptualize the problems arising from the modern nexus of intimacy and identity. The motif expounds the virtual incommensurability of the two while implicitly perpetuating the social

incentives for their concatenation. In Europe's functionally differentiated societies, intimacy has become a most powerful means to consolidate an otherwise dissociated individuality. In this context, Casanova has come to embody the tragic hero that heroically faces this challenge, the challenge of love in the time of individuality.

This challenge should not be taken lightly, but considered in light of the very real pressures under which intimacy has come in the modern era. Foucault, for one, argues that in the modern discourse on sexuality a vast array of social, economic, and political interests coalesce. In his *History of Sexuality*, he concludes that the individual today in part substantiates its social existence by coming to terms with his or her sexuality. "It is through sex", Foucault asserts, "that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility [...], to the whole of his body [...], to his identity [...]" (155-56). These are immense expectations. Therefore, it might not surprise to see an increasing number refuse to submit to these demands.

Luhmann in particular addresses the growing tendency to dismiss institutionalized forms of love, above all the tendency "to reject marriage and to simply live together" (214). This sober approach to intimacy, Luhmann observes, is eloquent of an "overdetermined scepticism which results from knowing the problems and from taking them seriously" (214). These problems, of course, arise from the need to uphold the illusion of complete correspondence between lovers.<sup>14</sup> By doing away with marriage, lovers alleviate their relationship of hyperbolic expectations – 'oneness,' 'eternity,' etc. – and thus neutralize potential areas of conflict, yet without calling into question the institution of love itself. "Not to marry expresses a kind of reservation – but in a way, that avoids symbolizing the reservation against the bonding symbol of love that induces this rejection" (Luhmann 214). Still, this means that certain aspects of love are beginning to succumb to excessive social pressures. As a result, the search for alternatives that minimize these strains is in full effect. But while some welcome the move to what one could term a 'strategic model,' others may argue that this shift precipitates the loss of a fundamental aspect of the human experience.

Hermann Hesse, for one, would join ranks with the latter group. Hesse, who in works like *Demian* (1919) and *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1930) explores individual self-realization through art, love, and spirituality, would excoriate the callousness of the strategic model, strike a blow for romantic love, and insist that society desperately needs figures like Casanova, as a model and as an inspiration. More than once the author committed

these convictions to paper, yet rarely as concisely and emphatically as in his 1925 review of the *History of my Life*. “Something”, Hesse cautions, “seems to have gone missing and become a thing of the past, something that Casanova had, and that our parents had, and that our own youth had and which infused our youth with magic: the veneration for love [...]. Today, neither the tragic, nor the virtuosic lovers seem to exist anymore, only the base marriage imposter and the psychopath [...]. From boring bourgeois America to the reddest Soviet socialism – in no truly ‘modern’ worldview does love play any other part than that of a minor, peripheral source of pleasure in life, which may be perfectly well organized by a few hygienic recipes” (“Über Casanova” 474-475). Hesse wishes for modern society not to shy away from the challenges of love and to embrace this essential experience of the human condition. Or, in other words: Hesse believes that modern society needs a little more Casanova.

Seen in this light, the title of Hesse’s short story *Casanovas Bekehrung* appears less ironic. The Chevalier, weary from a series of misadventures he suffered in Cologne and Stuttgart, has just arrived in Zurich when he decides to renounce the world and enter the Order of Saint Benedict at the Einsiedeln Abbey. However, a few hours before he is to commence his noviciate, a chance encounter with a female traveller brings this plan to nought. This, and not Casanova’s passing sanctimony, is the story’s eponymous conversion. By conceding that it is not for him to say, “farewell, goddess of fortune, I have reached the port” (“Casanovas Bekehrung” 521), the Chevalier accepts his fate as an Ahasuerus of love, destined to eternally wander the earth in search of redemption. This dramatic focus on the struggle for self-knowledge places *Casanovas Bekehrung* in the tradition of the modern novella. In an almost allegorical concentration the existence of the hero is put to trial and decided. The Chevalier is pushed to a point where he must finally come to terms with his place in the world, with his individuality. Much to the satisfaction of the reader, Casanova converts to his ‘true self’ – for whom else could the reader look to, if the hero had simply given up?

## NOTES

- 1 The *Pages Casanoviennes* (1925-1926) were followed first by the *Casanova Gleanings* (1958-81) and then by the *Intermédiaires des Casanovistes* (1984-present).
- 2 The two men probably first became acquainted during Casanova's 1752 stay in Vienna (Vol 3, Ch. 12). Their last meeting at Dux in 1792 da Ponte recounts in his *Memorie* (Vol. 2, Pt. 1, 6-23).
- 3 Hussey bases his analysis on admittedly intriguing sketches that were found in Casanova's estate and that show significant similarities with the opening of Act II: "The only other thing that seems to be certain about these extracts is that they are not merely copies in Casanova's handwriting of a scene from 'Don Giovanni.' He would, indeed, hardly have copied them out as pieces of poetry worth recording. Their incompleteness, the fact that they are variants of the same scene, and above all, the numerous alterations in the same writing prove that they are sketches for a scene in the opera. That they are intended for the 'Don Giovanni,' which we know as Mozart's, and not for some other libretto, can hardly be doubted, since the sense of the words and the situation coincide so closely with what stands in the actual score. It is clear, then, that Casanova did some work on this scene, and it is highly improbable that he made the sketches for his own amusement and without any practical purpose" (471).
- 4 In 1787, Casanova had yet to begin work on his memoirs.
- 5 Compare volumes I, IX, and X of the *History of my Life*.
- 6 Indeed, Casanova quickly finds solace in the arms of a woman whose love is for hire.
- 7 The libretto for the operetta is largely based on the Vaudeville *Casanova au fort Saint-André* (1836) by Arago, Varin and Desverges.
- 8 Communication can only be fully understood when also considering factors such as prior knowledge, pragmatic understanding, emotional intelligence, etc. (Lakoff and Johnson 11).
- 9 This section relies on the work of Niklas Luhmann, who provides a circumstantial discussion of functional differentiation in Luhmann, Niklas. *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*. Vol. 1. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1980.
- 10 See above, p. 5.
- 11 Stock was the first to point out this overlap of the two traditions in Schnitzler's novella.
- 12 See above, p. 5.
- 13 Fellini's *Henriette* is modelled after the character in the *History of my Life*. See above pp. 8 and 13.
- 14 See above, p. 12.



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