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Burke's Poetic Metaphor and Obama as Poet

Devon S. Cook

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Burke's Poetic Metaphor and Obama as Poet

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At the end of *Permanence and Change*, Kenneth Burke calls for a new orientation toward life and social action which he refers to as “the poetic metaphor” (261). This essay connects Burke’s briefly used poetic metaphor with his theories on the use of “poetic” language in the essay “Semantic and Poetic Meaning.” What results from this synthesis is a critical tool for rhetorical analysis which allows for the discussion of style as a vehicle for communication about ethics and morals in public discourse. Obama’s *The Audacity of Hope* is used as the example of a text which uses “poetic” language in order to discuss moral and ethical issues in a national arena. Obama ultimately dramatizes his own synthesis of values, putting himself in the position of a trusted intermediary. This analysis provides clarity on Burke’s thinking at the end of *Permanence and Change* and helps us understand his contribution to the study of rhetoric and cooperation.

Keywords: Burke, Obama, poetic metaphor, poetic ideal

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page i

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements iii

Table of Contents iv

Burke’s Poetic Metaphor and Obama as Poet 1

The Initial Response 4

Burke’s Poetic Metaphor 8

Obama as Poet 15

Conclusion 21

Works Cited 24

Burke's Poetic Metaphor and Obama as Poet

In his conclusion to *Permanence and Change*, Kenneth Burke calls for a shift in point of view, a new orientation “for the shaping of our attitude toward the universe and history,” which he refers to on and off as a “poetic metaphor” (261). This metaphor, as Burke frames it, would describe each citizen as a “poetic or dramatic man [or woman],” communicating and appealing to fellow citizens in the same way a poet communicates with his or her audience (264-65). Burke's argument in *P&C* is that all of human social interaction can and should be understood using this metaphor. He claims that a view of public discourse through the poetic metaphor would emphasize “the *participant* aspect of action rather than its *competitive* aspect” (266), offering a needed corrective to the competitive culture of capitalism. He thought that if people went through the effort of “translating” their perspectives into the ethically selected means of poetry, the resulting attitude “would make for greater patience” (265). Through this poetic metaphor, Burke envisions a peaceful, though lively public dialogue in which participants share their individual perspectives through the “[morally] weighted vocabulary” of poetic expression (178).

Burke claims much in *P&C* about the potential benefits of adopting his poetic metaphor, but offers little explanation as to why or how these benefits would follow. Among other things, Burke claims that the poetic metaphor “would give us invaluable hints for describing modes of practical action,” that it “can include” and “go beyond” all other metaphors for man as a social being, and that it is “the ultimate metaphor for discussing the universe and man's relations to it” (263). He offers hints as to how these benefits will be realized, but on the whole, *P&C* gives us only the general idea of Burke's vision, with gaps between the overarching concept and the result he anticipates.

Burke's essay, "Semantic and Poetic Meaning," can be seen as an explanation of poetic communication which fills in some of these gaps. In this essay, Burke places all discourse within a range between "poetic" and "semantic" ideals, with the "semantic ideal" focused on accurately naming and describing the universe through a attitudinally neutral vocabulary (141), while the "poetic ideal" seeks to achieve a "maximum complexity of weighting" (159), which foregrounds moral judgments and attitudes. Burke's argument is that the poetic ideal works better for encouraging cooperation and communication because it addresses the moral and ethical motivations which ultimately determine action. He also argues that style matters in the pursuit of a poetic ideal because only poetic language carries the "weight" necessary to pass judgment and eventually motivate others to action. Here Burke provides a description of the type of communication encouraged by the poetic metaphor, then gives an explanation for how this poetic language results in an emphasis on participation and cooperation.

