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## Tony Kushner's Use of Angels in Building a Community.

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*Angels in America* represents a long journey from the diagnosis of its protagonist, Prior Walter, with AIDS, to the new family he is shown with in the epilogue. In facing his crisis traditional structures of emotional support are found wanting. Kushner replaces them with a dialectic analysis of the concept of the angelic. This moves us towards the ideals of self-respect and mutual support which Kushner posits as embodying personal and social fulfilment. Opening the play with a rabbi's funeral elegy, the playwright begins by looking backwards, with a distinct emphasis on the need for change. The dead woman is deployed as 'a whole kind of person'. Her Judaism is described as 'this ancient, ancient culture and home', but one without a future. The rabbi finishes his speech however by stating: 'Pretty soon ... all the old will be dead'.<sup>1</sup> The scene invites the audience to consider both the power and limitations of inherited cultural identity in providing a helpful framework for configuring ourselves in relation to others.

Kushner is concerned with the generation of communities. In *Angels* he depicts Judaism, Mormonism and individualism, but finds these ideological frameworks insufficient for his characters' needs. He therefore develops a new politics of community derived through varying forms of the angelic. He interrogates the idea of angels dialectically to form social networks that queer the familiar. Kushner associates this development with changing attitudes

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<sup>1</sup> Kushner, *Angels in America* 16-17

to God. Depicting God as unknowable he finds His existence irrelevant, and explores spiritual and political life through eschatological motifs. The angels whom he characterises as Continental Principalities blame humanity for God's withdrawal.<sup>2</sup> The recessive deity is linked to the development of human knowledge and used as proof of the collective power of human agency. Such power is offered as a plea for the active promotion of humanitarian ideals by identifying them as achievable.

*Millennium Approaches*, part 1 of *Angels*, is marked by Prior's descent into crisis until in the final scene the Angel appears and catalyses the action of the second play, *Perestroika*:

Greetings, Prophet;  
The Great Work Begins:  
The Messenger has arrived.<sup>3</sup>

This messenger is not the Angel but Prior. The moment heralds Prior's confrontation with his own desire for death and stasis and his resultant embracing of life. *Perestroika* follows his journey back into a community where he can share his experience of redemption. His Great Work is to demonstrate and preach the author's ideological proposals. He exists as the vortex at which Kushner's forms of the angelic will emerge and converge.<sup>4</sup>

The significance of Kushner's debt to Walter Benjamin's angel of *Theses on the Philosophy of History* has been much discussed.<sup>5</sup> This is, however, just one aspect of his Continental Principalities which acts in conjunction with others. Strongly influenced by Judeo-Christian mythology in addition to Walter Benjamin, Kushner's characters are powerful symbols but weak individuals. We are shown a divine entourage transformed by the wearying march of history to reflect our own anxieties regarding Whiggish conceptions of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 177

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 125

<sup>4</sup> Montgomery affords Prior the same centrality in his analysis of *Angels* in conjunction with the Corpus Christi plays.

<sup>5</sup> See primarily Savran.

progress. The Continental Principalities are ideas given physical form and allowed to interact with the individual's perspective at the level of the plot. These same angels simultaneously manifest Prior's subconscious, given form by his memories.

Angels from above and angels from within are supplemented by Kushner through his deployment of angels from without. The Old Testament angel with whom Jacob wrestles,<sup>6</sup> of such significance in the play,<sup>7</sup> is characterised by those angels already detailed. Those less violent angels of the New Testament who help one, or help one to help oneself,<sup>8</sup> are reborn as the humans who surround us. They acquire their full significance as the play moves through and beyond the time of revelation. Using a spiritual journey metaphorically the playwright explores political and social concerns. The two people who most support Prior are Harper and Hannah, a female mystic whose hallucinatory experience will help lead him to the threshold of revelation, and a mother-figure who ensures that he does not lose touch with his responsibilities towards the real world. These women, the abstract externalisations of Prior's will to stasis, and the religio-Benjaminian Continental Principalities are equally significant forms of the angels in America. Each controls a major field of experience, the social, personal or cultural, which are explored in Kushner's paean to '*More Life*'.<sup>9</sup>

When we meet the Angel at the end of *Millennium Approaches* she is a necessary device both structurally and physically for the introduction of Kushner's alternative conceptions of the angelic. Benjamin's *Theses* are central to the Angel's prophecy, most specifically the parable of the angel of history:

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

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<sup>6</sup> Gen. 32.24-30

<sup>7</sup> See particularly Barnett 474-6, Pederson or Lipshitz, and the episode as presented in *The Book of J*.

