

Milan Kundera, *Slowness* (1995)

Denon gives no description of Madame de T.'s physical appearance.; but one thing seems to me certain: she cannot be thin; I imagine her to have "a round and supple waist" (these are the words Laclos uses to characterize the most coveted female in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*), and that bodily roundness gives rise to a roundness and slowness of movements and gestures. A gentle indolence emanates from her. She possesses the wisdom of slowness and deploys the whole range of techniques for slowing things down. She demonstrates it particularly during the second stage of the night, which is spent in the pavilion: they enter, they embrace, they fall onto the couch, they make love. But "all this had been a little hurried. We understood our error.... When we are too ardent, we are less subtle. When we rush to sensual pleasure, we blur all the delights along the way."

The hast that loses them that sweet slowness, both of them instantly see as an error; but I don not beiee that this is any surprise to Madame de T., I think rather that she knew the error to be unavoidable, bound to occur, that she expected it, and for that reason she planned the interlude in the pavilion as a *ritardando* to brake, to moderate, the foreseeable and foreseen swiftness of events so that, when the third stage arrived, in a new setting, their adventure might bloom in all its splendid slowness.

She breaks off the lovemaking in the pavilion, emerges with the Chevalier, walks with him some more, sits on the bench in the middle of the lawn, takes up the conversation again, and leads him thereafter to the château and into a secret chamber adjoining her apartment; it was her husband who, in other times, had set this up as a magic temple of love. The Chevalier stops, dazzled, at the door: the mirrors covering all the walls multiply their reflections in such a way that suddenly an endless procession of couples are embracing all around them. But that is not where they make love; as if Madame de T. meant to head off a too powerful explosion of the senses and prolong the period of arousal as much as possible, she draws him toward the room next door, a grotto deep in the darkness and all tufted in cushions; only there do they make love, lengthily and slowly, until the break of day.

By slowing the course of their night, by dividing it into different stages, each separate from the next, Madame de T. has succeeded in giving the small span of time accorded them the semblance of a marvelous little architecture, of a form. Imposing form on a period of time is what beauty demands, but so does memory. For what is formless cannot be grasped, or committed to memory. Conceiving their encounter as a form was especially precious for them, since their night was to have no tomorrow and could be repeated only through recollection.

There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting. Consider this utterly commonplace situation: a man is walking down the street. At a certain moment, he tries to recall something, but the recollection escapes him. Automatically he slows down. Meanwhile, a person who wants to forget a disagreeable incident he has just lived through starts unconsciously to speed up his pace, as if he were trying to distance himself from a thing still too close to him in time.

In existential mathematics, that experience takes the form of two basic equations: the degree of slowness is directly proportion to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting.