

KUSHNER'S ANGELS IN AMERICA AND THE CONFRONTATION WITH DEATH

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The assumption on which this paper is based is that myths, fairy tales and narratives in general are metaphorical attempts to understand and explain the perceived realities of our own selves--our origins, our future, our world. This is not a falsifiable assumption, it can only be granted as reasonable or rejected, but the list of those who have granted it is impressive. As early as 1725, Giambattista Vico (Bergin and Fisch, 1984) was claiming that myths were civil histories in poetical form. And since Freud (1906), Lévi-Strauss (1958) and Lacan (1966), this list has been growing at an exponential rate. Freud has also claimed (1900, 1906, 1908, 1919) that the artist and the writer gets "there" before either scientist or scholar, wherever that "there" might be--the unconscious, subjectivity, or the "malaise" of civilization in a special epoch, place, culture or ideology.

We are also assuming that movies are our contemporary form of mythmaking, and that, like myths, they provide clues to our social values, defining social values as the shared wishes, conflicts and fears of a society in general, or of groups within a society, as

manifested in the actions, norms, laws and systems of belief of its members. (For the rationale underlying these assumptions and for a more detailed account of methods of analysis see Vilella 1989, 1999, 2000 and 2005.)

Tony Kushner's two plays, *The Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, first written and produced in 1992-1993, fits well within Giambattista Vico's characterization of myth as civil histories in poetic form. And they are not only mythical, they are prophetic. For instance in Scene 6 of *Millenium Approaches*, Roy Cohn and his lawyer, Martin, are trying to convince Joe, a young Mormon lawyer, to accept a job in the Department of Justice in Washington, and to use "clout" to run interference in favor of Roy, "a Saint of the Right," who is in danger of being disbarred. Martin predicts events that we can clearly observe today. He says:

It's a revolution In Washington, Joe. We have a new agenda and finally a real leader. They got back the senate but we have the courts. By the nineties the Supreme Court will be block-solid Republican appointees, and the federal bench-- Republican judges like land mines everywhere.... Affirmative action? Take it to court. Boom! Land mine! And we'll get our way in just about everything: abortion, defense, Central America, family values, a live investment climate. We have the White House locked till the year 2000. And beyond.... we'll get the Senate back, and in ten years the South is going to give us the House.... The end of Liberalism.... of New Deal Socialism.... Of ipso facto secular humanism. The dawning of a genuinely American political personality. Modeled on Ronald Wilson Reagan.

The two three-hours plays jointly called *Angels in America* earned its writer two Tony

Awards and, in 1993, a Pulitzer prize, and were produced in many theaters, nationally and internationally. The HBO sponsored film, directed by Mike Nichols, televised in 2003 in two segments of three hours each, also earned a number of prizes for its writer, director and actors, and in 2004 was made available for sale in DVD. However, in the *Variety* issue of December 22, 2003, Denise Martin (2003, p. 30) wrote that “Despite rave reviews” *Angels in America* “brought HBO crashing down to earth” with “a not-so celestial average of 3.6 million overall viewers between the premieres of parts one and two.” Viewers for the second segment, she added, “dropped 30% from the first.”

This combination of many national and international awards, and comparatively modest TV ratings suggests that *Angels in America* did not appeal to the general population that thrives on sports, talk shows and soap operas. If we accept Metz’s claim (1975) that generally films appeal to large audiences because they fulfill the function of a good object--because they help us narrow the gap between expectation and experience--we must conclude that both film and play may have appealed to the desires, dreams and values of one large or many small groups within our society, but not to the desires and values of the general American population as a whole.

The HBO film, as rewritten by Kushner and directed by Nichols, was not much changed from the original plays, just pared down a little closer to the bone, which may have increased its already great power to surprise and move. With the caveat that any retelling of a story is already an act of interpretation, I shall distinguish “story” from “plot,” as Brooks (1984) does, and then will summarize the plot for those who have not yet seen the film.

Story is the time-bound sequence of events, in the order they are supposed to have happened in the narrative. Transposing Brooks' distinction to film, it is generally presented through dialogue, action, sequencing of images, and occasionally through voice-over or written narration. *Plot* is the way the story events are revealed, alluded to or withheld from the viewer (who may then have to guess, deduce, construct, reconstruct or interpret). It is generally expressed in films through flashback, flashforward, speeding or slowing of movements, lighting, fading, abrupt cuts, close-ups, long shots, unusual camera angles. The significance of the narrative is not so much in the story or the plot as in the tension between story and plot--in the way they follow, complement or contradict each other. We shall first deal with the main story and then with the underlying text.

Angels is the story of eight people confronting death: their own death, that of people they love, and the death of love. This very complex story told with passion, wit and humor is further complicated by the logic of a text that comprises with equal ease three different levels of "reality": that of consensually validated daily life, that of vision and that of hallucination.

