

**“A Kind of Painful Progress”:
The Benjaminian Dialectics of *Angels in America***

Roger Bechtel

Broadway is, without a doubt, that which critics love to hate. Even without leveling sardonic broadsides at overproduced mega-musicals or overweening star turns, we can always count on Broadway to be our easiest target. Of course, historically speaking, we seem to have good cause: where once we could count on Broadway to nourish new plays and playwrights, we can now bemoan the economies that preclude most new American drama from ever making it north of 14th Street or east of 8th Avenue. These days, after all, our Pulitzer Prize winners are culled almost exclusively from the ranks of Off-Broadway, where they've often transferred after starting life in one or more of the regional theatres. The 90's did, however, witness one outstanding exception to this rule: the play that everyone loved to love, *Angels in America*.

There is bound to be something dubious, however, about a serious, ostensibly politically radical play, produced on Broadway, receiving uniform and unabashed adulation.¹ If at first the academic response was as sanguine as that in the popular press, with virtually every critic finding something different to admire, a kind of backlash has developed since. The turning point was conspicuously marked by David Savran's influential essay, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation."² The unremitting accolades received by *Angels* is the very thing that, for Savran, makes the play itself suspect. "Why," he asks, "is [*Angels*] both popular and 'radical'?"³ His answer is that the play isn't radical; despite its purported politics, ideologically *Angels* amounts to nothing more than a thinly veiled American liberal pluralism. Gone from the play, Savran argues, is any real sense of revolution, any trace of Kushner's avowed commitment to socialism. Formidable in its own right, Savran's argument was soon echoed or adopted by other scholars, creating a critical bandwagon which trumpeted the play's supposedly faulty politics.

Yet if *Angels* seems to fall short politically, it is important to examine the political bar it is so vehemently expected to clear. My goal in this essay is to perform this examination, primarily by looking at the play in the context of American realpolitik, and comparing it to the idealized leftist agenda marshaled against it by these critics. Primarily, however, I want to address their corresponding argument

Roger Bechtel is an assistant professor of theatre arts at Illinois Wesleyan University. His other publications include articles and review for *Theatre Studies*, *Theatre Journal*, and the *New York University Law Review*. As an actor and director, he has worked both off-Broadway and at various regional theatres around the country.

that *Angels* also fails to live up to its political and aesthetic inspiration, Walter Benjamin. Claims that *Angels* is insufficiently dialectical or opposed to Benjamin's derisory notion of progress prove false upon a closer reading of Benjamin and the play, which, I argue, exhibits a historical sensibility very much akin to Benjamin's.

The Critical Reception

As Savran rightly points out, not only is the play's title and central conceit drawn from Walter Benjamin's famous "angel of history," but Kushner attempts to imbue his work with Benjamin's unique notion of historical dialectics (which I will examine shortly).⁴ Kushner's failure, Savran claims, is that the play isn't actually dialectical at all. Instead, the political oppositions Kushner dramatizes either inevitably stand as ambivalent and/or "irreducibly contradictory," or collapse under the structural or rhetorical weight of one of the pair's terms.⁵ What is missing is sublation, the essence of dialectical synthesis. As Savran argues, "*Angels* is carefully constructed so that communitarianism, rationalism, progress, etc., will be read as being preferable to their alternatives: individualism, indeterminacy, stasis, etc."⁶ Of course, the real problem here is neither theoretical nor aesthetic but political; the terms into which these ostensible oppositions collapse coalesce into a liberal pluralist agenda.

The ultimate difference between Benjamin and Kushner, however, is the antithetical positions they take with regard to the notion of progress. According to Savran, "Unlike the Benjamin of the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, for whom any concept of progress seems quite inconceivable, Kushner is devoted to rescuing Enlightenment epistemologies at a time when they are, to say the least, extremely unfashionable."⁷ The problem, for Savran, in reasserting the concept of a progressive history is its subversion of the imperative for praxis. Averting the apocalypse in *Angels* amounts to the tacit implication that, in time, the "new Jerusalem" awaits all, regardless of class, race, ethnicity, or sexual preference. This is where *Angels*' seeming ambivalence comes into play. Although the binary terms of the play (communitarianism / individualism, progress / stasis, etc.) ultimately resolve one-sidedly, their appearance as functional oppositions serves to create the feeling and the vision of America as a potentially pluralist utopia. Ambivalence functions here in the same way dissensus functions in American culture: as the putative guard against conservative hegemony, and, at the same time, its most effective mask. In other words, both the play's ambivalence and the American culture's celebration of dissent that it mirrors promise a utopian future that obviates the need for revolutionary action, thus perpetuating the conservative status quo. What's left is a politics of identity that is reformist at best:

. . . *Angels in America* assures the (liberal) theatergoing public that a kind of liberal pluralism remains the best hope for change.

Revolution, in the Marxist sense, is rendered virtually unthinkable, oxymoronic. . . . In short: an identity politics comes to substitute for Marxist analysis. There is no clear sense that the political and social problems with which the characters wrestle might be connected to a particular economic system. . . . an alternative to capitalism, except in the form of an indefinitely deferred utopia, remains absent from the play's dialectic. Revolution, even in Benjamin's sense of the term, is evacuated of its political content, functioning less as a Marxist hermeneutic tool than a trope, a figure of speech (the oxymoron) that marks the place later to be occupied by a (liberal pluralist?) utopia.⁸

The problem with *Angels on Broadway*, Savran concludes, is that it generated not only "cultural capital" but "economic capital," which commits Kushner, even if only subconsciously, to perpetuating the system that rewarded him.⁹

Savran's views have begun to find support from other critics. In her essay "Notes on *Angels in America* as American Epic Theater," Janelle Reinelt echoes his argument in somewhat different terms:

Rather than focusing on the reiteration of liberal themes, I regret Kushner's drift away from socialist themes. The replacement of class analysis by other identity categories, while useful and strategic in terms of contemporary exigencies, leaves the play with no other foundation for social change than the individual subject, dependent on atomized agency. Since this subjectivity is contradictory and collapsed, the only horizon of hope must be transcendent.¹⁰

This last point is repeated by Charles McNulty in his essay, "*Angels in America: Tony Kushner's Theses on the Philosophy of History*."¹¹ Also citing Savran, McNulty makes much the same argument: that despite the historical materialist analysis of *Millennium Approaches*, *Perestroika* retreats into a "fairy tale of progress" and "religious fantasy."¹² McNulty, however, ends on a far harsher note:

By the end of *Perestroika*, Kushner stops asking those pinnacle questions of our time, in order to dispense "answers" and bromides. . . . to be truly convincing, [they] must be passed through, dramatized, not eclipsed by celestial shenanigans peppered with *Wizard of Oz* insight.¹³

Needless to say, "*Wizard of Oz* insight" is a far cry from what *Newsweek* critic Jack

Kroll called “the broadest, deepest, most searching American play of our time.”

