

The Dybbuk Between Several Worlds: Spectropolitics,¹ the Demon, and the Devastation of the Future in Tony Kushner

O Dibuk entre vários mundos: espectropolítica, o demônio e a devastação do futuro em Tony Kushner

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Abstract: The dybbuk is a malevolent spirit that possesses the bodies of the living. Rooted in Jewish folklore and mysticism, the dybbuk is believed to be the soul of a dead person who cannot find rest. The purpose of this article is to reconcile Tony Kushner's glimpse of apocalyptic anxiety in adapting S. Ansky's text, *The Dybbuk* (2000). By placing ghostly characters on stage that echo the past and its resonance by bringing in a demon who now considers not only the claims of this past on the present, but also the historical devastations projected into the future, I look at Kushner's play in light of the immateriality of its characters in relation to the uncanny experience of recognizing theater as the possibility of materializing a link between Sigmund Freud's concern of the unfamiliar (or the *unheimlich*) and Walter Benjamin's concern of experience.

Keywords: Tony Kushner; *A Dybbuk*; Jewish lore; spectropolitics; Performance Philosophy; Walter Benjamin

Resumo: O *dibuk* é um espírito malévolo que possui os corpos dos vivos. Com raízes no folclore e no misticismo judaico, acredita-se que o *dibuk* seja a alma de uma pessoa morta que não consegue encontrar descanso. O objetivo deste ensaio é reconciliar o vislumbre da ansiedade apocalíptica de Tony Kushner ao adaptar o texto de S. Ansky, *A Dybbuk* (2000). Ao colocar no palco

¹ My concern with spectropolitics is not new. Many of the ideas on the Philosophy of the specter I write about in this article are recurrent. However, the issue of spectropolitics recurs in Tony Kushner's work and will be treated as such.



personagens fantasmagóricos que ecoam o passado e sua ressonância ao trazer um demônio que agora considera não apenas as reivindicações deste passado sobre o presente, mas as devastações históricas projetadas no futuro, olho para a peça de Kushner à luz da imaterialidade dos seus personagens no tocante à estranha experiência de quando se reconhece o teatro como a possibilidade de materialização de uma ligadura entre a questão do infamiliar (ou do *unheimlich*) de Sigmund Freud e a questão da experiência de Walter Benjamin.

Palavras-chave: Tony Kushner; *A Dybbuk*; folclore judeu; espectropolítica; Filosofia Performance; Walter Benjamin

Hell is empty,
And all the devils are here
(William Shakespeare)

The) dybbuk is a malevolent spirit that possesses the bodies of the living. Rooted in Jewish folklore and mysticism, the dybbuk is believed to be the soul of a dead person who cannot find rest. According to legend, the dybbuk attempts to possess the body of a living person to resolve earthly problems or simply out of a desire for revenge. This notion of possession and the struggle between two worlds, the dead and the living, finds its earliest expression in oral tales passed down from generation to generation, capturing the imagination of many with its frightening and unsettling implications.

In *The Dybbuk* (1994), Tony Kushner retells S. Ansky's classic mystical legend and updates it for the contemporary world, even though it is still, apparently, geographically and temporally set in Ukraine in the 1920s. In the stories of the dybbuk, both in the seminal play by Ansky, a Russian folklorist and playwright, and in its adaptation, translated by Joachim Neugroschel, the incorporation of the tensions and anxieties of their times, reflecting the emotional and spiritual conflicts faced by those living in a rapidly changing world, are understandable. The dybbuk's inability to ascend to the next life (whether it exists) parallels the characters' own imprisonment between belief and doubt, the mystical and the rational, the individual and the collective. In this article, I intend to reconcile the American playwright's glimpse of apocalyptic anxiety by, once again, placing on stage ghostly characters that echo the past and its resonance by bringing in a demon who now considers not only the claims of this past on the present and of the dead on the living, but also the historical devastations projected into the future. The future for Kushner, as haunted as the present is, proves to be an impossible locus of reconciliation. The evil impregnation of the dybbuk, by taking over the woman's body, becomes a text that echoes Walter Benjamin's theses on history: "In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones?" (1940). Thus, drawing from the German philosopher, I look

at Kushner's play considering the immateriality of its characters in relation to the uncanny experience of recognizing theater as the possibility of materializing a link between Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny (or *unheimlich*) and Walter Benjamin's concept of experience. The cultural and, often, linguistic strangeness felt by the audience only reinforces the possibility of the demon and how the possibility of its existence is even more real in theater.