This story of confrontation with death starts with the funeral of a woman we never meet, but quickly centers on two characters who find out they are about to die of AIDS. These two central characters, who never meet each other, are nevertheless connected through the relations established by their friends and acquaintances. Both have a perverse structure, but one is limited within the bounds of the social link and the other can never find limits strong enough to contain the *jouissance* that writes letters of the second death in his body. It is mainly (but not exclusively) on these two central characters that the

story will focus to illustrate the stakes of perversion in our days, stakes which the author of *Angels* detected more than fifteen years ago.

A mental structure, for the purposes of this paper can be either “normal” or “abnormal,” whether it’s a neurotic, psychotic or perverse structure. Perversion should not be taken as a synonym for homosexuality, as it often is in psychoanalytic theory. The specific structure of perversion leads its subject to be highly concerned with the Law, which they recognize exists but which they find deficient and insufficient (and often hate). Yet, they must always seek it, in an effort to limit the constant pull of *jouissance* that may otherwise overwhelm them. Since the structure is linked with a certainty that brooks no opposition, the pervert subject *knows* that *he* has a grasp of the world and of what the world should be, a grasp that he has to constantly display in demonstrations that simultaneously demand the production of more laws and show the powerlessness of the signifiers supporting them. Within such a structure the investment in change and in the politics of change cannot be less than considerable, whether expressed in public or private life, and may considerably influence a society, for better or for worse. The social problematic can be further complicated by the fact that perverse features can also be present in cases of obsessive neuroses (Apollon, 2002a; Bergeron, 2002; Cantin, 2002).

I would like to suggest that since Watergate, all questions of ethics and law have been seriously jeopardized in the United States, possibly because a President--that is, a symbolic Father figure and so a representative of the Law of the Father in his nation--as well as the Attorney General that he nominated, both sworn to defend the law of their country, not only broke the laws they were supposed to defend but also engaged in lies and

countless illegal acts to cover up the original crime. When the cover up was finally unveiled and the government's lies exposed as such, both the President and most of those involved were let go, without as much of an apology to the nation and its citizens for the unlawfulness of their actions. Such events could not but diminish the credibility and stability of the United States as a nation, and overload the ever unavoidable problems of a chain of signifiers already burdened at birth with the inscription of its minus one. Had Nixon not brought us Watergate, Reagan might not have managed to give us the equally dishonorable Contra War, the Supreme Court might not have gone against its country's own constitution, Florida might never have happened, and even had it happened we might not be now involved in yet another set of lies and another war.

Because of the constraints in time, only a few scenes from *Angels* will be shown and analyzed in detail.

The setting is New York. Prior Walter, a handsome out-of-the-closet homosexual and former drag queen, is witty, mannerly and very WASP, and lives comfortably on some free lance work, a modest trust fund and many grains of salt. He lives comfortably, that is, until he discovers he has AIDS and realizes that his Jewish lover of four years, Louis, will leave him. Regretfully and full of guilt, Louis, a word processor at the Brooklyn Federal Court of Appeals, does leave Prior, and after a few weeks of gloom and doom, is befriended by Joe, a young Mormon lawyer who is chief clerk to the chief justice in the same court and a protégé, admirer and friend of one of the most powerful lawyers in town, Roy M. Cohn. Eventually Joe and Louis will become lovers for a brief period.

Roy, the lawyer with the greatest "clout" in New York, has just offered Joe a job with

“clout” in Washington, in the justice department. Joe, a good looking ambitious and clean cut young American from Salt Lake City, does not quite understand the nature of the job he is being offered, which Roy hints at but does not make explicit. Joe is also in an emotional and religious crisis, detecting in himself homosexual leanings which he knows are sinful, for he is still linked to his religion and his wife by many bonds of duty and a few of love.

Harper--whom Joe married because she did everything wrong--and in Salt Lake City that stands out, has been in an emotional crisis since they came to New York, and copes with it by taking as many Valium pills as needed to enable her to have consciously induced hallucinations--in which she “makes up” people to whom she can reveal her wisdom, her pains and her still denied awareness of what is wrong with her husband.

The other important main characters are Belize, a nurse who takes care of Roy in the hospital, and who also was also a former drag queen and one of Prior’s best friends. Belize is a central figure for the understanding of the story, because of his use of signifiers. He is spare of words and seldom says what cannot be fully said, in contrast to Louis who can talk brilliantly about everything and nothing, as he does when explaining to Belize why democracy has succeeded in America--“comparatively, of course.”

