

Dominique Vivant Denon: *Point de lendemain* [No Tomorrow], 1777 (2,761 words)

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Sensual and witty, elegant and enlightened, Dominique Vivant Denon's story of a one-night liaison has now been rightly recognized as a grand literary masterpiece. In merely thirty or so pages, the erotic *conte* [tale] *Point de lendemain* [No tomorrow] captures the libertine essence of the French eighteenth century. It is often read, with a fondness not far from nostalgia, as a vignette for a certain idea of libertinage. With *Point de lendemain*, Denon celebrates the subtle seductions and the intense *voluptés* of vicomtes and marquises, set in rococo landscapes à la Watteau or in lavish interiors worthy of la Du Barry. *Point de lendemain* is as graceful as a painting by Fragonard and as sensuous as one of Boucher's. It is also as sharp and well written as a Voltairian epigram. Besides being a *chef d'œuvre* of libertine literature, Denon's tale deserves to be praised as one of the many banners of an enlightened age which was emancipating pleasure from the shackles of sin, vindicating happiness as Man's inalienable right, and 'inventing' liberty. Besides the fall of the Bastille in 1789 and Mozart's Don Giovanni's cry 'Viva la libertà!' in 1787, there was also, in 1777, the libertine night with no tomorrow of Denon's *Point de lendemain*.

On the surface, the plot of *Point de lendemain* is one of classical simplicity. It tells the story of an erotic impromptu, one summer night, between a more or less 'ingénue' young man and a more or less disingenuous lady. It starts in the evening as they meet and ends in the morning as they part. The minimalism of his plot allows Denon to unfurl, between the lines, all the nuances, degrees, complexities, and pleasures involved in the decent setting up and denouement of an affair with no tomorrow. The young man, now older, and no longer 'ingénue', recalls this one night-adventure with 'la décente Mme de T***' [the decent Mme de T***] (*Point de lendemain*, p.73). On a whim, she abducted him from the Opéra, inviting him to come with her right here right now to spend the night at her estranged husband's country estate just outside Paris. Why she does this, she does not say. It is part of the mystery of that night. Promptly pushed into her carriage at the intermission, Damon decides to abandon himself fully to the charms of the moment. The nocturnal ride in the moonlight is an occasion to steal (or take) a first kiss. The two arrive at the castle and meet the husband who soon retires, leaving his wife and her guest alone at last. The night begins.

So do the games of seduction between Damon and Mme de T***. Yet what the narrator describes is not so much their mutual seduction as their negotiation of a reciprocally understood desire with the rules of decorum. *Point de lendemain* does not relate a love at first

sight; it does not tell the story of Damon's impervious desire for Mme de T***, nor of hers for him. It narrates instead how two characters happened to recognize in each other an accomplice in the search for forbidden pleasures. Desire in *Point de lendemain* is for voluptuousness itself. Still, crucial as it is to that adventure, lust is wrapped in decency, as it should be for these two noble characters. Nothing is ever expressed bluntly: we are in a universe of double-entendres and allusions, of disguised yet easily decipherable signals for those initiated to the eighteenth-century erotic etiquette. This masked seduction has been compared to the mating ritual of a refined society, an erotic *pas de deux*. In keeping with their gender roles, she must seem reluctant, he must seem eager. *Faveurs* are begged with respect and granted with dignity. Mme de T*** imposes 'gradations' to the fulfilment of their desires: they go slowly, step by step, favour by favour, relishing each of their small victories over virtue. This decency imposed on libertinage is conceptualized as a source of erotic and aesthetic pleasure in itself rather than as a frustration of desires. After all, illusions and artifices are praised as sources of bliss in *Point de lendemain*: from the artificial landscape of the garden to the artfulness of the lady's little white lies, the narrator points to the satisfaction arising from the refinement of raw nature into a pinnacle of civilisation. *Point de lendemain* is indeed a celebration of libertinage as an art of love.

