

A Textual Analysis of Martin Crimp's Adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*: The Importance of Testimony and Relationship

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Abstract

This paper argues that Crimp's adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (2006) transforms Nina's two key speeches into two urgent acts of testimony. The paper compares Crimp's adaptation to other, more canonical adaptations of *The Seagull* in the English language, such as Anne Dunnigan's (1964) and Michael Frayn's (1988), and concludes that, while previous translators have given Nina's speeches a metaphysical and spiritual emphasis, making her words reflect a cosmic struggle between good and evil and thereby inserting her words within a religious framework, Crimp produces a post-Holocaust play which aims to position spectators actively with regard to the inequality of contemporary world order. Crimp's version removes Chekhov's references to Russia and sets the play in a bourgeois context of deceit, which simultaneously reflects a larger political context of rivalry amongst world powers. Nina's language, in her testimonies, is both personal and political. In order to interpret the indeterminate, lyrical language of Nina's testimonies, and to complete the picture of an unequal world order, the audience are encouraged to draw on their own experiences of oppression and duplicity in interpersonal relationships. Crimp thus invites the audience to evoke a resistant type of memory and to oppose the inequality of the existing order, as they detect the need for ethics in their personal, everyday context.

Translations and Adaptations of *The Seagull*

On the face of it, Martin Crimp's 2006 adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1899) is consonant with the original play. It maintains Chekhov's structure, plot, and setting.¹ Both plays are about the difficulty a series of characters experience in connecting with one another while spending the summer at Piotr Sorin's country estate. In his 2006 adaptation, however, Crimp transforms these problems into clearly visible vignettes of contemporary social tensions and contradictions. In Crimp, the difficulty connecting, Nina's breakdown and Kostya's outrageousness, melancholia or acts of self-inflicted violence, are articulated as a consequence of the structural violence of contemporary society, increasingly dominated by market forces and the search for status. They are seen, therefore, as the result of the way in which late capitalist identities are constructed in the context of an unequal world order dominated by ambition and by the retention of benefits and profit by a few.

The difference in emphasis offered by Crimp's 2006 version of *The Seagull* in contrast to Chekhov's original is achieved in a number of ways, including, importantly, alterations to character and relationships.² However, it is Crimp's treatment of Nina's two key speeches in the play - one delivered in Act One as she performs the role of a war survivor for Kostya's play, the other delivered in Act Four, as she passes on to Kostya her testimony of Trigorin's violence - that is key to this discussion, particularly insofar as he transforms these speeches into urgent, direct acts of testimony.³ Crimp gives Nina's speeches the fragmented and metaphorical

¹ One exception in relation to setting exists: Chekhov's Act Two is set on a croquet lawn and Crimp's is transposed to a dining room.

² Trigorin and Kostya's fortunes as writers - the former being successful, the latter unsuccessful - are contrasted with their framing as good or bad men - the former being duplicitous, the latter ethical. By such means, Crimp seems to critique the society that permits, even facilitates, immoral action in the service of ambition and worldly success.

³ In Crimp's version, Nina describes herself as being that 'steady heartbeat' (13), the 'slow pulse of the universal will' (13), and the 'blood moving under the skin' (13). Nina may thus also represent a more abstract principle, such as humanity's creative, vital impulse to adapt and survive, as opposed to its self-destructive tendencies. Given the fact that she is a witness, she may represent memory itself, in its potential to prevent violence from repeating itself.

character of a testimonial. Her language is not rational and referential, but lyrical and often highly symbolic. Haunted by the violence, both personal and political, she has witnessed, in her attempt to testify, Nina 'actively pursue[s] the [traumatic] accident [...] through obscurity, through darkness and through fragmentation' (Felman and Laub 24), in a language which is often 'cognitively dissonant' (Felman and Laub 53). As well as functioning as a critique of contemporary society, Crimp's version of *The Seagull* is also, importantly, a post-Holocaust play, in that it seeks to make social contradictions transparent for the audience, and to elicit a resistant type of memory from spectators. By way of Nina's testimony of her experiences of suffering, which I shall explore shortly, Crimp seeks to make the audience engage with the duplicity of contemporary society and to recognise and critique the fractures violence has created in the twentieth century.

