

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* or How American History Spins Forward

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Abstract

Angels in America's roaring success represents a real turning point in mainstream American drama. This article explores both Kushner's treatment of history—particularly American history—and the ingredients which compound the melting pot American society had become in the 1980s. Through the specific situations the characters undergo in both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, the playwright exposes his own Brechtian and neo-Hegelian vision of current events. Kushner deliberately recycles traditional American myths and elements of American culture and pins them all on a reconstruction of identity—whether gender, racial, or political—as the real axes of his plays. By making gay characters lead the plays, and by including obvious religious elements from an apocalyptic literary style, political discussions on Reagan's policy on AIDS, and reminiscent historical images, *Angels in America* becomes a revision of the new National Period America is living as the promised land which every single individual re-creates with her/his daily efforts and capabilities.

“The people look skyward seeking aid from above, and the Angel of History appears on the horizon his eyes staring, mouth open and wings spread, while human catastrophes are hurled before his feet”. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”.

“History is a ribbon, always unfurling; history is a journey. And as we continue our journey, we think of those who travelled before us”. Ronald Reagan's Second Inaugural Address. January 21, 1985

“We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come”. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America Part Two: Perestroika*.

Most critics still try to agree on how to label Tony Kushner's two-part play *Angels in America*. For some of them, it is just epic drama or political drama; others classify it as a gay play or an AIDS play; and some go beyond and call it a religious or a Jewish play. But there certainly is one thing with which they all coincide: *Angels in America* is serious drama and the most criticised, commented on, and awarded play on the American stage since the middle 1950s.¹ This way, critics such as John M. Clum wrote that the play is “a turning point for gay drama and American drama” (2000: 249); John Lahr commented on Kushner that “not since Williams has a playwright announced his poetic vision with such authority on the Broadway stage” (1993: 133). Others question why the play is both “‘radical’ and popular” (Savran 1998: 243). Indeed, Kushner's first succeeding play is a complex one and difficult to categorize from any point of view: as a show, a literary work, a political and religious reflection, a cultural (gay) phenomenon, or as a historical document. It is my contention that, apart from its dramatic qualities, literary influences and sources, *Angels in America* is not only one

more AIDS or gay play, but also a piece of dramatic work that critically gives an answer to thousands of Americans who lived a crude reality and questioned what it meant to be part of a community in a particularly difficult time as the Reagan era was.²

1. The Play

Angels in America Part One: Millennium Approaches premiered on May 1991 followed by *Part Two: Perestroika* which premiered in November of the following year.³ The playwright subtitled his play “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes” (1992 and 1994: iii). A “fantasia” is a musical work in which the composer has allowed his imagination free play, with one musical idea flowing from another with little regard for “set” forms. Thus, Kushner makes scenes overlap—sometimes in a contrapuntal manner, has characters move in and out of simultaneous dialogues with each other, and rapidly changes the settings from offices to houses, from a hospital to an imagined Antarctica, Central Park or Brooklyn.

Both parts of *Angels in America* tell the story of a group of people trying to make sense of the world in New York in the mid-1980s. Prior is an entertainer living with AIDS whose Jewish lover, Louis, has left him and become involved with Joe, a Mormon and political Republican. Harper, Joe’s wife, is slowly having a nervous breakdown, and Hannah, Joe’s mother, comes from Salt Lake City to help the couple. Their stories differ from Roy Cohn’s (a fictional re-creation of the infamous American conservative lawyer who died of AIDS in 1986) and his attempts to remain in the closet while trying to find some sort of personal salvation in his values.⁴ Belize is an Afro-American ex-drag-queen nurse who takes care of both Prior, his friend and former lover, and Roy Cohn at the hospital.

Most of *Millennium Approaches* is devoted to the introduction of the plot and the character’s main features and personal situations. It is not until Act Three in this part and *Perestroika*, when the audience is presented the play’s major theses. On the one hand, a meditation on what it means to live and die—of AIDS, or anything else—in a society that cares less and less about human life and basic decency. On the other hand, the play’s public critique on the administration led by Ronald Reagan, from the obvious disregard for the AIDS crisis to the overt political corruption.

2. Kushner’s Concept of American History and Politics

The night Bill Clinton was about to be elected the new president of the United States, November 1, 1992, *Angels in America Part One* and *Part Two* premiered in the fully staging of the play at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. By that time, as David Román recalls “over 171,890 people had officially died of AIDS-related causes in the United States alone” (1998: 205). Kushner started to work on *Millennium Approaches* in 1988. For most of the critics, he had in mind two influential writers: on the one hand, Bertolt Brecht’s theories on political drama and, on the other, Walter Benjamin’s ideas on history.⁵ Although critic James Fisher thinks that “*Angels* is certainly inspired by aspects of Brechtian theatre, but it is primarily fuelled by Walter Benjamin” (2002: 57), the playwright employed the Brechtian epic mode and form and became greatly influenced by the use of multiple points of perspective and a dialectical vision of history. Brecht’s insistence on socially-conscious, proletarian drama is also

evident in Kushner's depictions of normal people in politically charged crises and particular individuals exposed to deprivation and suffering.

