



Milan Kundera's *Slowness* – Making It Slow

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Abstract

The Czechoslovak author Milan Kundera's first novel in French, *Slowness*, compares the heady speed of contemporary life unfavourably with the slowness of the eighteenth-century, epitomised for Kundera's narrator by Vivant Denon's novella *No Tomorrow*. A deconstruction of *Slowness*' arguments reveals that its narrator is complicit with the trends he decries and so his own rhetoric is as malignly influenced by speed as that of the twentieth-century characters he denounces. His representations of both *No Tomorrow* and the eighteenth-century phenomenon of libertinism are little more than deceptively happy soundbites. By glorifying the qualities of slowness but failing to demonstrate them, however, the novel encourages a transformation within its implied ideal reader that allows her to rise above the problematic conceits of its narrator and make of his work a genuinely slow text.

Keywords: Milan Kundera, *Slowness*, Vivant Denon, *No Tomorrow*, Point de Lendemain, Libertinism

1. Introduction

Francois Ricard's postscript to the French 1998 edition of Milan Kundera's *Slowness* documents the 'two traits' (Kundera, 1998: 185) that separate the work from the artistic norms of the six Czech novels that Kundera had written in the previous decades, namely its remarkable brevity and the simplicity of its structure. Despite these obvious variations, to which we can add the use of a language that Kundera had previously reserved for his non-fiction, *Slowness* continues his familiar project demonstrated throughout his earlier Czech novels and specifically attested to in both the fictional *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and the theoretical *The Art of the Novel*, that of investigating 'the trap the world has become' (Kundera, 1984/1994: 215; Kundera, 1986/1988: 26). This novel's main preoccupation is a dissection of the late twentieth-century's increasing obsession with speed and the malign effects of this on our existential situation. *Slowness* documents the events of a single night, split into two time-periods separated by over two hundred years. A character in his own right, as in previous novels, Kundera's narrator compares our era unfavourably with the libertine France of the eighteenth-century, exemplified for him by Vivant Denon's novella *No Tomorrow*, first published in 1777. In this earlier, less hasty period, all actions, chiefly the erotic, are performed with a slowness that gilds them with a grace and significance of which the narrator's contemporary characters can only dream.

The narrator's stance is initially convincing, particularly for a reader tricked by the novel's slightness into imagining that it requires less serious engagement than Kundera's previous work. An attentive reading, however, reveals that the narrator's complicity with the trends he decries makes his stance untenable. *Slowness* can be approached most rewardingly as a novel about a poor reading of *No Tomorrow*, one infected by the contemporary trends Kundera's narrator condemns and that resultantly misrepresents a literary investigation into libertinism as a straightforward affirmation of the lifestyles it propounds. Just as a longer look at *No Tomorrow* than the narrator of *Slowness* evidently has time for exposes his reading as erroneous, a resistance of the seductive masks worn by *Slowness* itself leads us beyond its flimsy surface and produces a longer, *slower* text than we at first imagine, which urges the implied ideal reader - performatively as well as constatively - not to be deceived by the speedy, sound-bite arguments that are not only critiqued within the narrative but simultaneously comprise it. Despite the faults of the narrator's rhetorical strategies, the novel ultimately succeeds by propounding a way of life that it itself fails to demonstrate, encouraging a positive transformation in the reader through its hypocrisies as she is encouraged to retrieve from *Slowness* an experience genuinely slow.

2. The speediness of *Slowness*

The facet of the aforementioned “trap” dissected by *Slowness* - that of our tumultuous relationship with speed - is well documented and far from a recent concern. Walter Benjamin’s analysis of the nineteenth-century French poet Baudelaire is the key starting point for a historicization of rising anxieties regarding the changing pace of life. For the nineteenth-century writer, Benjamin argues, ‘no subject’ demands more attention than ‘the crowd’ (Benjamin, 1970/1992: 162) that dominates the rapidly expanding European cities. Benjamin cites a wide range of authors, including Poe, Engels and Valéry, and collates their reactions as ones of ‘fear, revulsion and horror’ (Benjamin, 1970/1992: 170) at the speed, the bustle and the anonymity that characterised the city streets, which deliver to their inhabitants a constant bombardment of new stimuli that seizes the nervous system like a perpetual electric shock. Writing in the early twentieth-century, Georg Simmel documents the city space’s ‘rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions’ (Simmel, 1903/1997: 175), which contrasts vividly with the slower, more even rhythm of small-town and rural existence and engenders a blasé attitude and a generalising uniformity. Two of the most influential postmodern cultural theorists, Frederic Jameson and David Harvey, cite the worries of Benjamin and Simmel respectively, both in a similarly dismissive manner suggesting that no matter how worried were the modernists, their descendants were to face far worse. For Jameson, Benjamin’s account of modernism emerging from the new bodily experiences forced upon us by the city is ‘singularly antiquated’ (Jameson, 1997: 45) by the emergence of technologies vastly beyond what Benjamin could have envisaged. For Harvey, Simmel’s concerns can only ‘pale into insignificance’ (Harvey, 1992: 286) beside the sensory overload delivered by rampant consumerism, though he accepts that the psychological consequences of a blasé attitude and excessive simplification are similar. These concerns all manifest within Kundera’s novel, though not only within the arguments his narrator makes but also via the manner in which he makes them, causing a kind of rhetorical short-circuit marked by a worrying collusion with the trends he decries that leaves a seductively promising thesis shot through with holes.

The two primary narratives of *Slowness* compare and contrast the speed of the modern era with the sweet languor of the eighteenth-century, via the erotic adventures of their respective characters. Before and during the entomology conference that comprises the bulk of the contemporary narrative, hosted at the same hotel at which the narrator and his wife Vera are spending the night, we are introduced to a heavily flawed cast. Chief among the entomologists is Cechoripsky, a former Czechoslovakian scientist forced by the Communist regime into manual labour. Also present is the intellectual Berck, ‘the martyr-king of the dancers’ (Kundera, 1996: 17), who epitomises the modern trend of performing as though permanently in front of a camera and excels at transforming complex phenomena into totalised soundbites. We also meet the historian Pontevin, who prefers to dance not for the benefit of invisible millions, but for a small audience at the trendy Café Gascon. Pontevin’s young disciple, Vincent, an admirer of the eighteenth-century and especially the Marquis de Sade, is ordered to attend the conference in order to disrupt Berck’s ambitions and ‘raise some hell’ (Kundera, 1996: 27). Following the conference, Vincent attempts a seduction of the typist Julie that quickly descends into farce, literally alongside the plunge into chaos of the relationship between the television producer Immaculata and her cameraman boyfriend.