Theater is, and always has been, a two-way street between the real and the imaginary. The magic of theater approaches Benjamin's understanding of experience when he argues that experience loses its meaning in a world completely disfigured by the barbarism of world wars and their devastating consequences, where the "tiny and fragile human body" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 144) is confronted with all the ostentation of the war machinery of mechanized warfare. It is well understood that there is a dialogue between the spectator and the actor on stage, and the question of representation moves away from the question of Platonic mimesis as it takes on something ghostly, illusory, and fantastical. Representation becomes a non-being. That is, dealing with unreal, immaterial beings in theater is to represent the invisible by making it visible. The question of what is cognizable by the audience, I believe, mixes with what is magical, perhaps fantastic, and in Kushner's play, as in Ansky's, it converses with the question of spectropolitics when the trope of unfamiliarity is placed under scrutiny. The representation of the devil in Kushnian theater and his anthropocenic view of the world are, once again, brought to the stage.

George Minois (2019) notes that it is in the apocryphal literature of Judaism that the theme of hell first spreads, with the Book of Enoch, dating from the 1st century BC. Minois points to the fact that it is in the Apocalyptic texts that the idea of sinners dying in fire and the need for reconciliation of collective responsibility (original sin) in relation to individual responsibility is presented. Demonologists claim that people believed that the universe was inhabited by invisible beings whose presence interfered with the visible world and its human inhabitants. Consequently, evil spirits, omnipresent in world literature, became invisible agents of all kinds of human evils (Pagels, 1995, p. XV; Bruce, 2024, p. XV). The path to perceiving the invisible world has always been found in legends and oral traditions of peoples, which are generally neglected and, consequently, forgotten. The movement to recall these legends is the perception of an invisible world when one sees the need to deal with what Scott G. Bruce (2024, p. XVIII) emphasizes: "In the manifold arts of depredation, all of these demons gave voice to the fears and anxieties of the cultures that created them".

Ansky's Jewish demon, the *Dybbuk*, is a play deeply rooted in the history, culture, and legends of Eastern European Jews. Directly inspired by the playwright's ethnographic expeditions to the heart of Jewish Eastern Europe, the play is filled with Jewish specifics: legends and folk tales, holidays and ritual observances, sacred religious and mystical texts, and, at its core, a supernatural creature known only to those versed in Jewish mythology.² Despite being

² In writing *The Dybbuk*, Ansky drew inspiration from the stories he collected on his ethnographic expeditions. Many early Jewish ethnographers sought to collect Jewish arts practices such as folk songs because they understood that these practices served "as a, if not the, cultural storehouse— not only of concepts, imagery, tropes, and emotions, but also of language, rhythm, rhyme, sounds, and music." It is a storehouse that reveals the rich pluralism of Jewishness. And yet, the collection of Jewish folklore was driven by two ostensibly incompatible purposes. On the one hand, as Annette Werberger argues, collecting Jewish folklore was part of "the European attempt to produce tradition and traditionality" as an exercise in nation-making. Across Europe, folklore was being put to use to "build" cultural identity. Jewish ethnography during the time of the An-sky expeditions was tied to a drive

a play with purely Jewish roots, over the past century, *The Dybbuk* has become a cultural landmark with broad global significance, reaching audiences around the world.

The representation of the immaterial, or non-being, on the Kushnian stage

Walter Benjamin's categories of *Erfahrung* (experience) and *Erlebnis* (lived experience) are fundamental in approaching modernity. Centered on the analysis of the manifold ways of perceiving and feeling the world, those categories have changed due to profound social transformations overtime. In "Experience and Poverty" (1994), Benjamin analyzes the phenomenon of the decline of *Erfahrung* (experience) in a *crescendo* that considers the psychosocial effects of the emergence of writing, of the press, of cultural industry, and of anonymous and rootless living in large cities, I mean, a process of dehumanization. The loss of experience is, in the final analysis, the destruction of tradition, that is, it is anything that is transmitted or brought into the present from the past. Experience loses its meaning in a world completely disfigured by the barbarism of world wars and their devastating consequences. The horrors of the First World War and its dire consequences highlight the decline of experience, challenging the possibility of self-narration.

The glimpse of an apocalyptic anxiety generates a more pronounced emphasis on theological doubt in Ansky's original text. However, these elements only deepened the emotional impulse of the play's two dominant stories: that of Khonen, the young rabbinical student who dies of love for a woman promised to another and whose spirit comes to inhabit her body, and that of the rabbi who seeks to exorcise the dybbuk. Written before the outbreak of World War I, Ansky's play was not produced until the 1920s. Strongly inspired by German expressionism, Ansky exposes the horrors of war by bringing to the stage the duality of non-being. Kushner, in his version, reproduces the question of duality between the individual and the collective in American society, in a way reproducing the horrors of that society.

The theme of being between worlds manifests in the play on the multiple levels. The dybbuk is caught between two worlds, unable to ascend to the next life. The characters are likewise caught: between the world of the mystical and the world of the rational, between belief and doubt, and as An-sky himself pointed out, "between the individual and the collective" (Moore, 2023, p. 217-218).