As regards Walter Benjamin, it was precisely his *Understanding Brecht* (*Versuche über Brecht*, 1966) one of the books which most influenced Kushner's theatre in the same way as his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1969) particularly inspired *Angels in America*. In the core of this essay, Benjamin uses a strange visual allegory for the presentation of his theories on history written within the context of the Nazi advance across Europe. By gazing at Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* (1920), the philosopher develops a parable of history in his ninth thesis:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257-58)

In Benjamin's metaphor, the angel of history stands for both the absence of the idea of a future and the intolerable situation of a present. Trapped between a past and a horrific future, the angel just passively gazes at the catastrophe of the history of humankind. Thus, the paradise becomes a real tempest that gets caught under his wings and pushes him into an unknown future. This way, Benjamin's angel looks like a bird of bad omens rather than a prophetic messenger. The philosopher's upset and pessimistic view on history and progress is at the basis of Kushner's plays. But the playwright succeeds in getting over Benjamin's thesis and not only improves it, but also reverses it.

As a convinced gay modern Marxist Jew, Kushner introduces a different optimised concept of history. In *Millennium Approaches*, some of his characters give their opinion about a disastrous and apocalyptic vision of history and its future by recalling the AIDS epidemic, racism, homophobia and the dismantlement of the world: "ROY: I see the universe, Joe, as a kind of sandstorm in outerspace with winds of mega-hurricane velocity but instead of grains of sand it's shards and splinters of glass" (4), "WOMAN: In the new century I think we will all be insane" (81), "ETHEL ROSENBERG: History... is about to crack wide open, Millennium approaches" (86). Even the angel, at the beginning of Act Two in *Perestroika*, reminds us of Benjamin's words on Klee's angel: "ANGEL: Before the boiling of blood and the searing of skin comes the Secret catastrophe: Before Life on Earth becomes finally merely impossible, it will for a long time before have become completely unbearable. ... YOU MUST STOP MOVING!" (28).⁶

But it is precisely in *Perestroika* where Kushner's vision on history becomes much more hopeful. As the play progresses, we find two conflicting concepts of history: the one held by the angel—or the "Continental Principality of America" (78)—and the one defended by Prior, who has become a kind of (gay) prophet. On the one hand, apart from calling a halt at the beginning, the angel conceives history and time as immobility which will lead to God's return, because time seems to have stopped in heaven after April 18, 1906, the date of the famous San Francisco earthquake, when God abandoned

heaven (“In that day ... The King of the Universe: HE left ... and did not return” (28)). This kind of stagnation of history is also associated with decay, ruins and destruction even in the set design annotated by Kushner in his stage direction (Act Five, Scene Five) when he describes the angels’ ‘office’ in heaven in Prior’s vision:

The Continental Principalities sit around a table covered with heavy tapestry on which is woven an ancient map of the world. The tabletop is covered with antique and broken astronomical, astrological, mathematical and nautical objects of measurement and calculation; heaps and heaps and heaps of books and files and bundles of yellowing newspapers; inkpots, clay tablets, styli and quill pens. The great chamber is dimly lit by candles and a single great bulb overhead, the light of which pulses to the audible rhythmic surgings and waverings of an unseen generator. At the centre of the table is a single bulky radio, a 1940s model in very poor repair. It is switched on and glowing, and the ANGELS are gathered about it, intent upon its dim, crackly signal.⁷ (85)

This concept of time and history is diametrically opposed to Prior’s, who gradually believes in his prophetic mission. Near the end of *Perestroika*, Prior—in his last vision—definitely understands and resolutely explains the angels in heaven what he has to do: “We can’t just stop. We’re not rocks, progress, migration, motion is... modernity. It’s *animate*, it’s what living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it’s still desire *for*. Even if we go faster than we should. We can’t wait” (87-8). Unlike the angels’ opinion and plans, Prior stands for Kushner’s concept of the individual’s mission in history, and particularly in America’s history. As a result, Kushner, through Prior’s voice, exposes his concept of history which considerably differs from Benjamin’s: “We live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that’s it, that’s the best I can do. It’s so much not enough” (89-90). Even Harper, Joe’s Mormon wife, concludes at the end of the Act that chaos and hellish events in life cannot be everlasting: “Nothing’s lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we’ve left behind, and dreaming ahead” (96). Kushner’s formulation of history becomes a kind of attainable utopia in which desire and hope are its real engines.

