THE LAST DANCE: AN ESSAY ON *THE INTELLIGENT HOMOSEXUAL'S GUIDE TO CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM AND A KEY TO THE SCRIPTURES*, BY TONY KUSHNER

A ÚLTIMA DANÇA: UM ENSAIO SOBRE A MORTE EM *THE INTELLIGENT HOMOSEXUAL'S GUIDE TO CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM AND A KEY TO THE SCRIPTURES*, DE TONY KUSHNER

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ABSTRACT

A possible "theory" about Tony Kushner's theater is supported, in some way, by the aporia of death. The end, far beyond the political is visible in his most prominent plays. The meaning of this end tries to make itself clear through his ghostly characters, characters that are reproduced in all his theatrical productions. The ambivalence of life is consistent with the idea of the possibility of haunting. What exists after death? Kushner has never tried to find a concrete answer to this question, but he places characters on stage who, through his spectropolitics, try to remember the past. This essay is about this spectropolitics: when ghosts come on stage not only to remember the past, but as a warning sign about the future. *The Homosexual's Guide* centers on the Italian-American Marcantonio family. Fearing the onset of Alzheimer's, Gus, the patriarch, asks his family for support in trying to pursue an assisted suicide after a failed self-destruction attempt. This text tries to weave a link amongst death, politics and the loss of memory as a collective process of erasure of American history.

Keywords: Phantasmagoria, politics, spectropolitics, theater, Tony Kushner

RESUMO

Uma possível "teoria" sobre o teatro de Tony Kushner está apoiada, de alguma forma, na aporia da morte. O fim, muito além do político se faz visível em suas peças mais proeminentes. O significado deste fim tenta se fazer claro através de seus personagens fantasmagóricos, personagens que se repetem em todas as suas produções teatrais. A ambivalência da vida, em seu caminhar, se mostra consistente com a ideia da possibilidade da assombração. O que existe após a morte? Kushner nunca tentou buscar uma resposta concreta para tal pergunta, mas coloca no palco personagens que, através de uma espectropolítica, tentam rememorar o passado. Este ensaio é sobre esta espectropolítica: quando os fantasmas vem à cena não só para rememorar o passado, mas como um sinal de alerta sobre o futuro. *The Homosexual's Guide* centra-se na família ítalo-americana Marcantonio. Temendo o início de um Alzheimer, o patriarca Gus pede o apoio de sua família para tentar um suicídio assistido, após a falha tentativa de autoextermínio no passado. Este texto tenta, então, tecer uma ligadura entre morte, política e perda da memória como processo coletivo de apagamento da história estadunidense.

Palavras-chave: Fantasmagoria, política, espectropolítica, teatro, Tony Kushner

> *The fog was where I wanted to be. Halfway down the path you can't see this house. You'd never know it was here. Or any of the other places down the avenue. I couldn't see but a few feet ahead. I didn't meet a soul. Everything looked and sounded unreal. Nothing was what it is. That's what I wanted–to be alone with myself in another world where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself. Out beyond the harbor, where the road runs along the beach, I even lost the feeling of being on land. The fog and the sea seemed part of each other. It was like walking on the bottom of the sea. As if I had drowned long ago. As if I was the ghost belonging to the fog, and the fog was the ghost of the sea. It felt damned peaceful to be nothing more than a ghost within a ghost.*
>
> Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night*

A possible "theory" about Tony Kushner's theater is supported, in some way, by the aporia of death. The end, far beyond the political – or of the political voice – is visible in his most prominent plays. The meaning of this end (the end of life, of politics, of love, and even of the verbiage that is ultimately linked to his dramaturgy) tries to make itself clear through his ghostly characters. The ambivalence of life is consistent with the idea of the possibility of haunting. What exists after death? Kushner has never been able to answer this question (or even tried), but he has brought to the stage, as in *Angels in America* (1991), a plethora of non-corporeal characters (and some very real ones from history) who stage the moments we most fear. The story of the incomprehension of who this familiar other is, the story of a country haunted by real ghosts that frighten what is left of that devastated land, is much of what Kushner has been trying hard to convey.

