

## GHOSTS IN ANGELS IN AMERICA: ROY COHN'S MALEVOLENCE

### FANTASMAS EM ANGELS IN AMERICA: A MALEVOLÊNCIA DE ROY COHN

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**Abstract:** According to Frederick Jameson, Derrida's ghosts are not the meanest ones in the modern tradition. The relationship of anger is what makes the ghosts to hate the living and want them dead. Jameson still questions the fact that the specter tries to reach a new solution to the phony problem of the antithesis between humanism (the respect for the past) and nihilism (the end of history, the disappearing of the past). It is not difficult to see echoes of Negri in Kushner – the ghost and the playwright as recurrent characters both bring to the stage a barbaric past, a sad memory that should not be repeated or forgotten. Roy Cohn, one of the ghosts from the past in *Angels in America* comes to the stage with a double function, to repeat the vile past and to haunt the present. Walter Benjamin's idea of a past full of debris comes to the stage once again with the demons we carry within.

**Keywords:** Angels in America; Tony Kushner; Phantasmagoria; monster theory; Roy Cohn

**Resumo:** De acordo com Frederick Jameson, os fantasmas de Derrida não são os mais malvados na tradição moderna. A relação de raiva é o que faz os fantasmas odiarem os vivos e desejá-los mortos. Jameson ainda questiona o fato de que o espectro tenta chegar a uma nova solução para o falso problema da antítese entre humanismo (o respeito pelo passado) e niilismo (o fim da história, o desaparecimento do passado). Não é difícil ver ecos de Negri em Kushner – o fantasma, o personagem recorrente do dramaturgo, traz à cena um passado bárbaro, uma memória triste que não pode ser repetida ou esquecida. Roy Cohn, um dos fantasmas do passado de *Angels in America* volta ao palco com uma dupla função, a de repetir o passado mesquinho e a de assombrar o presente. O passado cheio de escombros do anjo da história de Walter Benjamin volta ao palco mais uma vez com os demônios que carregamos dentro.

**Palavras-Chaves:** Angels in America, Tony Kushner; fantasmagoria; teoria do monstro; Roy Cohn.

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## Introduction

*“There are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there’s only the political, and the decoys and the ploys to maneuver around the inescapable battle of politics”*  
(*Millennium Approaches, Act III, Scene 2*)

*Angels in America: a Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, a two-part play written between the years 1986 and 1990, by the American playwright Tony Kushner, took the stage for the first time in 1991, directed by Oskar Eutis, on the Mark Taper Los Angeles Forum. However, the play, which won several awards such as the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Tony Award for Best Play, only made its Broadway debut three years later in 1993. This extremely political play that brings themes like AIDS, religion, homosexuality, also brings to the stage supernatural beings like ghosts, angels, and fiends from the past. The play, wrongly seen as a play about AIDS and the gay community, is much more than that. *Angels* is a play about suffering, about self-denial, about abjection, about fear, about politics, about history, about memory, about the banality of evil and also about AIDS and the gay community.

*Angels* is a play that resists solidification, a play that, according to Tony Kushner, conveys to its audience Theseus’ words to Hippolyta in *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*. Not all of what the spectator sees is a fairy-tale, but emotions that carry the audience, and makes it see things that were not there before. In Kushner’s phantasmagorical world of *Angels* the horrors of death confound themselves with the horrors of life. Walter Benjamin’s idea of memory, developed in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, points out to a so-called “secret agreement between past and present” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 254), which is quite evident in Kushner’s rendition of the angel of America. For the German philosopher, mankind needed to be fully redeemed in order to receive the fullness of its past, however, it has never been. I argue that because mankind is not fully redeemed, what it gets is a vindictive and prejudicial angel who demands men to stop moving, to stop evolving.

