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'1999714424'¹
Numbers and Series
in some Contemporary British plays

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Theatre comes in numbers: from the schisis constitutive of the actor who says “I” on the stage to the plurality of artists in charge of the text, settings, lighting system, sounds, and, at the other end of the process, to the spectators, theatre asserts the collective. This collegiality defines an ethics based on the encounter with the other, which is the paradoxical condition for feeling at home in and with oneself: the theatrical experience can only take place when this plurality is at-one-d. Sarah Kane gives a shape to this ‘at-one-ment’ when she asserts a collective yet reunified subject in her place: Kane does not speak of “herself” but of “hermself” and builds for her character a plural unessentialist, liquid subject², a subject-world: “ I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds, I bombed the Arabs, ...”³. Only the ethical subject thus created can address the traumas of contemporariness as defined by Agamben: “The contemporary is s/he who firmly hold(s) his/their gaze on his/her own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness. All eras, for those who experience contemporariness, are obscure. The contemporary is precisely the person who knows how to see this obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his/their pen in the obscurity of the present.”⁴

The collapse of meaning entailed by the mathematical eradication of the European Jews and by the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki made it clear that it was impossible to continue thinking of language as a humanist tool. “We come after.”⁵ It prompted the necessity to come up with new, non-verbal, “post-linguistic” languages.⁶ However, and here is the paradox, numbers, even though they exposed the mathematical barbarity tattooed on the arms of the camp prisoners, were also, in the aftermath of the war, considered the only possible

¹ S. Kane, *Crave*. Methuen, 1998, p. 36.

² Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 2000, p. 2.

³ S. Kane, *4: 48 Psychosis*. London: Methuen, 2000, p. 25.

⁴ G. Agamben Agamben, Giorgio. “What is the Contemporary” . *What is an Apparatus?* Trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009, p. 44 (adapted translation)

⁵ G. Steiner. 1970. *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman*. Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1998, p. 4.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 8.

reactivators or resurrectors of literary activity. Thus, alongside the dehumanizing power of numbers, The OuLiPo, and its theatrical offspring the OuTraPo (Ouvroir de Tragicomédie Potentielle in which Stanley Chapman and Tom Stoppard stand out as figureheads) resort to numbers to give back some legitimacy to language and literature, to re-inject logic in language through explicit mathematical constraints: the “exercises in style” proposed by Raymond Queneau consisting of 99 rewritings of the same story; the “+7 constraint” which replaces each word of a poem by the 7th word that comes after it in the dictionary; or the Fibonacci sequence as a structural device are, for instance, perfect examples of how numbers are promoted to being the main providers of structure in a world in ruins. This use of maths therefore testifies to both the loss of an inner logic – constrained writing consists in situating the guiding principle of a text not inside but outside the text⁷, – but also testifies to the hope for a retrieved capacity to mean and to speak. This is what contemporary theatre continues to explore.

Numbers are both at once the sign of the lost letter – that of the world’s dehumanizing barbarity –, and that of some sort of retrieved even if aporetic meaning. Here is the amphibological stance of modern and contemporary drama that welcomes the number to both obliterate the letter and to re-found it: numbers both testify to the overwhelming compulsive repetition of failure and yet somehow re-empower language as a valid system of signs to speak out human defeat. Finally, in a post-postmodern vision of things, post Baudrillard’s simulacra theory, theatre strikes us as a laboratory of ‘possibilities’, allowing for the quantum ‘multiverse’ to replace the universe, and giving an equal status to all the parallel worlds co-existing in the a multi-layered temporality. Numbers, therefore, ask for a re-evaluation of the frontier between fiction and reality. To analyse this shift of paradigm that takes us from death by numbers to maths as the departure point for an “extra amount of being”, let us take a few of examples among many in the plays by Sarah Kane, Martin Crimp, Caryl Churchill, Simon Stephens or Nick Payne.