When interviewed by Andrea Bernstein on his play *Slavs!* (1994) and about his vision of history, Kushner points out that “You can’t stay back. The fundamental question is: Are we made by history or do we make history—and the answer is yes” (Kushner 1995c). Kushner believes in a dialectical order of the universe and therefore of history. If there is nothing to be done then there will not be any need for a change and, as a consequence, no longing or desire for the utopia. That is what one of the characters in his *Slavs!*—Prelapsapianov—asks at the end of the play: “What is to be done?” (1995: 185); the answer is to be found in Louis’ words at the end of *Perestroika*: “The whole world is changing! ... The world moving ahead. And only in politics does the miraculous occur” (97-8). In this sense, the playwright also gives an answer to what a play and drama in general could do as a political commitment to give hope to the audience:

You have to have hope. It’s irresponsible to give false hope, which I think a lot of playwrights are guilty of. But I also think it’s irresponsible to simply be a nihilist, which quite a lot of playwrights, especially playwrights younger than me, have become guilty of. I don’t believe you would bother to write a play if you really had no hope. ... What I found in the audience response is a huge

hunger for political issues and political discussion. So I always wonder: Is it that Americans don't like politics, or is it that so much theater that is political isn't well-done? (1995c)

David Savran thinks that Kushner's concept of history and politics in *Angels in America* is connected with "Enlightenment epistemologies" and that the plays "champion rationalism and progress" (1998: 258). Kushner seems to establish a kind of neo-Enlightenment approach in his play because of the constant allusions to "progress", "change", "modernity" and "motion". From my point of view, what Kushner suggests is that history is needed to know where to start from. Real history is the one which is not written yet, the one to be done out from the past and the one which pushes us forward to improve it; the same one which prevents us from repeating it or getting stuck. In this respect *Angels in America* champions plurality and crossbreeding—as the only means for moving forward—and rejects stagnation held by reactionary attitudes from religious, social, political or even emotional backgrounds. The plays' support for hybridisation is not only found in a thematic level but also in its own structure by using split scenes set in different simultaneous places or scenes in which characters from different epochs concur. Thus, in one of his hallucinations, Prior meets two of his ancestors—Prior 1 from the Middle Ages and Prior 2 from the 18th century—who were also victims of another epidemic—the Black Death—and whose function is to make the audience reflect on the repetition of history and the necessity of facing together both the disease and the prejudices it entails.

By exploring that the unity is not undifferentiated and static, but rather differentiated and contradictory, Kushner's *Angels in America* rather follows a neo-dialectical materialist pattern inspired by Benjamin's theses, although not genuinely Benjaminian, as Borreca puts it: "the work adapts Benjamin's visionary materialism to a historiography founded on faith in enlightened historical progress" (1997: 249). Sure enough, the dialectic appears because of the contradictions of the unity—there is a conflict of opposites which encourages a historical process of constant change and this change is progressive.⁸ In fact, the play, as it progresses, includes a set of opposite characters who develop by showing their different personal and social struggles, or in Borreca's words "all the major characters are compounded of dialectically opposed impulses that manifest the dynamics of that moment in a 'Benjaminian' way" (1997: 249). The result is a kind of wide scope as if the author was showing us how America has been built up but, at the same time, how different realities make up America in a permanent state of change. Thus, as Savran points out, historical materialism exposes a process by which "the political (which ostensibly drives history) intersects with the personal and sexual (which ostensibly are no more than footnotes to history)" (1998: 262), or in Benjamin's words: "Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge" (1969: 260).

It is precisely from his characters' personal history that Kushner designs his dialectical explanation of the changing world America is. As Román points out: "Kushner's plays open up the microstructures of the characters' interactions in order to comment on the macrostructures of social institutions, political philosophies, and competing historiographies" (1998: 210). The playwright makes his characters recall their people's pasts, origins and roots. Thus, Rabbi Isidor recalls the great Jew migrations from Europe to America; Prior lays claim to his WASP lineage; Mormons Joe, Harper and Hannah feel proud of their ancestors having crossed the continent, and Belize remembers how black people were taken as slaves from Africa. Kushner, on the other hand, achieves this dialectical relationship by mixing them with one another in

intermingling stories. In this respect, Prior—a WASP club designer with AIDS—is partnered with Louis—a leftist Jew word processor—who leaves Prior to get involved with Joe—a closeted Republican Mormon clerk—who, in turn, is married to Harper—a valium-addicted housewife. Meanwhile, Joe admires his mentor, Roy Cohn, who is a closeted Republican Jew lawyer with AIDS; Hannah—Joe’s Mormon mother—happens to meet Prior and becomes one of his best friends. However, both Prior and Harper meet in their hallucinations provoked respectively by fever and valium; and finally Belize—ex-drag queen and Prior’s best friend and former lover—who works as a nurse for both Prior and Roy Cohn, who suffer from AIDS in hospital.