## Phantasmagoria as memory

At the end of the eighteenth-century physicists and magicians invented a new kind of light show, which they called the phantasmagoria. The idea behind this show was that the spectators would never see the projector, which was hidden behind a screen. When the lights in the auditorium went out, a ghost appeared on the screen, at first very small; it grew rapidly and seemed to move towards the audience. The illuminated views were animated and mobile, they seemed to surge towards the terrified spectators, not at all accustomed to such pictorial assaults. Moreover, the macabre *mise en scene* invented for this new kind of projection increased the audience's sense of unease and anxiety. The walls of the auditorium were usually draped in black. A dismal silence, broken by the metaphysical speeches of a 'phantasmagorist' or by the lugubrious strains of a glass harmonica introduced a whole witches' sabbath. It was, basically, a spectacle of horror, such as a horror theater, and mysticism where illusions of not only the dead, but demons, terrified audiences in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ghouls were conjured out of the afterlife to a horrified crowd, who, in turn, trailed an interesting fascination with the macabre. Walter Benjamin's interest in the phantasmagoria as commodity stems back to his *Arcades Project*. To Benjamin, the subject of the work, the arcades of Paris, were relics of a past social order, where consumerism ruled. Charlie Lawrence Jones, in his article "On Walter Benjamin, and the "Arcades Project", reminds us that:

Through his research Benjamin started to see the arcades as representative of a pivotal moment in social history: the point when society became focused on consumption over production. Buying the latest fad product was just an opium, he thought, dulling senses to the true nature of the world. By bringing light to this, he hoped to wake people up from the consumerism of the 19th Century and bring forth some kind of socialist utopia (2017).

Benjamin's idea of phantasmagoria, according to Margareth Cohn in her essay "Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria" (1989), is hardly illuminating in either a literal or a figurative sense, but what this ghost brings as memory, or the phantasmagoria of cultural memory, is the incorporation of this monster as a cultural being. The allegory of the word phantasmagoria, reminds Cohn, means "speaking other" within the *agora* (the marketplace as well as the public space). Benjamin also reminds us, still in his thesis, that

“there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (2007, p. 256), that is, this phantasmagoric cultural memory that is somehow transmitted from one person to the other lingers on and it is this ghost’s job to drag it along as it reminds the living of the inconceivability of the present. The possibility of redemption, which does not exist anymore, appears as a demonic *Doppelgänger*, “the phantasmagoria remains firmly rooted in the haunted realm of commercial exchange” (COHN, 1989, p. 96). The phantasmagoria expresses well Benjamin’s Marxist understanding of the strangely supernatural power evinced by the material reality of a commodified world, that is, the monsters of a consumers’ society that is ready to emerge. Moreover, the idea of “speaking other” helps to solidify the concept of the *other* as something that scares, that frightens, that menaces. Jeffrey Cohen, in his seven thesis of monster culture, claims that the monster body is a cultural body, that it incorporates fear, desire, anxiety and fantasy; unfortunately, according to the professor, the monster always escapes. Because the monster is a historical being, it escapes boundaries, frontiers, time, but it also is a double narrative, one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves. The actual inability to define or to point at the monster or even the abject, to put it into Kristeva’s words, seem to be very exhausting. The monster or this cultural other is visibly put into words in the Tony Kushner’s theater.

To Frederick Jameson, Derrida’s ghosts (and for our purpose here it would cross-dress as a monster, that is, a cultural monster) are not the meanest ones in the modern tradition. The phantasmagoric anger is the primitive frenesi of class, that here governs the relationship between the dead and the living. This relationship of anger is what makes the ghosts hate the living and want them dead. However, Jameson still questions the fact that the specter tries to reach a new solution to the phony problem of the antithesis between humanism (the respect for the past) and nihilism (the end of history, the disappearing of the past). It is not difficult to see echoes of Negri in Kushner, - the ghost (or the monster), the playwright recurrent character, brings to the stage a barbaric past, a memory link between the present and a past that cannot be repeated. Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, Kushner’s apocalyptic angel and Marx’s possible extinction, somehow, bring to the stage a past full of debris, which is clearly repeating itself.

Freddie Rokem in *Philosophers and Thespians* reminds us that Derrida questions the fact that one is able to be late to the end of history, and concludes that this matter is a problem of the contemporaneity – because it makes people question themselves whether the end of history is the end of a certain “concept of history”. To the Israeli philosopher, the correct question would be: isn’t it utopia that comes after of what Derrida calls “a certain concept of history”? Rokem offers two possible ways out: the first is how we relate to history when we imagine and represent utopia in the theater. According to him, these 20<sup>th</sup> century utopias are based on complex variations and ligatures between the past and the future. On one hand, these utopias are seeing as a means of healing past’s failures. On the other hand, likewise, these utopias are seeing in a nostalgic manner, as a way of returning to an idyllic past where it is still possible to reestablish the paradise lost. The second problem is how the appearance of ghosts on the stage, simultaneously, points out to an ambivalently conceived past as failing and nostalgic, and to the future. The apparition of a supernatural being, frequently, forms a concrete link between these pasts and futures. And, to him, different from what Hamlet had said, the rest is not silence, the dead come back to claim, through words, the present and the future.