Allan Kellehear, in *A Social History of Dying* (2007), comments on how death has become a rather shameful subject – labeled negatively. For him, the social and moral challenge for those involved in these modern battles over identity at the end of life is the problem of programming death. If we are conscious of being finite beings, when should we die? Is it ethical to end our own lives? Is it possible to anticipate death? Or even plan one's own death? This essay aims to walk through the dance of death, or the last dance, of a family that, haunted by the past, discusses the possibility of ending what remains of life (in all its meanings, including the political) of their patriarch. Death – now far removed from its otherworldly origins – has become a set of trials and tests in this world. Death continues its reversion to the other world as secularization obscures our view of it or allows only the vaguest descriptions of these places. Increasingly, the slow deterioration of aging and the slow dimming of consciousness (here haunted by Alzheimer's) that we experience as we grow older bring up a new and urgent question about death in life.

Sigmund Freud wrote extensively about death, mourning, and sadness. In the introduction to the English translation of *Das Unheimiliche* (1919) Hugh Haughton writes about the difficulty in translating the German word into any language:

> Freud's survey of the lexical range of the term in German and other European languages makes the issue of translation central to the essay (it also makes it particularly hard to translate, forcing the translator to leave many terms in the original foreign form). This plays out the central issue of foreignness and familiarity that Freud treats as integral to the logic of uncanniness. The term 'uncanny' is the appropriate English translation for 'unheimlich' (it's the English term Freud uses among his survey of foreign language equivalents) but it doesn't reproduce the semantic structure which provides the crux of Freud's account of the relation between the Heimlich and the Unheimlich, which simply can't be domesticated into English." (Freud, 2003: 19)

In the "Translator's Preface", David McLintock argues that:

> no English pair is semantically comparable with the German pair heimlich/unheimlich, which is so important for Freud's linguistic argument: English 'homely/unhomely (which I have inserted tiresomely often in square brackets) are etymologically and morphologically comparable with the German words, but not semantically equivalent. In the Leonardo study it was possible to find fault with Freud's handling of the linguistic evidence, but no such criticism can be entertained with regard to this piece, published nine years later, in which he provides a masterly analysis of the linguistic data and their relevance to the psychological findings (Freud, 2003: 19)

Therefore, different from Gilson Iannini and Pedro Tavares when writing about the untranslatability of the German word, McLintock chose not to translate the key concepts into English. The Brazilian translators chose to force a translatability creating the word "unfamiliar" (*infamiliar*) to express what is at stake in the concept developed by the psychoanalyst. "Unfamiliar" (*infamiliar*) shows that the border between languages is not insurmountable, but also that the passage from one language to another requires a certain amount of forcing, not different from McLintock's consideration. The concept of translation perhaps triggers another concept: the transposition of the passage from life to death, that is, the possibility of crossing the border between the two worlds, that of the dead and that of the living. The concerns of death and about death are integrated into the idea of the familiar, something that also harbors its antithetical meaning. For the translators, "the unheimiliche is a negation that overlaps with the heimiliche apprehended both positively and negatively: it is therefore a reduplication of this negation, which accentuates its distressing and frightening character" (Freud, 2021: 11). The issues the translators encountered in transposing the German concepts show that the original wording has the positive meaning of something we know and recognize and the negative meaning of something we do not know. Hugh Haughton (2003) considers that the essay on the uncanny interprets the uncanny as a return: he is returning to an old subject while being haunted by Otto Jentsch in a dialogue with the psychoanalyst. I believe the ones who return, here, the phantasmagoria, is also presented as something that is uncertain, for not only life is uncertain, but it directly connects us with something that is foreign to us, therefore, causes us anguish. Death causes us anguish. Regarding the relationship with death, or the desire to die (by taking one's own life), or to kill, Freud in "Times of War and Death" (1915), writing in the aftermath of the war, recalls that at

some point the human being could no longer keep death away from themselves, because it was already too close to them. Humans invent the spirit together with the soul of the loved one, never the enemy, but his guilt transforms this spirit into an evil being that needs to be feared. For Freud, "the (physical) modifications of death suggested to him the division of the individual into a body and one – originally several – soul; in this way, his mental course ran parallel to the process of decomposition initiated by death." (Freud, 2021: 13) But it is only in "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) that he sees the subject in a state similar to that of death, together with the lost object. Freud relates melancholy to the loss of the love object and the ambivalence of love relationships.