Moore (2003) believes that the audience will be divided similarly between those who understand the dybbuk and those who do not. Those who do not speak Yiddish and those who do will find different clues and hints that refer to their different secular, religious, and linguistic worlds. Viewers who do not understand Yiddish must accept their lack of familia-

to establish a Jewish cultural identity that was outside the religious framework, a "project of modernity, which is intimately linked to such factors as nationhood, progress, and science." On the other hand, Jewish ethnography also revealed the diversity of that Jewish religious framework (Moore, 2023, p. 209).

rity and embrace the strangeness, allowing themselves to have an instinctive reaction to the unknown. The uncanny here transcends the boundaries between the real and the imaginary.

There is a connection between Freud's concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) and the theatrical experience. The oddness of language only reinforces the possibility of the demon and how this existence is stronger in theater: how every existence is more real in the theater. Theater is, and always has been, a two-way street between reality and magic. Theatrical magic approaches the matter of experience. There is a dialogue between the spectator and the actor on stage, the concept of representation moves away from the concept of Platonic mimesis as it takes on something ghostly. Dealing with unreal, fantastic beings in theater is to represent the invisible by making it visible. The question of what is knowable by the audience, I believe, mixes with what is magical, and in Kushner's play, as in Ansky's, it converses with the concept of spectropolitics when the uncanny is put under scrutiny. We interpret, translate, and historicize through a lens that changes and alters itself.

Translating and interpreting the dybbuk is a way of rewriting history. The incorporation of the word dybbuk into other languages and cultures serves as an agent of this rewriting, for it is through the representation of this demon in the 20th century, initially belonging to the Jewish culture, that spectropolitics is seen as the catalyst for the possibility of rewriting history, thus making this incorporation possible. The historical fabric, haunted by the resurgence of the world, makes it possible to see how this new demonic being shapes the present through its theatricality inserted into it. Language politics plays a social role in Ansky's play. Neugroschel (2000) reminds us that the original Yiddish manuscript had been lost, forcing the Russian playwright to retranslate the play from Hebrew back into Yiddish. Thus, the existing Yiddish text is, in fact, a second-degree translation.

Neugroschel (2000) initially points out that the origin of the word dybbuk is Hebrew and derives from the root "to adhere". According to Gershom Scholem (1991), the word dybbuk was coined in Yiddish and first used in 1680. Absorbed by several other European languages, the word designates an undead entity that takes over the body of a living being and controls it. He considers that:

When we read something produced by our own culture, we experience that work within our familiar milieu. But when we read a translation, the direct opposite occurs: We have to infer the cultural context from the given work. [...] the totality forms a context that can assist us in perceiving Ansky's drama as manipulating codes in an intricate historical and cultural system (Neugroschel, 2000, p. XIX).

Walter Benjamin, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (2003), his 1925 thesis, describes tragedy as being closely linked to the Greek concept of chance. For the thinker, German Baroque drama departs from this question because it is characterized by an "extreme paucity of non-Christian notions" (2003, p. 130), yet "fate leads to death" (2003, p. 131). Kushner's *Dybbuk* is obviously rich in Christian ideas, so a possible theatrical historical work is constructed there; that is, it is glimpsed that theater carries history as phantasmagoria. Chonen, in making a pact with the devil, repeats the internalization of guilt, which, according to Benjamin, is imposed on men from outside by misfortune. But contrary to what the German philosopher asserts, Chonen does not "escape his demonic jurisdiction" (2003, p. 131). Chonen moves forward to meet the devil.

Fate does not only befall the characters but also dominates the surroundings:

It is characteristic of the tragedy of fate not only that a curse or guilt is inherited within whole families, but also that this is associated with...a fatal stage property. For once human life has sunk into the merely creaturely, even the life of apparently dead objects secures power over it. The effectiveness of the object where guilt has been incurred is a sign of the approach of death (Benjamin, 2003, p. 132).

The impossible journey on a road with curves changing direction foreshadowed the action that the dybbuk would have on the families of the bride and groom:

NACHMAN: You wouldn't believe this trip! We were on the river road but it seems to have doubled in length and forked many times since I was last on it, which was only last month. And the roadbed has fallen into disrepair, at one point it just vanishes into a great marsh that wasn't there before, we were almost stuck for the night. My wife says that demons, God should protect us, were trying to keep us out of Brinnitz! (Kushner, 2005, p. 57).

It is in the play's last act that the misfortunes caused by supernatural forces are clearly noticeable. Leah and her family are unable to reach the wedding venue, precisely because the dybbuk is preventing them from moving forward: the carriage loses its wheels, the mules die, the horses of the paladins sent after the couple and their family go mad and flee into the night, and on the outskirts of the city, all the roosters begin to crow; at midnight, the groom faints, but even the attempt to carry him on foot is thwarted.³ The nightmare world continues throughout the play, culminating in the spirit's refusal to leave Leah's body, leading to her death.