Against this madness, the narrator’s vision of the eighteenth-century indeed appears an idyll. This second narrative, juxtaposed with the beginning and closing sections of the above, but absent during the novel’s middle portion, recounts the plot of Vivant Denon’s *No Tomorrow*. A ‘gentleman of twenty’ (Kundera, 1996: 6) meets at the theatre with the enigmatic Madame de T and is transported by coach back to her chateau for a night of erotic enchantment. After strolling and exchanging kisses on the lawn outside, the young man, labelled by Kundera’s narrator as a Chevalier, is taken by Madame de T first to a pavilion and then subsequently to a secret chamber in the chateau itself, where slow lovemaking passes the time until morning. The next day, the Chevalier learns that he has been used: Madame de T is attempting to mask the identity of her true, long-term paramour, the Marquis, by displaying the Chevalier to her husband. The Chevalier is instructed to enjoy the night for what it was and return to his true love, the better partner for having both gained sexual experience and learnt a valuable life-lesson.

The closing chapters of *Slowness* carry the Chevalier beyond the final pages of *No Tomorrow* and directly compare his attitudes towards his experience with those of Vincent towards his own. Vincent is unconcerned by his failure and excited about reciting to Pontevin and his followers a heavily edited version of events that depicts him as a glorious libertine. The Chevalier, though unsettled by having been duped by Madame de T and her lover, realises that the beauty of the previous night remains unaltered by the morning’s revelations. As the two time periods collapse into one another, with the narrator, Vincent and the Chevalier all present outside the chateau, the Chevalier grows disturbed by Vincent’s obsession with talking about the previous night and ‘instantly loses his taste for saying anything at all’ (Kundera, 1996: 129). While Vincent now epitomises a modern dancer no less than Berck, the Chevalier decides to eschew both the dangers and the rewards of public confession. Earlier in the novel, the narrator tells us that ‘there is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting’ (Kundera, 1996: 34). The final chapters consolidate this bond by suggesting that the slowness of the Chevalier’s experiences has preserved them within a solid form less

susceptible to desecration. Vincent's memories, so hastily created, become infinitely mutable, granting him a certain freedom but also leaving him exposed to the caprices of "dancers" more skilled than he. The link between speed, dancing and sound-biting is stressed further in the novel's final paragraphs, where the narrator watches sadly as Vincent roars away on his motorcycle, presumably towards the Café Gascon, impatient to give the performance of his lifetime; the Chevalier, meanwhile, departs sedately in his chaise, no audience waiting, no performance required. The narrator concludes that on the Chevalier's 'capacity to be happy' with these existential choices 'hangs our only hope' (Kundera, 1996: 132).

It does not take a remarkable astuteness to notice the novel's complicity with the trends it decries. The narrator pours scorn upon the speedy, sound-biting tendencies of Berck and Vincent, within a text that is no more than 30,000 words itself, denying its own representations the opportunity to become more than one-dimensional. A. A. Mendilow states that 'the time people are prepared to devote to novel-reading does in no small measure determine the length of novels' (Mendilow, 1952/1972: 65). That *Slowness* is so short implies that its narrator considers his audience thoroughly attention-deficit. Whilst his reactionary stand is well-intentioned, the narrator remains oblivious to how deeply entrenched he is within his culture and though he genuinely despises sound-biting, his arguments are so rapidly outlined that they perfectly encapsulate the trend themselves.

The clearest showcase of Berck's "dancing" occurs in Chapter 21, where he reduces the complexity of Cechoripsky and his national culture to a series of speedy observations designed to showcase his gargantuan sensitivity. While waxing lyrically about the plight of Cechoripsky and his countrymen, Berck confuses Prague for Budapest and Eastern Europe for Western Europe, mistakes the Polish Romantic poet Mickiewicz for a Czech and describes Communist Czechoslovakia inaccurately as 'an enormous concentration camp' (Kundera, 1996: 64). Most important for Berck is not the factual content of his utterances, but the fact of his stating them and their passionate sincerity, given flight by their sheer pace. The narrative documents the scientist's objections and so the reader of *Slowness* is, importantly, aware that Berck's representations are incorrect. Cechoripsky's final objection, however, is interrupted by the arrival of Immaculata and her camera and so the reader never learns from where Mickiewicz actually originates. The speed of the narrative, like the speed of Berck's discourse, refuses to be restrained by the time-consuming delivery of facts and marches inexorably on to the next chapter, in which Berck's interpretation of Cechoripsky is consummated by Immaculata's recording process and Cechoripsky becomes mute and irrelevant. Because the reader is privy to Cechoripsky's internal monologue and so knows him better than Berck does, she is aware of the gulf separating the entomologist from the representation born from Berck's performance. This fact reveals the most rewarding way of reading *Slowness*. Just as Berck performs for the camera wielded by Immaculata, the narrator performs for his own audience, doing to his various subject matters what Berck does to Cechoripsky. The task of the reader is to mount a more successful resistance than the entomologist and not allow these representations to pass for reality. Cechoripsky's resistance demonstrates a subject defying its own objectifying representation, while my reading demonstrates the intended audience of such representations destabilizing the practice itself by rupturing the chain of supply and demand.

Though not as neglected as Kundera's later two French novels *Identity* and *Ignorance*, *Slowness* has received little critical attention, especially in English. The body of academic writing on this novel comprises only a small selection of articles, none of which engage in close or concerted enough a reading to be comprehensive. Karen von Kunes' essay focuses too greatly on the representations made by the novel, holding them as sacrosanct without realising that the novel's questioning of Berck and his fellow "dancers" affects the novel's own representations like a backfiring gun. Kunes' argument that Cechoripsky illustrates 'the didactic, narrow-minded "Czechism" of a nonadapting provincial mentality' (Kunes, 1999: 259) is spectacularly indecorous, blaming the entomologist for refusing to reflect Berck's erroneous representation, rather than vice versa. Maria Nemcová Banerjee's piece is more convincing, noting the compromised nature of the novel's arguments via its observation that its 'accelerated narrative pace... works at cross purposes with the lead theme of slowness' (Banerjee, 1999: 265). The narrator's hypocrisy is made apparent when Banerjee describes the naming of his wife, Vera, as 'a sudden flash of magnesium, exposing the travelling couple to the unnatural glare of celebrity' (Banerjee, 1999: 267), illuminating the correlation between the potential viewers of Berck's representational liberties and the potential readers of the narrator's own, who become spectators of the narrator's personal life. Banerjee ultimately falls prey to the allure of the narrator's representations, however, describing *Slowness* as 'a homage to Denon's novella' (Banerjee, 1999: 265), which is akin to calling Berck's performance a "homage" to Cechoripsky, rather than a blatant manipulation.

