Unpublished Fragment on Casanova

Over the previous weeks, he'd already gotten off to a running start. Having digested about three quarters of the extant biographical material on the man, he had corresponded with learned members of the Casanova society, and had boiled down the watery broth of legend and hearsay to establish, as best he could, the facts. He had also spent a weekend in Casanova's youthful haunt, the beautiful Renaissance town of Padova, chockablock with porticoes and slithery cobbled streets, and had visited his nearby birth city of Venice, trembling like a moonstone in its watery setting. He'd sketched an outline of Casanova's involvement in the very first Internationale of flim-flam men, that floating opera of card sharps, skimmers, mountebanks and poseurs who drifted through the sleepy courts of early 18th century Europe tweaking the jaded palates of the rich with a whiff of the louche and the faintly dangerous. And he'd begun to draw a portrait of the man himself, king among gamblers, talkers and lovers, compact, big-chinned, blazingly vital. Casanova dressed in the outlandish costumes of a 70's British glam-rock star. Though of common birth, he was accoutred with lace, phony brilliants, bijoux snuffboxes and the elaborately buckled shoes of a nobleman. His credo was libertinage with affection. His boast was that he'd never broken a heart. His true art was happiness, unencumbered by doubt. To that end, he was as intent on giving joy as taking it, and believed that when love was at stake between man and woman deception was inevitably reciprocal. A polyglot of vast erudition, he was also the master of swift, knowing conversation in several languages. He bandied arcane civilities with Voltaire, discussed the Gregorian Calendar with Catherine the Great, and presented himself when

occasion demanded as a priest, a doctor of law, a soldier, a public scribe, a violinist, a physician, the adopted son of a Venetian patrician, a gambler, a financier and a Pierrot. All of this force and conviction was marshaled for the sublime lightness of play; play as craft, play as the most serious activity of life. And when finally, at age 65, his powers ebbing, he discovered that there was no one left to play to, charm, make love to, bankrupt with ingenious schemes for national lotteries or lighten of a few hundred ducats during long evenings of whist or piquet, he retired to a castle in Bohemia, and began the process of playing exclusively to himself. There, under the patronage of a prince with literary leanings, grown old and wizened, he wrote day after day for hours, the quill grating on the page, looping letter to letter in a French cumbered with Italianate borrowings, his mind quivering along the pure magnetic north of memory. Year after year, ignoring the taunts of the servants, his creditors, the French Revolution already rumbling beyond the mountains visible from his windows, he redacted the careening course of his life. For thirteen long years he wrote, and at his death at age 74 left behind a body of work which so ably collaged the available prose forms of the period that it gave us one of the most credibly detailed, polyphonic portraits of 18th century Europe that exists.

Jeez, Philip wrote to a friend, *can you believe I've finally begun to bear down on the life of this romancer at the very same time as I've officially become a single man in Italy*? But he was excited to feel the book beginning to take wing.