With this complex cast, Kushner thickens the plot and weaves a tight web which functions as both a metaphor of what America really is and, paradoxically, as an oxymoron, “a figure of undecidability whose contradictory being becomes an incitement to think the impossible—revolution” (Savran 1998: 256). Moreover, this miscellaneous and intermingled American reality has a common factor which confirms the progressive unfolding of history which, according to Marx, consists in the succession of class wars which this process has engendered. *Angels in America*’s main characters belong to those groups which often underwent a kind of marginalization at some time of American history. Thus Kushner also uses minorities discourses to show that “giving up history is a luxury that those who have traditionally been pushed to its margins cannot afford” (Suárez 1995-96: 57).

Back to the imagery of the angel, there is still one more aspect that should be noted about Kushner’s concept of history. Throughout the image of the angel, the playwright symbolically conveys a utopia both on sexual and social politics in *Perestroika*. As regards the first, by having the angel “hermaphroditically equipped as well with a bouquet of phalli” (26) and “eight vaginas” (26), the author suggests the blurring of sexual boundaries as well as old binary opposites such as man / woman, heterosexual / homosexual. One of the play’s themes is indisputably the role of gay people in 1980s America and Prior is one of their most significant representatives. This way, the angel becomes a symbol for the utopian state in which homophobia will be definitely banished and the government’s social politics will be based on “Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace” in Belize’s words (82).

On the subject of sexual politics, it is also worth mentioning how the play (re)constructs patterns of gender identity. Apart from the angel, which is always addressed as ‘she’, Kushner also undermines the traditional gender roles by putting a significant voice in the mouths of the women in the play. Despite her hallucinations, Harper’s desire to quit the real world denounces, in a way, women’s silencing and dependant role on men. At the end of *Perestroika*, she asks her husband for his credit card before abandoning him: “If I can get a job, or something, I’ll cut the card to pieces. And there won’t be charges anymore. Credit card” (95). A sign of self assertion and of the recuperation of her own life and independence that she will make true not back in Salt Lake City—the Mormon homeland—but in San Francisco, the epitome for the American city of freedom.

Unlike this female character, Hannah is Harper’s Mormon counterpart. She is a strong-willed woman and middle-aged widow of a deceased military Mormon man. In *Perestroika*, her female role develops from having strong deep-rooted moral convictions to becoming part of a new non-nuclear gay family. She even criticizes her own son’s attitude at facing life events:

HANNAH. I don’t think you have a clue. Which is only typical of you. You’re a man, you botch up, it’s not such a big deal, but she...

JOE. Just being a man doesn't...

HANNAH. Being a woman's harder. Look at her. (62)

Moreover, Kushner (re)elaborates his concept of masculinity out from Joe and Roy's closeted homosexuality. In a decade—Reaganite America—in which masculinity is tightly linked to power and politics, the playwright deconstructs the “essence” of what is being a ‘real man’ in America by exposing these characters' features. Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn—disciple and mentor respectively—are described as real “macho” men (“the Marlboro Man”, 1994: 57) who relate to each other in terms of masculinising the Law: “ROY: Law's a pliable, breathing, sweating organ” (1992: 48). Convinced Republicans, neither of them can cope with their homosexuality, which is constantly repressed until Harper finds it out, in the case of Joe, and Roy is diagnosed AIDS, and even then he still asserts: “Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys” (1992: 32). Kushner then, by queering these characters, not only proposes a reversal of the traditional effeminate gay role, but also an eroticisation of the daddy-son relationship within the untouchable Reaganite American law circles.

Apart from this important construction of a utopian sexual politics, Kushner also proposes his own vision of American history through social politics. It is not coincidental nor anecdotal that the author chose the title *Perestroika* for the second part of his play. As is well-known, Mikhail Gorbachev introduced it to adopt a new economic policy in the former Soviet Union in 1987. In Russian, *perestroika* (“перестройка”) means “restructuring” and, according to his creator, it intended to reform and preserve the socialist system; such an attempt failed with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Kushner translates the idea and concept of perestroika into his play as a kind of utopian change in America in terms of constant motion and movement, of history as progression. This is why Kushner opens *Perestroika* with the world's oldest living Bolshevik's—Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsapianov—speech in front of the Kremlin by asking: “Can we change? Change? In Time? And we all desire that Change will come?” (1).