Most relevant to this paper is Natasa Kovacevic's essay, which focuses on *Slowness*' 'fetishized imagery' (Kovacevic, 2006: 639) and so at least questions it on a representational level. Kovacevic laments of the narrator's idealised eighteenth-century that 'the hungry, overworked, and diseased multitudes remain absent from the pastoral landscape' and so *Slowness* 'overlooks vast historical complexities and plays into the reductivist logic it denounces' (Kovacevic, 2006: 644). Kovacevic focuses, however, on the political and historical clichés forged via this mentality, while I agree with Fred Misurella that Kundera's aesthetic system gives 'art, especially ironic art... primacy over politics, and the novel... primacy over history, psychology and philosophy' (Misurella, 1993: 3). While crediting Kovacevic's

observation that the soundbites decried by the narrator are matched by those emerging *from* him as inspiring my own approach, I am more concerned with the ramifications of the “trap” of speed not on history or politics but on art and textuality and their resultant potentials to probe and illuminate. Kovacevic also strongly equates the narrator of *Slowness* with Milan Kundera himself, a link that the narrative’s blurring of the transparency between representation and original constantly belittles.

The arguments made by *Slowness*’ narrator, then, are not to be passively accepted, but actively challenged, even deconstructed, hopefully with more success than Cechoripsky’s silenced challenge of Berck. Many critics of Kundera agree that a deconstructive approach to his work is not only the best way of elucidating its meaning, but one encouraged from within the texts themselves. Nina Pelikan Straus thus goes against the grain when she argues that Kundera’s work demonstrates that ‘the circular discourses of... structuralism and deconstructionism are murderous... [and] not only enable the vaporization of cultural ideas but of human beings who live by these ideas’ (Straus, 1987: 75). John O’Brien, in an article that specifically refutes Straus’ thesis, states that Kundera’s frequent authorial intrusions - which Straus contends work to fetter wild interpretations and so make the text un-deconstructable - actually ‘add a sense of *play* by admitting that characters are not real, questioning motivations... and so on’ (O’Brien, 1992: 6), encouraging the reader’s imagination to take flight. The gulf between Straus and O’Brien’s interpretations perhaps stems from their different understandings of deconstruction. Straus portrays the discipline as an orthodoxy no less homogenizing towards its victims than Soviet imperialism towards the cultures it demolished (Straus, 1987: 69, 74). O’Brien, on the other hand, suggests Kundera’s critics apply the ‘soft-core’ deconstruction envisaged by David Lehman in *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man*, which ‘does not deny a text its basic reference points or interpretive contexts – only the idea that there is only *one* reference point or context’ (O’Brien, 2005: 67). A deconstructive reading of *Slowness*, then, does not involve becoming an embittered textual nihilist, but simply questions the specific “interpretive context” provided by its narrator and raises the possibility that the extreme speed with which he makes his arguments means that the representations generated in support of them go beyond and against his intentions. His interpretation of his material is not necessarily the most instructive or beneficial way of extracting meaning from it.

Stanislaw Baranczak raises the bar for critics interested in misreading *Slowness* when he witheringly describes its ‘overbearing and pontificating’ narrator, who ‘leaves no doubt whatsoever that he represents the author’ and ‘relieves us of the tiresome task of guessing [his] message’ (Baranczak, 1996: 42-3). In *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera states with force that he has ‘always deeply, violently, detested those who look for a position... in a work of art’ (Kundera, 1992/1995: 89). The work of art in question here, however, outlines a number of clear positions in only its opening chapter, regarding twentieth-century society as having turned ‘indolence... into having nothing to do’ (Kundera, 1996: 4-6) and the sensuality between Chevalier and Madame de T arising from the gentle pace of their journey, which is starkly championed over the speed of the narrator’s contemporaries. It is no great leap of faith to hypothesize that the elements of the subsequent narratives that unsettle the narrator’s theses - which he would perhaps notice if only he had the time to re-examine them - are intended to shroud the reader in the doubt so cherished by Kundera himself.

Slowness itself is filled with clues that a deconstruction of its narrator’s theses is a wise approach, even beyond the novel’s demonstration via Cechoripsky that a representation may only survive by stampeding over its subject’s objections. One such clue stems from the ramifications of the novel’s choice of tense. *Slowness* is the only novel by Kundera written predominantly in the present tense. Gerard Genette explains that it is almost impossible to tell a story without locating it ‘in time with respect to the narrating act, since [a narrator] must necessarily tell the story in a present, past or future tense’ (Genette, 1980: 215). While all of Kundera’s novels bar his first, *The Joke*, slip into the present tense during the extra-diegetic sections in which their narrators address us directly or question their characters, the intra-diegetic layers of *Slowness* themselves appear simultaneous to the narrating act. What Genette describes as the ‘time of the narrating’ (Genette, 1980: 215) does not occur months, weeks or even days after the story being narrated, but concurrently. Mark Currie warns that ‘the form of the present tense in the English verb... does not guarantee that the time reference will be in the present’ and so ‘a narrative which is written in the present tense should not be thought of as being tensed... differently from one written in a past tense’ (Currie, 2007: 139). The verb tense does not *necessarily* illuminate anything important about the temporality of a story’s narration. Jonathan Harvey agrees that ‘present-tense narratives cannot easily escape from having a “pastness”’ (Harvey, 2006: 82). *Slowness*, however, establishes clearly in both the opening and closing chapters that the narrator both arrives and departs from the chateau simultaneously to Vincent, consolidating the impression that the contemporary narrative is unfolding simultaneously to its narrating act. Genette states that ‘the narrating *place* is very rarely specified, and is almost never relevant’ (Genette, 1980: 215). In *Slowness* this place is specified repeatedly as the same as that of the “story place”, consolidating this sense of immediacy, with the story and its narrating process cohabiting not only temporally but geographically also.

James Goodman and Britt Jorgensen lament that in our speed-obsessed world reflections ‘on decisions, our relationships with people and the world around us go out of the window’ (Goodman and Jorgensen, 2005: 136). The narrator demonstrates a similar concern when he states that ‘when things happen too fast, no one can be certain about anything, about anything at all, not even himself’ (Kundera, 1996: 114). This applies not only to his contemporary

characters but also himself, for his narrative being produced so close to its subject matter robs him of reflective time and so he cannot himself claim any certainty. Monika Fludernik explains that analysis of the temporal duration of an ‘act of narration by a narrator’ is necessarily compromised because the ‘minutes and hours of speaking or writing time... are usually not determinable from the text’ (Fludernik, 2003: 119). *Slowness* clearly suggests that the temporal duration of its narrating process is identical to that of its story, beginning as the narrator and his wife approach the hotel and ending as they leave the next morning, the act of narration occupying, like its subject matter, only one night. If only the narrator had given himself geographical distance between the “story place” and the “narrating place”; if only he had given himself temporal distance, likewise, and enjoyed time for reflection; if only the temporal duration of the narrating act had stretched to more than a few hours. With these caveats, the narrator’s arguments may have formed less vulnerable to deconstruction. Or perhaps not: the opening line itself, ‘We *suddenly* had the urge to spend the evening and night in a chateau’ (Kundera, 1995: 114), clearly defines the following narratives as the result of an impulse, and so the one sentence written in the past tense, providing space for reflection between the urge and its reporting, sees the narrator fail to notice that his narratives’ hurried genesis leaves them born compromised.