<sup>8</sup> The first angel of the New Testament is that which appears to Joseph, urging him to 'fear not', Mat. 1.20.

<sup>9</sup> Kushner, *Angels* 280

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.<sup>10</sup>

Whilst characters in their own right, facilitating drama between their call for stasis and Prior's consequent justification of change, the angels also represent historical institutions. As 'Myriad Infinite Aggregate Angelic Entities',<sup>11</sup> they are too cumbersome to reform. The violence with which Benjamin describes progress is echoed by Kushner through the character of Roy. He describes the universe as 'A kind of sandstorm in outer space with winds of mega-hurricane velocity, but instead of grains of sand it's shards and splinters of glass.'<sup>12</sup> Like the angels, whose causal deficiency precipitates only despair in response to the wreckage of history, Roy's tendency to act on his fellow men rather than with them has led to a hopeless existence. Prior describes the angels as 'basically incredibly powerful bureaucrats, they have no imagination, they can *do* anything but they can't invent, create, they're sort of fabulous and dull all at once'<sup>13</sup> and thus explains their abhorrence of change.

Conceptualised as institutions, the size and longevity of the angels ensures their desensitisation to the value of individual human lives. They despair to hear of the impending disaster at Chernobyl, but they will only watch as history unfolds. They have devised their book of stasis but must tempt a human envoy to carry it.<sup>14</sup> By choosing this particular disaster for the angels to listen to on their wireless Kushner explains their negligence as a consequence of their experience of human mistakes. Rejecting the possibility of good acts, they believe destruction of the world and our fellow men to be inherent in human action, the belief with which our hero must wrestle. Witnessing history but playing no part in it, Kushner's angels cannot comprehend the will to life Prior or even Roy Cohn must feel as they live and create it on a daily basis. The Angel tells Prior that:

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<sup>10</sup> Benjamin 221

<sup>11</sup> Kushner, *Angels* 259-60

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 19

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 175

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 265

In creating You, Our Father-Lover unleashed  
 Sleeping Creation's Potential for Change.  
 In YOU the Virus of TIME began!<sup>15</sup>

The angel's accusation resonates with Prior as he learns of the power he possesses, embodying the Angel's condemnation of human agency in his rejection of her prophecy of despair. Furthermore, he repeatedly insists that the angels bless him, and will carry this blessing back to us from his sojourn in Heaven. Although Prior turns his back on the angels without waiting for their response, they will succumb to his will and bless him nonetheless.<sup>16</sup>

We accept the representation of Kushner's angels on stage because he does not preclude their external reality. However, the angels can also be interpreted as a human construct, the fantastical scenes reflecting the naturalistic and the encounters with angels playing out personal fantasies of desire and reconciliation. The prophet facilitates the Angel's manifestation in a form comprehensible by him, using both personal experience and inherited ideological frameworks. In her first shared vision with Prior, Harper explains:

[I]n my experience the mind, which is where hallucinations come from, shouldn't be able to make up anything that wasn't there to start with, that didn't enter it from experience, from the real world. Imagination can't create anything new, can it? It only recycles bits and pieces from the world and reassembles them into visions. ... Am I making sense right now?<sup>17</sup>

Although her explanation is logical Harper's need of reassurance draws attention to the instability of her theory, particularly its inability to explain her current conversation with Prior; she seems never to have previously met him. Kushner does not seek to resolve this dilemma but presents visionary experience as simultaneously rational and irrational, allowing the alternative forms to sustain each other. The author offers through Harper a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 175

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 265-7

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 38

psychoanalytical interpretation of Prior's subsequent experience with the Angel(s) whilst maintaining faith in the validity of such experience as revelation.