And that is also the reason why *Millennium Approaches* opens with Rabbi Isidor Chelmelwitz's sermon-like history lesson when he recalls the incessant Jewish migrations from Europe to America and exhorts the audience: “everyday of your lives the miles that voyage between that place and this one you cross ... In you that journey is” (2). The journey, the motion is what really counts as a personal commitment with history of ever changing and moving. But he even adds “you do not live in America, no such place exists” (2) as if reminding us and warning that a nation's history is never finished: it is daily built up by everyone.

Both Prelapsapianov's and Rabbi Isidor's words lead us—whether as readers or audience—to associate the framework they create with one of the most recurring themes in American culture: the myth of the frontier and the pioneers. The origins of the theorization of these myths are to be found in a famous paper—“The Significance of the Frontier in American History”—delivered at a meeting of the American Historical Association in 1893. In his lecture, Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) connected the free and noble spirit of the American personality with this ideal of evolutionary, progressive movement, and to regular contact with primitive society found in the geographic frontiers. For Turner, this character was shaped by the pioneer ideals of conquest—the pioneer was both a fighter and a finder, an inventor of new ways; flexibility—the pioneer rebelled against the conventional, was a nonconformist; democracy—among the pioneers, one man was as good as any other, and conditions were simple and free; and individuality—the pioneer prized personal development, free

of social and governmental restraint. However, to a great extent, Turner's essay was intended to announce the closing of the frontier, and therefore the end of a great historic movement and of the independence, self-sufficiency, and profitability that Turner believed had characterized it.⁹

A kind of revision and review of this particular American myth takes place in *Angels in America* in a sort of epic mode which reminds of some of Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstockings* series.¹⁰ The plays' major characters are driven by an anxious search for something new and better. They are all immigrants in their own homeland, they seem to stand for the new American pioneers. Thus, this explains Joe's political convictions ("We're a movement, this is politics ... We've worked hard to build a movement" (1994: 17)); Harper's search for happiness ("That's what makes people migrate, build things. Heartbroken people do it, people who have lost love" (1994: 80)); Cohn's team political ambitions ("We're on the move, Joe. On the move" (1992: 47)); Louis's commitment with democracy and anti-homophobic ideas ("Nothing deterred us from the task at hand" (1994: 43)); Belize's promising faith on a new future ("Soon, this... ruination will be blanketed white" (1992: 76)); Prior's deep belief in movement and improvement ("We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire for. Even if we go faster than we should. We can't wait" (1994: 88)) and Hannah's strength, decisive determination and encouraging words. *Angels in America* handling of history seems to revolve around a postmodern remake of the long established old American myths of the frontier and pioneers which puts it along with the American literary tradition on the topic which lately led to *road-movie* narratives and films.

The characters in Kushner's plays seem to live out of the past into the present. They cannot see, and for all their efforts they cannot predict the future. They depend, therefore, on their knowledge of the past to create a rational pattern which leads from present to future. Their working knowledge of the past is based on the myths they have inherited. Myths are self-justifying. Because they often carry social ideals, those who use them and participate in them assume that those dreams justify the past out of which these ideals came. To some extent, *Angels in America* tries to make sense out of American history on the basis of this American myth, something which becomes daring and unwise at times since it is only partially and tendentiously explored in a few characters who do not stand for archetypes and therefore do not represent a complete scope of the reality of America.

3. Gay Afro-Americans, Jews and Mormons on the Move

One of the most striking elements of the play is Kushner's skilful mixture and choice of different identities based on race, gender, political and religious parameters to expose the vast reality and continuous move that compound America. Moreover, one of the play's themes that further expounds on the idea of community is the use of religious images and references. If all the main characters would be divided into three groups, one will have Mormons (Joe, Harper and Hannah), Jews (Louis and Roy), and Christians (Prior and Belize). All three religions share a Judeo-Christian origin, in such a way that the various religious references in the play (the angel/s, Jacob wrestling with the angel, the Angel dubbing Prior a prophet, the Mark of Cain, Judas' betrayal of Christ, Lazarus' resurrection, the importance of a sacred Book) could be applied to almost any character. This religious background shows a common history behind the characters and heightens the sense of community among them.

But there is a common factor: all of them (except for the women) are gay. We should not forget that the play is subtitled “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes” (1992 and 1994: iii) that works as a unifying and agglutinating aspect. Scattered all over *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, there are lots of allusions not only to gay culture in general but also to American gay culture in particular. Some of the most remarkable are those referred to mainstream American films now appropriated by gay American culture. Thus, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) appear in some expressions and dialogues by Prior and Belize, the most “gay” characters in both plays:¹¹

PRIOR: Stella

BELIZE: Stella for star. Let me see. (1992: 42)

PRIOR: I have always depended on the kindness of strangers. (1994: 93)

ANGEL: ... If you Cannot find your Heart’s desire...