Other important characters are Hannah, Joe’s mother, who comes to New York when she finds out about her son’s homosexuality, and ends up mothering Prior; Ethel Rosenberg, who comes back from the dead to haunt Roy; Emily, the nurse who cares for Prior at the hospital; Henry, Roy’s doctor. And, out of the human realm, Mr. Lies, Harper’s imaginary friend; and the Messenger Angel, a beautiful hermaphrodite “with eight vaginas

and a bouquet of phalluses.”

Underlying the extremely complicated and complex plot are two levels of reality: that of daily life, that of hallucinations and that of vision. One of the tasks of this paper is to detect, in the logic of the movie, how to distinguish a hallucinations (which plague Harper, even though she seeks them) from visions (which Prior and Roy fear but cannot escape).

Two basic aspects will be discussed in detail in the search for the significance of the text: one, the way the signifier can be used both to destroy its power and to attain full speech; two, the way that plot and story mix to delineate logical means of differentiating what is a vision and what is a hallucination.

In Scene 9 of *Millenium Approaches*, Roy Cohn is in the office of Henry, his doctor, who is informing him of the result of his latest physical exams and tests. “The best theory is that we blame a retrovirus, the Human Immuno deficiency Virus. The antibodies are powerless to protect the body against it... At any rate it’s open to a whole horror house of infections from microbes which it usually defends against. Like Kaposi’s sarcomas. These lesions. Or your throat problem. Or the glands.” He’s being thorough, lucid, and supportive. Roy listens carefully and then responds. “This is very interesting, Mr. Wizard, but why the fuck are you telling me this?” Henry pauses, and then goes on tell he has just removed one of Roy’s three lesions, that he has swelling of glands in neck, groin and arm pits, plus oral candidiasis and fungus under the fingernails of two digits. But Roy goes on questioning: It afflicts mostly homosexuals and drug addicts. So what is Henry implying?

Henry is now warned that he must wait for clues. Roy keeps pushing him to “say it” but Henry patiently waits until Roy has tasted power enough to demand what he wants:

once more he says "Say: Roy Cohn, you are a homosexual. (Pause, and Henry remains silent.) Say it! And I will proceed, systematically, to destroy your reputation and your practice and your career in New York State, Henry. Which you know I can do."

In this short dialogue the use of the signifier to destroy its own value is so clear, it's blatant. The diagnosis is still has to be settled but Roy knows that after this demonstration Henry will give whatever help Roy wants. "Your problem, Henry, is that you're hung up on words, on labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean.... Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order. Not in ideology but something much simpler: clout. Not whom I fuck but who will pick up the phone when I call.... Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill passed through City Council... Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me Henry?" And Roy goes on: "AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer." And this time Henry answers: "Whatever the fuck you have, Roy....it boils down to very bad news."

Victorious though this exchange may make Roy feel, using another person for one's own purpose is not a technique that is conducive to the social link, to the cohesion and stability of a peaceful society. However it is possible, in Kushners's world of *Angels*, to manipulate and play with the signifier and at the same time to improve the social link. In fact correct manipulation is one of the ways we can distinguish the world of vision from the world of illusion and hallucination.

In scene 7 of the first act, Prior is at home, alone, taking pills. Harper is alone, at home, taking pills. She is sitting in an easy chair looking at the walls, he is lying down in

the couch reading a book about Jean Cocteau. He falls asleep and in his dream walks through corridors that evoke Cocteau's films, illuminated by candles held by arms coming out of the walls. As Prior approaches a luxurious dressing room with white and red velvet curtains, he sees himself in drag, sitting at a vanity table, wearing a blue satin robe, a wig and heavy make up. "I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. de Mille," he says, as if in a movie studio, but the illusion does not work, even in a dream, and he confesses to himself that one hits bottom when even drag is a drag. At that point Harper appears in a silvery grey evening gown, her hair combed, her face bright. She stops abruptly on seeing Prior and says "Who are you? What are you doing in my hallucination?" And he counters, "I'm not in your hallucination, you are in my dream."

In their hallucination and dream their speech changes quality and both seem to be trying to fathom insights that in real life they have pushed under the rug. Now part of his dream, rather than alone in her hallucination, Harper first sees that Prior is seriously ill, then that deep inside him there's an area totally free of disease. He sees that her husband is a homo. Threshold of revelations, she says, and he repeats the phrase.

The vision is characterized by a dialogue that has a depth, spareness and humorous irony *higher* than that of real life. Lacan (1953-1954, p 48) speaks of it in terms of mediation speech and revelation speech. Mediation speech is "mediation between subject and other and it implies the coming of being of the other in this very mediation. An essential element of the coming into being is the capacity of speech to unite us to him. But there is another dimension of speech--revelation. Revelation, not expression--the unconscious is not expressed, except by deformation, distortion, transportation.... the whole

of Freud's work unfolds in the dimension of revelation, and not of expression. Revelation is what we are searching for in the analytic experience." That is, mediation is in the field of the ego, revelation in the field of the unconscious. And later Lacan adds (p. 49): "If speech then functions as mediation, it is on account of its revelation not having been accomplished."