Comparing Crimp's version with Anne Dunnigan's 1964 translation and Michael Frayn's 1986 translation, this paper argues that whilst these versions make Nina's words in Act One express a metaphysical and religious problem, Crimp chooses to situate the play in an era of late capitalism and the war on terror. Late capitalism is the socio-economic system that characterises post-industrial societies, where the production of market goods is replaced by the production and distribution of information in a context dominated by new technologies of communication. The term designates an expansionist phase of capitalism. If industrial capitalism corresponded to a phase of accumulation, concentrating on industrial production and discipline, late capitalism works by controlling prices in a market that has become global. Gilles Deleuze captures the complexity of such a change:

It is not simply a technological evolution, it is a profound mutation of capitalism. [...] 19th-century capitalism is a capitalism of concentration, both regarding production and property. [...] In the present situation, capitalism no longer concentrates on production, which is often relegated to the Third World periphery. [...] It is a capitalism of products, sales or markets. [...] A market can be conquered only when one acquires its control, not through the formation of discipline, only when one can

set the prices, not through lowering the costs of production.⁴ (282-3)

This is further explored by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who assert that,

to the extent that the sovereign authority of nation-states, even the most dominant nation states, is declining and there is instead emerging a new supranational form of sovereignty, a global Empire, the conditions and nature of war and political violence are necessarily changing. War is becoming a general phenomenon, global and interminable. (3)

Crimp's plays thus respond to a context in which Empire is still present.⁵ Western countries, which possess infrastructure and technology, engage in constant, regulatory wars in order to control resources and set the market prices and policies. War thus becomes necessary in order to maintain the current world order. For Crimp, this radical search for profit which late capitalism allows is seen to create duplicitous, individualistic subjectivities. Crimp links a system that places no restrictions on market interests, and which leads to a context of global deceit and violence, to the introduction of these market interests and thus, of duplicity and violence, in interpersonal relationships.

⁴ Author's translation: 'No es solamente una evolución tecnológica, es una profunda mutación del capitalismo. [...] El capitalismo del siglo XIX es un capitalismo de concentración, tanto en cuanto a la producción como en cuanto a la propiedad. [...] En la actual situación el capitalismo ya no se concentra en la producción, a menudo relegada a la periferia tercermundista. [...] Es un capitalismo de productos, es decir, de ventas o de mercados. [...] Un mercado se conquista cuando se adquiere su control, no mediante la formación de una disciplina; se conquista cuando se pueden fijar los precios, no cuando se abaratan los costes de producción.'

⁵ As Hardt and Negri argue, 'A "network power", a new form of sovereignty, is now emerging, and it includes as its primary elements, or nodes, the dominant nation-states along with supranational institutions, major capitalist corporations, and other powers' (xii). Even if this type of imperialism does not entail the 'sovereignty of the nation-state extended over foreign territory' (Hardt and Negri xii), as is the case with modern imperialism, it is perhaps a more effective and sophisticated form of control than the one modern colonialism entailed.

In Crimps' *The Seagull*, the deceit that permeates characters relations both informs and reflects a larger political milieu of rivalry amongst world powers, thus turning the multiple vignettes of emotional duplicity which permeate Chekhov's play into symptoms and causes of an unequal contemporary world order. Nina's speeches reflect the link between the micro- and the macropolitical. When Nina delivers the testimony of the war survivor in Act One, the language she uses to discuss world relations is strangely reminiscent of the language of interpersonal relationships. In Act One, Nina uses possessives, such as 'my' enemy (14) or 'my' white throat (14), and refers to the enemy as the 'violent Other – origin of material brutality' (14), thus deliberately personalising the political.

