

year-old Casanova improvised a joke for her in Latin: *Discite grammatici cur masculina nomina cunnus et cur femineum mentula nomen habet? Discite quod a domino nomina servus habet.* (Tell us, O grammarians, why the male genitals are a female noun and the female parts are masculine? Because, they say, the slave always takes the master's name!) On hearing this, La Zanetta, we are told, proudly bestowed a gold watch upon the young prodigy's teacher.

History of My Life gives us a catty and supple panorama of a European society that eerily prefigures our own. It was a world in the process of disintegration, in which women exhibited sexual boldness—hence innumerable convents filled with middle-class girls recovering from illicit abortions. To his female contemporaries, Casanova seems to have been the ideal companion. Classless and rootless, willing to take seriously both women's sentiments and intellects, he inspired enduring affections.

His correspondence with many of his lovers spanned thirty years and thousands of pages—unfortunately, it's not included in any edition of the memoirs. In the memoirs themselves, these women remain mysteriously elusive: the cross-dressing Henriette; the subversively voluptuous and intellectual nun M** M**; the wounded C** C**; the coldly treacherous Charpillon; the charming Mimi; the courtesan Ancilla, who was made love to by the libertine John Murray as she lay dying of the pox—while Casanova watched. This nightmarish demise the writer chronicles with typical detachment: "It was one of the most striking spectacles I had seen in all my life. The cancer which ate away her nose and half of her beautiful face came up again from her esophagus two months after she believed she was cured of the pox by mercury ointment."

Nevertheless, the amorous episodes are just that, episodes—some of them probably invented with a good deal of novelistic bravura. It is the memoirs' picaresque social sweep that strikes us now rather than its salacious particulars. There is no pornographic prose to speak of. Everything is draped in decorous eighteenth-century euphemism. "I do not want," she said with a smile, "to be bothered with keeping your quintessence from falling on the carpet." And then again, sometimes the verbal posies become insipidly matter-of-fact. "I have found," he writes, "that the smell of every woman I love is agreeable to me."

Casanova eventually ran afoul of the state inquisitor Antonio Condulmer, a corrupt womanizer and investor in a theater whose productions Casanova had lambasted in the press. In 1755, on charges of sorcery and subversion, Casanova was imprisoned in the Leads, Venice's infamous prison, from which he made a sensational escape the following year. Predictably, he turned the exploit into a slim book, which earned him some international notoriety.

Thereafter, Casanova became a perpetual and desperate wanderer across the Continent under the sobriquet of Chevalier de Seingalt, always hoping for a reprieve from Venice but never quite obtaining one. He consorted with Voltaire, Rousseau, and Frederick the Great (or so he says), but his forced nomadism seems finally to have worn him down, and he was obliged in his old age to accept the patronage of Waldstein and his gloomily provincial castle—happily for us the impetus for his most impressive feat.

Today, Casanova lives on as a louche noun—one that has about it all the allure of cheap after-shave. But is it possible that he is about to be reborn, not as the immortal lover but as the boulevardier of all boulevardiers and the wildest bluffer of them all?

LAWRENCE OSBORNE

STRANGE FRUIT

IN AN EYE-CATCHING EXPERIMENT THAT has created an uproar among American historians, *The Journal of American History (JAH)* recently published an anguished essay on lynching by the distinguished historian Joel Williamson, along

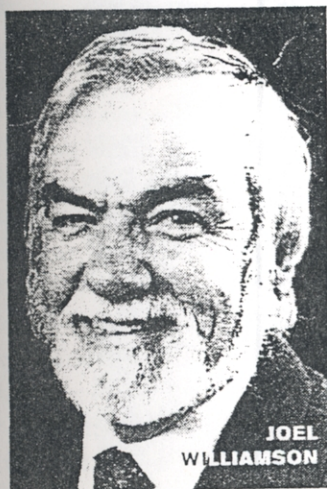
with the unexpurgated responses of his peer reviewers. Instead of keeping the editorial process cloaked in its usual secrecy, David Thelen, the journal's editor, coaxed all the parties into having their contributions published in their raw, unrevised state. Without having read one another's remarks, they agreed to go public. Shortly after, however, the experiment blew up in their faces. "I've heard more comment about this than about almost anything that's appeared in the journal in my recollection—most of it negative," reports Eric Foner, a professor of American history at Columbia University.