The ambivalence of life and death is constant in Tony Kushner's theater. Ghostly figures and "imaginary intruders" (figures who perform as ghosts or as objects of memory, who haunt the physical spaces of the scene, but are not ghosts per se) add to the sadness of the loneliness of death, of the void, spectral space. In *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam Wars, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (1997), Marita Sturken reminds us that memory forms the structure of human life, affecting everything from the "ability" to perform simple, everyday tasks to self-recognition. According to the researcher, "memory" establishes the "continuity of life"; it gives meaning to the present, since every moment is constituted by the past. As how we remember who we are, "memory" provides the very core of identity. From the earliest times that can be recorded, we represent stories to each other and in these stories lie the power to remember the past. From what is "unfamiliar" to melancholy, the time of death is present in the memory of the American playwright's characters. Here, life, politics and death mingle in one last lonely dance.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW AND HIS GUIDE TO THE INTELLIGENT WOMAN

Commissioned by the Guthrie Theater, *The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures* had its world premiere during the Guthrie Theater's Kushner Celebration. On the Guthrie's website you could find various commemorative activities such as "Plan Your Kushner Getway" and a "Kushner Store" ("buy an origami wallet!"). In other words, capitalism was alive at the Guthrie Theater, and Kushner was in business. Somehow, the play, which so strongly criticizes the reifications of capitalism, lost resonance when performed amid this bourgeois theatrical bonanza. Beginning his critique of a love affair carried over cell phones, Kushner traces the alienation wrought by our technologically mediated, market-driven society as it dissolves the social fabric: friend, family member and citizen are all abandoned, as they abandon, in the post-union landscape of the United States. Kushner's script foregrounds the displacement and desperation of the individual adrift in the "globalized" capitalist world of the 21st century.

George Bernard Shaw published *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism & Fascism* in 1928. The book is based on years of politics and pamphleteering. For Shaw, economic inequality is like the original sin; it poisons and distorts every aspect of life. Every social and political institution is corrupted at the root by pecuniary interests. Private property is a form of thievery – thievery with violence. For a capitalist economy can never function perfectly. In his guide, Shaw, an avowed socialist but averse to Marx's ideas, laughed at socialists who saw history as a melodrama in which the heroism of the proletariat is pitted against the villainy of capitalism. For the English playwright:

> We have to confess it: Capitalist mankind in the lump is detestable. Class hatred is not a mere matter of envy on the part of the poor and contempt and dread on the part of the rich. Both rich and poor are really hateful in themselves. For my part I hate the poor and look forward eagerly to their extermination. I pity the rich a little, but am equally bent on their extermination… I should despair if I did not know that they will all die presently, and there is no need on earth why they should be replaced by people like themselves. (Shaw, 1928: 493-494)

However, he saw capitalism as the source of all evil, the mainspring of dishonesty and exploitation.

Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures (1875), written by Mary Baker Eddy, is considered the central text of the religion of Christian science. Inspired by studies of the Bible carried out in 1867, the book presents a metaphysical view of Christianity, according to which sin, illness and death are not of god and therefore not real. Furthermore, she suggests that by striving to gain a spiritual understanding of the world as god's perfect creation, these "false beliefs" are eliminated from your experience. Eddy's book is a debate about relevant religious issues that are still discussed today. In the play, Empty and Clio talk vaguely about Eddy's book. They talk about dialectics, systems, death and spirits. Clio believes that Eddy's book raises pressing questions about death or whether there is life after death: a guide to the unknowable. Kushner presents this unknowable as a form of negative dialectic even though it serves reconciliation. The possibility of the existence of the spirit, the contradictions of an antagonistic but emancipatory dialectic, just like death is, in Clio's conception. A discharging demise would come from a change, from paralysis to action. As in the dialogue below:

EMPTY – I'm staying. He needs us, Clio. The citizen in the Horace poem, dreaming he's alone, in the audience; he's removed himself from the stage, from the action, from the actors – from us. That's your brother, my father, he's removed himself from active involvement in the world. We all know it's catastrophic, disengagement, separating thought from action but – We've let him go. I can make him choose not to die by wanting him to live. And I do, I want him to live. Sorry if that's no un *dialectical* enough for you but.