In Act Four, Nina, testifies to the violence of interpersonal relationships in which her experience blends with the lines of the war survivor she impersonated in Act One. She thus indirectly refers to Trigorin's violence and lies as being, like she claimed in Act One about international relations, 'COLD, BLANK [and] DISTANT' (64). Crimp thus frames the search for power and ambition in terms of conceptions of the self, in terms of whether the self can come face to face with its limitations and acknowledge the Other, or if it must contribute to oppression of the Other and to emotional – or terrorist – violence. In responding to violence in a post-Holocaust historical and dramatic context, I contend that Crimp is seeking appropriate ways of representing atrocity. How should or could barbarism be dramatized? According to Élizabéth Angel-Perez, the historical rupture which the Holocaust signified has caused British playwrights, and Crimp in particular, to seek to develop new forms, thus making visible 'the impossibility of recycling pre-existent dramatic categories and the need of a generic renovation of theatre' (200).⁶ Indeed, I argue that, through Nina's testimony and its lyrical, indeterminate language, Crimp seeks to position spectators in such a way that they become aware of an unequal, contemporary world order, and to oppose the introduction of barbarism as they may detect it in their own daily context.

The language of testimony, made lyrical, urgent and indeterminate, is an important strategy in Crimp's efforts to

⁶ Author's translation: 'Martin Crimp [...] met en place une dramaturgie de l'après-Auschwitz qui rend patente l'impossibilité de recycler les catégories dramatiques préexistantes et la nécessité d'une refonte générique du théâtre'.

relocate *The Seagull* as a response to contemporary society and violence and to personally and politically engage his audience. The lyrical testimony requires the collaboration of the audience; they are encouraged to evoke personal experiences of inequality, which are then turned into material for interpretation. This process requires the spectators to become aware of late capitalist inequality, and of the duplicitous subjectivities it creates. Crimp's use of testimony and lyricism in Nina's speeches reflects a post-Holocaust artistic response. It is perhaps an example of what Theodor W. Adorno, in writing about art as a form of resistance in the wake of Auschwitz, states: that for art to be resistant, social contradictions need to be 'experienced' by the receiver, and 'certain art holds open the possibility of that experience [...] In this way alone is aesthetic resistance possible' ('Autonomy' 240). According to Adorno, the experience of contradiction and crisis must be an essential component of any work of art that attempts to elicit resistance.

Crimp emphasises the potential for resistance of testimony through the *mise-en-scène* itself. The lyrical, poetic language of Nina's testimony in Act One is framed, in Chekhov, by a play-within-a-play, since Kostya's play is staged for both a fictive, bourgeois onstage audience and for a real audience. In Crimp's version, as indicated in the stage directions (3), spectators become the lake in front of which Kostya's play is staged. As she delivers her speech before the lake, Nina must turn her back to the real audience, refocusing the real spectators' attention on the fictive audience. The onstage audience for Kostya's play is made up of Piotr Sorin's guests, who are spending a summer vacation at his country estate. Nina's fictive audience is not responsive, they make fun of Nina's words and cannot understand the message she tries to deliver. Spinning the opening scene around like this invites the real audience to become responsible with respect to the violence spoken about, violence which has roots similar to the duplicity which led to the war on terror. In this way, Crimp encourages the real audience to cease to be mere voyeurs of the spectacle, and to position themselves actively with respect to contemporary structural inequality. The play's ultimate aim is that, out of their contact with oppression and suffering, the audience may develop a new, more personal sense of ethics, one not based on a series of 'commonsense,' prescriptive moral rules.

Testimony as Resistance: Crimp's and Chekhov's Play-Within-a-Play

Crimp contextualised *The Seagull* within a post-holocaust milieu by removing its references to Russia and by giving it urgency and directness of testimony. In her first speech, Nina speaks about the destruction of life on the planet. Her lyrical language evokes a world torn by violence – a dystopia brought about by competition between nations, greed and wars – and the ensuing loneliness of the subject who has witnessed violence:

Everything human, everything animal, every plant,
stem, green tendril, blade of grass –
each living cell
has divided and divided and divided
and died.
For millions of years
Now this earth is ash, this lake thick like mercury.
No boat lands on the empty shore.
No wading bird stands in the shallows.
And the moon – look – picks her way
like a looter through the ruined houses of the dead
slicing open her white fingers
on the sheets of smashed glass –
COLD
BLANK
DISTANT.

Pause.