What Savran, Reinelt, and McNulty all seem to be looking for in *Angels* is a statement of theory and praxis based on a revolutionary, or at least class, ideal that, discerning from their critical rejoinders, is best located in received modernist notions of “revolution.” Savran’s critique, however insightful it is in some respects, emits a positive air of nostalgia when it decries the absence of a revolutionary ethos in *Angels*. Yet what Kushner grapples with in his play is the very problem of effecting political praxis in the absence of theory; in a world where Marxism is struggling against its widely-perceived death-blow, realpolitik requires rethinking traditional approaches to “revolution,” its theory, and its praxis. In our postmodern, poststructural, post Wall world, Kushner confronts the reality that, at least at the present moment, we are decidedly post-revolutionary, at least in the classical sense. Instead of recapitulating a revolutionary discourse that may not be presently useful, Kushner explores other options for a leftist politics at the millennium.

The Angel of History

Kushner has openly recognized the influence of Walter Benjamin on his thinking and writing, but it would be a mistake to see the *Angels* in Kushner’s play as a simple theatrical translation of Benjamin’s angel of history. In fact, the two representations can be read as dialectical opposites.¹⁵ To examine the differences, the oft-cited passage from Benjamin’s “Theses” is worth quoting again here:

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹⁶

What Benjamin so arrestingly captures here is the forward thrust of progress without corresponding historical movement. The Enlightenment belief in progress has produced enormous destruction over time, but it has failed to produce “history,” i.e., a substantial shift away from the ever-mounting catastrophe that has become the empirical constitutive of Enlightenment’s reign. Benjamin’s angel faces

backwards, and although the vector of progress and time hurtle him forward, his fate is to be fixated on the historical past. Yet of history, he perceives only a single moment, unmarked by time, in which a single calamity piles its wreckage ever higher. The angel might perhaps be able to cease the carnage, to redeem this history, but he is ceaselessly propelled by the misguided notion that history is moving forward along the path of progress, that society is charting the course toward its own perfection. Thus Benjamin's angel longs to cease the "storm" of progress not so that he can settle into a comfortable stasis, but so that history can be wrested from the cycle of destruction that makes it synchronic and monolithic, and set on a new course. Only then will the angel be liberated from his forced retrospection, and with this new freedom of movement presumably be able to face, at his will and at any given moment, either the past or the future, gaining for the first time a perspective that is truly dialectical.

Kushner's *Angels*, on the other hand, is decidedly reactionary. Despite the Angel's dramatic entrance at the end of *Millennium Approaches*, it is only in *Perestroika* that her mission is made manifest when she explains to Prior the cosmic order. In his design of the human animal, God has incorporated the "virus of time" and thus the potential for change. However, the human compulsion for movement and progress has sent shock waves through Heaven, driving God away and leaving it resembling the ruins of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. In order to lure God back and to prevent earthly apocalypse, the Angel has anointed Prior as a prophet, entrusting him with the message that humankind must halt its movement and forbear all progress, mingling, and intermarriage. AIDS, presumably, is a form of reactionary angelic intervention, as the Angel announces to Prior, "On you in you in your blood we write have written STASIS! The END."¹⁷ Ultimately, however, Prior refuses the prophecy, announcing to the congregation of Angels, "We can't just stop. We're not rocks – progress, migration, motion is . . . modernity. It's *animate*, it's what living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire *for*. Even if we go faster than we should. We can't *wait*" (2.132).

Given Kushner's many affirming references to "progress" and "forward motion," it is easy to see how critics could read *Angels* as ideologically antithetical to Benjamin's critique of historicism. What these critics fail to do, however, is to historicize both Benjamin and Kushner. Placed in their proper historical contexts, the concepts of progress elicited by these two writers take on significantly different valences. For Benjamin, progress was the dangerous ideological foundation of social democracy, which, as embodied in the German SPD, had capitulated to fascism in the years leading to the Third Reich. He makes his argument against social democracy specific in the "Theses":

Social Democratic theory, and even more its practice, have been formed by a conception of progress which did not adhere to reality

but made dogmatic claims. Progress as pictured in the minds of Social Democrats was, first of all, the progress of mankind itself (and not just advances in men's ability and knowledge). Secondly, it was something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind. Thirdly, progress was regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. Each of these predicates is controversial and open to criticism.¹⁸

Viewing progress as "irresistible" allowed the social democrats to tolerate fascism, however egregious its manifestation, as a historical phase destined ultimately to fall under the boots of history's forward march. Yet despite his attack on social democracy, Benjamin was denied the vantage of any real political position from which to launch his critique; as Terry Eagleton puts it, Benjamin was "stranded between social democracy and Stalinism."¹⁹ Unable to embrace a communism mired in the abuses of Stalin, and at the same time philosophically opposed to the teleological certainties of social democracy, Benjamin was left to develop his own uniquely theological materialism.

As Savran implies, there is a Benjaminian concept of revolution that differs greatly from the classical Marxist formulation. In a sense, because history for Benjamin has no telos, it can exist in a more profoundly dialectical relationship with the present. Again in the "Theses" Benjamin writes, "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history."²⁰ It is here we find both Benjamin's concept of revolution and its theological inflection. If history is not evolution, revolution can only be accomplished through an act of historical agency; the shock necessary to disrupt the catastrophic eternal recurrence that is history must come at the hands of one ready to make the "tiger's leap" into the past. Such a move, straining as it does against the closed history of the ruling class, requires not only historical consciousness but fortitude: "The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history."²¹

Despite the "überman" sensibility of this last passage, couching historical agency in pointedly human (and masculine) terms allows Benjamin to prevent the key component of agency from being subsumed into his messianism. In other words, it reinforces the theory as materialism inflected by messianism rather than the converse. Indeed, what the revolutionary agent achieves in the act of exploding history is precisely a "weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim."²² For, unlike the Messiah, the historical materialist cannot through her

mere appearance redeem all of history in a single stroke. Instead, the power she wields comes directly from the past, in the form of a discrete image or memory, by the rescue of which the rest of history might follow. As Terry Eagleton describes it:

We repeat, as Freud taught us, what we cannot recollect; and we cannot recollect it because it is unpleasant. If we were able to recollect our ancestors, then in a moment of shock we might trigger the unpalatable memory trace at a ripe time, blast through the continuum of history and create the empty space in which the forces of tradition might congregate to shatter the present. That moment of shock is socialist revolution.²³

This last sentence, however, somewhat overstates the case in that it might be read as reinserting the teleological moment into Benjamin's theory. It is perhaps a truer reading of Benjamin not to claim that the moment of shock is socialist revolution, but that socialist revolution "might" be able to congregate in the space voided by the shock. Indeed, earlier in Eagleton's essay, he explicitly argues against foreclosing the "'text' of revolutionary history" in the "symmetrical shape of narrative," and instead characterizes Marxism as a "transformative practice" of "ceaseless 'beginning.'"²⁴

What should be apparent at this point is that Benjamin's theory of revolution posits only its moment of possibility and not its political form. Benjamin charges us to blast history open, but refuses to speculate as to how the revolution is to proceed through the breach. Indeed, the rhetoric of this particular charge implies a grand revolutionary gesture, but elsewhere Benjamin implies that the battle for control of history will not be won with a single blow but through the sustained efforts of generational struggle. If the history ripe for exploding is the monolithic construction of bourgeois historicism, the explosion will detonate in a counterhistory constructed for just such a purpose. The past, for Benjamin, consists in flashes of memory that must be seized or risk being lost forever: "The same threat hangs over both [the content of the tradition and its receivers]: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it . . . *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins."²⁵ The dialectical working of agency and history becomes clearer here: man's weak messianic power is insufficient to break open history without the power of history itself working as his dialectical superior—this is the debt owed to the past. In other words, as a political practice, the received narrative of history must have wrested from it historical counter-memories (to borrow from Foucault), which gain a kind of critical mass in accumulation. This critical mass is the power of counterhistory awaiting to be used to sunder its hegemonic opposite. What begins to reassert itself here is the concept of progress, but in a

radically different form from the evolutionary Marxism of social democracy. For progress in this conceptual instance operates without teleology or preconceived narrative; it provides only a theory of praxis which aspires to write into history the "strait gate" through which revolution might enter. Benjamin's revolution now begins to come into focus as one of "ceaseless beginnings"; while the question of the precise political form of revolution remains unanswered, the "Theses" appear not quite as mute on the subject as first supposed. What emerges is a praxis of preparation ready to account for a prolonged series of discrete and local actions. Given the historical contingencies faced by Benjamin in 1940, such a praxis seems perhaps the only feasible alternative, a point elucidated by Eagleton:

...[T]he *Jetztzeit* ceases to figure simply as a symbolic element within historical materialism and comes to stand in for the rigours of revolutionary practice. Between the coming of the masses and the coming of the Messiah, no third term is able to crystallize. The revolutionary prophet substitutes himself for the revolutionary party, able to fulfill its mnemonic but not its theoretical and organizational tasks, rich in wisdom partly because poor in practice. If Trotsky has the Transitional Programme, Benjamin is left with the "time of the now". No revolutionary movement can afford to ignore steady signs of progress, rhythms of gradual development, or (in a non-metaphysical sense of the term) questions of teleology. . . .²⁶

If Benjamin was a revolutionary prophet, his foretelling of the Messiah's coming did not forestall his understanding of the real work needed to prepare for the arrival.

It would seem absurd to compare Benjamin's fascist Germany with Kushner's postmodern America, and yet, at least for Kushner, there are parallels. In his earlier play, *A Bright Room Called Day*, Kushner doesn't hesitate to compare Ronald Reagan to Adolf Hitler, although he hopes his audience will read into the comparison appropriate historical context: "I never indulged in fantasies of some archaic form of fascism goose-stepping down the streets of America. Reagan and the forces gathered about him seemed to me, in the flush of their demoralizing victory in 1984, the advance guard of a new and more dangerous and destructive form of barbarism." Citing Marcuse's admonishment that history would only repeat itself in a more highly-developed form, he goes on to say, "Postmodern, cybernetic, microwave, microchip fascism may not look anything like its modernist forbear."²⁷

Whether the comparison between Nazi Germany and Reaganite America is apt is beside the point; what is relevant is that Kushner, like Benjamin, perceives the profound absence of any real platform for a meaningful politics of the left. If Benjamin's attack on the evolutionary ethos of social democracy was unremitting,

it was because he perceived that ethos as standing in the way of what could have been a formidable revolutionary movement. That fascism was the enemy was clear; the existence of substantial popular support for the left was also clear. The challenge was to turn that support into substantive opposition, to ignite leftist sentiment into revolutionary fervor. To this end, and on the eve of Hitler's final ascent, all rhetoric of progress per se had to be abjured. Millennial America, however, poses an altogether different dilemma. Where Benjamin apprehended the misdirection of leftist political energy, Kushner perceives America's profound lack of any cohesive left whatsoever. Although we may strain to compare Reagan with Hitler, what remains strikingly similar between their historical moments is the political quietus engendered in response. It is the nature of that quietus, however, that differentiates the two eras. For Kushner, the battle is not against a quiescent left as it was for Benjamin, but to prompt a nascent leftist response by exposing the tyranny of the right. What both perhaps share is the fear that the left will soon disappear altogether. Kushner's response, as I will argue more fully later, is to urge counterhegemonic formations, beginning with identity politics, that have the potential to cohere into an organized left. Such a response can only be measured in terms of progress; to wish for a revolutionary realpolitik in America is to fantasize, or worse, to think of history in a nostalgic and undialectical way. Yet Kushner's concept of progress is not the progress of social democracy. If Kushner shuns a rhetoric of revolution, he also avoids backsliding into teleology and grand historical narrative. Although he may wear the idea of progress on his sleeve, his approach is much more Benjaminian than any of his critics have realized.

Dialectics at a Standstill

As previously discussed, Benjamin's method seems not to strain toward the untenable rescue of history in all its moments as if by the entrance of the Messiah, but to work toward the accumulation of counter-historical moments so that a revolutionary tradition may survive. Paradoxically, however, this is precisely the way to redeem the totality of history; from a dialectical perspective each moment of history sublates all others:

A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. . . . He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed.²⁸

If this captures the dialectical essence of history's redemption, what remains is to elaborate on the nature of the historical subject.