The function of the mass of scholarly annotations is to point to the nightmare burden of realia on the action. In the development form of the tragedy of fate there is no getting away from the stage-property. But alongside it there are dreams, ghostly apparitions, the terrors of the end, and all of these are part of the stock-in-trade of its basic form, the Trauerspiel (Benjamin, 2003, p. 134).

The night, in fact, plays a decisive role, as it can be seen in the apparitions of spirits, –“From here it is but a step to the drama of fate, where the witching hour plays a dominant part” (Benjamin, 2003, p. 134).

In the opening stage direction of the play, the Messenger lies on a bench with his head in his travel sac while Chonen quietly leans against a bookcase filled with old books. As he thinks and prays to himself, evening falls on the synagogue, darkening its shadowy corners, creating a mystical and mysterious atmosphere, –“great scenes which derive their poetic quality from the night” (Benjamin, 2003, p. 135). Much of Act I is based on the possibility of the

³ MICHL: Rabbi, you must come, the bridegroom and his family are on the outskirts of the town, their carriage lost its heels, their mules have died, the riders we sent after them, their horses went wild and charged off into the night, and on the outskirts of town all the cocks have started crowing, at midnight, the bridegroom has fainted, they've carried him on foot but they're suddenly so stricken with terror they cannot take another step! You must come now! (Kushner, 2005, p. 100-101).

existence of an “Evil One”, which leads to the Messenger’s statement affirming the possibility of invoking the devil:

FIRST BATLON: I agree, let’s not talk about such things, not here, not at night,
We’ll inadvertently summon The Evil One.

SECOND BATLON: The Devil can’t enter a Holy place, not even if you invoke Him!
There’s nothing in the Holy books, no Chants or incantations, not even in the
Kabbalah for calling forth Satan.

THE MESSENGER: Actually there is a way (Kushner, 2005, p. 13).

Latent superstition is exposed in the First Batlon’s⁴ speech when he describes this powerful rabbi from his shtetl who possessed enchanting abilities, including the power to summon Satan.

FIRST BATLON: [...] **He told me he’d made a golem, back when the persecutions grew too frequent and too fierce; he told me how he’d made the dead rise, he could fly invisible through the air and devils danced at his behest. He even conjured Satan** (Kushner, 2005, p. 14, my emphasis).

The advent of midnight is key to Leah’s⁵ exorcism, as it becomes the essence of disorder and the impossibility of her arrival at her wedding ceremony. The importance of performing the exorcism before midnight is precisely what makes the roosters crow after the witching hour in Act IV. Popular tradition says that midnight is the witching hour, the moment when the dead are allowed to commune with the living. And here, it is the hour when the dybbuk is at its strongest and can conjure evil and cause chaos around it. Walter Benjamin, in the quote below, links Nietzsche’s question of eternal return to space-time and how it becomes spectral, historical, yet in Kushner’s play this is only possible because the spirit world is within history.

There is a good reason for associating the dramatic action with night, especially midnight. It lies in the widespread notion that at this hour time stands still like the tongue of a scale. Now since fate, itself the true order of eternal recurrence, can only be described as temporal in an indirect, that is paradisaical sense, its manifestation seek out the temporal dimension. They stand in the narrow frame of midnight, an opening in the passage of time, in which the same ghostly image constantly reappears. [...] The midnight hour of the Trauerspiel stands in contrast to the daytime setting required by every tragic action. ‘Tis now the very witching time of night, when churchyard yawn, and hell itself breaths out? Contagion to the world.’ **The spirit world is ahistorical** (Benjamin, 2003, p. 135, my emphasis).

The trope of the dark night serves as a catalyst for the mysteries that abound in the play. The dark corners of the synagogue explain the presence of the dead souls who go there to pray, leaving traces of deep sadness. Lost lives haunt Kushner’s play, just as the divided souls of Chonen and Leah will only be united after death, finally becoming one. Maybe this

⁴ According to Tony Kushner in his cast list, batlonim are generally people who are employed by the community to stay in the synagogue and complete the minyan when necessary.

⁵ RABBI AZRIEL: If we are to perform this ceremony. Rabbi Shimshin, it must be done before midnight as you know, and . . . There is a danger here. The child is dying. The dybbuk is drawing away her life (Kushner, 2005, p. 75).

is when Aristophanes' eulogy to Eros leaps off the page. The piles of sorrows of lost loves are scattered on the synagogue's floor:

GITL: I don't like it here at night, it's grim and frightening.