Little by little then, teasing desire to the edge of the night, the two characters progress into ever more intimate spaces which prompt (or simply echo) the increasing intimacy of their embraces. At the start of the evening, they had left the gossiping crowd of the Parisian Opéra for the isolation of a country castle. Now, they have left the castle full of servants for the darkness and silence of the park. Their liaison truly starts with a stroll in the park, when their arms interlace. Then, they sit down on the lawn, where the night air, the isolation, the 'moment' itself inspire kisses and furtive caresses. The pastoral takes a decidedly libertine turn on the *carte de Tendre*. Afterwards, they pass into a garden pavilion, open – allegedly at least – by chance and clad in shadows as modest (and therefore disinhibiting) as they are mysterious. There, Damon and Mme T*** make love: savagely at first, then, a second time, more slowly, more voluptuously, better: 'Tout ceci avait été un peu brusqué. Nous sentîmes notre faute. Nous reprîmes avec plus de détail ce qui nous était échappé. Trop ardent, on est moins délicat.' [All this had been a little rushed. We felt our fault. We started again more minutely all we had missed] (*Point de lendemain*, p.86-87). They leave the pavilion tired, but the night is young and so is our protagonist: 'Je prie le lecteur de se ressouvenir que j'ai à peine vingt-cinq ans.' [I beg the reader to remember that I was only twenty five] (*Point de lendemain*, p.89). How to surpass the bliss experienced in the pavilion before the return of

morning? The shrewd Mme de T*** lures her partner's curiosity to a boudoir invented to wake up the senses of even the most wearied visitors. In that luxurious, almost enchanted cabinet hidden at the heart of the castle, Mme de T*** and Damon reach the climax of their night and exhaust their last desires. They experience an ecstasy for which they thank the pagan gods of pleasure, Eros and Priapus. They are still catching their breath when the maid runs in to warn them: morning has broken. The night is over.

Damon rushes out in the cool air of the park. In the clarity of dawn, the events of last night resemble a mere dream. His wonderings are interrupted by the arrival of the Marquis, Mme de T***'s *amant en titre* [official lover]. Damon soon learns from him that his role last night had been to act as a decoy lover to fool Mme de T***'s husband. However the Marquis does not suspect the extent to which Damon played the part. The following scene is worthy of a comedy of errors: the husband and the two lovers gather at the lady's *lever* (she slept late for once, to nobody's but Damon's surprise). The dramatic irony of that scene invites the reader to be one last time the accomplice of Mme de T*** and Damon in their persiflage of M. de T*** and the Marquis. In a last and furtive tête-à-tête, she bids farewell to our narrator: 'Adieu, monsieur; je vous dois bien des plaisirs, mais je vous ai payé d'un beau rêve.' Should they remember that night, it must be as just a dream with no tomorrow, that is, with no follow-up, no hopes of a renewal, and no consequences either. As he leaves the castle, Damon still wonders at the events of last night: 'je cherchais bien la morale de toute cette aventure et... je n'en trouvai point.' [I looked for the morality of all this adventure and... could not find any] (*Point de lendemain*, p.104). Thus ends Denon's libertine conte: on a *point final* [full stop] which is but a *point de suspension* depriving the reader of the expected morality to the tale yet, through this, enabling us to share with Damon, even beyond the text, the fascinating mystery of Mme de T*** – decidedly obscure – and of the night – decidedly female.

However, there might in fact be a morality to *Point de lendemain* in its very dismissal of the notion. As Damon has learnt that night, pleasure (including the 'pleasure of the text') must be enjoyed for pleasure's sake, without assigning it a function, a meaning, a tie, or a consequence beyond the jouissance of a moment. The title says it all: 'point de lendemain'. It is an injunction to enjoy the present without a thought for the future. It has echoes in the rest of the text: 'point de questions, point de resistance...' [no questions, no resistance] (*Point de lendemain*, p.74), 'point de morale, je vous en conjure' [no morality, I beg you] (*Point de lendemain*, p.76), 'point d'étourderie' [no carelessness] (*Point de lendemain*, p.94), and of course, the 'point final': *point de morale* [no morality] to this adventure. Although Damon