Memory is the realm of the past, of history apprehended, and its medium is the image. "The past," Benjamin writes, "can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."²⁹ The importance of the image for Benjamin should not be underestimated; as he noted, "Only images in the mind vitalize the will. The mere word, by contrast, at most inflames it, to leave it smoldering, blasted. There is not intact will without exact pictorial imagination. No imagination without innervation."³⁰ These memory flashes, however, are not random but the product of the image's particular *Jetztzeit*, its embodiment of the presence of the now which reciprocally galvanizes both it and its present-time counterpart. Thus, to use Benjamin's example, Rome is redeemed by Robespierre and France ignited by Rome. It is not the historical image alone which embodies the charge, but the juxtaposition of past image and present moment, or of images and moments arrayed in constellation, which embodies a particular dialectical dynamic.

If Benjamin doesn't offer a term or phrase in his "Theses" to encompass this concept, his *Passegenwerk* suggests such configurations should be called "dialectical images." But, as Susan Buck-Morss points out, the dialectical image is "overdetermined in Benjamin's thought."³¹ The most obvious difference between its conception in the "Theses" and in the *Passegenwerk* is that the latter locates these images in specific historical objects like the 19th century Parisian arcades. These objects still burst from the now-time of their historical milieu in dialectical tension with the present, but they also carry an inherent dialectical charge between their phenomenal presence as commodity fetishes and their embodiment of the collective desire for utopia. The shock or "illumination" gained from the dialectical image serves to awaken the viewer from the dreamscape of commodity capitalism, and thus has ontological as well as epistemological impact. While in the "Theses" the same operation obtains, the illumination does not necessarily issue from a "profane" object, but can be found in, for example, an entire era.

The concept of the dialectical image is bound up with another Benjaminian concept: "dialectics at a standstill." Benjamin's angel had the storm of progress caught in its wings, and we do as well. If there is any possibility of revolutionary change, we must be able to see history not as an irrepressible force which carries us helplessly along in its wake, but as a force open to our own use in shaping its future course. In this sense, the dialectics of history must be brought to a standstill to allow us that insight. Benjamin first alludes to this phenomenon in *One Way Street*:

Again and again, in Shakespeare, in Calderon, battles fill the

last act, and kings, princes, attendants and followers “enter fleeing.” The moment in which they become visible to spectators *brings them to a standstill*. The flight of the *dramatis personae* is arrested by the stage. Their entry into the visual field of nonparticipating and truly impartial persons allows the harassed to draw breath, bathes them in new air. The appearance on stage of those who enter “fleeing” takes from this its hidden meaning. Our reading of this formula is imbued with expectation of a place, a light, a footlight glare, in which our flight through life may be likewise sheltered in the presence of onlooking strangers. (emphasis added)³²

The theatre, appropriately enough, operates here as a metaphor for the alienation effect that Benjamin describes: by stopping both movement and time (or perhaps it is better to say the dialectical exchange between movement and time), and placing the object “on stage,” we may observe and come to understand it in a way that is normally foreclosed to us. It is not simply the object, however, that becomes estranged, but the processes of movement and time that otherwise obscure both the object and themselves. In other words, history itself, both as a construction and a process of constructing, is dramatically displayed. Benjamin most clearly describes this moment in his “Theses”:

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. . . . Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on the constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. . . . In this structure, he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.³³

The monad Benjamin alludes to is the dialectical image; as Rolf Tiedemann points out, the content of the dialectical image is a dialectic at a standstill.³⁴

It is precisely in its use of dialectical images that *Angels* embodies Benjamin’s notion of history. *Perestroika* provides two scenes which are particularly good examples of how this concept is incorporated into Kushner’s dramaturgy. The first of these scenes is set in the Diorama Room of the Mormon Visitor’s Center, where Hannah has been working since her arrival in New York. At this point in the

play, Joe has left Harper for Louis, and Harper has begun to spend her days with Hannah at the Center. Kushner describes the Diorama Room as “a little proscenium theatre” in which mannequins depicting a family of Mormons in 1847 are shown in tableau trekking across the desert in their covered wagon (2.62). A taped voice narrates the story of the great journey from Missouri to Salt Lake, and although only the father’s face moves, taped dialogue is given to him and his sons, each being illuminated by a small spotlight when he speaks. The women in the tableau, it is important to note, the mother and daughter, neither move nor utter a word. On this particular day, Prior has come to the Center where he meets Harper—an uncanny encounter after their mutually hallucinatory interaction earlier in the play. When the mechanical theatre actually begins, the Mormon father is incarnated by Joe, and from nowhere Louis suddenly appears in the scene to question him about Mormonism and politics. Finally, the two of them leave the diorama to talk through their crisis, and Harper draws the curtain.

Kushner’s Diorama Room is very much like the Parisian panoramas which figured prominently for Benjamin in the *Passegen-Werk*. According to Buck-Morss, panoramas were “artificially constructed, lifelike replicas of scenes from history and nature—everything from battlefields to alpine vistas—that were favorite attractions in the nineteenth century” (2.67). Like movie theatres at a contemporary shopping mall, the panoramas of Paris were often found in the arcades, where denizens would sit around a large, circular wall and look into individual viewing slots, watching history being literally unrolled before them. Not only was the content of this history ideologically charged, but the form of the panorama reflected the progressive idea of history so anathema to Benjamin: the panorama rolled inexorably forward, the spectators caught up in its irresistible acceleration.

This same dynamic is at play in *Angels’* Mormon diorama, which functions as a little theatre of history. The story it tells is Joseph Smith’s leading the Mormons on the journey from New York across America to an unknown destination, the promised land. The rhetoric that bolstered the pilgrims on the way was, of course, one of religious faith, an ideology challenged by Harper as she comments on the staged conversation between the mannequin Father and his two sons, Orrin and Caleb:

Orrin: When will we arrive in Zion, Father? When will our great exodus finally be done? All this wandering . . .

Harper: Never. You’ll die of snake bite and your brother looks like scorpion food to me.

Father: Soon boys, soon, just like the Prophet promised. The Lord leads the way.

Caleb: Will there be lots to eat there, Father?

Harper: No, just sand.

Caleb: Will the desert flow with milk and honey? Will there be water there?

Harper: Oh, there's a big lake but it's salt, that's the joke . . .

Father: The Lord will provide for us, son, he always has.

Orrin: Well, not always . . .