Assuming that these internal angels are a product of, or are malleable by, the individual who conjures or sustains them, Kushner argues that they exist to facilitate the redemption of that individual. They therefore behave according to the needs of the visionary. Even if a single angel is created or shared by more than one person, that angel can profit both of its witnesses in a unique way. The angel conjured by Prior in the presence of Hannah is part of a long-term project to help him rediscover his self-love through facing and condemning both physical debilitation and social condemnation. The same angel that facilitates this for Prior will kiss Hannah in a sexual awakening, stating 'The Body is the Garden of the Soul.'<sup>18</sup> This revelation will precipitate her reinvention '*like a New Yorker*'<sup>19</sup> as she is confirmed in her new status as the adoptive matriarch of her homosexual urban family.

Associating sexual fulfilment and spirituality Kushner's Angel claims 'Not Physics But Ecstasies make the Engine Run',<sup>20</sup> and that 'Angelic orgasm makes protomatter, which fuels the Engine of Creation'.<sup>21</sup> For Prior the sexual aura of the Angel is tangential to her message, yet he feels it nonetheless. Both his and Hannah's experience of the Angel functions as a type of auto-eroticism, representing the discovery of one's own beauty. When Prior tells Belize of the Angel's effect he insists that 'I want the voice; it's wonderful. It's all that's keeping me alive.'<sup>22</sup> Although at this point Prior has not yet known the Angel fully, his arousal offers the promise of fulfilment beyond himself, even as the possibility for such fulfilment it generated within himself. Once Prior is alone it is revealed that the Angel was imbuing him with strength throughout the preceding conversation, even if he has not yet

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 252

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 277

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 173

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 175

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 66

learned enough to manifest the Angel in a form visible to the audience.<sup>23</sup> To encounter an angel in Kushner's world reinterprets the divine insight offered by encountering a biblical angel. Here however the emphasis is on the reassurance of one's significance through the attentions of the quasi-divine, who help us to be reconciled with our greatest fears, rather than on one's purpose in the design of others. The emphasis of such revelations on the importance of the individual encourages the recipient to be similarly respectful of others. The stressing of self-knowledge rather than hedonism, facilitated by the recurrent dissection of these encounters, offers the initiate freedom not just to be themselves but to choose well the self that it is best to be.

If the Angel is a product of Prior's imagination then so too is her message. Prior explains:

I've been given a prophecy. A book. Not a *physical* book, or there was one but they took it back, but somehow there's still this book. In me. A prophecy. It ... really happened, I'm ... almost completely sure of it. [...] It was after Louis left me. Every night I'd been having these horrible vivid dreams. And then [...] And then She arrived.<sup>24</sup>

When the Angel gives this book to Prior she presses it back into his heart, where it was first conceived. Belize, identifying the prophecy as racist and reactionary, emphasises: 'But it *is* offensive or at least monumentally confused and it's not ... *visited*, Prior. By who? It *is* from you, what else is it?'<sup>25</sup> On Prior telling Belize how in imitation of his creation God '*Left... [...] And did not return*' Belize interprets this as emanating from Prior's abandonment by his boyfriend Louis: 'I smell a motif. The man that got away.'<sup>26</sup> When Prior reflects on the angel's visit he too acknowledges that her message reflects his desires, identifying the cause

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 68

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 169

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 180

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 177



as his illness rather than the betrayal of Louis. In universalising his experience he goes some way to fulfilling his place in the narrative strategy:

Maybe I am a prophet. Not just me, all of us who are dying now. Maybe we've caught the virus of prophecy. Be still. Toil no more. Maybe the world has driven God from Heaven, incurred the angels' wrath.<sup>27</sup>

Having become a prophet, but for humanity rather than the Angels, Prior will eventually declare himself living proof of the imperative to and possibility of life: 'I've been living with AIDS for five years. That's six whole months longer than I lived with Louis.'<sup>28</sup> When Prior is in Heaven, which looks like San Francisco, he notes that 'the real San Francisco, on earth, is unspeakably beautiful.'<sup>29</sup> He was able to return to the world because of his ability to identify which San Francisco was the most real. After visiting the Angels we find ourselves in hospital where Belize reveals that Prior has just woken from the height of his fever.<sup>30</sup> Kushner suggests that Prior's threshold of revelation was his moment of choice between life and death.