Death by Numbers

In the *Fewer Emergencies* trilogy, Martin Crimp replaces the characters’ names by numbers (1, 2, 3), thus creating a reifying interchangeability. Caryl Churchill thematizes this

⁷ Literary constraints make it clear that textual essentialism (the fact that one may think that a text contains its own truth and that the author is the undisputable master of it all) is no longer acceptable: what gives the text its *ontos* is the act of reading, therefore an exterior event. On constrained literature, see Christèle Reggiani, *Rhétoriques de la contrainte*. Georges Perec, *l’Oulipo*, Saint-Pierre-du-Mont, Éditions InterUniversitaires, 1999, 2013. This comes very close to Marjorie Perloff’s concept of “proceduralism” (M. Perloff. *Radical Artifice. Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 139).

frequent practise and dedicates a whole play to cloning: in *A Number* (2002), Salter cloned his own son 21 times. He refers to them B1, B2, B3 and keeps calling them “despicable things” that any sound person would “squash”. As shown by Liliane Campos, the play has to do with “mathematized humanity” and reduces man to a repeatable and deprecating formula.⁸

Reification

The process of reification by numbers constitutes the matrix of some of the most important plays of the turn of the millennium, among which Martin Crimp’s *Attempts On Her Life*. The whole play reads as an ‘exercise in style’ and consists, not in 99 retellings of the same story this time, but of 17 scenarios constructing Anne as a terrorist, a victim, an artist, a performer, a car, a tv set, a cigarette... 17 scenarios that tend to exhaust all the possibilities of Anne: ‘ALL THE THINGS THAT ANNE CAN BE’⁹. The metaphorizing process, which has much stronger implications than a comparison (“Ann is a cigarette” vs “Ann is like a cigarette”) becomes the matrix of the seventeen scenarios. The process culminates with scenario 14:

She’s a pornographic movie star
A killer and a brand of car
A KILLER AND A BRAND OF CAR!

She’s a terrorist threat
She’s the mother of three
She’s a cheap cigarette
She is Ecstasy.¹⁰

Yet these variations on the character of Anne, while constructing her as a protean world-character and collapsing ontological frontiers (Anne could be a woman but also a car or a TV set), all abide by the same constraint: they never stage Anne. The multiplication of the suggested images entails a progressive dissolution of the referent in the myriad of referents implied, and the identity of Anne is lost for good under the plethora of simulacra. The proliferation of

⁸ L. Campos. «‘Any number is a shock’: Figuring humanity in Caryl Churchill’s *A Number* ». *Coup de Théâtre* n°26 (2012) : 27-41.

⁹ M. Crimp. *Attempts on her Life*. London: Faber, 1997, p. 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59

metaphors offers a whole range of images that read as many mediating filters keeping us away from the “real” individual.¹¹

More recently, Simon Stephens has also been working with series and numbers. Stephens often derives the structures of his plays from maths as when in *Rage* (2016) he takes his inspiration from photographer Joel Goodman’s 31 “Manchester parties hard into 2016” photos, or when, with *Maria* (2018), he resorts to the Fibonacci sequence to give his new play its structure. The Fibonacci sequence consists in finding the next number by adding up the two preceding numbers (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8). *Maria*, which Stephens has written for a new collaboration with German stage director Sebastian Nübling, stages a 19-year-old webcam girl and a single mother. Stephens arranges his cues according to the Fibonacci sequence and relies on the generative constraints to make the most of the worst: numbers enable the play to somehow positively claim that in the “inchoate atomized world (yet) order remains”¹². More than denouncing a mathematic logic trapping the human, the play invites reflexion on the numbers that govern our lives while addressing the issue of solitude in our hyperconnected world.

Eradication

Let us go one step further in the process of death by numbers, and into tragedy. As in Crimp whose Anne-Anny-Anya she is somehow literalizing in her last two plays, Sarah Kane’s numbers first strike us as death numbers. In *4.48 Psychosis* – a play made of 24 sections for the 24 hours of a day – numbers or figures materialise the cynical logic of objective time, the logic of Big Ben as Virginia Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway would put it, in the face of a subjective innermost urge: an implacable mathematical logic that leads to death. Figures represent blunt scientific observations, such as the doses of medicines prescribed and ingested:

Setraline, 5° mg... weight loss 17 kgs

Zopiclone, 7.5 mg.

Melleril, 50 mg.