This paper argues that Ethel Rosenberg (such as most of Kushner’s ghosts) does not point at a utopic future, but to a dystopic present that only serves to haunt those who dwell within. Her ghost serves a purpose, her ghost is the unrelinquished memory of the past that cannot be released. Roy Cohn’s death forces his way into history as not only a notorious character, but a sad memory of the past. His evil trajectory will also transform him into a ghost, but in a demonic ghost that uses his peers’ loyalty to manipulate power. Cohn’s ghost, therefore, would frighten future’s minds; curiously his malignity would point at a history that should not have been repeated; yet history repeated itself.

### **The fictitious Roy Cohn**

Set in New York City, the play takes place between October 1985 and February 1986. *Angels in America* is a complex play about characters that intertwine. It opens with an exit, a ceremonial closure for Sarah Ironson. This is at her funeral that Louis learn that his lover Prior is dying of AIDS. Joe, the closet-gay in the play, and Roy Cohn’s protégé,

is married to Harper, who is addicted to Valium. Both couples meet as Louis stumbles into Joe in the courthouse's bathroom. Harper and Prior meet, in a fantastical mutual dream sequence in which Prior, operating on the "threshold of revelation," reveals to Harper that her husband is a closeted homosexual. This is when Roy learns that he has been diagnosed with AIDS. But having come to witness Roy's last days on earth. Roy learns that his political opponents plan to disbar him for an ethical lapse, but he vows to remain a lawyer until he dies. Ethel comes to observe him in his misery. Roy nears his end, reeling from Joe's disclosure and from Ethel's news that he has been disbarred. He dies, but not before tricking Ethel into singing for him. After his death, Belize summons Louis to recite the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, to demonstrate thanks (for his stash of AIDS drugs) and forgiveness. Ethel is the one who leads Louis in the prayer.

### **The monster in *Angels in America***

Much has been said and discussed about Kushner's play *Angels in America* (*parts 1 and 2*), all sorts of theories and their possible interpretations, from the queer (the most talked about) to the Jewish strand of the play, however very little is mentioned about the plethora of non-corporeal beings Kushner uses in most of his work. His most preeminent commentators, such as David Savran and James Fisher focus again solely on either the political or the queer aspects of his plays (they are not really interchangeable. The queer aspect is, of course, political). Harold Bloom, in the introductory part of his book of essays on Kushner, acknowledges that Kushner is a "theological writer" other than a political writer, and the playwright somehow agrees with this idea by saying that, for him, there is a struggle between the human and the divine and part of that struggle is political. Likewise, for the playwright, drama without politics is inconceivable. Bloom plays with the fact that Ronald Reagan turned out to be pretty much harmless in the end, since their president (George W. Bush at that time) was scarier than Reagan himself, and according to the professor, not even Shakespeare would fathom to create such an evil character. Fear defined the times. Ronald Reagan was President; the Christian right, including the political-action group the Moral Majority, had helped get him there. The AIDS crisis had laid waste to thousands of people, but Reagan had never talked

publicly about the disease, until 1987. Taking into consideration his first plays (written in the 1980s) Kushner places at least one phantasmagorical character in all of them. In fact, Ranen Omer-Sherman in his article “The fate of the other in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*” mentions *en passant* a “supernatural presence of ghosts and angels, and even the nature of Heaven itself” (2007, p. 9). According to this critic, “the politics cannot be isolated from its relation to Judaism’s understanding of the sacred. By considering Judaism’s intrinsic relation to “prophecy” as a rigorous mission of social progress, the coherence of Kushner’s vision of men and angels emerges with greater clarity” (2007, p. 9) And then again “there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has claim” (2007, p. 13) And to me this is exactly when the ghosts come parading in, in this delicate moment in between, when the past meets the present.

### **History is about to crack open**

In a 1986 New York editorial in the Times, journalist William Safire wrote that Roy Cohn once told him that he “he does the worst to his enemies” and that it is “how he makes them defeat themselves”. Safire and Cohn became friends when the latter worked as an assistant at the New York Attorney’s Office. Cohn was living in a roller coaster; he was brilliant, rude, intimidating, iconoclastic and terribly unpopular. He denied his homosexuality because it went against his extremely masculine image in politics. Nobody intimidated him, neither the government, nor the Mafia, nor the press, nor the Catholic Church and any other lawyer who comes his way. However, Roy Cohn was loyal, very loyal to his peers.