The brutal material struggle of individuals
has ended.
Only the steady heartbeat of the world goes
on.
I am that heartbeat. (12-3)

In Crimp's barren, dystopian context, the moon is 'like a looter' (13) who drags herself 'through the ruined houses of the dead' (13), lamenting the lost potential of individuals. Refusing to take part in such a violent game, the moon disclaims her memories of humanity, and pours herself over the unacknowledged site of violence. What is crucial is that, unlike previous translators of Chekhov's play, Crimp foregrounds anxiety about a world saturated by violence through Nina, whose language appears haunted by contemporary conflicts. The shadow of genocide

hovers over Nina's words, since the war she talks about involves the whole of humanity.

In contrast, Dunnigan's 1964 translation features Nina's speech as an ontological or spiritual riddle. Dunnigan's version proposes that 'for thousands of years the earth has borne no living creature' (115), but there is no mention of a war having taken place. It is more reminiscent of a religious apocalypse than of a war between human beings. Life is no more, but there seems to be no explanation or cause:

Men, lions, eagles, and partridges, horned deer, geese, spiders, silent fish that dwell in the deep, starfish, and all living things, having completed their sad cycle, are no more [...] For thousands of years the earth has borne no living creature. And now in vain this poor moon lights her lamp. Cranes no longer wake and cry in meadows, May beetles are heard no more in linden groves. Cold, cold, cold. Empty, empty, empty. Awful, awful, awful. *Pause*. The bodies of all living creatures having turned to dust, eternal matter has transformed them into stones, water, clouds, and all their souls have merged into one [...] I am all alone. (115)

Dunnigan's translation renders Nina's speech a metaphysical meditation, whereby the destruction of the multiplicity of life on earth is evoked only in order to convey a sense of chaos and materiality that will finally be resolved into a single universal spirit. Alternatively, Crimp evokes the lives of animals and blades of grass, humans and cells, in order to lament the fact that the efforts undertaken by past generations have been undermined by a war and made to disappear without a trace. In this context, both Nina and the moon become witnesses who recall the memory of violence so that such efforts will not be forgotten.

Frayn's translation, meanwhile, turns Nina's speech into a metaphysical or religious problem that dismisses the apparently random character of existence in the name of a better afterlife:

For fear that life might appear to you, the Father of Eternal Matter, who is the Devil, effects in you, as he does in stones and water, a constant replacement of the atoms, and you are in a state of continual flux. One thing alone in the universe stays unchanging and constant – spirit itself (*Pause*). All I am allowed to know

is that in this stubborn, bitter struggle with the Devil, marshal of all material forces, I am fated to be victor; and that matter and spirit will thereafter merge in wondrous harmony to usher in the reign of Universal Will. But that will come about only after long tens of thousands of years, when moon and bright Sirius and earth alike will gradually turn to dust [...] And until that time, horror, horror, horror. (70)

By comparison, Crimp's version of *The Seagull* is definitively located in material reality and it is here that the battle between good and evil is waged. What Crimp portrays in terms of social and psychological competition for the earth's resources, Frayn portrays in terms of a struggle between God and the devil. In contrast, in Crimp's adaptation, the fight between good and evil is a result of the self-aggrandisement of a few at the expense of a disenfranchised majority.

Crimp's adaptation, then, deliberately brings the barrenness of the stage and of the earth into sharp political focus. Nina speaks of the refusal to sacrifice herself for the sake of the Other. Nina makes reference to how it is always the presence of the Other that makes the self confront its own boundaries and abide by reason:

And now my enemy approaches:

The violent Other –

Origin of material brutality.

I can hear his body

churn the lake –

smell his foul breath.

I can see his terrifying

lidless eyes.

The violent Other:

hoping to wind the

steel wire of reason

round my white throat

HARD

BITTER

RESTLESS. (14)

The language works like a poetic riddle for the audience. World relations have been undemocratic and savage because of the fear,

amongst Nina's contemporaries, of yielding to the demands of the 'violent Other' (14). Violence seems to have arisen because 'the Other – origin of material brutality' (14) always makes the self aware of its necessary boundaries. Thus, as Nina suggests, the Other is 'terrifying,' hoping to 'wind the steel wire of reason' (14) around the self, that is, hoping to restrain and restrict ambition.