This vision must be seen as deeply introspective. Prior did not however experience it alone. 'Even in his characters' most private, most alone moments, the "myth of the Individual," as Kushner calls it, is shot through with company.'<sup>31</sup> He entered it with the encouragement of Hannah and was guided by Harper along the way, as these women shared and were the angels of his creation. It is through such acts that Hannah and Harper are confirmed as Prior's guiding spirits on his journey towards revelation and proclamation of Kushner's new covenant. The reactionary Angels of History and Ideas are a provocation to action, and the angels of Prior's creation a manifestation of his reasoning process. He would

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 182

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 278

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 254

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 269-70

<sup>31</sup> McNulty 89

not have the strength to undertake this journey of the will if he did not have two further angels to support and advise him.

Harper begins the play in a fraught emotional state, and as a paranoid Valium addict is unable to help herself. When she does take her first steps towards recovery they are facilitated by the growing sense of self-worth she experiences in her ability to help Prior. They first meet in a mutual dream scene which establishes their affinity with one other. Although differing in experience their language and thought structure is complimentary: when Harper admits that Mormons don't believe in homosexuals, Prior replies that homosexuals don't believe in Mormons.<sup>32</sup> When they do meet in person they half-remember their dreams and look familiar to each other. On Prior referring to his visitations Harper accepts them unquestioningly:

PRIOR: [...] An Angel. It crashed through my bedroom ceiling.  
HARPER: Huh. That sort of thing always happens to me.<sup>33</sup>

The scene is set in the diorama room at the Mormon Visitor Centre. The father in the diorama is played by the actor playing Joe, Harper's husband, but the stage he inhabits is invaded by Louis, where he attacks the Mormon Father/Joe about his beliefs. Prior and Harper are again sharing some sort of hallucination, precipitated not only by spiritual affinities but because the argument between Joe and Louis concerns them both. When Harper has closed the diorama curtains<sup>34</sup> and Hannah reopened them<sup>35</sup> Joe is a dummy again and Louis is absent. When Harper reiterates their mantra of the 'Threshold of revelation' Prior can complete her sentence.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Kushner, *Angels* 36

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 194

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 198

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 199

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 201

In talking with Prior Harper realises the significance of the world beyond herself. Acknowledging her fallibility she allows Prior to become her angel as she becomes his. If Prior had neither Harper nor Hannah to guide him through his visions then they would be as dissatisfying as the solitary and drug-induced travels of Harper. Although she is initially guided through her hallucinations by her estate agent confidant Mr Lies he is of her own invention and more a structural device than a character. Revelation can only be effective if its experience or consequence is shared. Her Polar fantasy ‘has a way of melting ...’<sup>37</sup> because Harper has not yet accepted either the example of Prior nor care of Hannah. When she is alone Harper wishes she had an Eskimo to share her world with, or a polar baby to look after, either of which would provide reciprocal care for her. Although Kushner stresses just how lost in her own dreams Harper is, he also gives us cause for hope in her relationships with Prior and Hannah since she clearly wants to get better. Speaking about the baby she reasons with herself ‘if it gets really cold, she’ll have a pouch I can crawl into. Like a marsupial. We’ll mend together. That’s what we’ll do; we’ll mend.’<sup>38</sup> Harper’s long journey toward self-understanding helps her to help others who are vulnerable, believing what they tell her and believing in their ability to mend when no-one else would. Prior is shown the path towards recovery by the faith in him of a benevolent stranger. When Harper and Prior first meet she reassures him that ‘Deep inside you, there’s a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that.’<sup>39</sup> Her reassurance is enough to set him doubting the certainty of his immanent death. Her belief in him suggests to Prior that he must find belief in himself. It is immediately after his first encounter with Harper that Prior hears a warning of the Angel’s approach, representing the fears which Harper’s belief has given him the will to struggle with. It is her promise of inner health, combined with her validation of his visions, that frees Prior to imbue his concerns with physical form, the Angel, that they might then be overcome.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 108

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 109

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 40

When Harper offers this reassurance to Prior she demands nothing in return. This is most apparent when he meets her in Heaven as she is petting his dead cat. As they draw strength from each other this redoubles rather than weakens their will. She is so resolved in her newfound desire for life as to choose to withdraw from this final vision. Her belief in Prior has guided him through the wilderness of his subconscious. Her realisation that she must remain with the living is simultaneously a plea to Prior that he follow her lead: ‘I have to go home now. I hope you come back. *Look* at this place. Can you imagine spending eternity here?’<sup>40</sup> Having chosen life Harper returns to Joe in order to actively leave him. As Prior’s guide she has taught him how to believe in himself. She has also taught him to find the truth contained in felt experience.

