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## Martin Crimp's Nomadic Voices

Elisabeth Angel-Perez

A number of Martin Crimp's plays give preference to voice over eyesight (*thea* in Greek). The spectator is offered a theatre of language in which the characters constitute themselves as narrators more than as actors. In *The Treatment* (1993), *Attempts on her Life* (1997) or the *Fewer Emergencies* trilogy (2005), however, words circulate between the different speakers who constantly try to appropriate the voice of the other: Anne's words are taken over by the film producers, the main 'absence' of character'<sup>1</sup> in *Attempts on her Life* is recomposed by her friends' or parents' words, the scenarios of the trilogy are chorally remembered. This circulation of words and of voices blurs the contours of the self. Further, I will argue here that Crimp plays with these remembering, often ventriloquist voices, and that it is essentially through putting the voice at a good distance from the self that he achieves the expression of selfhood. De-centred, circulating, nomadic voices become the only place capable of sounding the subject. This movement that entrusts the expression of the subject to an exteriority intensifies steadily from *The Treatment* to *Written on Skin* (2012).

### ((Disengaged voices))

Martin Crimp started writing both for the stage and for the radio (*Four Attempted Acts* [1984], *Definitely the Bahamas* [1987]), and far from being insignificant, this fact brings forth the early interest that he had in voice as the place of corporeity. He pushed this interest to its most radical manifestation when he started to write for the lyrical stage and collaborated with composer George Benjamin on *Into the Little Hill* (2006) and *Written on Skin* (2012), as we

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<sup>1</sup> 'a lack of character, an *absence*, she calls it, doesn't she, of character', Martin Crimp, *Attempts on her Life* (London: Faber and Faber), p. 25.

shall see. Writing for the radio and for the opera shows a capacity to think of the word as the source of an image, and the sound situation as the scenery. Yet all his work for the stage is equally guided by the conviction that the word conjures up a situation and it is in this in-between – halfway between poetry and enactment – that Crimp’s work lodges itself.

A disengaged identity is the nodal point of Crimp’s literary and theatrical practice. In this respect, Crimp comes close to Beckett’s frequent body-voice dissociation as explicitly operated in *Eh Joe*, for instance, in which a female voice sounds a male conscience. In the ‘Four Imaginary Characters’, Crimp very autobiographically describes the discovery of the ‘Writer’ within himself in terms of ‘possession’:

‘I’ve come to spend my life with you,’ he says. He goes on to explain that certain people, certain people like myself, are selected to be inhabited by writers. I’m not sure I like this word ‘inhabited’. ‘What do you mean?’ ‘Well,’ says the Writer, ‘we writers identify people who have nothing inside, who are dead inside – if you’ll pardon me saying so – and we move into him the way a hermit crab moves into an empty shell.’<sup>2</sup>

Although circulating and fluctuating identity is present in the themes of his more classical plays such as the diptych *The Country* (2000) and *The City* (2008)<sup>3</sup>, it literally shapes the poetics of Crimp’s most experimental plays, *The Treatment* and *Attempts on Her Life*, or in the *Fewer Emergencies* trilogy: in these seemingly improvisational texts, the actors of the drama narrated onstage never appear. Bobby only exists in and thanks to the narrators’ voices. Language is the place where the characters become real: on Crimp’s stage as in Freudian talking cures, to verbalise, to vocalise, to vociferate, is to bring to life. More than a performative function, voice has an ontological vocation. The ‘treatment’ that Anne is

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Crimp, ‘Four Imaginary Characters’, *Martin Crimp: Plays One* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), pp. vii-xii, (p. viii).

<sup>3</sup> The story of *The City* revolves around the character of a translator who in the end ‘authorizes’ all the characters of the play as she may well have invented them all.

submitted to in the eponymous play shows this clearly. It has two phases. Anne first has to voice her own history (or herstory) so that she can exist as a subject for herself and for the others whose words mirror her own:

*I. TriBeCa. The Office.*

*Anne, Jennifer and Andrew. Andrew smokes.*

JENNIFER     So he comes right over to you.