Harper: . . . they drag you on your knees through hell and when you get there the water of course is undrinkable. Salt. It's a Promised Land, but what a disappointing promise! (2.66)

Harper here is literally talking back to history, questioning the received narrative that still rules the Mormon Church. The scene becomes truly dialectical, however, when Louis enters the historical scenario to question Joe, still embedded in this narrative, about the theocratic nature of Mormonism, which conflicts with Louis's oft-espoused belief in pluralist democracy. The symbolism here is clear: Louis wants to pull Joe out of history, to free him from what Louis perceives as 150-year-old totalitarian religious dogma. Despite the fact that his Mormonism has long constrained him from exploring his sexual identity, Joe protests and defends his faith; yet Louis prevails, at least in this scene, and the two exit the little proscenium stage. Even though Joe finally addresses his sexuality through Louis, at the end of the play he remains deeply divided, mired in the reactionary Reaganism that exists in tandem with the conservative strictures of his religious convictions. One of the central ironies here, indicative of his internal contradictions, is that Joe has reversed the pilgrimage of his probable namesake Joseph Smith: his repressed desire has fueled a migration away from the "promised land" of Utah, a dystopia of rigidity and conformity for a gay Mormon, to a relative utopia of freedom, New York. Yet while New York City allows Joe a sexual expression he could not enjoy in Salt Lake City, he cannot reconcile his new-found freedom with his Mormon past—like Joseph Smith's, his promised land is also a desert.

The dialectical tensions of the scene multiply when history begins to talk back to Harper in the figure of the Mormon Mother. If Joe mediated history in the form of the Mormon Father, allowing history to speak only indirectly in the guise of contemporary authority, Harper and the Mormon Mother participate in a direct historical exchange. After Prior leaves, Harper conjures the Mother, saying, "Bitter lady of the Plains, talk to me. Tell me what to do" (2.71). The Mother comes to life, steps out of the diorama, and gestures for Harper to follow her. Instead, Harper takes the Mother's place on the covered wagon. But when the Mother says simply, "Come on," Harper, too, steps out of this frozen historical model and follows her to the Brooklyn Heights Promenade. Without saying so directly, the Mormon Mother is telling Harper to leave Joe, just as she abandons her place alongside the doctrinaire Mormon Father in the Diorama Room. Harper's days in the Visitors' Center have been spent waiting for Joe to appear in the likeness of the diorama

dummy, while, like the mounting debris faced by Benjamin's Angel of History, her discarded soda cans, candy wrappers, and potato chip bags pile up around her. The moment is filled with the presence of the now, as Benjamin would say: both women, despite their historical separation of 150 years, are locked into a similar cycle of stasis and subjugation. Yet through their mutual interaction, the dialectical interpenetration of these two historical moments, history is cracked open—the dialectic is brought to a momentary standstill, and both women escape their historical inertia. Harper must call forth the Mormon Mother from her enforced silence and bid her to speak, but it is the voice of the Mother that beckons Harper away from her own historical entrapment. Together they leave the Mormon Center and all that it symbolizes.

The dialectic at a standstill is also evident in *Perestroika*'s epilogue. Until this final scene, Kushner's crisp dialogue and use of split and overlapping scenes give the play an unrelenting forward drive. But in the epilogue this forward motion wanes, and Kushner creates a moment that seems to be suspended both in time and space. The setting of the scene is the Bethesda fountain in Central Park, and as Prior describes it, it is a "sunny winter's day, warm and cold at once. The sky's a little hazy, so the sunlight has a physical presence, a character" (2.146). This contrasting matrix of attributes—warm and cold, bright and hazy—seems to arrest a moment and place it in perfect equipoise between seasons, temperatures, even conditions of light. The scene takes place in February, 1990, some four years after the previous scene, yet Prior himself seems to have stopped time, his AIDS having been in remission throughout this period. As he says, "I've been living with AIDS for five years. That's six whole months longer than I lived with Louis" (2.146). Finally, in this scene Kushner allows the characters to break the fourth wall and speak directly to the audience, a device he has not used at any previous moment in the play. By implicating the audience in the dramatic action, this use of direct address creates another level of suspension: the space becomes not just Central Park, but the theatre; the time not just February, 1990, but the present. In Prior's final monologue, the feeling of history standing still evoked by the dynamics of the scene finds its metaphor in the fountain: "The fountain's not flowing now, they turn it off in the winter, ice in the pipes. But in the summer it's a sight to see. I want to be around to see it. I plan to be. I hope to be" (2.148).

This "frozen" moment is the time-space in which history can be written, when the continuum of history can be disrupted and set on a new course. This scene, perhaps more than any other, embodies Kushner's description of his play as a "gay fantasia on national themes," for it allows and urges us to fantasize America as the "vehicle," to use Ron Scapp's term, which might take us to a more genuinely democratic state (an argument which I will elaborate shortly). It allows us a glimpse of a realizable utopia. As Scapp urges, "*Angels in America* is an attempt to extend the political imagination of Americans through fantasy, that is to say, to broaden

the fantasy of democracy. . . .” This fantasy, however, this new vision (it is significant that Prior appears in this scene for the first time wearing “thick glasses”) can be gained only when the welter of history is momentarily halted and we can see, or foresee, as Prior does, beyond the present moment. Only then can we direct our action meaningfully; Prior’s three declarative statements about “seeing” the fountain indicate the desire, the will, and the hope that inform his final assertion, “The Great Work Begins” (2.148).

Praxis, Progress, and Pluralism

In addition to the diorama scene and the epilogue, the play is filled with countless other dialectical images. The ghost of Ethel Rosenberg wanders the hospital where Roy Cohn is dying; the World’s Oldest Bolshevik addresses the Kremlin; and prior Priors, ancestors from the 13th and 17th centuries, visit the bedside of their ailing namesake. While all of these elements, among others, create dialectical/historical tension, it is in the aforementioned scenes that we most clearly see history emerge as praxis. The exhortation to work that ends the play brings us back to the crucial place that agency occupies both in Kushner’s play and in Benjamin’s theory of history. In fact, Perestroika begins by framing the theory-praxis problematic.

Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, the World’s Oldest Living Bolshevik, in a kind of prologue to the action proper, confronts what he considers to be the dire state of the world with a cry for theory:

How are we to proceed without Theory? Do [these reformers] have, as we did, a beautiful Theory, as bold, as Grand, as comprehensive a construct . . . ? You can’t imagine, when we first read the Classic Texts, when in the dark vexed night of our ignorance and terror the seed-words sprouted and shoved incomprehension aside, when the incredible bloody vegetable struggle up and through into Red Blooming gave us Praxis, True Praxis, True Theory married to Actual Life . . . Have you, my little serpents, a new skin? Then we dare not, we cannot, we MUST NOT move ahead! (2.13-14)

The answer to Prelapsarianov’s question is, of course, no—there is no grand new Theory, and if there were, it would certainly be suspect as the kind of metanarrative toward which Jean Francois Lyotard advises us to be incredulous.³⁷ Kushner’s attitude toward the Oldest Living Bolshevik is anything but nostalgic, just as his Angels are anything but sentimental kitsch; both Prelapsarianov and the Angel suffer from the same defect: the urge toward stasis and inactivity, the surrender of agency vis-à-vis history. Kushner’s Bolshevik and Angel are subversive, but only

as dialectical images which undermine our preconceived nostalgia for a *sturm und drang* revolutionary left or a spiritually redemptive cultural icon. This nostalgic attitude is precisely the trap that Savran et al fall into: to critique *Angels* for lacking classical Marxist analysis is to be out of touch with the contemporary political zeitgeist. Instead, Kushner offers us a theory and praxis for a millennial America. Rather than a resigned paralysis in the absence of theory, or at least a conviction that praxis must follow theory, Kushner suggests a truly dialectical relationship between the two. As Hannah says in the epilogue, "You need an idea of the world to go out into the world. But it's the going into that makes the idea. You can't wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory" (2.147). Moreover, Kushner makes it clear that theory must have a use value, that it must translate into realpolitik, and that it can outlive its usefulness. Here again, Hannah is the voice of reason: "An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you. It's naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new" (2.105).

Seeking something new is precisely what Benjamin did when historical imperatives made classical Marxism seem untenable. Although often criticized in his own time for being inadequately materialist and insufficiently dialectical, Benjamin nevertheless attempted to negotiate a critical relationship with materialism throughout his last writings. It would be inappropriate to compare the nature of Benjamin's work with that of Kushner's, but apt to claim that Kushner, like Benjamin, is engaged in a negotiation with his own time. What Kushner finds in Benjamin is a theory of history that can also be used aesthetically, a means of reinvigorating our experience of history in an aesthetic mode. What has been leveled as a criticism of Benjamin can be turned to advantage in just this way. As Jürgen Habermas points out, "Benjamin also conceived the philosophy of history as a theory of experience."³⁸ While Habermas claims that Benjamin ultimately fails "to make his messianic theory of experience serviceable to historical materialism," nonetheless Benjamin becomes enormously useful in theorizing an experience of history that functions *as if* by messianic redemption.³⁹ History, as previously noted, exists for Benjamin in images, in flashes of memory, and must be liberated from the hegemonic narrative that we receive as history. We therefore *experience* history imagistically, which makes our relationship to history not just conceptual but ontological. This is the thrust of Benjamin's messianism, that the word of history can be made flesh through the image, that history can be redeemed in the presence of the now and not just re-presented in the past tense. This is the power of the dialectical image. It is through the accumulation of such images, wrested from a history that wants to level all counter-memories before it, that a counter-history can be written and gain critical mass. That Benjamin's theory rests on the image makes it symbiotic with the aesthetic, fulfilling the belief held by both him and Adorno that critique itself could only be "rescued" through the dialectical relationship of art and philosophy. Aesthetically, then, Benjamin's theory

of the dialectical image becomes invaluable to the politicized artist, and certainly indispensable to the critical perspective of *Angels*. A silent Mormon Mother speaking after 150 years and Ethel Rosenberg returning to expose the crimes against her are both examples of counterhistorical images that crack open the continuum of history in Benjaminian fashion.

Realizing Benjamin's theory of history through dialectical stage images itself engenders the "idea of the world" needed to "go out into the world"; or, in other words, it constitutes not just theory but a kind of aesthetic praxis insofar as it stimulates our historical sensibility, a sensibility which operates as a kind of prerequisite to political action. Yet, for Kushner, this is not enough, the nature of that political action must be addressed as well. This is the arena in which he comes under attack, for it is here that ideas of progress and pluralism emerge. Progress and pluralism, however, need not be read as a liberal cop-out of leftist ideals. Instead of viewing these terms as irreconcilable with Marxist discourse, in an age and nation that lack a cohesive left it is better, in the words of Ernesto Laclau, to use them to establish a "living dialogue" with Marxism.⁴⁰ Like Kushner, Laclau recognizes the need to maintain a historical perspective, and to this end he advocates "creatively appropriat(ing) the past," reconstructing a radical tradition in which Marxism is but one part of the genealogy:

It is clear that Marxism cannot be its only point of reference. The plurality of current social struggles, emerging in a radically different and more complex world than could have been conceived in the nineteenth century, entails the necessity of breaking with the provincial myth of the 'universal class.' The struggles of the working class, of women, gays, marginal populations, Third world masses, must result in the construction of their own reappropriations of tradition. . . .⁴¹

The "plurality of current social struggles" is readily apparent again in the epilogue to *Perestroika*, where we see, in just four characters, representations of men, women, the working class, whites, African-Americans, Jews, Wasps, Mormons, homosexuals, heterosexuals, youth, and maturity. Yet even drawing these categorical distinctions is problematic, since they combine and play off one another in their own dialectical constellation, making the location of "identity" a much more complex operation than such categories can accommodate. And from this complex plurality of identities arise the numerous social struggles the play encompasses. Gay politics, of course, predominate, but we shouldn't forget that Louis, Prior, and Belize are all working class—a point the play makes abundantly clear by portraying them at work. Joe and Louis first meet in the men's room at the Hall of Justice, where Louis has come to cry in private. Responding to Joe's

confession that he doesn't know his name, Louis says, "Don't bother. Word processor. The lowest of the low" (1.28). Later he remarks that Joe was not the first to find him there, but was the first to show concern: "Three of your colleagues have preceded you to this baleful sight and you're the first one to ask. The others just opened the door, saw me, and fled. I hope they had to pee real bad" (1.29). We see this employer/employee (master/slave) hierarchy assert itself again between Belize, a nurse, and Roy's doctor. The doctor admonishes Belize for not wearing white, then later attempts to pull rank by asking Belize his name. Finally, when Belize correctly attempts to direct him toward the oncology ward (Roy insists he be listed as suffering from liver cancer), the doctor barks, "I don't give a *fuck* what it *says*. I said this is the right floor. Got it?" (2.25). Of course, this abuse is nothing compared to what Roy himself dishes out: "Find the vein, you moron, don't start jabbing that goddamned spigot in my arm till you find the fucking vein or I'll sue you so bad they'll repossess your teeth you dim black motherf . . ." (2:26).