CLIO – Right before I came here last summer, a neighbor lady in Paterson, I told her my brother had cut his wrists, and she gave me a book Mary Baker Eddy. *Science and Health With Key to the Scriptures* (…) I don't subscribe to systems anymore. But her book's beautiful, a guide to the unknowable, the relationship of the intangible to the material. I find she's particularly good on the subject of death. I want him to live, too. I just… Death's in this house, Empty; it's here. I've seen it, close up, but I don't know what death is. So I don't know what Gus hopes to find by doing this, I know he's made his mind up to pursue it, and I don't think I can alter that. She writes that death is the idea of death. If you look at it that way, it's an expression of the uneasy way spirit inhabits matter, and –

EMPTY – Of course you can't alter – You and him, you're transfixed by death maybe, maybe it's some sort of ooky-spooky European political death dementia we bought with us when we came over in 1892. I'm glad you're going, Zeeko. Unintentionally, you're probably reinforcing his depression. The two of you, you're like the before picture in an ad for Prozac. I don't have time to think about death. I have to think about how I can prevent death. (…)

CLIO – Whether Spirits exist, something escapes from matter when it dies. I've witnessed that. It is tragic, but life's tragic, baby. Don't you know that? And if we're lucky, death's also emancipation, a kind of – (…)

> MAEVE – I don't think she meant death is good or anything, just like it's like, regarded in a certain light, um… Ecstasy. (…) Ecstasy, it means out of… well, stasis. A… A shift, a change. So what did you mean when you –
> EMPTY – Death's some sort of liberation? (Kushner, 2009: 172, 173).

Eddy's book, according to Kushner, was the inspiration for his play. But there is something more than Eddy's book underlying Kushner's play, for it was George Bernard Shaw, in the early 1920s, who saw politics as a way of filling a void, who brought necessary debates about the capitalist way of life to the stage and, above all, saw politics as a form of activism with a very well-defined goal. Capitalism, in the hands of these two playwrights, even if separated by a period of almost 100 years, does not lose the essence of the evil inherent in it. The title of the play, I believe, is an amalgamation, based on dialectical thinking, of these two books from the century of the Industrial Revolution. Both playwrights show a continuity of political thinking. Shaw once placed Don Juan in hell as he superposes paradise and hell as a token of capitalism. Kushner approximates hell to paradise as, like Shaw, it represents this new republicanism he so despises. Observing illusions (or spirits), removed from the world, our darkness ends up seeking light in the gaze of another beyond us. The dream of suicide is nothing more than the dream of the end, perhaps the dream of the end of capitalism. Theater as art once again fulfills its function of mimicking the negativity of the reified world.

PHANTASMAGORIA AS MEMORY

Walter Benjamin's interest in phantasmagoria as a commodity dates to his Arcades Project. For Benjamin, the subject of the work, the arcades of Paris, were relics of a past social order, where consumerism

reigned. Charlie Lawrence Jones, in his article "On Walter Benjamin, and the 'Arcades Project'" (2017), reminds us that:

> Through his research, Benjamin began to see arcades as representative of a crucial moment in social history: the point at which society focused on consumption over production. Buying the latest fashion product was just an opium, he thought, dulling the 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 about some kind of socialist utopia. (Jones, 2017)

The meaning of phantasmagoria is unreal, chimera, utopia, fabrication. Benjamin's idea of phantasmagoria, according to Margareth Cohn in her essay "Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria" (1989), hardly illuminates in a literal or figurative sense, but what this phantasm 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, Cohn reminds us, means "speaking the other" within the agora (the market, as well as the public space). Benjamin also reminds us, in his "Theses on History", that "there is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin, 2007: 256), in other words, it is the job of this spirit to drag this ghostly cultural memory, which is somehow transmitted from one person to another, as a reminder of the irreconcilability of the present. The possibility of redemption or conciliation, which no longer exists, appears as a demonic doppelganger, "the phantasmagoria remains firmly rooted in the haunted realm of commercial exchange" (Cohn, 1989: 96). The phantasmagoria expresses well Benjamin's Marxist understanding of the strangely supernatural power evidenced by the material reality of a commodified world, that is, the monster of a consumer society that