In order to examine this critical/theoretical apparatus, I've chosen Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* as an example text. As someone who has succeeded in both art and politics, Obama represents a rare and valuable example of a Burkean poet in American public discourse. His first book, *Dreams from My Father*, is written in the literary style of a memoir, and although it didn't sell well when it was originally published in 1995, it became a bestseller over a decade later during Obama's emergence into America's national consciousness ("Obama's Books"). Also a bestseller, *The Audacity of Hope* was published a few months before Obama announced his candidacy for president and serves as an ideal example of Burke's poetic metaphor because it has been praised for its style, even by those who disagree with the author's politics¹. Thus *The Audacity of Hope* mirrors Obama's own position in between the realms of poetic and political

¹ See the section "The Initial Response" below.

discourse, offering a unique opportunity to examine the role of poetic language in American politics.

Although Burke's "poetic metaphor" is almost always touched on by critics who treat *P&C* as a whole², it has received little attention in and of itself as a tool for rhetorical analysis. My goal in this essay is to develop Burke's poetic metaphor as a concept and critical tool, using two of his texts, *Permanence and Change* and "Semantic and Poetic Meaning." Not only does this analysis add to scholarship on Burke, it also demonstrates the potential of Burke's concept for helping us understand the role of aesthetics—specifically literature—in American social life. Burke gives us an interpretation of Obama's writing that highlights Obama's poetic phrasing of moral and ethical positions, and helps explain the function of the seemingly contradictory positions Obama presents within *The Audacity of Hope*. Ultimately, it becomes apparent that Obama's book is able to synthesize a variety of perspectives and cross political boundaries through poetic language that foregrounds the battle between conflicting moral attitudes. Through the poetic dramatization of this battle, Obama is able to provide what Burke describes as a "perspective atop all the conflicts of attitude" ("Semantic" 148) which is integral to development of his political ethos.

My analysis takes me first through an examination of the initial public response to *The Audacity of Hope*, a response which highlights its unexpected style and approach, while also showing how, even though the book sold incredibly well, its style and approach were not seen as

² Burke's "poetic metaphor" has been recognized by most critics as a culminating idea of *P&C*, while also being connected to a wide variety of critical perspectives. Hawhee uses the term as evidence of Nietzsche's influence on Burke (139-40). Rueckert uses it as an example of Burke's use of poetry for insights into human behavior (51-52). Blakesley uses it as evidence of Burke's "pragmatic rhetoric," characterizing Burke's comic frame as "the healthiest of poetic metaphors" (91). These uses of "poetic metaphor" range widely in emphasis, and there are many more ways in which it has been contextualized; in short, the term has been highly theoretically malleable, probably due to Burke's simple and somewhat vague definition, along with his abandonment of the poetic metaphor (as a load-bearing concept) after *P&C*.

beneficial to Obama's imminent presidential campaign. Then I provide a detailed description of Burke's poetic metaphor as illuminated by Burke's theories on the definition and rhetorical function of poetic language, connecting comments made by book reviewers about *The Audacity of Hope* to specific qualities Burke attributes to poetic language. I then launch into a close reading of Obama's book, which highlights the function of poetic language as it contributes to Obama's campaign rhetoric of cooperation and change. Finally, I offer some conclusions on the implications of this analysis for the role of poetic forms of discourse within American society.

The Initial Response

On October 17, 2004—four months before announcing his run for president of the United States—Barack Obama saw his 350-page campaign biography, *The Audacity of Hope*, hit bookstore shelves. A little over two weeks later, the book registered at number two on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list, having already sold over 180,000 copies (Bosman).

Although Obama was already somewhat of a national celebrity and had appeared on national television twice to support his book, the crushing success of *The Audacity of Hope* far exceeded the expectations of those in the publishing industry, leading Julie Bosman of the *New York Times* to label it a “publishing stunner.” The memoir-polemic hybrid continued to appear on bestseller lists throughout Obama's presidential campaign, selling roughly 540,000 copies between January and September of 2008 alone (“Obama's Books”).

Obama's success as a writer sets him apart as an author-politician. His two volumes—*The Audacity of Hope* and *Dreams from My Father*—have combined to sell over 4.5 million copies, more than double the total sales for twenty-three books by Jimmy Carter, who is his next closest competitor in terms of sales (McNamee; “Political Authors”). By all accounts, Obama is the bestselling American politician of the last fifty years.