LEAH: I've never been in a synagogue this late before [...]. It's brooding tonight, mourning over lost lives, it's heartbreaking, it's dark as the bottom of the sea.

FRADDE: Sure it's a sad place at night and I'll tell you why that is. The dead come to pray here at the shul at night, scattering their sorrows on the floor like dead leaves, leaving piles of sorrows all over the place (Kushner, 2005, p. 27-28).

The dybbuk rewrites a haunted history.

Tony Kushner's *The Dybbuk* in the United States

Tony Kushner's play *Dybbuk or Between Two Worlds* was first staged in February 1995, when it premiered in Hartford, Connecticut, at the Hartford Stage Company, directed by Mark Lamos. Originally titled *Between Two Worlds*, the play tells the story of Leah and Chonen, who, unbeknownst to them, are promised to each other by their parents before birth and who, unconsciously, fulfill their destiny by falling in love as young adults. But Chonen's father has long since died, and in his absence, Leah's father breaks his vow and chooses a wealthy suitor for his daughter. Chonen turns to Kabbalah (part of Jewish mysticism) to win Leah back, but the dark power he awakens spirals out of control and kills him. On Leah's wedding night, Chonen's soul returns from beyond the grave in the form of a dybbuk and takes control of her body. Leah's family turns to a Hasidic rebel to exorcise the dybbuk from their daughter, but although the exorcism is successful, Chonen's soul remains between life and death. Leah follows him, dying to be reunited with her beloved. In death, Leah and Chonen find a way to fulfill their destiny.

S. Ansky gave his original drama the subtitle "Between Two Worlds" – a reference not only to the play's dialogues between the rabbinical representatives of this world and the spirits of the other, suggesting the eternal struggle between the material and the mystical, but also to the precarious situation of Eastern European Jews, caught between the traditions of their shtetl's past and the relentless pressures of modernity. Written during a time of great transition, on the eve of a new century, Ansky's concern seems even more urgent as we reach the end of the millennium, just as Kushner's rendition – originally adapted in 1994 – does near the end of the following century. Beyond the millennium bug and the possible end of the world, Kushner presents an apocalyptic anxiety about a future that is difficult to reconcile, while still looking back on a terrifying past.

In a conversation with Tony Kushner in 2012, in New York, the playwright commented on the importance of magic in his dramaturgy. His *Dybbuk* (2005) reinforces this need by bringing the Jewish experience closer to the Kabbalah and spectropolitics.

It would seem as if what we call "fantasy" is often an attempt at understanding what rational and daily experience fails to grasp: forces, notions, possibilities frequent in our everyday life, often at remote points in our coordinates of infinity and eternity. Jews obviously did not regard their Bible and Talmud as "fantasy." For them, the Scriptures, especially the first five books, were millennial objects of

study, and a portion of the Pentateuch was read each week in synagogue, thereby forming an annual cycle. The Bible and the Talmud were the basis of a national constitution, a code of laws, a way of life, at the core of acting and thinking, particularly outside the Holy Land, and imbued with the promise of a messianic future (Neugroschel, 1976, p. VIII-IX).

Anatol Rosenfeld returns to the mystical question of the Kabbalah in his essay “A Drama of Hasidism: The Dybbuk, by Sch. An-ski”, published in 1952. “The tzadik—the holy man and Hasidic master—is capable of influencing higher decisions with magical power”⁶ (Rosenfeld, 2012, p. 29, own translation) through prayer. The tzadik does not merely comment on revelation like the traditional rabbi; he is revelation itself. Rabbi Azriel of Miropol is a tzadik, and therefore the only rabbi capable of performing an exorcism on Leah. The tzadik linked to the Kabbalistic tradition embodies the magic of the Torah, —“the living incarnation of divine wisdom”⁷ (Rosenfeld, 2012, p. 34, own translation), while at the same time “the ‘fantasies’, the ‘fairytales’, the ‘fables’ in the Bible, and in the post-biblical commentaries and exegeses in the Talmud and what came after, were not really regarded as fantasy by the Jews themselves, until perhaps the Haskalah—the rational movement in nineteenth-century Judaism” (Neugroschel, 1976, p. IX). This mysticism can be observed in Chonen’s reasoning below:

CHONEN: The tzaddikim walk among us, and these saints have as their occupation scrubbing sin from human souls, to renew the soul’s perfect original brightness. But evils crowd ‘round every doorway. Clean a soul of seventy sins, polish it bright, it will come back at once even more spotted. Purify a whole generation and the next generation appears, unrepentant. And each generation grows more stiff-necked, and the tzaddikim grow fewer and weaker, and to us it seems that evil is withering the world [...]. We should not try to banish sin, but to make sin holy. Like the goldsmith with his delicate ladles, his small hot flames, his precise and cautious gestures; the way the farmer carefully, deliberately divides wheat from chaff; this is how we purify sin, in the crucibles of our souls, we purify sin and make sin holy.