It can be argued conversely that the narrator’s choice of the present tense is, given his ambitions, a logical one. Firstly, the narrative thus reflects Harvey’s notions of time-space compression, which propose that the compressed time horizons produced by the exponential increase of travelling speed leave a world ‘where the present is all there is’ (Harvey, 1992: 240). The present tense is therefore the only means by which the narrator can precisely communicate those aspects of the world he finds so problematic. Secondly, we can view *Slowness* through Derrida’s argument that an archiving process ‘produces as much as it records the event’ (Derrida, 1998: 17). The cause-and-effect sequence by which an event occurs prior to its recording or its subsequent representation is ruptured; individuals no longer perform actions and then subsequently relate them, but the potential for relation is what births the temporally prior but consequentially successive original, this trend growing ever more frenzied thanks to the archiving opportunities offered by advanced technology. This model of a present structured and formed ‘in anticipation of its recollection’ (Currie, 2007: 13) perfectly describes Berck, whose grand displays of sentiment are engendered by the possibility of their dissemination by the cameras controlled by journalists such as Immaculata. Vincent fails to perform the perfect libertine orgy but welcomes the possibility of reciting a revised account the next day, with this version the one “archived” via the memories of his audience. Future representations both determine Berck’s present and encourage Vincent’s revision of his recent past. The idealized counterpoint to both is the Chevalier, for whom ‘no tomorrow’ exists and so his experiences remain unpolluted (Kundera, 1996: 132). Narrative theory posits that any narrative written in the past tense evokes the future time of the narrating act, in relation to which the narrative content is *past*. Narrating Vincent’s exploits via the past tense would necessarily evoke the moments in-between the story and the narrating act, during which Vincent dazzles the Café Gascon with his doctored orgy, or Berck’s interview is broadcast to rapturous acclaim; relative to the temporal position from which the narrator was telling the story, these events would already have happened. The narrator’s use of the present tense, then, seeks to disempower the dancers by removing from the novel’s temporality the spaces in which the spoils of their dancing are enjoyed. In seeking to cut the dancers off from their sustenance, however, the narrator chooses a mode of offense that simultaneously damages his own position by contradicting his call for slow reflection.

In this he reflects his fellow characters, most notably Vincent. The nobly intentioned gestures of its cast being frequently undercut is a common phenomenon within *Slowness* and a further call that its extra-diegetic gestures deserve an undercutting of their own. No stance is allowed to stand unquestioned and no character achieves a position that escapes compromise. Early in the novel, for example, Pontevin’s criticism of Berck and his fellow dancers is immediately countered by Vincent’s suggestion that Pontevin is ‘a great dancer’ (Kundera, 1996: 24) himself. The resultant debate is described almost in script-form, devoid of much narrative commentary surrounding the exchange of ideas, so that each man states his position without the narrative granting either a degree of agency that empowers one enough to subsume the other. Later in the novel, Vincent’s denunciation of dancing becomes even more compromised than Pontevin’s. While describing Vincent’s passionate description of ‘the dancers and the deal they have struck with the Angel’, which strongly evokes the links established between angelic purity and totalitarian zeal in Kundera’s earlier *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, the narrator states that Vincent ‘climbs his hyperboles as one climbs the steps of a stairway to heaven’ (Kundera, 1996: 71), blurring any distinction between the young man and his enemy. Vincent’s speech deconstructs itself via the clash of intentions between its constative and performative elements, much like the narrator’s own lightning-fast denunciation of speed. The narrator’s primary attack on modernity is itself challenged, by a young man who fatalistically describes the ‘gaze of the cameras’ as ‘part of the human condition from now on’ (Kundera, 1996: 72) and suggests to Vincent that if he lived in any of the past eras he and the narrator idealize he would arbitrarily rail against other novelties, such as the new cathedrals of the twelfth-century. This nameless character’s dismissal of Vincent and, by extension, the narrator as embittered reactionaries appears logical and stands uncontested. Indeed, Vincent is portrayed as pathetic for being unable to summon a suitable riposte.

Most damagingly, by the novel's close the thematic scaffolding the narrator constructs in the opening chapters has been buffeted to near-collapse. On the first page we are told that the addictive ecstasy of speed results from the driver being able to focus 'only on the present moment', which frees him or her from the future and so leaves 'nothing to fear' (Kundera, 1996: 3). Speed, then, leaves us in a timeless present. But the associations made between speed, the dancers and the cameras are soon compromised when we realise that the dancers live not in the present but anticipating the future, from which they are therefore far from free. And the idea of a timeless present is soon reframed not as the dangerous product of driving at speed, but as the luxurious mode of being resulting from the slowness and anonymity enjoyed by the Chevalier. By the novel's close, the phrase 'No Tomorrow' is clearly positively loaded, yet on the opening page, applied to a contradictory situation, it represents what the narrator finds most problematic. Similarly, the speed of the motorcyclist comes by the final pages to evoke not a timeless present but a race towards the future. We cannot say that the narrator's argument changes organically with these shifting conceptions, because by the novel's close the basic stance propounded at the start still stands and the Chevalier's slowness remains fetishized. In his world of constant motion, however, the narrator cannot realise that his argument is a web of hypocrisies and contradictions. Harvey explains that one major consequence of the postmodern world's 'speedup in the turnover times of capital' is the accentuation of the 'volatility and ephemerality of fashions, products... ideas and ideologies, values and established practices' (Harvey, 1992: 285). For the narrator's argument to have a chance of success, he requires access to ideas and values that remain stable enough to provide firm rhetorical foundations. *Slowness* suggests that the pervasiveness of the postmodern condition lies in its very cultural mechanics rendering unviable any stance that seeks to destabilize it from within; the rhetorical fixity from which we could build a counter-argument is irreparably effaced.