ANNE           He comes right over to me.

JENNIFER     He comes over to you. I see.

ANNE           And he sticks tape over my mouth.

JENNIFER     OK. Why ?

ANNE           To silence me. He wants to silence me.

JENNIFER     To silence you.

ANNE           Yes.

JENNIFER     Good. What kind of tape ?

ANNE           Sticky tape. The kind of sticky tape you use for securing cables.

JENNIFER     Good.

ANNE           D’you know the kind I mean.

JENNIFER     We know the kind you mean.

ANNE           The kind with a silver back. Sometimes silver, sometimes it’s black.

JENNIFER     Silver is good. The glint of it. That’s good.<sup>4</sup>

This quick-paced, almost stichomythic dialogue shows how the film producers (to whom Crimp gives the Socratic and maieutical name of ‘Facilitators’ because they help Anne deliver her story) voice Anne’s story in their turn, therefore allowing her to go through the vocal

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Crimp, *The Treatment* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 1.

equivalent of Lacan's mirror stage<sup>5</sup> before they can deprive Anne of her own existence. Their repeating her own narrative, in free indirect speech, constitutes a sound mirror for Anne so that she can contemplate her image while she realizes that this otherness or dispossession is no less than an anticipatory and metaphorical murder, confirmed by her death at the end of the play. At a broader level, what Crimp presents us with is the impossible 'being for oneself' of the subject, the impossibility of being in oneself and for oneself in one's language. The play reaches much further than its own scope in the vision of language it proposes, and suggests a metaphor for the speaking subject in general. Composed of repetitions and echoes, the text creates a haunting effect which makes it manifest that language can never be one's own. The exchange between Anne and the two 'Facilitators' reflects the alienation inherent in language: the language we inherit is that which has been shaped by others ('je n'ai qu'une langue et ce n'est pas la mienne', 'I have but one language – yet that language is not mine', Jacques Derrida writes in *Monolingualism of the Other*).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the verbal exchange also accounts for the natural dispossession that occurs whenever one addresses someone and illustrates what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the 'passive dialogism' of language<sup>7</sup>: because it is addressed to someone, language is shaped according to the addressee's personality. Language builds itself according to the addressee's expectations and therefore my language includes the addressee as much as it does me. My language is consequently somehow partly independent from its biological source of production. If my language cannot escape this dialogism, which is both constitutive (my interlocutor proves I exist) and mortiferous (yet s/he deprives me of my own language), if my language is 'inhabited' by someone else, then my infra-verbal

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<sup>5</sup> French psychoanalyst Henri Wallon conceptualized what he called « l'épreuve du miroir » in 1931. Yet it was Lacan who explored the concept further and reconceptualized it into the moment or phase during which, between 6 and 18 months, a child anticipates her/his physical unity. See Jacques Lacan. « Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique » (1949) in *Écrits*, (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 93-101.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. by Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> « Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies upon the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account... », in Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Trans. by Vern W. McGee (Austin, Tx: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 91.

almost infant-like, voice alone, that is my voice such as it has not yet reached the capacity to articulate language ('in-fans' means outside language as yet), remains the place of my proper self.

Crimp takes passive dialogism one step further in *Attempts on Her Life*. In this play, Anne simply never appears. The play reads like a radical sequel to *The Treatment*. It also gives an extremist version of the exportation of one's voice. Anne has died in *The Treatment* only to not be resurrected on the stage in *Attempts on Her Life*. Yet, of the expected formula of the drama, what remain are only the vestiges of language and of character (Anne, as already noted, is referred to as 'a lack', an 'absence' of character'), 'fragments shored against' Anne's 'ruins',<sup>9</sup> delivered to us by the voices of others. The play therefore stages a literally dis-located postmodern subject<sup>10</sup> who struggles to find a stage where s/he can speak out his or her fragmented nature:

It's theatre – that's right – for a world in which theatre itself has died. Instead of the outmoded conventions of dialogue and so-called characters lumbering towards the embarrassing dénouements of the *theatre*, Anne is offering us a pure dialogue of objects: of leather and glass, of Vaseline and steel; of blood, saliva and chocolate. She's offering us no less than the spectacle of her own existence, the radical *pornography* – if I may use that overused word – of her own broken and abused – almost Christ-like – body.<sup>11</sup>

In this play, the central character is submitted not to an evolutive process but to an involutive one, that is one which takes her back to regressively being a mere voice which, on top of it all, is not her own. The spectralized character only exists through and inside the others' voices, to

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<sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, (London: 1923, Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 41, (v. 430).

<sup>10</sup> See Heiner Zimmermann, 'Images of Woman in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life*', *European Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 7 (1) (Apris 2003), pp. 69-85, (p. 81).

<sup>11</sup> Martin Crimp, *Attempts on Her Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 50-51.

the point that we may wonder if the character would exist at all without them to speak her or if she can only achieve a being thanks to these rememberers, commentators and ventriloquists: in other words, voices that are not her own. This is the paradox that Crimp explores further in his ‘texts for music’, *Into the Little Hill* and *Written on Skin*.

### **((Into the Little Hill and the Exiled Voice))**

With the ‘text for music’ of *Into the Little Hill* (2006), Crimp offers a modern version of the *Pied Piper*<sup>12</sup>, in which he addresses both a political issue and a reflection on the power of music: ‘With music, I can open a heart/ as easily as you can open a door/ and reach right in’.<sup>13</sup> The central figure, the Minister, has to get rid of the ‘rats’ whose identity is blurred, although they are described as carrying suitcases and screaming babies in their arms.<sup>14</sup>

The text for music (Crimp rejects the term ‘libretto’, deemed somewhat reductive), narrates the story but very often concentrates on the Minister’s psychological state. Benjamin, however, opts for a chamber opera for two female voices: contralto and soprano. These two voices have to sing all the roles: those of the Mothers, the Musician and the Crowd, which are minimal, but also that of the Minister. In Crimp’s text as well as in the choice of female voices made by George Benjamin, the Minister, even though central, cannot express his emotional state in the form of confession or of monologue: first because there are no real

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Crimp explains: ‘The original story is the famous one of the *Rattenfänger von Hameln*. George and I exchanged lists of possible themes and stories – circled round them for a while – until it was me who returned to one which was, I seem to remember, on George’s very first list. It suited us both, being well-known enough to offer an unbreakable narrative, but also – like a myth – terse and unexplained enough to allow each of us – first me – then George – to intervene in our own particular ways. In fact, in order to have no preconceptions about what the story signifies, I went to the earliest English-language source, which is a brief and entirely neutral ‘digression’ in Richard Verstegen’s *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence* (1605). This is where I discovered the “little hill” of the title.’ Ensemble Modern and Martin Crimp, ‘Into the Little Hill: A Work for Stage by George Benjamin and Martin Crimp’, *Ensemble Modern Newsletter*, 23 (2006), [http://www.ensemble-modern.com/en/press/press\\_archive/interviews/2006/557](http://www.ensemble-modern.com/en/press/press_archive/interviews/2006/557) [accessed 3 January 2014].

<sup>13</sup> Martin Crimp, *Into the Little Hill* (Paris: L’Arche, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Vicky Angelaki writes: ‘We may take the rats to symbolize any ethnic or religious minority, perhaps ghettoized and treated as a risk to general welfare’, in Vicky Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp : Making Theatre Strange* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 128.

conventional arias as the narrative is never suspended and the Minister's words are always part of it, and second, because the Minister's internal space is only sung out loud from an exterior position (a female voice). Paradoxically, it is as if, to be heard or even to be voiced, his state of mind had to be vocalized, or rather sung, by another. The whole opera rests on the discrepancy between the interiority expressed and the voice that sings it. The Minister, on whose conscience the piece concentrates, is never sung out loud by a biologically corresponding voice. His 'inscape' is made accessible to us by the two singers' voices, therefore by de-centered voices, either in the form of direct speech ('the minister says'/ 'the minister thinks,'<sup>17</sup>) or in the form of free indirect speech and of a stream of consciousness that supposes an obliteration of the narrator behind the character's words.