Lofepamine, 70 mg, increased to 140 mg, then 210 mg. Weight gain 12 kgs.¹³

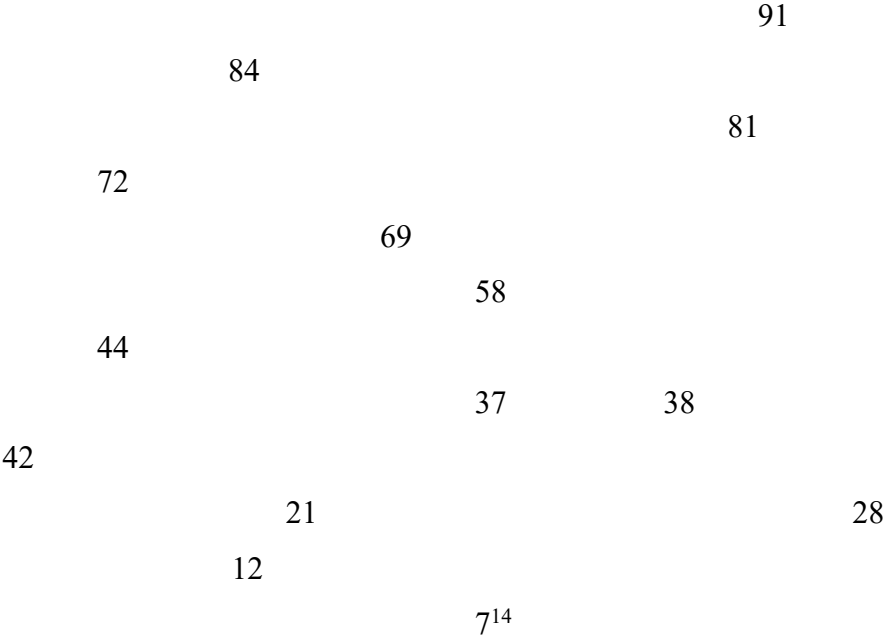
¹¹ J. Baudrillard. *Simulacres et simulation*. Paris, Galilée, 1981

¹² Simon Stephens at the Crossing Border Conference, Maison des Sciences de l’Homme de Saint-Denis, 11-12 october 2018.

¹³ Kane, *op. cit.* 2000, p.21-22.

Numbers are also present to measure the degree of concentration a patient is capable of. To count backwards in sevens is a common exercise in mental care sections and is very often unsuccessful:

100



A sane and sound mind is one that has these chaotic figures infallibly put back in order :

- 100
- 93
- 86
- 79
- 72
- 65
- 58
- 51
- 44
- 37
- 30
- 23

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

16

9

2¹⁵

Figures here strike us as the straitjacket of science; the character is made to feel like a lab rat dehumanized, reified, reduced to a serial number.

Serial numbers

“1999714424” is a serial number that disrupts the texture not of *4.48 Psychosis*, but of Kane’s penultimate play, *Crave*. Language withdraws and makes room for a different system of communication, ciphers and numbers, which inscribe (in)humanity as in the darkest periods of history. The spectator is propelled into a world where language has collapsed and is being replaced by infra-verbality. When it occurs, this serial number invites the reader/spectator to enter a hybrid regime in which meaning is conveyed by words, when words are left; by independent letters when one gets short of words, and finally by numbers when one gets short of letters. This number does not yield its secret. It reads like a phone number containing the emergency number 999, but also like the death number on the extermination camp prisoner’s arm (note that stage director Daniel Evans explained that he was tempted to scarify his arm with “4.48”¹⁶), containing the date and perhaps the number of the mental hospital ward where Kane was confined. This number reminds us of Primo Levi’s “Null Achtzehn”, which engraves the defeat of humanity:

Alors pour la première fois, nous nous apercevons que notre langue manque de mots pour exprimer cette insulte : la démolition d'un homme. [...] C'est comme si les numéros remplaçaient la fonction informative du langage : « Pour les anciens du camp, le numéro dit tout : la date d'arrivée au camp, le convoi dont on faisait partie, la nationalité. [...] Ce n'est que beaucoup plus tard que certains d'entre nous se sont familiarisés avec la funèbre science des numéros d'Auschwitz, qui résument à eux seuls les étapes de la destruction de l'hébraïsme en Europe. ¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁶ G. Saunders. *Love me or Kill Me. Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002, p. 277.

¹⁷ P. Levi. *Si c'est un homme*. 1947. Trad. Martine Schruoffeneger. Paris : Julliard, 1987, p. 26-27.

Numbers come in place of letters to *speak* the eradication of humanity. Kane is not afraid of outrageous comparisons – in *Cleansed*, for instance, she recycles Barthes’s *Lover’s Discourse* in which he compares the forlorn lover to the prisoner in Dachau –, and the dehumanizing experience of the hospital allows the persona to be reinvested with the weight of collective history.