As Roy's tirade demonstrates, however, the source of his prejudice isn't just class, but a broader menu of biases including, at the very least, class and race, and most likely sexuality. What class allows here is Roy's perceived license to exercise his pandemic hatred with impunity—although Belize will soon assert his own subversive power. Likewise, Joe's three colleagues might have avoided Louis for any number of reasons: his sexuality, his Jewishness, or his class. Issues, too, of racism and anti-Semitism arise in the several debates between Belize and Louis, and in Harper we see a woman struggle to free herself from a traditional gender role. The point is that Kushner represents the social struggles in the play as necessarily pluralistic, but not discrete, and not atomized. The boundaries that comprise the categories of class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. function here dialectically; they exist as important social and historical realities and markers, and at the same time are fluid enough to allow them to, in Kushner's words, mix, mingle, and intermarry.

What Laclau hopes for from just this kind of plurality is the galvanization of a new left, that these struggles born of identity politics will cohere into a counterhegemonic force. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, written with Chantal Mouffe, liberal pluralism is viewed as the first step in a possible progression toward radical democracy:

The task of the Left therefore cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy . . . The very fact that it is possible arises out of the fact that the meaning of liberal discourse on individual rights is not definitively fixed; and just as this unfixity permits their articulation with elements

of conservative discourse, it also permits different forms of articulation and redefinition which accentuate the democratic moment.⁴³

Inherent in this formulation is the idea of a progressive transformation, and they are explicit in their desire to "redimension the revolutionary act itself."⁴⁴ Citing Gramsci's notion of a "war of position," they insist that every radical transformation is processual, and that "the revolutionary act is, simply, an internal moment of this process." Thus any success in a liberatory struggle, whether anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, anti-racist, etc., is a victory in the war of position. However, anti-capitalism does not have *necessary* links to, for example, anti-sexism; they exist in separate spheres of the social. For these struggles to coalesce into a unified left, a hegemony must be articulated between them.

Kushner, too, understands the need for this articulation. Again in the epilogue to *Perestroika* we see not just pluralism, but a unified plurality of concerns. The scene begins with Louis and Belize debating politics, their talk ranging from Russia and the Balkans to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Gradually, however, as the scene progresses, a kind of harmony and consensus begin to form, until all the characters are working together to relate the story of the Bethesda Fountain and the Angel Bethesda to the audience. This cooperative effort emerges from an exchange about, of all things, theory:

Louis: [Y]ou can't wait around for a theory. The sprawl of life, the weird . . .

Hannah: Interconnectedness . . .

Louis: Yes.

Belize: Maybe the sheer size of the terrain.

Louis: It's all too much to be encompassed by a single theory now.

Belize: The world is faster than the mind.

Louis: That's what politics is. The world moving ahead. And only in politics does the miraculous occur.

Belize: But that's a theory. (2.146)

Rather than "rescuing Enlightenment epistemologies," Kushner here offers a theory that is also a non-theory: interconnectedness.⁴⁶ What he avoids are the grand narratives, the unified theories that have come under such harsh scrutiny, in favor of a praxis of plurality that will, in dialectical fashion, generate its own theory. Of course, precisely because progress is an ongoing dialectic, shortly after this moment, Louis and Belize return to their wrangling over politics, to the necessary and generative process of dissensus. But in this instant in which the dialectic freezes,

this momentary picture of coalition, we can imagine an articulated counterhegemony of the left.

Finally, Laclau and Mouffe argue that recent decades have produced a dramatic interpenetration of the public and private spheres in terms of political space. As they put it:

Thus what has been exploded is the idea and the reality itself of a unique space of constitution of the political. What we are witnessing is a politicization far more radical than any we have known in the past, because it tends to dissolve the distinction between the public and the private, not in terms of the encroachment on the private by a unified public space, but in terms of a proliferation of radically new and different political spaces.⁴⁷

If the private was historically considered apolitical, not only do we now understand its political valences, but it is increasingly becoming a political arena as highly charged as that of the public. Perhaps a better way to put it would be to say that the once rigid political barrier between the public and private is becoming more and more labile. The importance of this dynamic is that it multiplies the opportunity for a variety of divergent subjects to become politicized, increasing the impetus toward radical democratic pluralism.

The dissolution of public and private boundaries is integral as well to the dramaturgy of *Angels*—as Savran notes, *Angels* demonstrates throughout the "deconstruction" of the "opposition between public and private."⁴⁸ There are countless instances in *Angels* where we see the public/private boundary collapse—from the collision between Joe's politics and his sexual relationship with Louis, to Belize and Louis's debates about drag—but one particularly important example is the politics of AIDS evidenced in the play. Roy, wielding his political power like an axe, manages to acquire a considerable supply of AZT. This same treatment is unavailable to the politically impotent Prior. In 1986, the year in which the play is set, there was a two-year waiting list for AZT, and in this early experimental phase of the drug, patients were often administered placebos. The public/private distinction erodes in any number of ways in this scenario. Roy has public political power only by denying his private life; as he says, "Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. . . . Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout" (1.45). Conversely, Prior's private affliction is subject to the politics of public funding for research and governmental restrictions on treatment distribution. Implicit in the play are several nagging questions: Why, in the face of a deadly epidemic, would there be a two-year waiting list for any potential treatment? Why would placebos be administered to patients in immediate

danger of dying? If the population stricken with AIDS were not largely gay, would the public response be different? There is, however, a subversive irony at work here: Roy only knows about AZT and the placebo tests through Belize, who attributes his own knowledge to being "queer." Moreover, Belize steals several vials of AZT from the incapacitated Roy and gives them to Prior, who outlives Roy by years.