The second part of the piece takes place 'Inside the Minister's head', and an aria, sung jointly by the two female voices, vocalizes remorse and inner struggle:

1 There is no other sound.

2 There is another sound.

1 There is no other sound.

2 There is another sound: the sound of his heart. The sound of the Minister's heart humming in the Minister's head under the clear May sky. Listen.<sup>18</sup>

The fact of not saying I (the Not-I) in the text is the sine-qua-non condition of selfhood: as if the only way for one to have access to the character's self were to have it sung by an ex- or de-centered voice, that is by a voice whose tessitura does not correspond to the subject that is sung. The essentialism of the voice is negated. **To be reached, the intimate has to be exported in an exteriority, 'extimated'.**<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> The word is here used in the sense Michel Tournier uses it in his *Journal extime* (2000), in clear opposition to



From Samuel Beckett onwards (with the notable pioneering American exceptions of Alice Gerstenberg's *Overtones* (1910) and of Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* [1928]), theatre has at last made it possible for interior monologues to be heard on the stage. As Jean-Pierre Sarazac writes, 'Le soliloque des nouvelles dramaturgies monte d'un corps muet. Il est, littéralement, transcrit du silence'<sup>24</sup> (the soliloquy in the new dramaturgies rises from a silent body. It is literally transcribed from silence).

In addition to the vocal delegation that consists in having other voices express a character's interiority, Crimp elaborates another protocol of distancing: epicizing or narrativizing the drama. In this oft-cited quote, Crimp explains that in some of his plays the dramatic space he creates is a 'mental' one and not a 'physical' one: he writes drama in the head rather than on the stage:

I have consciously developed two methods of dramatic writing: one is the making of scenes in which characters *enact* a story in the conventional way – for example my play *The Country* – the other is a form of narrated drama in which the act of story-telling *is itself dramatised* – as in *Attempts on Her Life*, or *Fewer Emergencies* [...]. In this second kind of writing, the dramatic space is a *mental* space, not a physical one.<sup>26</sup>

In *Attempts on Her Life*, or in the *Fewer Emergencies* trilogy, the textual principle chosen by Crimp is that of the narrative within the theatre. The characters who speak are never those who act and, not unlike a Brechtian adaptation of a Greek chorus (in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* for instance), voices narrate, comment, and put the action – along with the incumbent pathos – at a distance. The spectacle, consequently, is as much that of the story being in the process of writing itself as that of the story proper. The suspense therefore is no longer at the

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the intimate. The 'extimate' is also a concept developed by Lacan in 1969. See, among other occurrences, Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVI, D'un Autre à l'autre* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 249.

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, *L'Avenir du drame* (Champ-Vallon: Circé, 1999), p. 130.

<sup>26</sup> In Ensemble Modern and Martin Crimp, 'Into the Little Hill: A Work for Stage by George Benjamin and Martin Crimp', *Ensemble Modern Newsletter*, 23 (2006), *op. cit.*

level of the diegesis: what one is eager to know is, more than how the story will end, *whether* the story will be written at all: the suspense affects the very possibility of the play rather than the story of the play. The epic dimension takes over from the dramatic and the only ‘drama’ (the word means ‘action’ in Greek), the only *agon* (conflict) are those of the voices struggling hard to come to the surface of the audible.