When we met the Angels discussing Chernobyl they were shown to be unable and unwilling to intervene in environmental catastrophe,<sup>41</sup> making action on earth all the more paramount. The first time that we meet Harper she pictures the environment in eschatological terms. She explains of the ozone layer:

It’s a kind of gift, from God, the crowning touch to the creation of the world: guardian angels, hands linked, make a spherical net, a blue-green nesting orb, a shell of safety for life itself. But everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defence giving way....<sup>42</sup>

She identifies the failure of this model but doesn’t yet recognise the solution, reasoning that ‘God won’t talk to me. I have to make up people to talk to me.’<sup>43</sup> In helping Prior her emotional development facilitates the formation of a new vision of environmental repair. That her belief in Prior’s inner health was proved true offers the audience hope that her final vision might be similarly realised, ‘a hope critically rooted in the knowledge that the world in

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 253

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 260-2

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 22-3

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 46

which we live is insufficient and that something better must and can be attained.<sup>44</sup> Unlike the Angels above, human angels will help in facilitating this rejuvenation. Furthermore, by associating the environment with Prior, who in the epilogue is living with his illness, Kushner asks if through a similar struggle we can maintain the planet's life, if not health. His miraculous recovery exemplifies the miraculous possibilities of human solidarity in the rejuvenation of the environment. From the aeroplane continuing her own Great Voyage Harper sees 'A great net of souls, and the souls were three-atom oxygen molecules, of the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them, and was repaired'.<sup>45</sup> The consequences of continued environmental neglect would be catastrophic, but the opportunities that positive human intervention presents for collaborative action are similarly unprecedented.

Hannah is the last angel we meet. Grounded in reality she offers her daughter-in-law Harper practical support. She collects Harper when she is found by the police<sup>46</sup> and later helps her to dress herself and thus re-enter the real world.<sup>47</sup> Helping Prior by helping Harper, Hannah also cares for him directly in the absence of her biological son Joe. Joe excludes himself from the emergent community through his political philosophy, which is essentially a rationalisation of selfishness.<sup>48</sup> He didn't need Hannah when he had Harper to channel his anxieties onto, and will finally reject her directly: 'There is no possible thing I can imagine you doing. Ma. You shouldn't have come.'<sup>49</sup> It is after this rejection that Hannah adopts Prior. Falling sick Prior asks that she call an ambulance but she takes responsibility for him as her son and escorts him to hospital, where she will remain with him through his fever.

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<sup>44</sup> Chambers-Letson 144

<sup>45</sup> Kushner, *Angels* 275

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 152

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 183-4

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 207

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 229

Like Harper, Hannah accepts that there is value in Prior's visions, but rationalises his experience through her religious, and specifically Mormon, sensibilities. It is through her that Kushner offers an analogy between Prior and the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith. Hannah tells us 'He had a great need of understanding. Our Prophet. His desire made prayer. His prayer made an angel. The angel was real. I believe that.'<sup>50</sup> Hannah, a guiding angel, believes that the apocalyptic angel of Prior's vision is both actual and imaginary; a real entity with independent will simultaneously contained within and dependent upon Prior. The prayer metaphor suggests that the Angel is created by Prior for Prior out of his need for spiritual rejuvenation. In light of this parasitic existence Hannah offers Prior guidance in his quest to overcome the angel's prophecy. Reminding him of the source of its power she tells Prior: '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.'<sup>51</sup> Since the angel and its prophecy were created or summonsed out of Prior's need, it is he who must find the wisdom to obey or reject her. Having so recently experienced rejection by Joe, Hannah is determined to cultivate in Prior a similar strength of will as that possessed by her errant son, but to offer him guidance in its better use. Harper helped Prior to accept his visionary capability; Hannah guides him in negotiating the raw emotions they reveal.