Roy Cohn became a notorious figure when he was appointed by the Senator Joseph McCarthy to be the Senate Chief Counsel and lead the fight against communism in the United States – or rather, “anti-American activities” – in the 1950s. Also known as a “witch hunt”, “McCarthyism represented a political repression against the so-called communists in the USA. Joseph McCarthy was a Republican senator for the state of Michigan, whose paranoia led him to fantastically accuse thousands of Americans of

being socialist militants and to imply that the US State Department in Washington, DC, was filled with “communists on file”. The senator, who claimed “to see communists even under his bed”, became politically prominent after chairing the Permanent Investigating Subcommittee of the Government Operations Committee. McCarthy persecutions were not limited to the Federal Government; one of the facts of the witch hunt period was to characterize not only foreigners, but openly anti-American ones, the economic and social policies implemented by the New Deal. A reflection of this characterization was the creation, in 1938, of the House Committee for the Investigation of Un-American Activities (HUAC). Although their activities declined during World War II, due to the alliance between the US and the USSR, they would soon be resumed. From then on, the HUAC would pursue former Roosevelt collaborators and, in the same period, would also turn its investigations to Hollywood, giving rise to the famous “blacklists” of actors, screenwriters and technicians. Fernando Peixoto goes back to the paranoid machine of betrayal and fear of the McCarthy Era and comments that the inclusion of Hollywood in the persecution route would be an invaluable aid to unleash a wide publicity campaign of a sick patriotism.

The feeling of the anti-communist hysteria that dominated this period was then fueled by a series of external events and espionage scandals. In 1948, Alger Hiss, assistant secretary of state and adviser to Roosevelt in Yalta, was accused of being a communist spy by Whitaker Chambers, a former Soviet agent. In 1949, the Soviet Union blew up its first atomic bomb, making Americans believe they could be the next target. Finally, in 1950, the Truman government discovered a British-American spy network that passed on information to the Soviets about the development of the atomic bomb. The arrest and trial of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, directly aided by Roy Cohn, also accused of having passed secrets about the bomb, accentuated the idea of communist danger in the country. According to Cohn himself, in his memoir, he spent a large part of that trial on the phone conspiring with Judge Irvin Kaufman in order to get the expected verdict. Loyalty programs were created by the president and Congress after the Republican party won in 1946. In February 1950, Joseph McCarthy, in a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, showed a list of 205 well-known communists who worked for the Department of State. McCarthy never produced any documentation to prove the veracity of his



accusations, but in the next four consecutive years he explored what he believed has touched the American public's central nervous system – the fear of the imminent threat that came “from outside”. He and his cronies Roy Cohn and David Schine made incredible accusations, destroying the lives of hundreds of innocent people.

Therefore, Roy Cohn's figure in the 1950s was intimately linked to the idea of fear. Avid for power, Cohn allied with McCarthy to attack his own people. Contrary to Cohn's profile, Ethel Rosenberg, a housewife, mother of two, but member of the communist party, was judged and sentenced to death by the workings of Cohn himself. Ethel spent two years on death row at Sing Sing, only being able to vindicate herself years later, in fiction, seeing him wither away and die in such a horrible way as her own death.

Roy appears onstage for the first time in Kushner's “Angels in America”, sitting at his desk, surrounded by telephones bleeping incessantly, talking to Joe Pitt:

ROY: So how's life in Appeals? How's the judge?/JOE: He sends his best./ROY: He's a good man. Loyal. Not the brightest man on the bench, but he has manners. And a nice head of silver hair. /JOE: He gives me a lot of responsibility./ROY: Yeah, like writing his decisions and signing his name./JOE: Well.../ROY: He's a nice guy. And you cover admirably (KUSHNER, 2013, p. 13).