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Williamson's readers. Then there was the fact that Williamson's first-person references to his own work left no doubt as to his identity. Robin Kelley says that "once the author's identity becomes clear, and it's a great guy like Joel Williamson, there's a real reluctance to reject." And, apparently, a reluctance to analyze too closely. After noticing several "assertions that go unexamined"—particularly Williamson's idea of a monolithic black culture—David Blight, a professor of black studies at Amherst, retreated, saying, "These are minor points for discussion." If Edward Ayers and George Fredrickson, both esteemed American historians, were at all bothered by Williamson's bizarre statement that the



Anita Hill case "would echo in gender terms the racial message broadcast by the Supreme Court in the *Dred Scott* decision," they did not say so. Could they have been favorably influenced by the fact that Williamson had lavishly praised them in his essay? In an interview with *Lingua Franca*, Ayers insisted this was not the case, although he admitted to being "enormously flattered."

For their part, Robin Kelley and David Levering Lewis were unswayed by the awareness that this was a memoir by a noted historian. Lewis disparaged the Anita Hill-*Dred Scott* comparison: "Surely the consequences of the Thomas confirmation vote were exactly the reverse [of *Dred Scott's* disenfranchisement of free blacks]. Senators found themselves scrambling to placate and apologize.... The Judiciary Committee is now coeducational, and the

national life has been transformed." As for Kelley, he chastised Williamson for speaking on behalf of "the American historian" and "we Americans": "Williamson cannot and should not say 'we' unless he specifies who he's talking about." To Kelley, Williamson seemed alarmingly ignorant of the black and radical white scholars who knew and wrote about lynching long before Williamson's "discovery." In making these trenchant arguments, however, Kelley seemed to miss the point of Williamson's essay: While Williamson had indeed not done his homework, he was now attempting to apologize for it.

Was this, as some historians are saying, a woe-fully symptomatic episode of what Stanley Crouch calls the "all-American skin game"? If so, the reasons were other than what one might suppose. The racial split did not consist in any shattering epistemic differences. One can easily imagine a different division with, say, a white neo-Marxist echoing Kelley and an older black scholar appreciating Williamson's candor. Ultimately, the central drama of this peer review turned not on race but on how to evaluate an autobiographical manuscript that was clearly the work of a prominent (and well-liked) member of the club. If the *JAH* has done any harm, it may not have been so much to race relations among historians as to their public reputation. While it's unclear whether the scholars who approved the article were consciously relaxing their standards for Williamson, their standards seem to have been mighty low that day. As Wilentz quips, "If this is a window onto how historians operate, someone ought to consider dropping the blinds again."

ADAM SHATZ

THE RADICAL IMAGINATION

PARIS IN THE FORTIES WAS A CITY AWASH IN forged identities and remade lives. But few transformed themselves as completely as Cornelius Castoriadis. When the young Greek émigré arrived, in 1945, he settled down to write a doctoral thesis on the inevitable culmination of all Western philosophies in "aporias and impasses." But by the end of the decade, he had quit academia to lead a curious double life. As Cornelius Castoriadis, he worked as a professional economist, crunching numbers at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Meanwhile, adopting a number of aliases, he developed one of the most influential bodies of political thought to emerge from

the non-Communist left over the last half century. Castoriadis's covert writings helped to rally France's beleaguered anti-Stalinist left in the Fifties and to inspire the spectacular Paris revolt of 1968.

Yet even as other intellectual heroes of Paris '68 marched on to academic renown in the United States, Castoriadis's work has remained little known in this country. That may change this year: As he turns seventy-five, academic presses are generating the biggest wave of Anglophone publications by and about Castoriadis yet. *The Castoriadis Reader* (Blackwell), with representative extracts from almost fifty years of political and philosophical writing, reflects his long march from Marx back to Aristotle. *World in Fragments* (Stanford) presents a selection of readings from Castoriadis's recent work, including papers on ancient Greek democracy, the French Revolution, psychosis, racism, and the history of science.