After establishing the mother-and-son relationship between Hannah and Prior Kushner cements their bond through shared experience. Although Prior will meet Harper in heaven, Hannah shares the first stages of his final vision. She reiterates her guiding message that a man has more strength than an angel. Since Prior willed the angel into being the same

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 235

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 237

will can overcome it.<sup>52</sup> Even as Hannah is disoriented by the actuality of the vision she explains:

It's an angel, you ... just ... grab hold and say ... oh what was it, wait, wait, umm. ... OH! Grab her, say "I will not let thee go except thou bless me!" Then wrestle with her till she gives in.<sup>53</sup>

Kushner shows us symbolically the fellowship of the community replacing Prior's angst, as the human angel helps the prophet to overcome the angels from within. The struggle of Prior is that of Everyman even if, as is shown by the juxtaposition of his and Hannah's relationship to the same angel, it takes different forms for different people. What all angels have in common is their efficacy in precipitating self-knowledge, but to come to terms with this gift the help of others is always necessary. When Prior finally ascends to Heaven to return the angels' book he faces them with the strength that Hannah has given him.<sup>54</sup> The same strength that facilitates his return from this liminal realm leads him to tell Hannah, as they wake from their mutual dreams, that 'You'll come back.'<sup>55</sup> The words are performative, factual, imploring, but they are also the reassurance that she can come back, that he will still want and need her and will not reject his guardian angel as her first son did.

In the epilogue the characters share in their mutual support of each other, and similarly are allowed to share the onus of exposition. Hannah proves her commitment to her adoptive son in her promise to wash him clean in the Fountain of Bethesda.<sup>56</sup> Such hopes for redemption are felt by all of the four characters to each other, but Hannah has a special commitment to her eldest son: 'I told him I would personally take him there to bathe. We will

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<sup>52</sup> It has been argued that biblical angels, specifically in conjunction with *Angels in America*, might be interpreted as emanating from their visitant: 'Perhaps there was no angel... just Jacob, afraid of what was coming.' Nutu 179.

<sup>53</sup> Kushner, *Angels* 250

<sup>54</sup> For source see Gen. 28.10-15.

<sup>55</sup> Kushner, *Angels* 271

<sup>56</sup> For source see John 5.2-4.

all bathe ourselves clean.’<sup>57</sup> As the fourth wall is brought down Kushner invites us to include ourselves in the new-formed family represented on stage. Having overcome angels above and within, our Prophet keeps them at bay with the ongoing support of his angels without. Harper was an important guide on his road to self-discovery, but she leaves the play as she begins a journey of reconciliation with herself. In light of his own admissions we must not be surprised that the figure Kushner places at our prophet’s side, his guiding angel, is a mother.<sup>58</sup> After placing variant forms of the angelic in conversation with each other throughout the play the humane mother wins through as alternative forms of the angelic are overcome rather than defeated. Reading Prior Walter as Kushner’s protagonist the dialectic development facilitated by the juxtaposition and overlaying of various forms of the angelic is the driving force behind both his spiritual journey and the development of the plot. Although Kushner offers some resolution through the mother-figure there are many unexplored contradictions between the various angelic forms which facilitate the field’s ongoing generation of meaning.

Kushner new society is accomplished and accomplishable without appeal to or dependence upon a distant and unknowable God, characterised as a Flaming Aleph. Making no claims regarding His existence, Kushner insists that our priority of action must lie with ourselves, with other humans, with the health of the planet and with the here and now. Although allowing for the possibility of faith as a support in the implementation of this, to do so must never be easy: ‘You should struggle with the almighty. [...] It’s the Jewish way.’<sup>59</sup> Since this personal struggle is central to Kushner’s drama of individual will, the choices that Prior makes in his relationships with the various angels he encounters are his own. As important as his final blessing is how Prior begins his closing speech. Although blessing everyone, and including the audience in the community, his first concern is with his own life in relation to the passage of time:

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<sup>57</sup> Kushner, *Angels* 279

<sup>58</sup> See particularly Kushner, *Notes About Political Theatre* 19, or Cohen 221-2.

<sup>59</sup> Kushner, *Angels* 269



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.<sup>60</sup>

To love others and to love ourselves should go hand in hand. Prior's love of himself is catalysed by the love for him of Hannah and Harper. That which he offers them in return, even in the act of accepting their love, goes a long way towards helping them to mend themselves as well. We have seen multiple angels in multiple forms throughout the play, each with its own strength and each with its own problems. Barnett suggests 'Tony Kushner believes in magic – in theatrical, dialectical magic that seems at once wondrous, impossible, and real.'<sup>61</sup> It is through our struggle to reconcile the irreconcilable that life is lived and communities are formed.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 280

<sup>61</sup> Barnett 490

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