HENECH: Holy sin is an impossibility.

CHONEN: God made sin.

HENECH: Not true, Chonen, sin is from the Sitra-achra, it belongs to the Other Side.

CHONEN: And who made the Other Side? The Sitra-achra is God’s Other Side. Satan is another side of God. And so Satan must be holy (Kushner, 2005, p. 25–26).

“In the fabric of the Dybbuk, the theosophical doctrine that evil (the lowest rung of good) is ‘the other side of God’ and that even in the devil there is a divine spark”⁸ (Rosenfeld, 2012, p. 28, own translation) takes on decisive importance, and perhaps for this very reason, the tzadik will ultimately fail at the end of the play.

It is in Act II that the story of a marriage becomes a horror story. It is in Fradde’s words, when he states that the world is a troubled and mysterious place, that what will become a possession by the dybbuk begins.

⁶ “O *tzadik* – o santo e o mestre hassídico – é capaz de influenciar as decisões superiores com força mágica”.

⁷ “(...) a encarnação vivente da sabedoria divina”.

⁸ “No tecido o *Dibuk* reveste-se de importância decisiva a doutrina teosófica de que o mal (degrau mais baixo do bem) é ‘o outro lado de Deus’ e que mesmo no demônio há uma fagulha divina”.

FRADDE: Souls of the righteous rest in the bright lights of Paradise, Leahlah, they're up on high, not here in Brinnitz, which is only for the living, and those who don't belong [...].

LEAH: What about the ones who have been cheated of long lives, what about the ones who die too soon? What becomes of everything they were supposed to do, the tears unshed, the happy days never spent in happiness? [...] **Fradde, blow a candle out and if it's still tall and straight you simply light it again, you don't throw it out; if a life is extinguished before its vessel has grown frail and broken, it can't be forever, its flame can be rekindled** [...] (Kushner, 2005, p. 51).

Chonen discovers that Sender has finally managed to secure a dowry for his daughter, Leah, and that she is going to be married. In a fit of rage, the student rebels against the loss of his beloved, crying out for the message that should have been for him while repeating the Name in the messenger's ear. Chonen, enraged, uses black magic to summon the demon. The lights in the synagogue go out at the moment of Chonen's death. Although the extinguishing of the candle signifies the extinguishing of Chonen's life, the candle is somehow relit.

Macbeth, when reciting about the finitude of life, compares it to the extinguishing of a candle. In an increasingly secular world, where good and evil get mixed up, life becomes a shadow in a poorly staged memoryless world. The story told by a fool is masked by losing its meaning in a world devoid of illusions. The candle as a representation of life (of the possibility of the soul's existence) is extinguished several times in Kushner's play. As in Shakespeare, there are no more illusions in the contemporary world. However, there seems to be an exchange between the extinguishing of the candle and the possibility of the Jewish demon. Leah, by inviting her dead mother to her wedding, opens a passage to the other side. Without listening to the Messenger's advice that souls always seek a body, and that there are still dark souls seeking to develop, she invites another soul to her wedding –someone they believed had died in sin. Leah knew. The idea of the existence of the demon as something that tries to harm others is pressing throughout the play. The magic of the Kabbalah in collusion with that of theater would make it possible for the tzadik to purify these souls. Jewish metaphysics reveals itself as magic, "certain rituals and formulas, meticulously repeated, always have the same consequences, conjuring spirits (or demons)"⁹ (Rosenfeld, 2021, p. 55, own translation). Thus, we see the possibility of possession by the dybbuk.

LEAH: [...] **Fradde, I want to go to the cemetery now and invite mother to come to my wedding, to wait with my father by the chuppah and lead the marital procession, and then dance with me like we did when I was very small. I've seen her, Fradde, on the Holy Days, on the Festivals, at Pesach she watches us from the cold without, hoping to be asked in... The dead will talk to you if you permit them; this martyred couple, the holy bride and bridegroom, they visit me night after night, and they were young and terribly beautiful and each was bursting with joy when they stepped under the canopy, and the music was so joyful it hid the clatter of horses' hooves, and the scent from the baking ovens was so sweet it masked the devil's stench, and the first stroke of the axe scattered his teeth across the square, and the horses' hooves tore through her dress as she ran, and they seized her veil with their hands and...** (Kushner, 2005, p. 52–53, my emphasis).

⁹ "certos rituais e fórmulas, minuciosamente repetidos, têm sempre as mesmas consequências, conjurando os espíritos (ou os demônios)".