Yet, at the same time, through the reference to the Other as having 'lidless eyes' (14) Crimp suggests that the enemy was also violent in its demands.⁷ However, Crimp portrays this fear of the Other as exaggeratedly visceral – note the enemy is 'felt' as a presence that 'churn[s]' (14) the otherwise peaceful lake, and is detected by its 'foul breath' (14). Crimp sketches out a polarised situation which satirically evokes the political climate of the war on terror. In Crimp's version, as mentioned, Nina delivers her speech by turning her back to the real audience in order to address the fictive audience, thus making the real audience self-consciously aware of its ignored presence. The real audience, indeed, becomes the lake, while Nina speaks of a world torn by violence to an unreceptive fictive audience. These fictional spectators dismiss the play as experimental and make fun of Nina's words, increasing Kostya's frustration. Arkádina asks, 'Is this one of those experimental things?' (13) Or jokes, '(laughs) I can smell sulphur. Is that intentional? [...] (laughs) Of course – it's a special effect!' (14) Polina finds Dorn's hat more interesting than Nina's lines, which prompts Arkádina's sarcastic comment that 'the doctor is doffing his hat to the violent Other, origin of / material brutality' (14). Kostya finally loses his nerve.

Nina's speech encounters bad witnesses on stage. Yet because her fictive audience fails to grasp the importance of her message, the real audience can potentially become positive witnesses. Indeed, by spinning the opening scene around by 180 degrees, Crimp explicitly interpellates the real audience. Nina's language, which is non-conventional and personal, lyrical and indeterminate, requires the audience's active interpretation. They

⁷ Note the intertextual echoes between *The Seagull* and *Cruel and Tender* (2004), a play which also dramatises the contemporary context of the war on terror, and which is also a re-writing of another play, Sophocles's *The Trachiniae* (c. 430 BC). In *Cruel and Tender* Amelia, the female protagonist, similarly refers to the terrorist as a face with 'no eyelids': 'my husband is sent out on one operation after another with the aim – the apparent aim – of eradicating terror: not understanding that the more he fights terror the more he creates terror and even invites terror – who has no eyelids – into his own bed' (Crimp, *Cruel* 2).

must attend to the Other. The Other, like a steel wire that winds around one's throat, signifies self-limitation and is a powerful reminder of insignificance of the self. Nina understands violence as the result of the self's inability to make sacrifices for the Other. The riddling quality of Nina's language produces a strangeness which captures the audience's attention. Indeed, the references to the Other belong to the context of academia, and appear de-contextualised. In this sense, they work very much like an *objet trouvé* or a linguistic ready-made (Zimmermann 117), which is offered to the audience as an object of interpretation. As Heiner Zimmermann has argued in relation to Crimp's *Attempts on her Life*, Crimp's linguistic ready-mades are de-contextualised, and thus opaque, fragments of language, which introduce signifiers 'whose signified is inaccessible or which do not represent anything, but simply "are"' (117). Crimp's verbal ready-mades, then, inspired by Marcel Duchamp's visual ready-mades from the early twentieth century, invite spectators to interpret de-contextualised fragments of language, to decode the riddles offered to them. Spectators are impelled to create new ethical codes as they seek to bring closure to the play.

According to Adorno, for art to be resistant it must defy the conventions of realism. Adorno theorised the potential of lyricism – and thus, of the literature of testimony – to act in a resistant manner for the reader/audience. As he puts it, 'what we mean by lyric [...] has within it [...] the quality of break or rupture' (215). He adds, 'The subjective being that makes itself heard in lyric poetry is one which defines and expresses itself as something opposed to the collective and the realm of objectivity. It has, so to speak, lost nature and seeks to recreate it through personification and through descent into the subjective being itself' (Adorno, 'Lyric' 215-16). The lyric poem, through its defamiliarisation, attempts to bring to light 'things undistorted [...] not yet subsumed' (Adorno, 'Lyric' 213) to dominant modes of perception, and to the reification of an exchange society.