ends his narration on a puzzle, unable to see clearly through Mme de T***'s intentions (had she planned where the night was to take them?), he leaves the castle in the morning wiser and more enlightened than he had reached it the night before. The clue is in the Masonic subtext of *Point de lendemain*. Denon, who would later join Free Masonry and was an erudite scholar of Ancient worships (in particular Etruscan Priapic ceremonies), compares Damon's adventure to a rite of initiation: 'Tout cela avait l'air d'une initiation.' [It all looked like an initiation] (*Point de lendemain*, p.94). It has three stages (the garden, the pavilion, the cabinet); the 'novice' must swear of oath of secrecy. The comparison culminates in the pages describing his discovery of the cabinet. Damon walks through a maze of corridors blindfolded by darkness. The boudoir covered with mirrors officiates as a Masonic hall of reflections. There in a dark alcove made to resemble a temple, he undergoes a symbolical death from which he will be reborn a new man. The little death, like the comparison of love making with a pagan ceremony, is a common trope of libertine writing. So is the *topos* of a young man's erotic education, the model being Meilcour's in Crébillon's *Les Égarements du cœur et de l'esprit* (1735-1738) [The Wayward Head and Heart]. Yet Denon gives a Masonic meaning to the revelation made to the novice during that libertine ceremony. What Damon learns indeed is to value a non-jealous, non-possessive bond. The pleasure he shares with Mme de T*** fits within the Masonic ideal of brotherly love. They will not be tied to each other, and they will not break each other's trust. The harmless pleasures of *Point de lendemain* have therefore little to do with the wicked thrills of Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) [Dangerous Liaisons], or with the power plays at stake in Crébillon's dialogues *La Nuit et le moment* (1755) [The Night and the Moment] or *Le Hasard du coin du feu* (1763) [The Chances by the Fireside]. That young man who, when the text started, was jealous of his other mistress's infidelities, now sees his one-night partner return to her lover the next morning without resentment, happy, quite simply, for the pleasures they shared secretly.

Point de lendemain could have ended with the maid's irruption in the boudoir at dawn, thereby truly depriving the story of any idea of 'lendemain' [morrow]. But by describing at length the morning after, Denon forces us to witness Damon's acquiescence to the ephemeral, inconsequential, and dream-like character of his night with Mme de T***. The liaison described in *Point de lendemain* is indeed not a love story. From the title page, it rejects the notion of commitment and goes on to debunk the idea that desire can last beyond its fulfilment:

La nouveauté pique. Vous m'avez trouvée aimable, et j'aime à croire que vous étiez de bonne foi; mais l'empire de l'habitude est si long à détruire, que je sens moi-même que je

n'ai pas ce qu'il faut pour en venir à bout. J'ai d'ailleurs épuisé tout ce que le cœur a de ressources pour enchaîner. Que pourriez-vous espérer maintenant près de moi? que pourriez-vous désirer?

[Newness excites. You found me lovely, and I like to think you were in earnest; but the empire of habit is so long to destroy that I doubt I have what one needs to vanquish it. I have also exhausted all the resources which the heart uses to enthrall. What could you now hope for from me? What could you desire?] (*Point de lendemain*, p.91)

Happy affairs, this tale seems to say, seldom last beyond morning. Through the maxims and reflections of his characters and narrator, Denon reveals himself to be a shrewd *moraliste* of the human heart and mind. *Point de lendemain* is thus a demonstration through concrete experiences (we are, after all, in the century of empiricism) of how desires are born and die.