In the wake of such unexpected (and continued) success, it is strange that so little attention has been paid to *The Audacity of Hope* as a rhetorical artifact; yet when the book was published, it was treated as highly rhetorical, a campaign biography intended to bolster Obama's already ascendant image. In their August 2007 review of *The Audacity of Hope* for the *U.S. News & World Report*, Dan Gilgoff and Kenneth T. Walsh wrote, "Obama possesses a rare gift among published presidential aspirants. He can really write. Sure, his prose suffers from the same lack of serious policy prescriptions that ail his debate appearances. But Obama is such a keen observer of modern political life, and such a good storyteller, that you don't much care." As will be discussed further below, Gilgoff and Walsh's focus on Obama's writing style is common among those who encountered *The Audacity of Hope* before the 2008 election. For those involved in the national political scene, it was Obama's ability as a "good writer" that stood out in his book, not the genius of his post-partisan maneuvering. Their claims about Obama's style—that it is engaging, interesting, and lacking specifics—place *The Audacity of Hope* squarely within Burke's poetic metaphor, highlighting Obama's "poetic" appeal.

Although *The Audacity of Hope* was an overnight success from a book-publishing standpoint, it perplexed the majority of critics who reviewed the book in nationally syndicated newspapers and political magazines. Far from familiar with Obama's persona as a first-term senator, these early reviewers did not see the seeds of a successful presidential campaign in Obama's book. Gary Hart—a former senator and a Democrat—wrote in his December 2006 review for *The New York Times* that *The Audacity of Hope* is "missing that strategic sense," or "an inherent understanding of how the framework of [Obama's] thinking and the tides of the times fit together." He labels Obama as "a figure of national interest, curiosity and some undefined hope" (14). Among reviews written before Obama announced his run for president,

Hart's comments are measured but somewhat representative. Those reviewers with conservative audiences roundly criticized both Obama's initial equivocation on issues of policy and his consistently mainstream-liberal conclusions (Levin; Ferguson), while more liberal reviewers chose to label his lack of concrete agenda as youthful idealism (Hart 14; Scialabba 28). Even reviewers with no concrete ties to either the Left or the Right acknowledged his lack of a specific program for America's government and military operations (Duffy; Gray 41). Across the board, there is a sense that Obama's vision is broad, if at times didactic, while his youth and idealism are refreshing though probably detrimental to his chances of being elected president.

There are, of course, many aspects of *The Audacity of Hope* upon which these reviewers disagreed. One praised his writing as being "free of the usual and tiresome political clichés," while another says just the opposite, describing his political analysis as "little more than an endless barrage of clichés" (Duffy; Levin 75). In principle and on matters of policy, the reviews are divided consistently along party lines, with Democrats praising Obama's "reasonably wide and thoughtful, if occasionally predictable" insights and Republicans decrying the "crudity" of his political observations (Hart 14; Ferguson 29).

Most of the reviewers seemed intent on using *The Audacity of Hope* as the incidental battleground upon which to continue preexisting political debates, as can be expected; however, there is one positive thing about Obama's book that they did seem to agree on: Obama's talent—especially among politicians—as a writer. Obama's claim that he did indeed write the book himself was legitimized by the elegant prose of *Dreams From My Father*, having been written over a decade before the 2008 election. One reviewer openly extols Obama's "easy eloquence," arguing that "One simply has to quote him; paraphrases just don't do him justice" (Duffy). Another, less impressed reviewer admits that, despite its many flaws, the book is "crisply

written, and the personal stories that shape each chapter are often telling and interesting” (Levin 75). *The Weekly Standard* contributor Andrew Ferguson even made “The Literary Obama” the title of his review, arguing that Obama seems much more relevant as a literary figure than as a competent politician (28). Throughout all the reviews there is a consistent respect for Obama’s writing ability—not just in his command of the English language, but in his ability to write elegant, engaging, and sometimes passionate prose.