is ready to emerge. Cohn also points out that "one of these spectacles, the "phantasmagorical experience" or, as it was also called, the phantasmagoria, was literally illuminating. Using a movable magic lantern called a phantoscope, it projected for its spectators a parade of ghosts" (Cohn, 1989: 90). The phantasmagoria of cultural history is somewhat reproduced in the 1996 essay *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, by Jeffrey Cohen, who uses the idea of "speaking the other" to help solidify the concept of the other as something that frightens, terrifies and threatens. Cohen, in his "Seven Monster Theses", states that the monster body is a cultural body, which incorporates fear, desire, anxiety and fantasy; unfortunately, according to the professor, monsters always escape. Because the monster is a historical being, it escapes barriers, borders, time, but it is also a double narrative, one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves. The real inability to define or pinpoint the monster or even the abject, using Kristeva's words, seems very exhausting. I would dare to propose that Cohen's cultural monster is a transposition of Benjamin's phantasmagoria of cultural history into which the other, or the ghost, is a weave between pasts and futures. The monster or this cultural other is visibly put into words in Tony Kushner's theater. And here, he is about to take his own life.

The appearance of ghosts on stage simultaneously points to a past that is ambivalently conceived as flawed and nostalgic, and to also a future that cannot be fulfilled. The appearance of a supernatural being often forms a concrete link between these pasts and futures. And for this supernatural being, unlike what Hamlet said, the rest is not silence, the dead come back to claim, through words, the present and the future. But how do you hear a silence? Harold Bloom returns to consider the ghost of Hamlet's father:

> I hear a primordial silence, as well as voices descending from a sphere inside and outside the rock of the self. When Hamlet concludes by murmuring: "The rest is silence", he intends both an acceptance of oblivion and a longing for what the Hermetists call the Pleroma or Plenitude. (...) How does one hear a silence? (Bloom, 2019: 72)

Derrida (2006) argued that all texts are, in fact, haunted by other texts. Marvin Carlson, in *The Haunted Stage* (2003), reminds us that theatrical texts relate even more to other texts, literary or not. The haunting appears making a noise, disturbing Bloom's silence, you cannot hear silence, what you hear is the noise of the past disguised as silence. Correspondingly, Peter Brook's concept of empty space mashes up with Marvin Carlson's view of a ghosted empty space, when the second takes the social ghost into consideration. There are no empty spaces should you consider that every space has been inhabited before, hence, the noise heard is mainly the harrowing past that should not be forgotten.

THE HOMOSEXUAL GUIDE TO CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM

The *Homosexual's Guide* centers on the Italian-American Marcantonio family. The patriarch Gus, who lives on Clinton Street in Brooklyn's Carol Gardens, is a distant cousin of real-life radical congressman Vito Marcantonio and heir to his family's anarcho-communist past. Fearing the onset of Alzheimer's, he enlists the support of his family to try to kill himself again after a failed suicide attempt. His sister Bennie, his son Pill with her husband Paul, his daughter Empty with her pregnant girlfriend Maeve and her ex-husband Adam, his son Vic with his wife Sooze, struggle, ponder and respond not only to Gus' request to end his own life, but to their own problematic and strangely lonely existences in the midst of this large contemporary family. Memory loss appears on stage in the first scene of the play:

PILL – Hey look at that, Alzheimer's cleared right up.
V – You don't have Alzheimer's.
PILL – Did you think you were losing your memory last year? When you...
(…)
GUS – The Committees of Correspondence! Right, that, I – [...]
Because, because she's there, and you, and you're cueing me, it comes back, with you kids. But over and over, it's just... not there. Blank spaces, not like forgetfulness, but. Like *trying to remember* has become this dangerous thing, it... pulls *me* into the blank space, *I'm... I'm become irretrievable. I go away.* [...]
He had Alzheimer's. It's in the Family DNA. In his last Years, and he lived *forever* – he was lost in this terrifying fog, a curse to his family, a dead thing in diapers, wandering. We all said that'll never be me. *I* meant it. (Kushner, 2009:10-14)

The personal, as Kushner demonstrates throughout his work, never comes without the political: Gus's politics belong to a gradually disappearing history of communist activism and union organizing (trade unionism – an activity that for Gus's son Vic has caused the nation's current economic ruin). It is not just that this political history is disappearing and failing – like a collective social Alzheimer's – but the very capacity of human beings to connect as a political and social organism is disappearing. Gus refuses to show the union documents to his son, who is a historian. Or history teacher, as he puts it. The erasure of history for Gus (and for American society in general) is made clear in the play. The diminishing importance of history and trade unionism moves towards an amnesia that is very real for the humanities in the USA. Betrayal and alienation define this family and the society that forms it. Reagan's children, the "selfish and greedy, loveless and blind" who populated *Angels in America* (1991) are now

the children of an even more alienated and alienating time: the age of exacerbated neoliberalism.