Yet Crimp goes further in his method of voice-delegation: contrary to what happens in *Attempts on Her Life* or in the mini-dramas whose favoured textual principle is the third-person singular, *Into the Little Hill* intertwines the narrative and the reported speech so that one moves back again from the epic mode to the dramatic mode. Free indirect speech merges with direct speech in precious moments of shared enunciation: in his text, Crimp does not simply juxtapose his ‘two methods’, as in *The City* for instance. Rather, he superimposes them so that the recitative, reinvested with emotion, becomes the aria. This symbiosis between the recitative and the aria pioneers a method that reaches a climax in *Written on Skin*, Crimp’s second text for George Benjamin, and the composer’s first large-scale opera.

**((Differance or Invitation to Music: *Written on Skin*))**

*Written on Skin*, a rewriting of a medieval poem or ‘vida’ by Guilhem de Cabestanh<sup>27</sup>, creates a very particular dramaturgic setup which makes room for music. From the opening, a double temporality becomes clear: that of the angels who, from the rim of the stage or of a miniature, lean forward towards the inside of the frame and, like a Greek chorus in a tragedy, comment on the story as it unfolds; and that of the characters of the en-abyme story. Yet neither of

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<sup>27</sup> Guilhem de Cabestanh or Cabestany was a troubadour in the county of Roussillon. According to his legendary *vida*, he was the lover of his patron’s wife. On discovering this, Raimon de Castel Rossello killed the troubadour and fed his heart to his wife. Michel Adroher, *Les Troubadours roussillonnais* (Pézilla-la-Rivière, Publications de l’olivier, 2012) or Margarita Egan, ed. and trans., *The Vidas of the Troubadours* (New York: Garland, 1984).

these two spheres remains within its prescribed frontiers. The angels break into the representation and the characters play their parts while narrating them at the same time. If the characters can be the narrators of their own story, it is because they have been the people involved in it and therefore know it from within. Crimp superimposes the two temporalities and allows the characters to be both inside and outside the frame at once. Thus, the lines spoken by characters are almost always formally introduced by the characters themselves, who, becoming their own self-narrator, both embody and disembody the role:

BOY	A book costs money, says the Boy.
PROTECTOR	I'll give you money.
BOY	A book needs long days of light.
PROTECTOR	I'll give you money. I'll give you light.
	But first: show me proof.
BOY	The Boy takes from his satchel an illuminated page. <sup>28</sup>

*Written on Skin* performs the fusion of Crimp's 'two methods of writing' and thereby opens a memorial temporality. By both acting and narrating themselves as actors, the characters gain a kind of haunting depth as they exist both in our time frame (present time) and in that of the narrated characters (medieval past). Katie Mitchell's staging (Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, 2012) opts for a clear display of this double temporality as the characters are called back into life and made to don their own personae:

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Crimp, *Written on Skin – Publication du Festival d'Aix en Provence* (Aix-en-Provence: Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, 2012), p. 37.

Nous avons décidé qu'il devait simplement y avoir deux temporalités très clairement représentées : celle des narrateurs et celle des personnages. Je me suis dit que, si les narrateurs-personnages racontent les choses qu'ils font, c'est qu'ils doivent les avoir effectuées auparavant. Pourquoi dès lors ne pas les faire revenir d'entre les morts et leur demander de refaire leurs gestes passés.<sup>29</sup> (We decided that there should be two temporalities very clearly represented: that of the narrators and that of the characters. I thought that if the narrators-characters are able to tell the things they are doing, it's because they have done them in the past. Why then not have them come back from the dead and ask them to perform their past actions).

In a disquieting way, that the characters should be capable of narrative distance as regards themselves suggests a post-mortem existence. Their enunciative position is therefore literally spectral and Crimp addresses the ambition of theatre to sound the voices of the dead.

The text and the staging are engraved in this unreal present in which the characters are both startlingly naturalistic and mimetically engaged in acting out their story, while being at the same time uncannily distanced because of the contemporary frame that continuously reminds us of its presence. Thus, the Boy does not ask 'what d'you want?' but '[w]hat d'you want, says the Boy',<sup>30</sup> which allows identification with the en-abyme story while remaining critical and distanced as if Brecht's dialectic theatre had collapsed into a single instance.