PRIOR: In your own back yard...

ANGEL, PRIOR and BELIZE. You never lost it to begin with. (1994: 29)

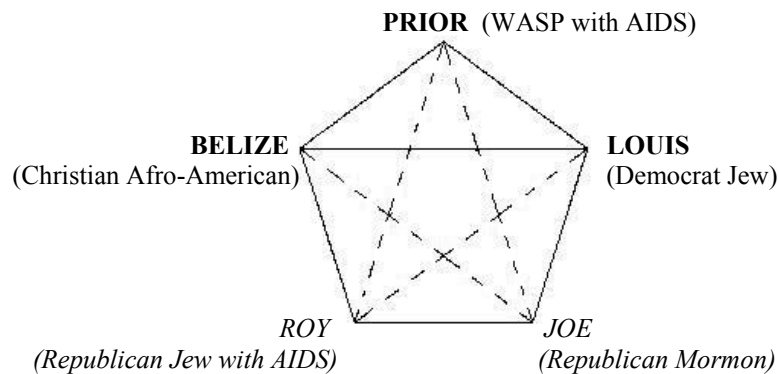
PRIOR: ... I’ve had a remarkable dream. And you were there, and you, ... And some of it was terrible, and some of it was wonderful, but all the same I kept saying I want to go home. And they sent me home. (1994: 93)

Kushner does not randomly choose these films based on previous successful novel and play respectively. The playwright includes them in *Angels in America* because both combine American heroines on the move looking for personal improvement in a journey of individual search which involves loss, pain and suffering. At the same time these films/works are regarded as real landmarks of American cultural tradition and, as included in Kushner’s play, become elements which contribute to create the American personality and idiosyncrasy.

Kushner places gay men at the end of the millennium in America in the same tradition of those who underwent persecution and exodus—mostly Mormons and Jews—and suffering the effects of a lethal pandemic such as AIDS is. That is why the play intermingles them. At least in *Millennium Approaches* and the first acts of *Perestroika*, the audience/ reader apparently realizes that there is a bond that ties them all together as different but, at the same time, opposite members of the same community (“Consider it solidarity. One faggot to another” says Belize to Roy, (1994: 13)); among these bonds are those of Roy and Joe who, besides being in a professional relationship, see themselves in a father-son relationship in which Roy gives Joe advice, love, and opportunities; additionally, Prior’s ex-lover Belize is a nurse and a friend that takes care of him while he is in the hospital and who also has a revealing conversation with a soul-searching Louis. But, as we go forward in the play we realize that gayness does not count as “the” major theme according to the characters’ relationships and interests. This is due to the fact that each one is living his own homosexuality minced by the filter of a target which does not exactly correspond with gay identity matters. These characters, who work as real pieces of the large American jigsaw, just happen to be gay.

Since this interconnectedness among the gay characters seems to be deliberately put at the basis of the play by Kushner (a gay Jew himself), then political, ethnic and religious identities become the real axes of the author’s thesis on dialectical history, both by having a part of them praised and the other condemned, thus establishing not

binary oppositions but a real web in which none of them is a pure sole identity. If we look at this identity map within a simple graphic we will realize what Kushner tries to achieve:



The pentagon, a geometrical figure where all sides and angles are equal, represents the relationships among the (gay) male characters in the play. The broken lines mean just a connection or momentary meeting but no real relationship among them and italics stand for the ‘punished’ characters. Kushner is obviously designing a map of characters as a metaphor for what he intends America to become—a real patchwork made out from differences but with identical targets: always on the move to build up the nation. All of them share the same history, but unlike Fitzgerald’s characters in *The Great Gatsby*, these new Americans moved from East to West after undergoing harassment and hostile persecution: Jews, since their first exodus, have been always expelled out from everywhere and have started all over again; WASP origins are to be found in the Puritan pilgrims’ journey across the ocean; Afro-Americans, violently brought from Africa, underwent their new persecution in America; and Mormons, a persecuted minority mainly in Illinois since 1832, finally settled in Utah, the New Zion. Thus Belize’s words to Roy Cohn when describing heaven in *Perestroika* are precisely significant enough of what Kushner stands for:

BELIZE: And everyone in Balenciaga gowns with red corsages and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion. ...
 And all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers. ...
 Race, taste, and history finally overcome. And you ain’t there.
 ROY: (*happily shaking his head ‘no’ in agreement*). And Heaven?
 BELIZE: That *was* Heaven, Roy. (47)