If the audience wants to bring closure to the play, and understand the testimonial language Nina presents to them, they will have to fill out Nina's words with specific images. These images may be drawn from the audience's own experiences of inequality. In witnessing, indeed, spectators become 'double witnesses,' that is, both to the trauma and to themselves (Felman and Laub 58). As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub put it, in witnessing the listener 'partakes of the struggle of the victim with the memories and residues of his or her traumatic past [...] the

listener has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, known to them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony' (58). Through Nina's language, Crimp invites the audience to detect violence as it takes place in their own interpersonal contexts. Crimp asks spectators to resist violence, as well as barbarism within civilised relationships, by making them aware of its symptoms, that is, of how it first manifests in a micropolitical context.

'Cold, Blank, Distant': Breakdown as Resistance to the Contemporary World Order

In Act Four of Crimp's version, two years after the staging of Kostya's play, Nina comes back and testifies to Kostya of the failure of her relationship with Trigorin, who seduced her and 'juggled' her (52) with another woman even when he was expecting a child with her. Nina tells Kostya of her suffering in a barely coherent, deranged speech, in which she keeps jumping between her present as an actress to the time when she first met Trigorin at Sorin's house. Nina begins to merge her own life with the violent experiences of the survivor she impersonated in Act One, and thus inserts her tragedy within a larger contemporary context of violence:

Oh well. Who cares. He said theatre was useless – kept making fun of me – kept chipping and chipping away till I felt useless myself – no confidence – second-rate – didn't know where to put my hands – couldn't act, couldn't stand right, couldn't control my voice. Horrible. I'm the seagull – is that right? – no. Remember? You shot one. 'Man turns up. Mindlessly destroys it. Idea for a story.' Is that right? No (*Rubs her forehead.*) What was I saying? Oh yes: chipping away. (63)

And later:

I love him more than ever. I want him. I can't bear it. I'm completely obsessed. Remember how innocent we were? Mmm? How good it felt? 'For millions of years.' Remember?
'For millions of years
Now this earth is ash, this lake thick like mercury.

No boat lands on the empty shore.
No wading bird stands in the shallows.
And the moon – look – picks her way
like a looter through the ruined houses of the dead
slicing open her white fingers
on the sheets of smashed glass –
COLD
BLANK
DISTANT.'

She impulsively embraces Konstantin and goes out. (63-4)

Testimony becomes the medium through which the subject attempts to convey her breakdown after experiencing 'barbarism' in a relationship. Thus, for the spectators, the 'coldness,' 'blankness' and 'distance' of the world after violence is juxtaposed with the coldness of interpersonal relationships. While Nina's reference to the 'violent Other' in Act One was personal, here Nina's language contains deliberately macropolitical echoes.

Nina's reaches that 'moment of self-forgetting in which the subject submerges into language and speaks not as something foreign to the subject but as his own voice' (Adorno, 'Lyric' 218). Nina attempts to separate herself from dominant modes of perception, and speak through her 'own voice,' urgently searching for images, and hovering between consciousness and unconsciousness. Nina's language makes free associations, and 'throw[s] new light on the familiar, thus meeting the objective need for a change in consciousness that might ultimately lead to a change of reality' (Adorno, 'Autonomy' 256). Nina's repeated reference to being 'chipped away' evokes the policies of Empire. It also conjures up the exploitation of the Third World by Western hegemony, which wields a type of power that keeps individuals docile. As Foucault says, the power exerted by liberal democratic societies to maintain the current world order is no longer based on taking life or letting live, as it typically was in pre-modern societies, but on the power to 'foster life or disallow it to the point of death' (138). Liberal democratic societies are interested in the power of life, in the development of 'numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations' (Foucault 140). This has led Hardt and Negri to conclude that a characteristic of late capitalism is that power is becoming totalitarian 'through the production of docile subjects' (53). Through the language of collapse and testimony, then, Nina reveals the ways in which both her personal experiences and, by

implication, global political relations, make one docile. Nina's personal experience of deceit and dishonesty is seen as a consequence of the construction of late capitalist subjects. Crimp refuses to induce an experience of 'satisfaction and harmony' in the spectator, derived from seeing 'fictitious conflicts resolved' (Adorno, 'Industry' 231), and seeks to reveal 'the generality of things' (Adorno, 'Lyric' 211) by making social contradictions visible.