Yet, although a multiplicity of significations can be attached to this number, and although not denying there is one, Kane gives no explanation for this number:

In some ways for me *Crave* has very fixed and specific meanings in my mind which no one else could ever possibly know unless I told them. For example, who knows what 1999714424 means? I’m the only person who knows – and the actors – and I have no intention of telling anyone what it means. So I can’t ever possibly expect to see the same production of the play twice, thank God”.¹⁸

This way of encrypting and of encoding the text opens the gate for a possible reenchantment of the number, for a resemanticisation and even for a poeticization according to the director’s or the spectator’s imagination: the number is a generative constraint to be integrated and elaborated upon: a matrix for poetry.

1. Reenchanting the number

Repoeticized, numbers become the trustworthy, tell-tale signs expressing the loss of the subject: they somehow allow language back into poetry and grant it a renewed degree of efficiency.

Vocalizing the number

In *4:48 Psychosis*, the structure which seems frustratingly and violently imposed by Big Ben – 24 desiccating sections – is doubled by a clandestine rhythm given by the 5 anaphoric occurrences of the alliterative ‘At 4: 48’:

At 4: 48? / when desperation visits / I shall hang myself/to the sound of my lover’s breathing
(...)

At 4: 48 / I shall not speak again
(...)

¹⁸ Dan Rebellato ‘Brief encounter’, qtd. in Saunders, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

At 4: 48 / when sanity visits / for one hour and twelve minutes I am in my right mind

(...)

At 4: 48 / I shall sleep

(...)

At 4: 48 / the happy hour / when clarity visits/warm darkness/which soaks my eyes / I know no sin¹⁹

This clandestine structure translates Kane's will to appropriate the exterior time through voice and poetry, her desire to make it her own so as to define what she calls her own "rhythm of madness". Proffered and vocalized, the number's alienating dryness is tamed as it is made flesh. Performing the number allows for its rehabilitation in language and for mathematical language to regain some humanity.

This hidden structure – the vocalized "rhythm of madness" – explores the continuous undercurrent of the character's determination to die and accounts for the "becoming-number" of Sarah Kane's language.

The becoming-number of Kane's language

What is at stake in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "devenir" or "becoming" is "with the shape one already has, with the subject one is, with the organs one has with the functions one fulfils, to try and extract particles whose movements we make as close as possible to the thing we are becoming and thanks to which we are becoming this thing", thus making it clear that all "becoming" is of a "molecular" nature²⁰.

If Kane has always been animated by a minimalist sense, using language only when it was impossible to do without it and only in a strictly limited way – "My favourite exercise is to cut, I cut, cut, cut!"²¹ –, language unfolds, and becomes more and more minimal, more and

¹⁹ Kane, *op. cit.*, 2000, p. 5, 11, 27, 31, 40.

²⁰ In "Devenir-intense, devenir-animal, devenir-imperceptible", Deleuze and Guattari explain that all "becoming" is of a "molecular" nature: "D'une certaine manière, il faut commencer par la fin: tous les devenirs sont déjà moléculaires. C'est que devenir, ce n'est pas imiter quelque chose ou quelqu'un, ce n'est pas s'identifier à lui. Ce n'est pas non plus proportionner des rapports formels. Aucune de ces deux figures d'analogie ne convient au devenir, ni l'imitation d'un sujet, ni la proportionnalité d'une forme. Devenir, c'est, à partir des formes qu'on a, du sujet qu'on est, des organes qu'on possède ou des fonctions qu'on remplit, extraire des particules, entre lesquelles on instaure des rapports de mouvement et de repos, de vitesse et de lenteur, les plus *proches* de ce qu'on est en train de devenir, et par lesquels on devient." (G. Deleuze et F. Guattari. *Mille Plateaux*, Paris, Minuit, 1980, p. 334). This is opposed to what the philosophers call the "molar entity": "ce que nous appelons entité molaire ici, par exemple, c'est la femme en tant qu'elle est prise dans une machine d'elle qui l'oppose à l'homme, en tant qu'elle est déterminée par sa forme, et pourvue d'organes et de fonctions, et assignée comme sujet." (*Ibid.*, p. 337)