Paul Virilio is fascinated by the phenomenological change in awareness produced by fast travel and argues that 'speed metamorphoses appearances', as 'the ground of the landscape rises up to the surface [and] inanimate objects are exhumed from the horizon and come each in turn to permeate the varnish of the windscreen' (Virilio, 2008: 101). The continuous movement forward means that 'the object that hurls itself upon the layer of the windscreen will... be as quickly forgotten as perceived' (Virilio, 2008: 101). If we view the narrative of *Slowness* through this lens, we see that its movement mimics that of the vehicles from its opening chapter. Successive chapters abandon the extra-diegetic narrative and perform a swift succession of introductions, rushing past Vivant Denon's various careers and the novella *No Tomorrow*, Epicurean notions of hedonism, an absurdly truncated definition of libertinism, a summary of Choderlos de Laclos' four-hundred page *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, a brief return to the narrator and Vera, Berck and his battles with the politician Duberques and, finally, Pontevin and the Café Gascon, all in just the first twenty pages. This sheer onrush evokes the exhausting psychological conditions of Simmel's metropolis, the bewildering array of consumer choices observed by Harvey and the multiplicity of surface levels that Jameson argues is post-modernism's most self-effacing trademark. With Pontevin the narrative finally settles down for a few brief chapters, before returning to a fuller discussion of *No Tomorrow*, where the brakes are applied with more force and the subject matter remains in focus for an entire ten pages. The narrative constantly generates new ideas but refuses to dwell on any at length, rushing exhaustingly onwards and letting each new diegetic layer make only a brief impression before falling back towards the horizon, the minute chapters encouraging the reader onwards and so increasing this bewildering momentum. The sections where the narrative settles for the longest time are ironically during the entomologist conference, which is reported uninterrupted from Chapters 16 to 25 and from Chapters 29 to 42, again compromising their progenitor's argument, for the slowest sections of the novel document our era and it is the eighteenth-century represented most disruptively as a rush of surface images.

Virilio says of a driver's passengers that 'those who partake of the violence of driving must remain as controlled as the images, immobilized by the straps recalling the restraints of youth[;] they can only impotently observe the exposition of the scene... passing rapidly before their eyes' (Virilio, 2008: 103). The reader of a novel is a passenger of sorts, born along by the motion of the narrative, yet one in a safer position than Virilio's fellow traveler, for the reader can break her restraints and force the driver to slow down without risking a fatal collision. We can hijack control of the narrative vehicle, become drivers ourselves and force the voyage to maintain a sensible speed. Mendilow explains that 'different novels lend themselves to being read at different speeds' (Mendilow, 1952/1972: 65). The clue is in the title and *Slowness* is a book begging to be read slowly. Currie describes the unique temporality of a novel by explaining that though 'in written texts, the future lies there to the right, awaiting its actualization by the reading', the presents of various readings of the same book 'will all differ from each other, so that some will finish, and so know the future, before others' (Currie, 2007: 18, 21). We can combat the dancers via a similar technique as that the narrator attempts with his use of the present tense, avoiding the rush for the future epitomized by Vincent in the closing chapter, neutering his and Berck's "future orientation" by reading *Slowness* slowly and so deferring the arrival of its future. Our stand can succeed where the narrator's fails, because his narration, in needing to remain contemporaneous with its subjects, is forced to match their heady speed, while we have the completed narrative preserved in front of us and so can afford to take time out for the reflection that reveals the aforementioned inconsistencies. We can also use the future, once it arrives and *Slowness* is finished, for a nobler cause than Berck and Vincent. While for them the future is an

appropriated space in which their sound-biting representations will be delivered and the rewards enjoyed, for us it can be reclaimed as a space in which we challenge such practice.

It is very possible to agree with the narrator's denunciation of speedy, soundbite representations but be disappointed with its execution. The reader can redeem the narrator by doing his job for him and truly questioning such representations *wherever* encountered. Mary F. Rogers explains that 'after readers have finished a novel, [the] horizon remains as an amplitude of possibilities' and so 'meaning-fulfillment often continues after readers have returned novels to their shelves' (Rogers, 1991: 105). On the closing page of *Slowness* we encounter the phrase 'no tomorrow', given increased significance through occupying a paragraph of its own. A reader bewitched by the narrator will feel, evoked by this phrase, both wonder at the Chevalier's nonchalance and nostalgia for the century he supposedly epitomizes. For the attentive reader, who considers the narrator's aims worthy but wonders just how deeply his complicity with the trends he decries is ingrained, the phrase will be a call to read Denon's *No Tomorrow* for herself, an activity that extends the "meaning-fulfillment" of *Slowness* by continually inviting comparison with its own interpretation. The truly worthy reader will then re-read *Slowness* itself – an activity described by Barthes as 'an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us "throw away" the story once it has been consumed' (Barthes, 1974: 15) and so one that furthers the narrator's reactionary ambitions far more efficiently than anything he does himself – with the potential to become what the narrator wishes he were but is not, a true advocate of the cause against hasty, falsifying representations.

3. Slowing *Slowness* down – A longer look at libertinism and *No Tomorrow*

The narrator of *Slowness* states that the most 'interesting' aspect about an African famine is 'that it cut down only children' (Kundera, 1996: 12-12), alluding to the media's decision to leave adult suffering away from the cameras. The famine killing only children is an illusion generated by its representation, but one that achieves a degree of concrete actuality through its ability to produce real-world consequences of increased charitable support. Media representations are shaped by manipulation behind the scenes that encourages its audience to support causes that otherwise would not provoke the same degree of interest. Throughout *Slowness*, characters perform similar manipulations, designed to encourage support not for worthy causes but for the public images of Berck and Vincent. We are unlikely to be swayed by these manipulations because the narrator lays the mechanics behind them bare and we observe them from a distance as they unfold. Support is constantly encouraged, however, for another arguably still less deserving cause. The narrator clearly disapproves of Berck and Vincent, which explains why their own machinations are made visible, while his love of the eighteenth-century phenomenon known as libertinism means the manipulations executed in its favour occur at an extra-diegetic level and so remain veiled. By researching libertinism and bringing our findings to a re-reading of *Slowness*, we can unravel the narrator's propaganda and determine for ourselves whether or not the cause is as worthy as insinuated.

A slower look at the narrator's own representations, particularly of libertinism and of Denon's *No Tomorrow* in its role as a typical piece of eighteenth-century fiction, proves him to be no better than the "martyr-king of the dancers" himself. Jameson describes how the process by which 'the history of aesthetic styles displaces real history' woos its audience via features that 'program the spectator to the appropriate "nostalgia" mode of reception' (Jameson, 1997: 20). This "mode of reception" is pushed onto the reader of *Slowness* during the opening chapter, where the narrator waxes lyrically about 'loafing heroes of folk song, those vagabonds who roam from one mill to another and bed down under the stars' (Kundera, 1996: 5). 'Have they vanished', the narrator asks, 'along with footpaths, with grassland and clearings, with nature?' (Kundera, 1996: 5), demonstrating a performance of kitsch that would give his counterpart from Part Six of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* major cause for concern. The opening sentence of this chapter's final paragraph narrows the target of the narrator's lyrical nostalgia down to eighteenth-century France, his use of the luxuriant noun phrase 'the inexpressible atmosphere of sensuality' focussing the positive impressions made by his earlier descriptions of a generic past onto this specific case-study (Kundera, 1996: 5). The narrator begins his narration already convinced of the period's superiority to his own and is desperate to ensure that his audience works from the same interpretive context. The final pages work to certify that the reader remains "programmed" to the "nostalgia mode of reception" long after closing the book, so that any further meaning-fulfillment is unlikely to destabilise the narrator's portrayal of libertinism. The happiness and comfort of the Chevalier is stressed as his chaise departs, whilst phrases such as 'he will be trying to stay as close as he can to the night as it melts inexorably into the light' and, starting the final sentence itself, 'the chaise has vanished in the mist', lend these luxuries a poetic fragility that suggests we should work to preserve them or, this proving impossible, cherish them before they fade for good (Kundera, 1996: 132). Any interrogation of the Chevalier's era is thus made to appear less a perfectly valid inquiry and more an undue cruelty.