The double frame allowing the same individuals to both play and narrate themselves is sometimes bypassed so as to allow the characters to break free from quotations – and Agnès's last rebellious speech testifies to her victorious struggle to promote a liberated feminine subject. This is, however, very rare, and the dominant principle is one that sees the characters both sing for themselves and speak of themselves in the third-person singular. The classical form is therefore both recuperated and kept at a distance:

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<sup>29</sup> Katie Mitchell, *Ibid.*, p. 23. (My translation).

<sup>30</sup> Crimp, *Ibid.*, p. 39.

PROTECTOR

[. . .]

*Pause*

How does it taste—says the man.

AGNÈS Good, she says—salt and sweet. Why?

PROTECTOR Good?

AGNÈS Yes, she says—good, she says—salt strange and sweet. Why?

PROTECTOR Good? How is it good?

AGNÈS Sweet as my own milk, yes—good—but salt—  
salt as my own tears. Why?

PROTECTOR Good? How is it good?

AGNÈS Salt as my own blood—says the woman—  
salt, sweet, strange, yes, good—  
dark as a mulberry, but light as a sheet of gold.  
Why?  
What has my husband my Protector given me to eat?<sup>31</sup>

The narration does not rely on a narrative but on action, therefore superimposing the recitative and the aria: the recitative, reinvested with pathos, becomes the aria while pathos, put at a distance in the aria, exiles itself.

It is precisely in this logic-defying temporality that the text opens a breach for Benjamin's music:

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Cette manière de représenter des personnages impliqués dans une histoire qu'ils racontent en même temps qu'ils la jouent permet d'élever le langage de quelques centimètres au-dessus du sol, et cet interstice est une invitation à la musique.<sup>32</sup> (This way of representing characters who are involved in a story that they themselves narrate while performing it enables one to elevate language a few inches above the ground and this interstice is an invitation to music).

Music is therefore organically imbedded in both Crimp's text and Mitchell's staging. The gap between the voices of the narrators and those of the characters, the *différance* – conceptualized by Derrida as both differing and postponing<sup>33</sup> – between the two discourses is the place, both before and beyond verbal language, of music.

Another transposition needs to be analysed: that which allows a movement from iconic visuality (the image we see: here the illuminated miniature) to vocal visuality, that is a vision constructed by the (here singing) voice. Like the dramatic structure, the sound structure reproduces for our ears what the illumination offers 'on skin' for our eyes to see, both a frame and an en-abyme story: 'Et puis je suis fasciné par les manuscrits médiévaux, j'admire leur fabrication et la présence d'images autour des textes, car cela rejoint l'idée, importante pour moi, que les mots sont des images et qu'ils créent des images',<sup>34</sup> ('I am fascinated by medieval manuscripts, I admire their fabrication and the presence of images surrounding the texts, because for me it corroborates the idea, an important idea, that words are images and

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<sup>32</sup> George Benjamin, *Ibid.*, p. 13. (My translation).

<sup>33</sup> Derrida's concept of 'différance', with an 'a' is present in all his philosophy. It is well defined as « Le mouvement de différence entre deux différences (avec un a et avec un e) n'appartient ni à la voix, ni à l'écriture au sens courant, et se tient entre les deux » ('the movement of differing between two differences (with an a and with an e) belongs neither to the voice, nor to the writing in the usual meaning of the word, and lies between the two). in Derrida, Jacques, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Crimp in *Ibid.*, p. 20. (My translation).

that they create images’). This transposition of the medieval image in sound finds an echo in Crimp’s choice of having the original troubadour of the medieval poem, replaced by an illuminator, as if music had to become image and therefore to move away from the sound to better to find its way back to music.