²¹ Saunders, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

more hacked and chopped up, more and more maimed. The dismembering of the character's body of flesh is replicated by the torture inflicted on the body of words. Yet once it has become outrageously dysfunctional and asyntactic, language reorganizes itself as a chain of signifiers converging into an almost onomatopoeic system: it serializes itself and organizes its own mad algorithm:

flash flicker slash burn wring press dab slash
flash flicker punch burn float flicker dab flicker
punch flicker flash burn dab press wring press
punch flicker float burn flash flicker burn²²

The series of signifiers, which insists on the physicality of words as pure (even if jarring) music, regenerates the efficiency of language and conveys the violence of madness. Deconstructed, yet thus redynamised, language loses itself as it reasserts its power. Loss speaks out strength. The *reductio ad absurdum* that affects the sentence also contaminates the word itself, at times replaced by acronyms (RSVP ASAP²³) ; here again it is a way to say less in order to say more (as in the medieval runes). Finally, language is decomposed in figures, in a final and successful attempt to speak the subject un-done or de-funct. Figures, which seemed to be at the service of blunt and dehumanizing science when seen from the point of view of the psychiatrist, are reappropriated and resemanticized by the patient. In the exercise which consists in counting down in sevens, Kane endows numbers with the power to semioticize her character's own destruction, her progressive spectralisation, the un-doing of herself. She proceeds to a count-down of herself.

Kane's persona's count down of herself replicates the death of the subject. The concluding words of *4:48 Psychosis* luminously corroborate this:

watch me vanish
watch me
vanish

watch me

²² Kane, *op. cit.*, 2000, p. 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

watch me

watch ²⁴

After the figures... silence.

Consequently, a shift of paradigm seems to be taking us from deadly mathematics to numbers as re-authorizing the author. It seems essential to inscribe this poetic rehabilitation of figures in a post-postmodern configuration, out of the compulsive barrenness and sense of failure of post-traumatic figures and series. Post quantum-mathematics playwrights make the most of this and transform the desiccating iterability into a “theatre of the possibles” (Sarrazac). In other words, I will argue that the shift of paradigm which informs the contemporary stage takes us from death numbers to maths as the departure point for an “extra amount of being”.

2. Multiverse vs universe

British theatre is much more science oriented than French theatre. This we know for sure and the works of Kirsten Sheperd Barr, Liliane Campos or Solange Ayache have made it very clear. Stoppard’s Chaos theory-informed *Arcadia* stands as a good example of the way many contemporary plays resort to science to propose a radically new aesthetics. In a post-postmodern vision of things, which leaves behind Baudrillard’s simulacra theory, theatre becomes a laboratory of ‘possibilities’, allowing for the quantum ‘multiverse’ to replace the universe and asking for a re-evaluation of the frontier between fiction and reality.

Whereas Crimp’s cynical 17 “attempts on her life” dehumanize Anne and render her presence impossible, the new developments of science (or rather the appropriation of these developments by recent literature) invite us to consider each new variation of the exercises in style not as a simulacrum keeping us apart from reality, not as an aborted Beckettian failure exhorting one to “fail again, fail better”²⁵, but, as Chaos physics suggests, as a whole range of possibilities co-existing one on top of the other in a configuration known as that of

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁵ These are the concluding words of Samuel Beckett’s *Worstward Ho!* (1983). Dragging its aborted possibilities behind was already prominent in Beckett’s innovative poetics of “ressassement éternel” (Blanchot); yet with Beckett multiplication and series were inescapably trapped in the philosophy of failure that paradoxically dynamizes all his work.

“superimposed states”. Instead of a multiplicity seen as scooping out what remains of the ontos, Chaos mathematics suggest that an extra amount of being be added onto the liminal proposition.

Chaos mathematics-inspired plays derive their structures from the theories explored by quantum physics and most notably from the paradox that matter can be in two different states at once. This is the paradox of Schrodinger’s cat, both alive and dead at the same time²⁶. Nick Payne’s *Constellations* develops by denying precedence to both linearity and circularity. The maths give the play its structure and regenerate not only the genre but also the accepted conception of the way life inscribes itself in the universe. *Constellations* stages the encounter between a bee keeper (Roland) and a physicist (Marianne) – this is the matrix situation – and confronts the audience with a series of scenarios that branch off at key moments of their relationship. None of the parallel universes is given precedence over the others, none is granted more “reality” than the others : on the contrary the multiverse blurs the frontier between reality and fiction as the parallel worlds are given the same importance as the supposedly “real” one whose status is therefore questioned.