And adds: “(...) principles count, I respect principles, I'm not religious but I like God and God likes me” (2013, p. 15). Cohn's paradoxical part is the same paradoxical part satan plays in christianism, remembering Dan Vogel's theory. To the American professor, satan and god are representations of a Christian culture, in which people have been immersed since their early colonization. Satan is at the same time god's foe and servant. Vogel reminds us that Shakespeare, through his portrayal of Macbeth, left a legacy to American tragedy of how to transform a fiend into a tragic hero who can arouse not only terror, but pity as well. Schlegel's interpretation of Macbeth describes him as “an ambitious but noble hero, yielding to a deep-laid hellish temptation, [committing crimes] impelled by necessity” (VOGEL, 1974, p. 147). To Vogel Schlegel's interpretation describes how satan is understood in American tragic thought – a hellish being impelled by necessity. The judge's loyalty is the same one Cohn expects Joe to have now: he needs Joe to go to Washington and work at the Justice Department and represent him in a suit against himself. He plays with Joe's ambition stating that he would be “Associate

Assistant Something Big. Internal Affairs, heart of the woods, something nice with clout” (2013, p. 15). Clout is something Roy Cohn had, and Joe knew it would only take Cohn a phone call to place him there. Moreover, Roy’s conversation with his doctor also serves to prove his satanic origin, Roy wants the physician to call him a homosexual, so that he could destroy him. In case he did it, Roy would “proceed, systematically, to destroy (his) your reputation and (his) your practice and (his) your career in New York State” (2013, p. 45). Something the doctor was aware Cohn could easily do. Roy explains to Joe how power works. Costa Lima compared Machiavelli and Merleau-Ponty when both discussed the meaning of power. The Brazilian theorist believes that “politics is what makes material life combine with necessary fictions for a collective living” (2008, p. 171). For him, “power is something that cannot be justified naturally, it convinces better deceiving, pointing out, suggesting freedom than terror; terror and freedom are two weapons of power, but the first is more efficient than the second” (2008, p. 171).

What Cohn does is terrify people around him, and this power he exerts over people is what makes them bow down to him (which is the same one satan exerts over people to cringe at his will). This example given to Joe exemplifies this theory:

ROY: Everyone who makes it in his world makes it because somebody older and more powerful takes an interest. The most precious asset in life, I think, is the ability to be a good son to a father who pushes them farther, I owe my life to them, powerful, powerful men. Walter Winchell, Edgar Hoover. Joe McCarthy most of all. He valued me because I was and I am a good lawyer, but he loved me because I was and am a good son. He was a very difficult man, very guarded and cagey; I brought out something tender in him. He would have died for me. Does this embarrass you? (2013, p. 58)

Roy Cohn wants to show that nothing can stand in his way, that the ends will always justify the means. In the play, however, death would bring him many an unpleasant surprise. Life, according to the lawyer is full of horrors; death is also full of horrors, actually it would frighten him in ways he would never imagine. Death finally comes in the shape of a character he already knew well. Ethel Rosenberg comes back to vindicate what is her own. The specter comes to remind Cohn of his past, but also of his present. Ethel’s ghost represents Cohn’s demons, also impelled by necessity, but this time, of revenge. The horrors of life mix up with the horrors of death. His fear of being disbarred haunts him until the very end of his life. Rosenberg’s ghost comes back to haunt Cohn’s

present, not to point to a future, but to the same dystopic present that haunts us all. In a dialogue with Joe, Cohn reminds him that Rosenberg would still be alive should it be not for him. During the trial, he was the one to lead the judge into deliberating how he wanted. At this moment the ghost looks at him and says that: “the fun has just started” (2013, p. 116):

ROY: Well you're wasting your time! I'm scarier than you any day of the week! So, be it, Ethel! BOOO! BETTER DEAD THAN RED! Somebody trying to shake me up? HAH! HAH! From the throne of God in heaven to the belly of hell, you can all fuck yourselves and then go jump in the lake because I'M NOT AFRAID OF YOU OR DEATH OR HELL OR ANYTHING!/ETHEL ROSENBERG: Be seeing you soon, Roy. Julius sends his regards./ROY: Yeah, well send this to Julius! (2013, p. 117)

Roy shows her the middle finger. Roy has a fit but is saved by Ethel herself – anything to make him suffer longer. Ethel Rosenberg has a special kind of hunger, her hunger is for vendetta. She appears at the exact moment Roy Cohn dies to vindicate what belonged to her: her right to survive, her right to live. Life is what none have anymore, and Ethel comes to haunt Cohn's present. What is really curious here is that Roy Cohn's ghost really came to haunt the world of the future. Roy Cohn's ghost is, again, a representation of greed, of hunger for power. The cracking open of the world, prophesized by Ethel is something that never actually happened. Millennium came, went by, and the ghosts of the past continue to haunt the present as a reminder of past failures. While waiting for the ambulance, he tells her he “has all the time in the world” (2013, p. 118). Ethel Rosenberg does agree with him saying he is immortal:

ETHEL ROSENBERG: You're immortal./ROY: I'm immortal. Ethel. I have **forced** my way into history. I ain't never gonna die./ETHEL ROSENBERG: History is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches (2013, p. 118).