THE MESSENGER: **Let me tell you something; I speak with a certain authority. The souls of the dead are everywhere, as you say, but souls always seek bodies, because only through the flesh can a soul purify itself. Some souls must pass through a number of bodies before they are cleansed. Sinful souls, bride, enter the bodies of beasts of the ground, birds of the air, even plants, and there, unable to achieve holiness, they await a tzaddik, who sees their plight, and sets them free. Some souls enter the bodies of infants, and by doing good in their new lives they ascend. [...] And then there are souls, troubled and dark, without a home or resting place, and these attempt to enter the body of another person, and even these are trying to ascend. [...] And such a soul is called a dybbuk** (Kushner, 2005, p. 54, my emphasis).

The dybbuk is first mentioned in the play at the end of the second act when he finally possesses Leah's body.

GITL: Did she faint at her mother's grave?
FRADDE: No, it was another grave, unmarked, and don't ask me what happened, don't ask me what happened, don't ask me what happened, it's best not to know.
[...]
NACHMAN: She's gone mad!
THE MESSENGER: A dybbuk has entered the body of the bride (Kushner, 2005, p. 61-62).

The changes in the world linked to scientific progress and its anxieties are felt throughout the play. Traveling becomes faster with the advent of the train as the mystical world loses its place as electric light is installed around the world. Without the shadows of candles, without the mystery of religion, with the death of god, the devil will cease to exist. However, superstition says that the devil is an illusionist. And in agreeing with Slavoj Žižek (2012, p. 5-6) when he says that the direct experience of reality is the decisive and determining moment of the 20th century, one can glimpse the existence of the devil in Kushner's contemporary world, that is, if we consider reality in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling away the deceptive layers of reality. Ideally, when magic ceases to exist and only reality remains, there would be no more room for superstition, but it seems to me that the opposite is true in Kushner's world. Although extreme violence exposes the "deceptive layers of reality", it is precisely the demonic illusion that masks reality, so the dark corners haunted by the flickering of impermanent candlelight will, in fact, never cease to exist.

Today, the transmission of wisdom woven into the living fabric of existence is no longer a valued practice because experiences are no longer communicable. The narrative I consider here, therefore, is close to the ancestral experience of telling and exchanging life stories and seeking to communicate them; it does not distance itself from the living experience of its narrator. History transforms suffering into text, claims Walter Benjamin (2007). Storytelling, linked to the fabric of Benjaminian experience, the weakening of *Erfahrung* in the modern capitalist world to the detriment of *Erlebnis*, outlines a reflection on the need for its reconstruction to ensure the possibility of memory, despite social disintegration. There is a link between the failure of *Erfahrung* and the end of the art of storytelling, for there seems to be an impossibility of the existence of a new form of narrativity in a world where writing (the act of writing makes memory possible) becomes implausible. The impossibility of narrative is

due to the presence of the dybbuk, which prevents the existence of remembrance (writing, turning traumatic experience into text), and without memory, the horrors of the past can always be repeated.

SENDER: Rabbi, must this boy write down everything we say?

RABBI AZRIEL: He must! Yes, absolutely, we record the nocturnal doings of God the same as the miracles and blessings He bestows; the tales of the dybbukim are as important as the legends of the tzaddikim, and as instructive. **It may be that your daughter suffers this evil impregnation simply so that we may turn her sufferings into a text—for others to study in the ages to come. Or it may be that she suffers for some other reason. Children sometimes bear the punishment for their parents' wickedness** (Kushner, 2005, p. 71, my emphasis).

THE SCRIBE: I beg your pardon, Rebbe, but last night I had bad dreams, and tonight after Shabbos prayers I found that somehow all my pens were ruined overnight, and now, when I try to write down what you say, the paper won't take the ink.

RABBI AZRIEL: Later, perhaps, we'll interpret your dreams and buy new pens and paper. It's all been written before, everything we do and say, it's all in some scroll, some codex, some tractate or holy book—Jews have merely tumbled from the pages of books, what we speak and think has all been written by the Hand of God. From whence comes our joy (Kushner, 2005, p. 83–84, my emphasis).

Haunted by Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), the mistakes of the parents truly fell upon their children, condemning them to death. The world becomes a great burden for itself. There is nothing left to narrate.