A second way of distinguishing vision from delusion is that actions in visions are efficient agents and action in hallucinations are not. For instance, when Harper goes to Antarctica with her hallucinated travel agent, Mr. Lies, her marvelous white suit does not keep her warm in Central Park, and she has to acknowledge the breakdown of her hallucination while she chews branches off a tree to make a fire. But when the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg phones an ambulance--in a scene when Roy was in no shape to move *before* Ethel arrived, the ambulance does come. And ghost though she is, Ethel reacts with curiosity to the fancy kind of phones Roy has. After Roy dies, it's only after Ethel speaks that Louis can remember the words of the Kaddish prayer, saying it after her. That is, the vision he cannot see but hears in his head brings back a memory he couldn't retrieve by himself.

A third way is the presence of another real person who shares that illusion, as Hannah shares the second coming of the Angel with Prior.

The underlying text, then, rather than the story, is what introduces into the play problems so universal that it goes beyond the problem of AIDS as such, beyond sexuality, and beyond the Reagan era. The way politics are handled by the signifier of perversion is still clearly with us, we can see its parentage and wonder about what inheritance are we

preparing for the next generation. However the ending of *Angels* is a coda rather than an epilogue, more in the nature of a whimper than a bang.

The play ends where it started, in an epilogue in which Prior meets Louis, Hannah and Belize in the fountain where the Bethesda Angel dwells. He is walking with a cane but looks otherwise healthy. It's now five years later, six months more, he says, than he lived with Louis, whom he refused to take back. They are discussing the Berlin wall, Gorbachev and interconnectedness, all--even Belize--talking the way Louis did when he gave "his why democracy in America" lecture to Belize. Hannah is no longer a blousy Mormon from Utah, but a sophisticated and elegantly dressed New Yorker. Prior ends the story by directly addressing the audience: "This disease will be the end of many of us," he says, "but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. Bye, now. You are fabulous creatures, each and every one," he says, looking directly at the audience. "And I bless you: *More Life*. The Great Work Begins." As he has "Bye, now" he waves, and as he says "I bless you," he blows a kiss. And the four friends walk away and climb stairs, talking, Hannah and Prior arm in arm. (Note: Please take note of how Dylan looks at this scene, adding a new interpretation from a quotation he recognized--from the Wizard of Oz--and I did not.)

Coda

After Prior refuses the mission assigned to him for the sake of man's own solutions, we do not learn much about what the four friends went through and how they fared between the time Prior recovered and the meeting by the fountain where the angel

Bethesda dwells. But we do know that some of the characters they seemed to love or hate have disappeared, at least from the universe of their friendship. Roy Cohn, we know, is dead. But what happened to Joe? Didn't he, too, earn points for coming out of the closet, for staying with Roy when he was down, and for refusing him when he was powerful and trying to send Joe to Washington? If Louis was forgiven for his mistakes, why not Joe? He, too, was struggling with his soul. And what about Harper--Prior's twin soul, but without his limits-- Harper who gets a credit card and a plane ticket and disappears in the blue yonder, in the direction of San Francisco where God was last seen? She's watching the souls of the dead go up and join hands to repair the ozone hole. More disturbing, even though the social link was established for at least four people who shared deep and hard experiences, what happened to their signifiers? Why is everyone in the Epilogue, even Belize, talking in the language Louis used to explain to Belize why democracy has succeeded in America? And what changed in his world to make a fierce prophet--a prophet who wanted to take God to court--speak so sweetly to an unknown audience?

In France, too, Anatole France tells us, there was a revolt of angels in the early 19th century, and it all started in the library of an old French family in the countryside. The revolt, led by the guardian angel Arcade, was against an impostor, the demiurge Ialdabaoth, who pretended to have created all that existed when he had only created humans. An army was prepared and Lucifer, now living on earth, was asked to lead it. But the night before his decision was to be made Lucifer had a dream. In hell and earth he had learned compassion and pity. But back victorious in Heaven he saw himself transformed into Ialdabaoth, the tyrant he had defeated, and so decided it was within his own mind and

men's mind that the spirit of laldabaoth had to be fought, for by nothing else but one's own mind could one even try to change the world. Maybe the prophet's mistake was to blame God, for the state of the world was due neither to his presence or absence but to the signifiers and letters inscribed or lacking in speaking beings. If so, the The Great Work will be Great indeed, but also only ever ending. If as a species we had to develop speech, in order to face death, we may now have to invent a signifier for a mental object of love, in order to walk beside the death drive as a friend and not an enemy (Apollon, 2001).

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