Roy Cohn actually forced himself into being a notorious character of history. His evil trajectory will also transform him into a ghost, but in an evil ghost, who uses his peers' loyalty to manipulate power. Cohn's ghost would haunt the minds of the future: curiously, his malignity would point to a history that should not be repeated, nonetheless, it has repeated itself. Even though the clothing was different, witches were hunted again in 2001. The question now is what this loyalty is based on. Manipulation through fear is something that Cohn knew well how to do, taking as an example the lives he ruined with

senator McCarthy in the 1950s. In order to put the Republican Party in the White House would mean to take control over the country, that is, to manipulate a country towards a way that would be beneficiary to that group of people.

Cohn asks Joe if he knew about Ethel Rosenberg and how his actions helped her be sentenced to death:

ROY: (...) You know what my greatest accomplishment was, Joe, in my life, what I am able to look back on and be proudest of? And I have helped make Presidents and unmake them and mayors and more goddam judges than anyone in NYC ever- AND several million dollars, tax-free – and what you think means the most to me? You ever heard of Ethel Rosenberg? Huh, Joe, huh? /JOE: Well, yeah, I guess I... Yes./ROY: Yes. Yes. You have heard of Ethel Rosenberg. Yes. Maybe you even read about her in the history books. If it wasn't for me, Joe, Ethel Rosenberg would be alive today, writing some personal-advice column for Ms. Magazine. She isn't. Because during the trial, Joe, I was on the phone every day, talking with the judge.../JOE: Roy.../ROY: Every day, doing what I do best, talking on the telephone, making sure that timid Yid nebbish on the bench did her duty to America, to history. That sweet unprepossessing woman, two kids, boo-hoo-hoo, reminded us all of our little Jewish mamas – she came this close to getting life; I pleaded till I wept to put her in the chair. Me. I did that. I would have fucking pulled the switch if they'd have let me. Why? Because I fucking hate traitors. Because I fucking hate communists. Was it legal? Fuck legal. Am I a nice man? Fuck nice. They say terrible things about me in the Nation. Fuck the Nation. You want to be Nice, or you want to be Effective? Make the law, or subject to it. Choose. Your wife chose. A week from today, she'll be back. SHE knows how to get what SHE wants. Maybe I ought to send her to Washington. (...)/JOE: You can't possibly mean what you're saying. Roy, you were the Assistant United States Attorney on the Rosenberg case, ex-parte communication with the judge during the trial would be... censurable, at least, probably conspiracy and ... in a case that resulted in execution, it's.../ROY: What? Murder? (2013, p. 113 – 114)

Roy was sitting in his hospital room now talking on the phone. The pain he is feeling makes him hallucinate with Ethel one more time. While on the phone he claims never to have killed anyone, “present company excepted” (2013, p. 184), and added “and you deserved it” (2013, p. 184). Roy's suffering amuses the apparition, though.

I don't trust this hospital. For all I know Lillian fucking Hellman is down in the basement switching the pills around – no, wait, she's dead, isn't she. Oh boy, memory, it's – hey Ethel, didn't Lillian die, did you see her up, there, ugly, ugly broad, nose like a ... like even a Jew should worry mit a punim like that. You seen somebody fitting that description up there in Red Heaven?? Hah? She won't talk to me. She thinks she's some sort of deathwatch or something (2013, p. 185).

The reference to hell in the playwright's name gives Roy the chance to play with the words. The red heaven, or the communists' heaven, points to hell itself. The place where

he believes all communists must go after they die. He gets no response from Ethel, nonetheless.

Ethel Rosenberg's ghost does not come back to show a new perspective of life in a better future, but to remind Cohn of his evil doings. Ethel is not only a representation of the past; whatsoever is someone who points at a utopia, as Rokem claimed. The future Ethel points at is as bad to Roy as it is for the rest of mankind. What this ghost was waiting for was a bus, which would take her to Yonkers to watch him being disbarred, the show Ethel would not dare to lose. Since she could "walk through a wall" (2013, p. 188), a power he did not yet have, Cohn threatens her:

Fucking SUCCUBUS! Fucking bloodsucking old bat! The worst thing about being sick in America, Ethel, is you are booted out of the parade. Americans have no use for sick. Look at Reagan: He's so healthy he's hardly human, he's a hundred if he's a day, he takes a slug in his chest and two days later he's out west riding ponies in his PJ's. I mean who does that? That's America. It's just no country for the infirm (2013, p. 188).