What we see in scenes like the one above is that the politics of the play range from pressing current issues to the larger questions of theory and praxis—indeed, as previously discussed, it is precisely the interconnectedness of the two that is the foundation of the play's politics. Similarly, on the spectrum of revolutionary theory, the messianic materialism of Walter Benjamin might seem to be far distant from the radical democracy of Laclau and Mouffe. Yet there is a commonality that binds them: assembly as a constitutive part of praxis. For Benjamin, it is the assembly of historical fragments into a present constellation rife with revolutionary potential. For Laclau and Mouffe, it is the assembly of local and fragmented struggles into a counterhegemonic force. That Kushner attempts to make bedfellows of these two theories is perhaps not so strange, for what both strive for is historical and political discontinuity, or political discontinuity as historical disruption. As Benjamin states in the notes to his "Theses": "[T]he classless society is not the final goal of progress in history, but its so frequently unsuccessful, yet ultimately accomplished interruption."⁴⁹ What Kushner understands, and what escapes his critics, is that progress can be a form of interruption, and democratic pluralism a form of progress. On this point the play is not ambivalent—even if the point is made on Broadway.

Notes

1. The response to *Angels* in the popular press was nothing short of ecstatic. In the *New York Times*, Frank Rich called *Angels* "miraculous . . . provocative, witty and deeply upsetting . . . a searching and radical rethinking of American political drama" (24 Nov. 1993: C11). Jack Kroll labeled it a "masterpiece" in *Newsweek*, and deemed it "the broadest, deepest, most searching American play of our time" (6 Dec. 1993: 83). John Lahr echoed this assessment in the *New Yorker*: "Not since Tennessee Williams has a playwright announced his vision with such authority on the Broadway stage. . . . *Perestroika* is a masterpiece" (13 Dec. 1993: 129-133).

2. David Savran, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How *Angels in America* Reconstructs the Nation," in *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on Angels in America*, eds. Deborah R. Geis and Steven F. Kruger (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997), 13-39. Savran's article first appeared in *Theatre Journal* 47 (May 1995) 207-27.

3. Savran 14.

4. 16-17.

5. 17.
6. 22.
7. 21.
8. 32.
9. 34.
10. Janelle Reinelt, "Notes on *Angels in America* as American Epic Theatre," in Geis and Kruger 242.
11. Charles McNulty, "*Angels in America*: Tony Kushner's Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Modern Drama* 39 (1996) 84-96.
12. McNulty 92-93.
13. 95.
14. Kroll 83.
15. A similar point is made by Art Borreca in his essay "'Dramaturging' the Dialectic: Brecht, Benjamin, and Declan Donnellan's Production of *Angels in America*" (249). However, like Savran, Borreca reads *Angels*, contrary to Benjamin, as resorting to a "faith in enlightened historical progress" (249). Where Borreca differs from some other critics, however, is in viewing the non-realistic dramaturgical elements as creating a dialectic with the play's epic realism which ultimately "unmasks as false the possibility of redemption outside history" (251). Borreca, in Geis and Kruger 245-260.
16. Benjamin, "Theses" 257-58.
17. Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994) 54. All quotations from the play are from this edition, and from *Angels in America: Part One: Millennium Approaches*. Hereafter, page numbers will be cited in the text; those from *Millennium Approaches* will be preceded by the number one, and those from *Perestroika* by the number two.
18. Benjamin, "Theses" 260.
19. Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Toward a Revolutionary Criticism* (New York: Verso, 1981) 177.
20. Benjamin, "Theses" 261.
21. 262.
22. 254.
23. Eagleton 78.
24. 69.
25. Benjamin, "Theses" 255.
26. Eagleton 177.
27. Tony Kushner, *A Bright Room Called Day* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994) 174-75.
28. Benjamin, "Theses" 263.
29. 255.
30. Qtd. in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989) 290.
31. Buck-Morss 67. Rolf Tiedemann remarks, "Dialectical images and dialectic at a standstill are, without a doubt, the central categories of the *Passegen-Werk*; their meaning, however, remained

iridescent, it never achieved any terminological consistency." See "Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passequen-Werk*," in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991) 284.

32. Walter Benjamin, "One Way Street," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978) 91.

33. Benjamin, "Theses" 262-63.

34. Tiedemann describes dialectical images as "configurations of the Now and the Then; [Benjamin] defined their content as a 'dialectic at a standstill.'" See Tiedemann 284.

35. Juxtaposing the barren existence of the Mormon pioneers with contemporary urban culture serves to estrange this refuse. Like Benjamin's profane objects, they contain a dialectical charge: not only are they the detritus of commodity fetishism, but as the remains of consumption they refer back to the unfulfilled utopian desire that drives consumption.

36. Ron Scapp, "The Vehicle of Democracy: Fantasies toward a (Queer) Nation," in Geis and Kruger 90-100. Scapp also notes the dialectical nature of the scene: "This is one of the play's more Hegelian moments (*Aufheben*), for it compels us to face the negation of the state of things along with the preservation of the very 'spirit' of the state of things themselves, while the world continues to spin only forward, toward the future, toward a state that has yet to come" (92).

37. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) xxiv.

38. Jürgen Habermas, "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique," in Smith 113.

39. 113.

40. Ernesto Laclau, "Politics and the Limits of Modernity," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 340.

41. Laclau 340.

42. For an excellent discussion of this issue see Framji Minwalla, "When Girls Collide: Considering Race in *Angels in America*," in Geis and Kruger 103-117.

43. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985) 176.

44. 178.

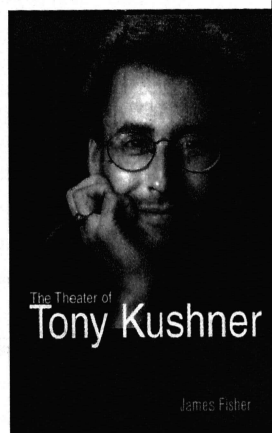
45. 178.

46. Una Chaudhuri makes a similar point: "The characters gathered together—a miraculous social grouping in themselves—continue their dialogues with each other and with the audience. The new historiography that flows from this place is dialogic and site-specific—a matter of different voices, with no single or dominating voice, no source of a master narrative—not even Prior, who speaks from a specific place." *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995) 261.

47. 181.

48. Savran 26.

49. Qtd. in Buck-Morss 290.



The Theater of Tony Kushner

Living Past Hope

By James Fisher

A rarity among American playwrights, Tony Kushner is a socio-political dramatist. Like Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and especially Bertolt Brecht, Kushner believes that "all theater is political." His plays explore the moral, social, religious, and political questions that shape the future of the United States in the world community. The first complete study of Kushner's work, Fisher's work covers all full-length, one-act, and adapted works by this Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist.

James Fisher is Professor of Theater at Wabash College.



ROUTLEDGE

29 WEST 35th STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10001

Available June 2001: 5 1/2 x 8 1/2: 268 pp
Hb: 0-8153-3150-9: \$80.00
[Can. hb \$120.00]