By summoning the spirit of the dead man, Nissin ben Rivka accuses Sender of breaking a promise they made to each other: their future children would marry. Rivka's son finds his beloved, but she is denied to him, for Sender does not want to give his daughter's hand to a poor student. Desperate, the student becomes a victim of Sitra-Achra and the demons that take his life. Lost and condemned to wander, his soul becomes a dybbuk, the dybbuk that possesses the soul of Leah, his beloved. The rabbis try to make a deal between death and Sender, but Rivka does not accept his side of the bargain. The dybbuk refuses to leave Leah's body, and the exorcism begins at the end of the fourth act. Rabbi Azriel orders the dybbuk to leave the bride's body, reminding him that the demon is trapped between two worlds, between good and evil. As the demon continues to refuse to leave, Azriel calls on God to help him, but what is striking is the way he addresses him, as a terrifying vulture, hastily devouring large wild animals, whose great day is near, whose day of destruction and desolation is near.¹⁰

The future, desolate and already devoid of magic, where vultures hunt and eat whatever they want, well represents Kushner's contemporary world. A world where real horrors are shown on television, where war is broadcast 24/7, where Walter Benjamin's fragile human bodies encounter Nietzschean nihilism. Sender, by choosing fortune over his word, represents the world of capital reality in which we live. The power of the devil goes beyond the

¹⁰ God Almighty, rise up from your Throne, fly as a Vulture that hastens to devour, terrible and dreadful, a leopard and a wolf, the foaming of mighty waters, whose great day is near, whose day of waste and desolation is near, Lord of the Saltpits, of the breeding-place of nettles, in the name of the Patriarchs, in the name of Matriarchs, of the martyred and the slain, in the name of the blood of the God of Wrath and Vengeance, I, Azriel ben Hadas, break every thread that binds you, spirit of the dybbukim, to the world of the living and to the body of the daughter of Channa! GO! (Kushner, 2005, p. 98).

synagogue; it is he who destroys everything in his path. Terrified, afraid of the chaotic reality that is building around them, the bride's family prefers not to move. The scribe can no longer write, and evil takes over everything.

THE SCRIBE: Rabbi, only turn the page:
the wonders of the coming age
will dwarf your shtetl magic so-
dybbuks, golems, all you know,
your writings and the words you say,
like oven ashes, swept away.
At some not-very-distant date
the martyred dead accumulate;
books of history will contain
mountain-piles of the slain (Kushner, 2005, p. 101).

History repeats itself, and this time, not as farce.

Leah dies and joins her beloved. The messenger finally delivers the message: "Boruch Dayan ho-emes"¹¹ (Kushner, 2005, p. 106). The Jewish blessing of death was what the messenger should have delivered all along. What death? The death of a future of improbabilities? The death of a world devoid of hope, terrified of its own concealed reality, sad, improbable, and, above all, impermanent.

Ghost-light: a possible conclusion

Considering Nietzschean nihilism, the dybbuk serves as a possible representation of modernity, so criticized by Kushner. By proposing the destruction of the future, the playwright loses sight of the possibility of hope. With Leah's death at the end of the play, taking into account Chonen's possession of her body, I question where the spirit or the demon goes: does it die with Leah, or does it remain in some form or place that we cannot see?

The dybbuk would serve as a representation of the modern world, a world that finds itself grappling with a resurgence of religious and superstitious beliefs that Nietzsche believed no longer existed. As the world, still in the early 20th century, became secular, it was possible to understand this new concern with moral debate. Today, almost at the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, we see a new evangelization of the world, especially in politics. Religious groups are taking over politics, trying to revive debatable Christian values disguised as a new morality, which obviously no longer has a place in contemporaneity. It is like living in an ahistorical time. This new demon, or the possibility of this new demon, is the likelihood of the prototype of an ahistorical being that can no longer explain the world. There is an isolation from dialectics, from knowledge –when it is no longer possible to understand the real world, the unreal returns as comfort. To recreate *The Dybbuk* in 1994 is to try to recover Ansky's ideology in the 1920s. Ansky's play brings to the stage reverberations of the horrors of mechanized warfare and a modernity founded on the violation of human bodies that, isolated in the world, destroying themselves, saw only their infinite fragility in a world haunted by demons.

¹¹ "Blessed be the true judged" (The Jewish blessing upon death, own translation).

Literature does not invent anything; it only retells what history informs us. Theater, in conceiving its own fictional world, creates aesthetic representations necessary to stage what needs to be shown. And often, it is through the demonic voice that one sees the evil side—or the real side—of human beings. The ghostly figures on stage bring precisely this to the scene, the anxiety of the cultures that created them, always pointing to a future that is often hopeless and already doomed to failure. By representing the invisible, one attempts to make what is not there believable, to question what has been interrogated so many times before, but the answers today are no longer satisfactory, or perhaps an answer is no longer possible. By representing the demonic figure on stage, Tony Kushner ensures an inquest that returns, just like ghosts. The enduring legacy of the dybbuk in theater and literature highlights its powerful resonance as a symbol of unresolved trauma, existential dread, and the search for redemption. Whether viewed through the lens of historical context or as a timeless exploration of human nature, the dybbuk continues to invite audiences to confront the unknown and embrace the complexity of the human experience. And perhaps, yes, this new century is the century of the dybbuk.

“The world is full of mysteries, and people never see them” (Kushner, 2005, p. 20).

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