Kushner returns (as do his ghosts) to Bauman's liquidity, to fleeting relationships without solidity, without love. Pill cheats on Paul with a younger call boy, Eli, while Eli, apparently the reified body, loves and then is left by Pill. Vic sleeps with his sister Empty's lesbian lover, Maeve, impregnating her with a child Empty does not want. Adam buys the family home to bring back his sometime lover, always ex, Empty. Not only do these personal relationships reflect the inability to form lasting human connections in today's socio-political world, but the family itself has lost its connection to the past, to its lineage. Personal amnesia becomes collective as Gus incinerates the family archives. Aunt and niece are left contemplating their loss of family history in a room framed by the fractured skyline of increasingly dehistoric New York City, where the profits of rapid development have destroyed the concept of home... a place to belong over time.

The destruction of the home or of the coven (of the witches and the communists, in this case) is made clear in Paul's words when he reinforces the fact that Gus is part of the communist party. Communists have historically been seen as the witches of American history. In Paul's words:

> PAUL – […] you know I love you all, but, but this… conference or, or gathering of the coven, it legitimizes whatever there is in him of genuine serious suicidal ideation, it wouldn't be a, a good idea probably for most families, but also the man. Is. A. Communist. Party. Member. Cadres. Party discipline, what do I know? […] (Kushner, 2009: 38)

The abject isolation of characters devoid of temporal, spatial or relational matrices, half naked, left adrift in a land of disconnection

and abandonment, who cannot find the familiar, only the *unheimlich*, loaded with all its distressing and frightening character, to tell them who they are or where they really belong is outlined throughout the play. The reified and objectified view of the commodity, going back to Benjamin and his concept of history, is maintained in the fact that life, and here also death, is transformed into a commodity. Marx's alienated from himself man is represented in Gus's road to death.

> ELI – You read Marx in… […]
> PILL – By making it, by working. His labor, his productive life goes into making objects; his labor remains in the objects in the form of value; it becomes objectified, outside of him. His life is objectified, outside of him. […]
> PILL – Since man is estranged from his own labor, estranged from himself, he expresses this, as everything human is expressed, according to Marx, in relationships, his self-alienation is expressed as alienation from other men. […]
> The damage of hustling, that you're commodifying your deepest self, your capacity for giving and receiving love, romantic love, that you're turning that, that capacity within into a thing for sale, you become remote from your own –
> ELI – No I mean what I mean is that it's interesting that if you turn tricks you're selling the alienated self. Right? Not like an iPhone your labor life is trapped in, like I get that, that that's bad, like I built this building I can't afford an apartment in, right, but know what I mean? It's not the building or the iPhone, it's you, that's the thing they buy, you don't make this thing, you make yourself into a thing, so – […] You buy the alienated worker, the alienation, right, you want to fuck the alienation or get fucked by it, the whole process of… what did you call it? Commodity?
> PILL – Fetishism.

ELI – Cool. Like if it's an affliction, a sickness, that process, you want to buy the process, not a boy, but a thing like a boy, in whom, in whom – it's transparent. The affliction. (Kushner, 2009: 61-63)

The end of the play features Snelle giving suicide instructions to Gus, who was her late husband's union colleague. Singing the union song, alone, as she leaves Gus to die, Snelle illustrates the tremendous cost of the loss of the collective: the end of the individual as a political, social and therefore human being.

But Gus is not alone in death: Pill's ex-lover Eli shows up, ready to do anything for 300 dollars. The play begins with the sterile sensuality of a cell phone conversation between lovers and ends with the profound loneliness of a self-inflicted death with a stranger; the patriarch pays the market price for care and human contact. The loss of connectivity that is lamented in the work was then replicated in the relationship between the performance and the audience. The conscience of the characters now needs to emerge in the performance with Kushner marking his, and the spectator's, complicity with the commodification of art and the self; so not only do the Marcantonios pay the human and social cost of this age of hyper-capitalism, but so do we all.