But libertinism does not necessarily deserve the plaudits the narrator attaches and is far from the lovely yet defenceless counterpoint to the ills of our era he strives to make it appear. Libertinism has enjoyed increased critical attention in recent years, with fresh publications of key libertine texts and an entire issue of *Yale French Studies* devoted in 1998 to unpacking libertinism's links with modernity. Michael Feher's lengthy introduction to *The Libertine Reader – Eroticism*

and *Enlightenment in the Eighteenth Century France* offers the most accessible analysis of the phenomenon, discussing facets both positive and problematic. The term 'libertinism' did not always refer to sexuality and appeared in the sixteenth century within a theological context. French theologian John Calvin, for example, used the word to denounce a sect of dissident Anabaptists (Feher, 1997: 11). The specifically eighteenth-century variety of libertinism evoked in *Slowness*, however, can be defined as 'the licentious ways of the declining French aristocracy' (Feher, 1997: 11). The death of Louis XIV in 1715 curbed the increasing demand that the nobles assembled around him at the court of Versailles demonstrate a strict morality and led, in the subsequent Regency of Philippe d'Orleans, to a 'relaxing of spirits' and a 'slackening of morals' (Feher, 1997: 13). This trend quickly filtered down to the general aristocracy, which continued to be stigmatised by such claims under the reigns of Louis XV and XVI, its increasing decadence contributing in no small way to the Revolution of 1789. The absolutism of the new, revolutionary governments mirrored that of Louis XIV and so ended the 'hiatus in monolithic authoritarianism' (Kavanagh, 1998: 79-80) started by the Regency that had allowed libertinism's cult of individuality to flourish.

Libertinism posits that the natural process of desire faces derailment by the artificial morality enforced by the social state, which mostly functions through its policing of women, the vanity of whom is shrewdly manipulated so that they feel admirable when they uphold the arbitrary virtues of modesty and constancy. The problem this causes for libertine men – one conveniently ignored by Kundera's narrator, for it contradicts his main argument – is that the 'delays imposed on lovers [by the social state] - that is... the unreasonable extension of the interval between the emergence of a fantasy and the sexual act that both fulfils and dissipates it' (Feher, 1997: 17) provoke a dangerous idealisation that springs the fatal trap of love. The Vicomte de Valmont from Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, for example, declares 'I really need to have this woman, to save me from the stupidity of being in love with her. For where does frustrated desire lead a man?' (Laclos, 1782/2007: 18). *Slowness* may be an important component of a libertine sexual encounter, but libertinism is better characterised by the need to conquer a fantasy's object as swiftly as possible, before the reason that illuminates love's perversity is eroded. Catherine Cusset goes as far as arguing that 'the opposite of libertinage is love, as a deep, long-lasting sentiment' (Cusset, 1998: 2), which suggests that the antidote to modern culture that the narrator of *Slowness* seeks is in the last place he would think of looking.

It is impossible to give an impartial account of libertinism without discussing its ramifications on gender. Two types of libertine can be discerned, the petit-maitre and the dangerous man (Feher, 1997: 20-31). The former delights in clever wordplay and the skilful seizing of opportune moments during which the vanity of a targeted woman becomes compromised, leaving her susceptible to the libertine's advance. The role of the woman is to 'pay at least lip service to received ideas about vice and virtue', so that even when submitting she must feign reluctance (Feher, 1997: 22). The petit-maitre must end the following liaison in a timely manner, for the successful functioning of a community of such relations depends on the constant flow of short but satisfying affairs; these adventures are 'all the more intense when they are new' (Feher, 1997: 21) and so a conquered woman must be "returned" to society so that she can become the quarry of another man. Lest this not seem misogynist enough, the dangerous man takes the objectification of women a step further. For him, the modest libertinism of the petit-maitre is contemptible. The dangerous man's "grand libertinism" begins with the similar goal of encouraging a woman to depart from the principles she professes to cherish, but his ultimate victory stems from exposing this departure to the largest audience possible and so laying bare women's status as 'the most faithful guardians of worldly hypocrisy' (Feher, 1997: 25). Just as Laclos' Valmont targets the famously unimpeachable Madame de Tourvel, the 'attraction that a dangerous man finds in a woman is directly proportional to the complexity of the plan' (Feher, 1997: 26) her conquest demands, for the subsequent revelation of his victory will then attract maximum admiration. And so while the petit-maitre and dangerous man alike must be experts at detecting the moments during which a woman's virtue becomes vulnerable, the dangerous man must be additionally what Feher describes as a 'skilful propagandist' (Feher, 1997: 28). Here also the rhetorical use to which libertinism is put by the narrator of *Slowness* fails his argument: the dangerous man at least is entirely "future orientated", his actions determined by the possibility of his representing them to a future audience, and so he is no less a dancer than Berck or Vincent.

Libertinism, then, is neither especially slow nor especially private. This fair conclusion exposes the largest manipulation attempted by *Slowness*' narrator, which sees him state that Denon's *No Tomorrow* 'figures among the literary works that seem best to represent the art and the spirit of the eighteenth-century' (Kundera, 1996: 8). Many critics would disagree and with good reason. For Feher, *No Tomorrow* 'gives a rare example of duplicity's joyful triumph' and comprises 'a unique manifesto in favour of libertine politeness' (Feher, 1997: 43). Nancy K. Miller is particularly keen to stress that the sexual freedom supporters of libertinism cite as its main strength is primarily androcentric and relegates women to the role of 'launching' the careers of young men, who ultimately become sexual oppressors and, biologically and socially, will never face the negative consequences of promiscuity that threaten the women they subordinate (Miller, 1995: 9; Miller, 1998: 18-19). Miller specifically cites *No Tomorrow* as the only libertine text that allows a woman to perform a libertine seduction of her own and 'escape the rule of consequence' (Miller, 1998: 18). James A. Steintrager explains that *No Tomorrow* does not reiterate contemporary discourses but sees 'the semantics of