The literary appeal of *Point de lendemain* stems in great part from Vivant Denon's construction of a double perspective inserted within a single voice. Through the first person narrative of the hero Damon, we are made privy both to the wonder of the young lover at the time of the affair and to the sarcastic lucidity of the more experienced, older narrator at the time of his story-telling. This double perspective discloses to the reader not just the shrewdness of Mme de T*** but also the entralling effects of her games. Whilst her deceitfulness is indeed unveiled – or at least, politely implied – by the narrator, she is not characterized as a despicable hypocrite. On the contrary, her graceful manipulation of the rules of the game presents her as an enchantress, admirable for her intelligence just like, a decade later and in a darker vein, Laclos's Marquise de Merteuil would be. Although the narrator's voice is Damon's, the tone of *Point de lendemain*, so seductive through the *sous-entendus* teeming between the lines, is rather that of Mme de T***. The two protagonists are indeed further characterized by the text itself: like the text, neither of them is innocent or naïve; but she, like the text, cunningly conceals lust under a respectable surface (nothing is said or written to upset this delicate balance), whilst he, also like the text, combines an amused irony with a focus on the charms of illusion.

Point de lendemain was first published in 1777 by a mysterious 'M.D.G.O.D.R' (now understood to conceal 'M. Denon, Gentilhomme ordinaire du roi') in Dorat's *Journal des dames*. As a testimony of its success, a pornographic version was published anonymously around 1780. The text is exactly the same, word for word, except in the places where a light could be cast on the specifics of the lovers' caresses. In 1812, Denon reprised the *conte*, editing it in the process. He made his hero/narrator five years younger and considerably more naïve, as if to increase his wonder on that night. The revised version starts with lines now

famous for their efficiency: ‘J’aimais éperdument la comtesse de ***; j’avais vingt ans, et j’étais ingénu; elle me trompa; je me fâchai; elle me quitta. J’étais ingénu, je la regrettai; j’avais vingt ans, elle me pardonna; et comme j’avais vingt ans, que j’étais ingénu, toujours trompé, mais plus quitté, je me croyais l’amant le mieux aimé, partant le plus heureux des hommes.’ [I was madly in love with the comtesse de ***; I was twenty, and I was naive ; she was unfaithful; I was angry; she left me. I was naive, I missed her ; I was twenty, she forgave me ; and since I was twenty, naive, still deceived but no longer left alone, I thought I was the best loved lover and, hence, the happiest of men] (*Point de lendemain*, p.35). Everything is said with a minimum of words. The narrator was ripe for a libertine night with no tomorrow, and would have a lot to learn from it.

Since the end of eighteenth century, *Point de lendemain* has inspired various artists nostalgic for a bygone *galanterie* which united liberty and gracefulness. Balzac reprised Denon’s tale in his *Physiologie du mariage* (1829), making it more bourgeois, less subtle, more explanatory yet more ‘pudibond’ at the same time. The ghosts of Mme de T*** and Damon also seem to float through the moonlit parks of Verlaine’s *Fêtes galantes* (1869): ‘Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé / Deux formes ont tout à l’heure passé. [...] Te souvient-il de notre extase ancienne?’ [In the old park, deserted and froze / Two shadows passed. [...] Do you recall our ancient ecstasy?] (Verlaine, *Colloque sentimental*). In 1958, with the film *Les Amants*, Louis Malle adapted Denon’s *conte* for the cinema and the twentieth century. Mme de T*** has become an unhappy housewife and Damon a lost traveler. Lost too is that night’s lesson in ephemerality, as the impromptu couple escapes together at dawn towards a ‘happily ever after’. Finally, *Point de lendemain* is the backbone of Milan Kundera’s *La Lenteur* (1990). Comparing the voluptuous pleasures of Denon’s couple with the rushed fornication of modern day lovers, Kundera’s narrator deplores the loss of the eighteenth century’s ability to appreciate the journey as much as the destination. The libertine art of love epitomized by *Point de lendemain* would have died with the *Ancien Régime*, replaced since by a consumerist approach of sex. Kundera’s nostalgic perspective on *Point de lendemain* could explain the *conte*’s popularity today among other libertine novels. It can be read as the ultimate rococo fantasy of a night with no tomorrow. This should not eclipse the fact that Denon’s story deserves the label of a literary masterpiece for the sharpness of its analyses, the cleverness of its construction, and the beauty of its narration. Still, that *Point de lendemain* should capture the essence of the eighteenth-century libertine art of love and, perhaps, the fantasies of its readers then and since, is what makes it a gem worth discovering.

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