Contrary to Caryl Churchill’s *Heart’s Desire*, the first of the *Blue Heart* diptych, in which each new departure is doomed to failure and sends the story back to square one therefore obliterating all possibility of progress, Payne proposes another sort of “combinatorial drama”²⁷ that promotes both stasis and progress. In Payne’s more optimistic combination, different versions of the same event are played out as if in parallel. These playlets, which confer on the play a structure which is both fragmented and linear, perform one of the principles of quantum physics explicitly stated by the characters of the play: “Marianne. In the quantum multiverse, every choice, every decision you’ve ever and never made exists in an unimaginably vast ensemble of parallel universes.”²⁸ Once the romance has been started and interrupted and started anew, we are made to understand that Marianne is going to die an untimely death because of brain cancer. As the disease gains ground, she progressively loses her capacity to speak. Yet, conversely to what happens in the second play of Churchill’s diptych, *Blue Kettle*, in which language is also attacked by a disease reproducing the havoc worked on language and cognition by Alzheimer’s disease, Payne defeats the inevitable tragic ending by inviting us to reconsider time as the fourth dimension yet to be defined. In Churchill’s play, language is phagocytized by two words “blue”

²⁶ The cat is confined in a box with lethal gas but it is only when one opens the box that one can determine if the cat is alive or dead. Before “measuring”, the cat is simultaneously both alive and dead. This is known as quantum superposition.

²⁷ L. Campos. « Quantum Configurations in Nick Payne’s *Constellations* ». *Études britanniques contemporaines* n° 45 (2013).

²⁸ N. Payne. *Constellations*. London: Faber and Faber, 2012, p. 25.

and “kettle” to the point that these two words, or even the consonants of these words, are all that remain. In the play, we are taken from a faulty but still intelligible language (« MRS OLIVER. I'm his mother. / ENID. Blue do you blue.»²⁹, to an almost complete contamination of language by the disease (« ENID. Blue blue blue blue blue today in the street, I begged. »³⁰), and finally to a total contagion of words by the virus that reduces them to hiccupping vestiges of language:

MRS PLANT. How bl bl bl this was bl son? (...) Ket b tle die of?

MRS PLANT. Tbkkkkl ?

DEREK. B.K. (*End*)³¹

Whereas Caryl Churchill was taking us all the way to death and the death of language through her tragic but playful iteration of failure, Payne requalifies infinity as a possible comedic pattern:

Marianne. L-listen to me, listen to me. The basic laws of physics – the b-b-basic laws of physics don't have a past and a present. Time is irrelevant at the level of a-atoms and molecules. It's symmetrical.

We have all the time we've always had. ³²

Payne's *Constellations* displays a structure of a powerfully oxymoronic quality: the superposed states come close to Derrida's concept of “demeure” as explored in his eponymous book: “demeure” as in “to remain” and “abode” or “dwelling”, but also as in the negation of what dies (“demeurt” as “to un-die”, somehow)³³. The image stays, both a sign of bereavement and a confirmation of immortality. In his theatre-lab, Payne literalizes and semioticizes the deconstructivist approach and poses the question of the adequacy between taking place and taking time.

²⁹ C. Churchill, *Blue Heart (Heart's Desire and Blue Kettle)*. New York: Theatre Communication Groups, 1998, p. 53

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³² Payne, *op. cit.*, p. 81-82.

³³ J. Derrida. *Demeure, Maurice Blanchot*. Paris : Galilée, 1998.

When performed and vocalized, a number does not oppose a word. It becomes one.

From deadly numbers to repoeticized numbers that re-empower verbal language and finally to the opening of an unimaginable infinity of possibilities, the presence of numbers on the stage is paradoxical and challenging. A symptom of a ruined universe and of dystopian catastrophe, numbers are also the sign of the never-ending recovery promised by infinity: after exposing the inevitable “ressassement éternel” (such as stigmatized by Caryl Churchill’s plays from *A Number* to the stammering *Blue Kettle* or *Not not not not Enough Oxygen*), numbers on the stage also take us all the way to the vertiginous impossibility to bring the “infinite conversation” to an end.

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