In between the epic (narrated) and the dramatic (enacted), or rather both at once, this ‘text for music’ identifies what it is that the paradoxical presence of voice is made of: both from the body and out of it, both embodied and disembodied, fleshing out the spectrality of the absent person yet never fully achieving complete corporeity or incorporation as the vocation of voice is to escape the body. Structurally, this text gets as close as it can to the very substance of what makes it audio-visible. The text is concentrated but sparse and allows room for music: more than that, it makes it necessary. It entertains vacuity, proceeds by extreme concision or compression and therefore requires the presence of music. Katie Mitchell is right to note that ‘La plus grande différence entre cette pièce de Martin [Crimp] et ce texte d’opéra, c’est qu’à un niveau brut, il y a moins de mots. Martin crée ici un langage très économe qui permet à George Benjamin de remplir l’espace entre les mots de musique et de sons’,<sup>35</sup> (‘the biggest difference between a theatre play by Martin Crimp and this text for an opera is that, basically, the latter has fewer words. Martin creates a very parsimonious language allowing George Benjamin to fill in the gaps with music and sounds’). Indeed, as well as being economical, the text pulses with sensations: constrained in a rhythm closer to that of a poem than to that of a play, free of any whiff of naturalism, the text is nonetheless pregnant with over-brimming humanity. In its dual nature, the text oscillates between repudiation of pathos and the inevitable empathy created by the passionate story. The potentially melodramatic situations are abstracted from the gaze – the illuminator’s murder, for instance – yet they are inscribed elsewhere in the text, differently and differently, suffusing the text with their

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<sup>35</sup> Mitchell in *Ibid.*, p. 22. (My translation).

spectral or ominous presence. The narrative and its capacity to arouse emotion are contained and constrained by poetic concision and the refusal of empathy. Yet sensuousness is nowhere more blatant than at the heart of concision and restraint.

AGNÈS    The woman takes off her shoes

steps

through a stone slit

turns

up the spiral stairs

pads

into the writing-room

where the Boy

ah

yes

look

the Boy bends over a new page.

What is it she feels between her bare feet

and the wood floor?

Grit.<sup>36</sup>

Crimp's characteristic attention to the most minute of details allows a concrete situation to be created which anticipates the sensuousness of the tale. The words already inscribe clandestinity and pleasure in the décor and, relying on the spectator's experience ('bare feet', 'grit'), they build up desire. Desire is continually displaced, lodged in apparently insignificant details allowing Crimp to elaborate an impression of rich sensuousness while continually

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<sup>36</sup> Crimp, in *Ibid.*, p. 39.



denying or postponing it. This is the paradox that Benjamin's music explores with its constant oscillation between affect and objectivity.

Crimp's text allows for the presence of voices that are, as Danielle Cohen-Lévinas puts it, 'ni présence à soi, ni perte du sujet', [des] 'voix au-delà du chant',<sup>37</sup> ('neither presence to oneself nor loss of the subject', 'voices beyond singing'). In *Written on Skin*, it is in the deepest layers of language, in its most intimate rhythms, that the founding oscillation between distance and empathy, which is the hallmark of this opera, is to be found: 'une histoire brûlante placée dans un cadre glacial'<sup>38</sup> ('this burning hot story placed in a frozen frame').

Whether because mediated by others or because mediated by a temporally distanced self, Crimp's characters are often deprived of an essential immediate voice, in a movement that confirms the exile of the subject and the circulation of voice on the post-Beckettian stage.<sup>39</sup> If vocalisation seems to be the shortest path to resonating with oneself when one has lost oneself, the movement towards the lyrical makes it even clearer. Crimp's nomadic voices are neither the trace of a presence of the self nor the proof of the loss of the subject: both distanced and interior, these voices alone give us access to the character's mindscape..<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Danielle Cohen-Levinas, *La Voix au-delà du chant – Une fenêtre aux ombres* (Paris: Vrin, 2006), p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> Crimp, *Written on Skin*, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> The impossibility of saying 'I' is explicitly stated by Beckett in *Not I*. On this point, see Dan Katz, *Saying I No More : Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett* (Evanston, IL : Northwestern UP, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> An earlier, shorter version of this article in French appeared in *Tropismes* 17 (2011). This content, translated into English, is published here with permission from *Tropismes*.