Both Nina – through her final testimony – and also Kostya – through the dissatisfied attitude he shows throughout the play – seek to articulate world inequality and the symbolic violence of Empire by directly pointing to Trigorin's dishonest subjectivity. Over and over in the play, be it in their acting and writing, through the riddling language of collapse or in overt denunciation, they refer to the individualistic, solipsistic nucleus of the late capitalist entrepreneur who refuses to acknowledge 'the steel wire of reason' (14) or the requirements and needs of the Other. Fragmented language, however, also reflects and denounces women's complicity with victimisation – 'I love him more than ever. I want him. I can't bear it. I'm completely obsessed' (63). Indeed, Nina participates and is complicit in the patriarchal system that oppresses her. As she puts it, once Trigorin ceased to love her or to consider her valuable, she 'felt useless [...] – no confidence – second-rate' (63). Through Nina, Crimp also denounces what Pierre Bourdieu has called 'the paradoxical submission' (7) of the victims – in this case, female victims of violence – to the structures of domination, leading them to view themselves through these structures which have been imposed on them, thus re-enacting 'dominant modes of perception [...] which lead them to acquire a negative representation of their own sex' (20).⁸

Crimp's 're-writing' of the character of Trigorin and the ethical riddles he is meant to awaken in the audience are intimately connected with the several, repeated crises of violence which have taken place during the twentieth century, of which the Holocaust is only the most extreme example, and to which Crimp's plays repetitively respond. Felman and Laub have asserted that, after the repeated twentieth-century crises of barbarism, 'testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times – our relation to the traumas of contemporary history: the Second World

⁸ Author's translation: 'Cette soumission paradoxale [...] C'est ainsi que les femmes peuvent s'appuyer sur les schèmes de perception dominants [...] qui les conduisent à se faire une représentation très négative de leur propre sexe.'

War, the Holocaust, the nuclear bomb, and other war atrocities' (5).⁹

In *A Theory of Parody*, Linda Hutcheon explains that contemporary authors 'trans-contextualize' (11) previous works of art and, in so doing, they parody them. The momentous historical events which took place between both playwrights' – Chekhov's and Crimp's – lifetimes, might account for the differences in the treatment of the most crucial passages, of the main characters and, in particular, of Trigorin. The Holocaust, indeed, was driven forward by individuals who, in an educated, ostensibly civilised society, committed acts of barbarism. In Hutcheon's words, 'parody is, in another formulation, repetition, with a critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity' (6). As she puts it, such self-conscious reworking of old texts 'play[s] on the tensions created by [...] historical awareness' (6). They signal less an acknowledgement of the 'inadequacy of the definable forms' of the predecessors [...] than their own desire to 're-function those forms to their own needs' (Hutcheon 4).

In conclusion, Crimp transforms the failure of interpersonal relationships as it is depicted in Chekhov into a very tangible, political reality that responds to the world today. Breakdown and testimony seek to reposition spectators as responsible with respect to contemporary violence, by making them aware of the need to resist it in micropolitical contexts. This awakens in the audience the need for ethical consciousness, and the need to prevent the introduction of 'barbarism' within civilised relations. Nina's two key testimonies are offered to the audience as poetic riddles about the transformation of a person into a vehicle for resilience and ethical action, on the basis of his or her own contact with suffering and oppression. Crimp's post-Holocaust version of Chekhov's *The Seagull* suggests that ethical codes, in the contemporary context, are not a pre-given set of moral precepts but the result of a process of learning, through life, that suffering is an injustice. A new ethics can thus only emerge out of the audience's realisation of the

⁹ The twentieth century is particularly linked to genocide because technological advancements have made the means of killing more effective. As Weitz comments in 'The Modernity of Genocides': 'In the end Nazism is in fact the outcome of developments in the mechanisms of power [and technology], newly developed since the eighteenth century, that have been pushed to their high point' (54). Aware that technology has, in the twentieth-century, been developed to its highest point of sophistication, Crimp thus turns to influencing the spectators' psychology as a means to resist the introduction of barbarism in the culture.

concrete, local, specific need for relationships to be redesigned. Through the indeterminate, lyrical language of breakdown and testimony, Crimp aims to make the audience evoke a resistant type of memory which makes them aware of the need to oppose the inequality of the existing order, and of the fact that they have the potential to become, like Nina, ethical and committed individuals.

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