V – So we, we vote? Ok, so, so, Gus? I assume you're a yes vote.
GUS – I am a yes vote.
V – Ok, then it's like, four against to one in favor, so...?
CLIO – It's consensus, not majority rule.
V – I don't...
CLIO – We cast ourselves as a Community in search of common ground. It seems foolish, but it works: you impose an artificial order on an oceanic situation so it doesn't drown you. We must all agree, or each must feel he or she can live with what the others want. [...]

> EMPTY – If all four of us want you to, to not kill yourself. To face - ... whatever this is, if it's, even if it's Alzheimer's – it's not, I think it's... (Kushner, 2009: 22 - 23)

Here it may be necessary to return to Freud and the concept of oceanic feeling. For the psychoanalyst, the feeling of "eternity" would be a purely subjective fact. Only based on this oceanic feeling could someone call themselves religious, even if they reject all faith and illusion, as Eddy writes. The strange possibility, indicated by the oceanic feeling, of there being a participation or even total dissolution between us and the world, in its elements and objects, accentuates in extremis the position contrary to the opposition between individual and society, the one that derives strictly from the idea of the decentering of the subject. The subject is outside of itself, it is constituted in the field of the other. Following this train of thought, it is important to remember that the subject of the unconscious is not located in the individual, but among us, in the world inhabited by culture, by history. For Pill, history is heavy. As a subject, you need to belong to a class, an identity, a group, so you need to be.

> PILL – History is (heavy). I was raised to believe you must belong, to a, class, to a party, to a cell or a cade or, or an identity, and affinity group, and if you find yourself a stranger within it, if it's hard, if the affinity's almost impossible to, to discern anymore, to sustain – you make it possible, you find a way. To belong. Because if you have no community you mean nothing, you achieve nothing, you are nothing. He believes that. My father. It's paramount. For my sister too. Somehow, for me, belonging to anything that deeply hasn't been possible. Betrayal's always been my only safety, my only… breathable air. (Kushner, 2009: 133)

The ghosts of Marvin Carlson haunt American history, and it is probably in Kushner's play that cultural memory enters the haunted house.

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF MARCANTONIOS

You could say that in some way the ghosts of American literature haunt *The Homosexual's Guide*. I would even go so far as to say that it is a play about the erasure of memory of that country. Just as in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), the Marcantonios' house ends up in ruins. A metaphorical ruin, but a ruin, nonetheless. Gus is still alive, left to die, but as the circle of his life shrinks, the spectator understands that his choice of death is similar to that of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853). In his essay "Bartleby, or Contingency" (1993), Giorgio Agamben writes that every act of creation is an act of intelligence and vice versa. The intellect in potency is the canvas on which nothing is written. The scrivener who does not write is the perfect potency, that now only nothingness separates him from the act of creation. Bartleby, as the scrivener who has stopped writing, "is the extreme figure of nothingness from which all creation proceeds and, at the same time, the most implacable vindication of this nothingness as pure, absolute potency. The scrivener has become the writing canvas, he is henceforth nothing more than its blank sheet" (Agamben, 2015: 26). Life is a blank sheet of paper on which we write our stories and store our memories. However, for the patriarch of the family, there is nothing else to write, there are no more memories.

> EMPTY – You want to kill yourself and sell the house.
> GUS – Sorta. Yeah. Other way around.
> PILL – Or: How about you sell, and then, instead of killing yourself, you could, you know, move?

> GUS – Yeah. I don't want to. […]
> EMPTY – You want to die instead.
> GUS – **I choose not to. That's a choice also. Refusal**[1]. (Kushner, 2009: 35-36)

I choose not to. In choosing not to live, Gus denies the power to recall, to remember. On the other hand, it is also in the act of typing or fictionalizing, as the patriarch's friend was able to do, that the world is built, that memories are created. However, Gus continues, even though it is in the work of his hands to make the world, it is also in his hands that the world can be undone. Adorno's dialectic permeates the entire play like a thread that sews up loose ends, but also has the ability to unstitch them. In Gus's words:

> GUS – [...] That's what it was, the kid was right. But so was I: My friend the printer, they left him alone that night, and somehow he managed to pull out the breathing tube. He asphyxiated. **The works of your hand makes the world. And while you still have the use of them, they can unmake the goddamn world, just as well**. (Kushner, 2009: 26)

When the Marcantonios' house collapses, it ceases to remember (and there begins a process of 'dewriting'), because it would be the house that, as the patriarch's Alzheimer's progresses, would remember for him or in his place. Just as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), the Marcantonios' house also has memory.