the libertine novel and of the literary female orgasm undergo important modifications' (Steintrager, 1999: 31). While eighteenth-century representations of sexuality typically constructed female pleasure as clearly discernable via obvious signs, which a libertine would need to read in order to identify his own sexual capability, *No Tomorrow* frames Madame de T's sexuality as undecipherable, via the suggestion of her true paramour, the Marquis, that she is anorgasmic, which Steintrager argues leaves the narrator unsure of whether or not she was "faking it" during their night together. Earlier libertine fiction presumes a transparency between the sign and the signified of female pleasure as 'a relatively unproblematic given' (Steintrager, 1999: 36). The process of canon formation, which selects particular texts as intrinsically representative of their eras, is often unrelated to a text's actual commonality with the dominant mood of a period and more the product of a particular social group selecting the texts that posit their own interests as universal values. We can discern a similar agenda behind the narrator of *Slowness*' selection of *No Tomorrow*. He begins convinced of libertinism's superiority to his own era and so is forced to select an entirely unrepresentative text that elides most of its problematic conceits. A counterattack against the trend towards generalisation decried by Simmel, Harvey and Jameson and epitomised by Kundera's narrator can be launched by exposing the fallacies of the latter's argument and restoring *No Tomorrow*'s atypicality.

The narrator's manipulation does not stop at the process of textual selection and affects his representation itself. Selecting as brief a text as *No Tomorrow* to propound the slowness of its era of origin over the speed of our own is clearly not the wisest of rhetorical manoeuvres. If the typical length of fictional texts from a given era parallels that era's experience of consciousness or availability of leisure time, as has been posited by writers such as Calvino, then positioning *No Tomorrow* as typical of the eighteenth-century suggests an era even flightier than our own. But despite my criticism of his methodology, I believe that the narrator's commitment to slowness is relatively pure, as is demonstrated by his most obvious interference with Denon's story, which transforms it from a continuous piece of prose into an account punctuated and fragmented by numerous digressions, chiefly those of the twentieth-century narrative. Roman Ingarden explains that 'every concretization of a literary work is a temporally extended formulation. The time span occupied by a given concretization may be greater or smaller according to circumstances...' (Ingarden, 1973: 343). By concretization, Ingarden means the process by which the dormant words and structures of the text acquire meaning via each reading process to which they are subjected. *Slowness*' narrator successfully produces a slower version of *No Tomorrow*, in which the reader's concretization of Denon's story occurs over a longer period of reading time - unless she becomes so absorbed by the narrator's version that she skips ahead to discover its outcome sooner - but again a nobly intentioned act backfires. Because of what occurs during the gaps between each instance of relation a different *No Tomorrow* emerges, one the reader is very unlikely to concretize in the same way she would its original. Assuming her reading of *No Tomorrow* is uninterrupted by other literature - which its brevity makes unlikely - its concretization will be far purer than that made possible by the narrator's version, where each section of his variation will be unavoidably coloured by its juxtaposition with the intervening material. It becomes an effort for the reader's interpretation of *No Tomorrow* to avoid paralleling the narrator's own inability to concretize the story from any perspective other than that of a facile comparison with our own era. Every act of Denon's characters is given an unconditional positive framing by its opposition to the farcical nature of Vincent and his contemporaries, beyond the horizons of the original text. The reader is impelled against forming her own, impartial judgements regarding the Chevalier or Madame de T's behaviour, since the narrator's value system hovers over the fragments of Denon's text and constantly threatens the displacement of her own. A successful retrieval of a pure *No Tomorrow* that allows the reader her own opinions, which necessitates retrieving the original text, thus becomes akin to avoiding an attempted seduction on the part of the narrator, one mirroring those performed by the libertine characters he evidently idolises.

Further interferences with Denon's text are relatively inconsequential, such as the 'bench' (Kundera, 1996: 28) on which *Slowness*' Chevalier and his mistress sit being, in the original, 'a grassy bank [that] appeared' (Denon, 1777/1997: 736) before them. While the bench is merely found, implying that it has been placed there and sat statically awaiting discovery, the verb 'appeared' implies that the original's 'bank' has arrived spontaneously in order to facilitate the evening's events, better evoking an unfolding conspiracy to which even the natural landscape is privy. A further modification occurs during the interruption of the lovers' first exchange of kisses: in *Slowness*, Madame de T realises that her seduction is proceeding too speedily and so 'stands and decides to turn back' (Kundera, 1996: 29). Denon's narrator, however, reports that 'silence fell all around us. We heard it... and we were frightened. We stood up without saying another word and began to walk again' (Denon, 1777/1997: 735), which portrays the break as jointly instigated. We could argue that Denon's narrator fails to notice Madame de T's manipulation of the event and assumes that he enjoyed equal agency, but given that ideologically-driven misrepresentation is a dominant theme in *Slowness*, it is safe to assume that the narrator's valorisation of Madame de T as 'lover of pleasure' and 'guardian of happiness' leads him to provide her with the greatest degree of agency in shaping the night's course as is possible (Kundera, 1996: 120). More damaging than these minor misrepresentations is one that unseats the logic that causes *Slowness*' narrator to cite *No Tomorrow* in the first place. The Chevalier's journey from the theatre to the chateau is described as a 'smooth and pleasant' (Kundera, 1996: 6) opposite to the speed of the narrator's contemporaries. In Denon's original, however, the

pair change horses twice, while phrases such as ‘lightning speed’, ‘the lurching of the carriage’ and ‘an unexpected jolt’ (Denon, 1777/1997: 733) create a sense of hurried momentum leading almost to chaos. At the start of Chapter 11, *Slowness*’ narrator admits that his description of Madame de T’s ‘bodily roundness’ is his own invention; elsewhere, he discloses that Denon’s narrator is never actually labelled as a Chevalier (Kundera, 1996: 32, 6). Drawing attention to these interpellations serves to veil those *not* directly acknowledged, for the reader may trustingly assume that all similar manipulations are likewise laid bare, when the alterations that most forcefully prostitute *No Tomorrow* to the narrator’s argument are those uncovered only by a direct comparison of both texts.

We must also consider how the changes in *No Tomorrow*’s form and perspective between original and representation affect its meaning. The former is told in the first-person past tense, the latter summarised in the third-person present. This shift in narrative voice transforms the story from confessional to exposé and robs the original narrator of the agency to describe his own experiences, paralleling him with Cechoripsky, whose life-story is similarly appropriated for the motives of another and who is likewise unable to prevent the usurper’s trail of misrepresentations. More important is the shift in tense. At the close of *No Tomorrow*, the narrator states ‘I looked hard for the moral of this whole adventure... and found none’ (Denon, 1777/1997: 747). As explained, use of the past tense evokes the future space of the discourse itself, in relation to which the story being reported is *past*. The title of the novella itself suggests this future space, with Cusset arguing correctly that ‘a title that contains the word “tomorrow”, even if only to deny this word, is obviously not ignorant of tomorrow’ (Cusset, 1997: 723). The form of the aforementioned verbs ‘looked’ and ‘found’ anchor them to the mentality of the narrator as he is leaving the chateau, not of his reporting future self. He is not saying that the story has no moral, or that he has not discovered a moral *since*, but merely that he was unable to divine it so near - temporally and geographically - to the night’s events. Placing this statement at the very close of his narration leaves it lingering in the reader’s mind and arguably encourages the reader to deduce a moral that the narrator wishes he had discerned sooner.