The Epilogue could also serve as an example of this intermingling of identities that gives form to America. At the end of *Perestroika*, Louis, Prior, Hannah and Belize gather in Central Park at the Bethesda fountain—Prior’s favourite place in New York—where the figure of an angel at its top commemorates the dead in the Civil War. By carefully paying attention to how they describe the fountain, we realize that now—1990 the time in the Epilogue—a new order that spins forward starts. The Jewish contribution to the new hi/story is the legend of the construction of the Bethesda fountain by the angel’s landing on the Temple square. It is completely appropriate that Louis, the Jewish character in this scene, narrates this part of hi/story. The Christian version of hi/story comes with the passage about the fountain’s curative faculties according to St. John’s Gospel (5:1-18). Belize aptly tells this section of hi/story, as the play provides clues that Belize is, at least by education, a Christian.¹² Hannah, obviously, provides the

Mormon contribution to hi/story, the foretelling of the renovation of the fountain during the millennium. The characters' new hi/story, then, is a combination of Jewish, Christian, and Mormon elements, used to hold up a gay man with AIDS in his affliction. A hesitant and striking mixture, perhaps, but definitely a powerful one. As Suárez puts it:

The fountain juxtaposes two pasts—one of rubble and defeat (the naval dead; the destruction of the Temple) and a legendary one of hope (the curing waters). The fountain acts, in this respect, as what Benjamin called a dialectic image: an image of the past filled with tensions (between death and life, despair and hope, reality and utopia) which can be mobilized by present concerns. The positive moment in the image signals the possible overcoming of the negative one of sickness and devastation. (1995-96: 56)

Unlike David Savran, when he states that the play's construction of American history is due to the sources of Mormonism (1998: 265), I would rather point out—according to what the plays seem to stand for—that it is the melting pot America has become at the end of the millennium which precisely works as the core element of the new National Period—America is the promised land which every single individual re-creates with her/his daily efforts and capabilities.

Since Prior reaffirms that life only exists in continuous evolution and that progress is only possible by accepting others, the play seems to have to finish with an optimistic note on championing for the need of being together and gaining social visibility, at the same time as the fight for human brotherhood becomes one of the main tasks to be done by Americans. As Thornton Wilder did in the 1920s and 1930s or Lorraine Hansberry did in the 1950s, Kushner favours a policy of integration rather than confrontation and lays claim to differences among the gay community. This may be one of the main reasons why *Angels in America* was such a great success in mainstream contemporary American drama. Kushner's commitment with reconstructing history includes a warning to American people so that they do not make the mistake of forgetting their past and the danger this may entail. In a decade—the 1990s—in which the representation of gayness starts to gain a level of normative status, *Angels in America* clearly seems to exhibit that only gay people are aware of this social and political commitment and of the changes to be done in the spirit of the American myth of the pioneers. Like a phoenix, as they were used to do through history, the play depicts them as the capable ones to achieve these changes: “We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come” (1994: 99).

Notes

¹ *Millennium Approaches* won, among others, the Fund for New American Plays/Kennedy Centre Award (1990); the Bay Area Drama Critics Award for Best Play (1991); the National Art Club's Joseph Kesselring Award (1991); the London Evening Standard Award for Best New Play (1992); the London Drama Critics Circle Award for Best New Play (1992); Drama Desk award for Best Play (1993); the New York Drama Critics Circle award for Best Play (1993); the Pulitzer Prize for Drama (1993); and four Tony Awards for Best Play, Best Leading Actor, Best Featured Actor, Best Direction (1993). *Perestroika* won the Fund for New American Plays/Kennedy Centre Award (1992); Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for Best New Play (1992) and the

Tony Award for Best Play, Best Leading Actor, Best Featured Actor (1994) among others.

² The plays use some elements taken from the Modernist tradition and the poetic American realism from O'Neill, Wilder and Williams; from Brecht's metadramatic theatre; from the Shakespearean narrative structure; from the British theatre of the New Left and from Charles Ludlam's camp tradition of the Theatre of the Ridiculous.

³ *Millennium Approaches* was first performed in a workshop production presented by the Center Theatre/ Mark Taper Forum, May 1990, directed by Oskar Eustis. The world premiere was presented at the Eureka Theatre Company in May 1991 and directed by David Esbjornson. *Perestroika* was first produced as a staged reading in conjunction with the production of *Millennium Approaches* by the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco, May 1991, and was directed by David Esbjornson. The play was produced in a workshop and presented as a stage reading at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, May 1992, both the workshop and the reading being directed by Oskar Eustis and Tony Taccone. The world premiere of *Perestroika* was presented by the Mark Taper Forum, in November 1992, directed by Oscar Eustis and Tony Taccone. The opening of the fully staged *Angels in America*, both *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, took place at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles on November 1, 1992 directed by Oskar Eustis and Tony Taccone, although the official press opening took place on November 8.