> ADAM – Gus isn't going to kill himself because he has to sell the house! Nobody does that! And he's *wrong* about the market, it's only going up, but that aside the sale of the house has *nothing* to do with –

[1] Bolden lines are mine.

> EMPTY – They died here, They died here, *Adam*. All of them, Nicolao, bisnonna Maria, my grandpa Matt, Nonna Rosa. Of course he can't envision life without it. If he feels he's weakening, losing his memory, he has a practically an eidetic memory, he had that, instant recall of the name of every worker he ever met, and in his day – strikes, union drives – he met thousands, their kids, spouses. I bet, I bet the house – If his memory's really going, **I bet this place, um, remembers for him?** And if he sells that, to get money for us… Of course he won't be some crazy forlorn old man in a meaningless memoryless room somewhere. (Kushner, 2009: 56)

It is only in act 3 that V refers to the house for the first time as the House of Usher: "so many candidates for concern in the House of Usher" (Kushner, 2009: 173). I would suggest here that the house that was about to collapse would take everyone inside to cave in together. The ruins of memory always remind me of Walter Benjamin's debris in his "Theses on History". Paul Klee's angel, with its open mouth and bulging eyes, "sees a single catastrophe" and unconditionally sends the observer back to a future "piled with rubble" and incapable of rebuilding what has been destroyed. Memories are gone along with the family home.

As curtain falls, Gus quotes part of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (1848) in his native Italian and plays with the question of the specter, the ghostly figure on stage. As he haunts the stage of life, memories of a bygone era resurface in a harsh way, but they contain the true soul of the one he haunts, the wasteland that is the United States of America.

> ELI – "Uno spettro s'aggira–" (he pronounces the "gg" as a hard "g".)
> GUS – (correcting his pronunciation:) "s'aggira." Means "haunting."
> *(from memory:)* "Uno spettro s'aggira per l'Europa – lo spettro del

> comunismo." "Spettro," that's… a specter, a ghost. *(A smile:)* At the very beginning, they were thinking about… "A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of communism." "The story of all societies that have existed is the story of class struggles." (Kushner, 2009: 236)

CURTAIN

Marvin Carlson in *The Haunted Stage: The Theater as Memory Machine* (2003) claims that "the physical theater, as a site of the continuing reinforcement of memory by surrogation, is not surprisingly among the most haunted of human cultural structures" (Carlson, 2003: 2), thus "one might argue that every play is a memory play" (Carlson, 2003: 2). Aligning with the thoughts of Walter Benjamin, Margareth Cohn and Jeffrey Cohen, Marvin Carlson considers the theater as a repository of cultural memory, but like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to multiple modification and forgetfulness as memory is. Therefore, "the present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the process of recycling and recollection." (Carlson, 2003: 2) Every play is haunted by American literature and theater, and I argued that is probably in Tony Kushner's plays that cultural memory finally enters the haunted house.

Attilio Favorini, in his 2007 essay, "Some Memory Plays Before the 'Memory Play'" argues that:

> (…) memory helps locate self on a continuum of characteristics socially constructed and both autonomically and auto-noetically determined, that is, driven by one's neurocognitive profile and history. We may "have" memory, but memory also has us: it tells us who we are. (Favorini, 2007: 30)

As how we remember who we are, "memory" provides the very core of identity. From the earliest times that can be recorded, we represent stories to each other and in these stories lie the power to remember the past. From what is "unfamiliar" to melancholy, the time of death is present in the memory of the American playwright's characters as life, politics and death mingle in one last lonely dance.

It is quite clear that Tony Kushner's spectropolitics goes beyond his *Homosexual's Guide* (2009). As the house of Marcantonio crumbles into debris at the end of the play, and the ghosts of American literature come to the scene, one cannot miss to acknowledge that Kushner's contemporary world is as haunted as Edgar Allan Poe's once was. Ghosts come on to the stage not only to remember the past as a finite time, but as a warning sign about a future that cannot be seen without its concerns and anxieties. The possibility of a better future meets the erasure of memory as the specter only presents us with anguish as it confirms we are living past hope.

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