Few texts suggest how large or small is the temporal gap between the time of the story and the time of the narration. *No Tomorrow* makes no explicit statement, but the beseeching ‘I beg the reader to remember that I was twenty years old’ (Denon, 1777/1997: 740) suggests the narrator is embarrassed by his youthful naivety and so implies a gap of many years. There has thus been plenty of time for the moral to be discovered. *Slowness*’ narrator writes a moral into the novella, but this relates to the actions of Madame de T within the time of the story and does not explore the possible consequences of these actions on the Chevalier, which would become apparent only some time between the story and the narrating act, a time that Kundera’s narrator effaces. Feher’s description of the “dangerous man” brand of libertine experiencing ‘a strange nostalgia for the time of his own innocence, that former time when he was in love with the woman who so brutally introduced him into society’ (Feher, 1997: 30) suggests a probable fate for *No Tomorrow*’s narrator, whose arguable humiliation and abandonment by Madame de T - combined with his realisation that her sensitivity is merely a front for her sexual pursuits - may well turn him into a “dangerous man” himself. Viewing *No Tomorrow* as a utopian manifesto for libertinism is only possible if we take its title at face value, as the narrator of *Slowness* does brazenly. But the state of “no tomorrow” valorised on *Slowness*’ final page is not only a counterpoint to the future orientation of Berck and Vincent, but a mode of existence that robs us of the time needed to illuminate both the morals and the consequences that will prove certain courses of action are less fruitful than they initially appear. The narrator’s use of the present tense to remove from *Slowness*’ temporality the future space in which Berck and Vincent will enjoy the spoils of their dancing is perhaps most misguided because it places too much emphasis on the likelihood of their dancing succeeding, demonstrating the narrator’s strong internalisation of his era’s mentality. The broadcast of Berck’s interview with Cechoripsky may be critically panned; Vincent may fail in his performance at the Café Gascon and become a laughing stock. The future space that the narrator denies these characters would then become one of consequence and, perhaps, of realising that forging a reputation through misrepresentation is unviable.

Slowness tellingly dodges the question of Madame de T’s possible anorgasmia. In *No Tomorrow*, once the narrator has been told that Madame de T ‘herself feels nothing [and] is made of stone’, he nonchalantly replies ‘I wouldn’t have guessed...’ (Denon, 1777/1997: 745) and his lengthy conversation with the Marquis continues. Either the lack of direct commentary on the remark implies that the narrator wishes to rush past it, embarrassed by having been deceived by a performance suggesting the opposite, or, conversely, the ellipsis suggests a smug satisfaction at having given his partner what the unskilled Marquis evidently cannot. We could also presume that the Marquis is lying in order to unsettle the narrator’s confidence. It is impossible to resolve from the narrative whether or not Madame de T is anorgasmic, or, extrapolating from this, whether or not a representation can be said to hold true to its suggestions. In the sound-biting present day, however, there is no room for the narrator’s reading of *No Tomorrow* to preserve this ambiguity. After describing the aforementioned conversation, he informs us that ‘the Chevalier could laugh up his sleeve, because [Madame de T] had just proven the opposite to him’ (Kundera, 1996: 120). The narrator does not state that it is correct for the Chevalier to presume this, but the show of confidence is entirely his invention and the Chevalier’s counterpart in *No Tomorrow* demonstrates no such surety. *Slowness*’ narrator reads into *No Tomorrow* a much stronger link between representation and reality than the text supports, which subtly mirrors an overly trusting reader’s conclusion that the

representation of *No Tomorrow* within *Slowness* is faithful to its original. By comparing the two texts and discovering the differences outlined here, the reader ceases to be *Slowness*' Chevalier and becomes instead his counterpart from Denon's original, in a much stronger position to combat the manipulations of Berck and Vincent because disabused of the faith that speedy representations can claim sovereignty.

4. Conclusion

Reader-response theory provides a model useful for consolidating my reading of *Slowness* as a dissection of how the speedy culture decried by its narrator derails our ability to unpack and learn from ambiguous texts like *No Tomorrow*, or *Slowness* itself. Wolfgang Iser explains that 'communication in literature... is a process set in motion... by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment. What is *concealed* spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is *revealed*; the explicit in its turn is transformed when the implicit has been brought to life' (Iser, 1978: 168-9). If we can describe a reader who follows this model as what the thematic concerns of *Slowness* would position as a good reader, then the narrator of *Slowness* is a bad reader of *No Tomorrow*. To make of *Slowness* a truly novelistic experience, we must be the opposite sort of reader to its narrator, one with far more time on our hands. What is concealed about libertinism must spur the reader into a process of revealing, one simultaneously inspired by the gulf within the contemporary narrative separating what Berck reveals about Cechoripisky to the camera - and what Vincent plans to reveal to Pontevin about his night with Julie - from what the implied ideal reader will notice these revealings veil. Likewise, the reader's unveiling of libertinism's true colours will be guided by what the narrator reveals about *No Tomorrow*, which provides its original as a logical starting-point. And what is made explicit within *Slowness* about both *No Tomorrow* and libertinism will be transformed by the knowledge brought by a re-reading, from a fair argument that offers libertinism as a viable alternative to our contemporary era into just another symptom of this era's conversion of difference and complexity into happy but manipulated soundbites.

Slowness becomes an effective antidote to the trends it criticizes precisely because of the contradictory situation of it proposing a promising set of values that it consistently fails to put into practice. Iser and Hans Robert Jauss both agree that the value of a work of literature is directly proportional to its refutation of a reader's expectations (Iser, 1974: 278; Jauss, 1982: 25). An initial expectation is set up and then demolished as soon as the reader first spots the novel on a bookshop shelf, the promises of its title at odds with its slimness. This trend continues throughout the reading process, as the novel's performative and constative elements continue to be at war with one another. If *Slowness* were already slow, out of the box, the reader would finish it without being compelled to perform the future meaning-fulfilment that makes a genuinely slow text of both Kundera's work and *No Tomorrow*. The latter text becomes especially valuable via its metamorphosis into a site in which the expectations of it conceived through the narrator's representation are demolished, so that the ambiguities *No Tomorrow* already establishes within its own universe are joined by those it casts upon the text that seeks to manipulate it. *Slowness* thus encourages a transformation within the reader, one that lifts her above the problems of her era, as she is not just told by the narrator but experiences for herself the deficiencies of speed and the truths illuminated via a slower way of living and reading.

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