Roy is looking gray now. He is in a hospital nightgown and diapers. However, he reminds Joe that in his:

(...) generation, we had clarity. Unafraid to look deep into the miasma at the heart of the world, what a pit, what a nightmare is there – I have looked, I have searched all my life for absolute bottom, and I found it, believe me: Stygian. How tragic, how brutal and short life is. How sinful people are. The immutable heart of what we are that bleeds through whatever we might become. All else is vanity. I don't know the world anymore. After I die they'll say it was for the money and the headlines. But it was never the money: It's the moxie that counts. I never wavered. You: remember. (2013, p. 210).

The heart of the world is exactly what he wanted it to be: infernal. His world was a nightmare. His legacy: the ultimate limits of power manipulation. A chess game against the devil, which would bring him total humiliation. Roy's disease made some of the disbarment trials be postponed, but it did not avoid it to happen. To be disbarred meant to lose power, in his case, his own life: *The Law: the only club I ever wanted to belong to. And before they take that from me, I'm going to die.* Roy knew the only thing he had was death (both ways), in fact, Ethel Rosenberg's ghost, who just came to remind him he had lost all power.

ROY: I'm going, Ethel. Finally, finally done with this world, at long long last. All mine enemies will be standing on the other shore, mouths gaping open like stupid fish, while the Almighty parts the Sea of Death and lets his Royboy cross over to Jordan. On dry land and still a lawyer./ETHEL: Don't count your chickens, Roy. It's over. /ROY: Over?/ETHEL: I wanted the news should come from me. The panel ruled against you Roy. (...)/ROY: But am I dead?/ETHEL: No. They beat you. You lost. I decided to come here so I could forgive you. You who I have hated so terribly I have borne my hatred for you up into the heavens and made a needle-sharp little star in the sky out of it. It's the star of Ethel Rosenberg's Hatred, and it burns every year for one night only, June Nineteen. It burns acid green. I came to forgive but all I can do is take pleasure in your misery. Hoping I'd get to see you die more terrible than I did. And you are, 'cause you're dying in shit, Roy, defeated. And you could kill me, but you couldn't ever defeat me. You never won. And when you die all anyone will say is: Better he had never lived at all (2013, p. 252).

Ethel tries to forgive him, but she can't. The fact that she does not manage to forgive him for his crimes works as foil to the only probable future which the ghost gets to point at: a future without any hope, kindness or love. The hate she felt created a star in the sky, and that star is a glimpse of memory, which will never be turned off. To make peace with this memory of horrors is to accept that stars also die: however, what is left off this death is a black hole, out of which nothing is able to escape.

### **Curtain**

The specter, brought by Tony Kushner to the stage in *Angels in America*, even though staged in a world (or in a moment in history) that hope was still possible, is a clear representation of a Kushnian dystopia, it is the representation of a world where this hope is out of place. The ghost or the cultural monster even though appearing in different shapes and forms, brings with it the memory of a past that needs to be put on stage. This barbarous past points at a present that, unfortunately, contrary to what Freddie Rokem claimed, at a utopia. According to the philosopher, the ghosts, when they appear on stage automatically points at the sad memory of a failed past and to the future. Rokem argues that ghosts are progression, a walk ahead. He also believes that this progression points at the end of history as a march of darkness towards light, that is, like a revelation. This revelation would yet point at a utopia through the eyes of someone who is a representation of the past. The ghosts, or the specters, in Kushner's plays are many, however, they only point at a regression, at a dystopia. They are the representation of insufferable barbarity in a world where there is still the possibility of another future, of

another present. The image that made us afraid in the past is exactly the same one that scares us today, the necessity of filling up all of those empty spaces, even when we know they cannot or should not be entirely filled is real. The impossibility of satisfying one's void. Questions remain, many times, linked to the impossibility of obtaining plausible answers. The opened doors by the pact between the playwright and the audience only allows in whoever the entrance was destined to, whoever relentlessly tried to search for those answers the ghosts could not give.

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