⁴ Roy Marcus Cohn—attorney, federal prosecutor, and communist-hunter—was born on February 20, 1927, in New York, NY. The son of a prominent state supreme court judge, Cohn built a flamboyant, successful, and troubled career on his prominent role in Cold War politics. He actively took part in the controversial espionage trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1951. By the mid-1950s, he helped engineer Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's notorious anti-Communist witch hunts. From the 1950s to the 1980s, his private practice put him in the top rank of celebrity attorneys, but questionable ethics ultimately led to his being disbarred in 1986. He died of complications from AIDS the same year at the age of 59. Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg was born on September 28, 1915 in New York City to a Jewish family. After finishing school, she became a clerk for a shipping company and soon joined the Young Communist League and eventually became a member of the American Communist Party. In addition to her clerk job, Ethel loved singing and, as she was waiting to go on stage to sing at a New Year's Eve benefit, she first met Julius Rosenberg. The couple was married in 1939. By the summer of 1950, Ethel's younger brother, David Greenglass, had named Julius before the Committee of anti-American Activities as a participant in the spy ring. The FBI questioned them and eventually were placed under arrest. The role played by Roy Cohn was fatal since he influenced the selection of the judge, and pushed him to impose the death penalty on the Rosenbergs. She was found guilty of espionage along with Julius Rosenberg and on April 5, 1951 was sentenced to death. On June 19, 1953, the Rosenbergs were put to death in the electric chair.

⁵ On Brecht's influence on Kushner, see, amongst others, Kushner 1995a: 134; 1995b: 35 and 1998: 107.

⁶ From now on, *Millennium Approaches* will be quoted from *Angels in America Part One: Millennium Approaches*. London: Nick Hern, 1992 and *Perestroika* from *Angels in America Part Two: Perestroika*. London: Nick Hern, 1994. Unless the play is not made explicit, references will only include the page.

⁷ Regarding this matter, note also stage direction at the beginning of Act Five, Scene Two: "... Heaven looks mostly like San Francisco after the Great 1906 Quake. It has a deserted, derelict feel to it, rubble is strewn everywhere" (79).

⁸ The concept of *history*, as used by Marx and Engels, means the social world in which men involved in making history live and by which they are determined, the action and interaction of men in society or the social world conceived as the totality of activities performed by the individuals who compose it. It also means the historicity of human nature, human activity, and human affairs in general. Engels was convinced of the “laws of motion” which govern both natural phenomena and historical events and which were to be found in the laws first formulated and developed by Hegel. Hegel’s view is at odds with the historical course pursued by the United States. In fact, Hegel was highly critical on the individualism at the heart of the American Revolution. But his ideas have nonetheless had an immeasurable effect on modern thought in the United States. He saw human history as the progression from bondage to freedom, attainable only if the will of the individual is made secondary to the will of the majority.

⁹ For further information see Turner 1996.

¹⁰ It was James Fenimore Cooper who first recognised and exploited the possibilities that the American frontier held for fiction. In the *Leatherstocking Tales* beginning with *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), and *The Prairie* (1827), Cooper brought the archetypal pattern of the pioneer into existence, importing traditional romantic plots to a local setting in the American wilderness. By the time Cooper completed his saga with *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841), he had in large part paved the way for future literary representations of the frontier establishing a romanticized picture of the backwoods that proved ideally suited to popular escapist fiction.

¹¹ American gay communities of the 1950s and 1960s adopted and appropriated these two films for themselves firstly because they included two gay cult icons of the time: innocent and charming Judy Garland as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* and macho and wild Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). But these films—apart from the queer readings they suggest (lesbianism associated with witches and fairies or butch masculinity)—also featured desire for exploring, the need of leaving home for improvement in a seemingly wild world that surrounds the leading characters: Dorothy and Blanche respectively.

¹² A black man with a Hispanic surname (Arriaga), Belize probably comes from a Caribbean country such as Cuba, Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico (we have to remember that in *Millennium Approaches*, Belize brings Prior voodoo ointment from “some little black Cubana witch in Miami” (43)). From a Latin milieu, Belize was probably raised a Catholic. In addition, Prior refers to Belize at one moment in the play as a “Christian martyr” (1992: 45), or Roy depicts him as “you people had Jesus so the reds never got to you” (1994: 11).

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