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CASANOVA AND SLAVONIC LANGUAGES

The Brockhaus edition of Casanova's memoirs based on the original manuscript, has been a real revelation to all those who, like myself, read Casanova in their youth, filtered through the adaptation of Jean Laforgue. The complete, uncorrected Casanova, with his peculiar French (not without charm), his italianisms, his idiosyncrasies, his views of a *laudator temporis acti*, and the incidental, philosophical and scholarly remarks which Laforgue priggishly suppressed as irrelevant, now reveals himself as a totally different character, far more human, heroic and tragic than the morally castrated man Laforgue had presented to us.

One remark of Casanova's (in an amateur philologist mood) which fell victim to Laforgue's scissors is in my opinion quite interesting for the scholar of Slavonic languages, especially if we remember that when Casanova wrote it, the comparative study of Indo-European languages was not quite past yet the amateurish stage.

The remark within which we are concerned occurs in the course of Casanova's journey to Russia (which, incidentally, is well worth a detailed study in itself); he writes:

»le Russe en general est le plus superstitieux de tous les chrétiens. Sa langue est illirique, mais sa liturgie est toute grecque.«¹

and a few pages later:

»on me faisait des visites, et Zayre brillait en faisant les honneurs de la maison en langue russe que j'étais bien fâché de ne pas comprendre. Rousseau, le grand J. J. Rousseau prononça au

¹ J. Casanova de Seingalt, Vénitien, *Histoire de ma vie*, Wiesbaden, 1960, vol. 10, ch. 6, p. 132.

hasard que la langue russe est un jargon de la grecque. Une pareille bévue ne semble pas convenir à un si rare génie, et malgré cela il y a donné dedans.²

Both remarks are suppressed in Laforgue's edition. His version of the passages is as follows:

»en general les Moscovites sont les chretiens les plus superstitieux du globe. Leur liturgie est grecque;«³

and

»on venait m'y faire visite, et Zaïre était radieuse de pouvoir en faire les honneurs.«⁴

It is quite obvious why the liberal, but patriotically smug Laforgue suppressed the whole remark about the *bévue* committed by the great Jean-Jacques. This was one of his idols and could not be contradicted.

Less obvious are the reasons for suppressing Casanova's first remark, that the Russian language is *illirique*.

The word *illirique* is one of Casanova's italianisms; it does not exist as such in the Italian language. However it is difficult to imagine that Laforgue would have failed to equate it with the French *Illyrien* and so recognize its meaning.

It is probably safe to assume that Laforgue, even if not ignorant of the term and its meaning, was as totally ignorant of the Slavonic languages, as so many of his contemporaries, and therefore chose to suppress the idea simply because he was unfamiliar with it. Whether he considered the two remarks in conjunction before suppressing both, we cannot know, but if he did it is highly probable that he should have been led by his admiration for Rousseau to ignore all expressions of an opinion which the French philosopher did not share.

Anyhow, whatever reason made Laforgue suppress the information, the fact remains that Casanova came forward with it and it is quite easy to assess how he was able to make the comparison. This was, it is true, quite a commonplace of grammarians and antiquarians of the 17th and 18th centuries, but somehow I prefer to think that Casanova reached the conclusion as a result of his own experience, rather than simply reading it in a book. If it was merely a question of reiterating a linguistic commonplace, why should he have bothered to mention it? My opinion is that, like all Venitian subjects, Casanova had plenty of opportunity to hear Slavonic languages spoken. Merchants from Dubrovnik (*i mercanti ragusei*) and Istrian and Dalmatian subjects of the

² Op. cit. p. 139.

³ Casanova, *Mémoires*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, Paris, 1960. (The text of this edition is that of Laforgue's adaptation) vol. 3, ch. 19, p. 456.

⁴ Op. cit. p. 462.

Serenissima were engaged in continuous visits to Venice. Montenegrins, and sometimes even people from the interior, Herzegovinians, Bosnians and Serbians visited Venice.⁵ They even left their name to the part of the city which they particularly patronized: *riva degli schiavoni* (*La promenade des Slaves*).

Besides this Casanova was at least twice in Istria, once on his way to Rome (via Ancona), and on another occasion on the way to Corfù and Constantinople. The anecdote about the doctor at Orsara (Vrsar) is one of the funniest in the memoirs. And he has also left an account of his childhood experiences in the Paduan boarding house of a very picturesque *esclavonne* (happening which would not be out of place in the *Lazarillo de Tormes*). No wonder then if during his sejour in St. Petersburg and Moscow in more mature years, he was able to describe Russian and the Slavonic languages heard in his youth as belonging to one and the same family, which he called *illirique*.

I am not, of course, trying to claim that this makes Casanova a great linguistic genius, nor to suggest that there is anything new in regarding him as something other than a great lover and adventurer, but I hope that this note has pointed to one among his multifarious interests, and his capacity for intelligent observation.

⁵ The Montenegrin poet Petar Petrović Njegoš in his poem *Gorski vijenac*, has left us a witty account of a Montenegrin's journey to Venice. Written in the tradition of the *Lettres Persanes*, this presents the unsophisticated barbarian's view of the corrupted capital.