The ways in which these critics initially responded to *The Audacity of Hope* serve to highlight its rhetorical idiosyncrasy—its violation and repurposing of genre conventions. Campaign biographies—ostensibly “image makers” whose “sole purpose is to promote [a candidate’s public image]” (Miles ix)—usually focus on establishing the “facts” of a candidate’s background in order to establish a presidential pedigree and/or the viability of a future agenda. With many of the questions about Obama’s background covered in *Dreams from My Father*, *The Audacity of Hope* seems to miss the mark by ignoring issues of specific policy, instead embarking on what are characterized as “long, tortured passages of chin-pulling and brow-furrowing” which seem unnecessary and unrelated to Obama’s “mainstream” Democratic conclusions (Ferguson 28). With a critical audience thirsty for the specifics of Obama’s political background and agenda, *The Audacity of Hope* delivered little of either and thus incurred accusations of immaturity and idealism.

The implication in most of these reviews is that *The Audacity of Hope* sold well because it was well written—that the book succeeded on merits of its literary qualities in spite of its political deficiencies. According to Kenneth Burke, it is exactly these qualities—like imagery, tone, and especially metaphor—that allow Obama to engage effectively in a different type of

discourse about morals, values, and ideals which has the power to cross boundaries and inspire action.

Burke's Poetic Metaphor

In *Permanence and Change*, Burke claims that “the ultimate metaphor for discussing the universe and man’s relations to it must be the poetic metaphor” (263). This is a bold statement, which immediately raises questions about what Burke means by the term “poetic metaphor.” Unlike the way he treats many of his other key terms in *P&C*, Burke seems to almost stumble upon his wording, first calling for a “a purposive or teleological metaphor³ (the metaphor of human action or poetry)” which he quickly begins referring to as “the poetic metaphor” (260-61). In a succeeding passage he offers more clarity to the term, describing it as “the metaphor of the poetic or dramatic man,” as opposed to other metaphors for man, like Nietzsche’s “man as warrior” or Rousseau’s “signer of the social contract” (263-64), but for the most part, Burke treats the term “poetic metaphor” as self-evident and provides little by way of thorough definition.

This lack of explication suggests that Burke’s poetic metaphor is precisely that: a metaphor which makes “*men as communicants*” into men as poets (267). An attempt to elaborate on the metaphor might sound something like this: since every action that we take as humans serves also to present our way of life and perspective to others, whether through language or through other less obvious symbols, it is advantageous to think of humans as poets or actors who perform our lives for others and ourselves, consciously and unconsciously “appealing” to others along the way. Once understood in this way, the poetic metaphor embodies a basic but

³ By “purposive or teleological,” Burke is referring to an orientation (in his sense of the word) which is fundamentally “*ethical*” and different from the “*logical*” orientation of science. Here he is borrowing terminology from a previous chapter, “Causality and Communication” (170).

fundamental shift in perspective, displacing the motives of competition and survival which Burke saw as forming the basis for social interaction in a capitalist society (261), and substituting them for the unavoidably ethical and essentially human motive to make the universe make sense in a “*creative, assertive, synthetic act*” (259). Such a metaphor, as Burke points out, is “purposive or teleological” (260), placing us all on stage or behind the poet’s desk, turning all communication into a “*problem of appeal*” (264), as we attempt to share our personal “universe-building” with others (250).

As for Burke’s claim that the poetic metaphor is not merely a corrective, but also the “ultimate metaphor,” George and Selzer point to Burke’s other statements in *P&C* which compare poetry to life, namely that “[i]n a sense all action is poetic” (215), and “we are all poets . . . Indeed, life has been likened to the writing of a poem, though some people write their poems on paper, and others carve theirs out of jugular veins” (76). They argue that *P&C* “theorizes the merger of rhetoric, poetics, and everyday life” (110), suggesting that for Burke the poetic metaphor could easily go beyond a metaphor for communication and extend into a metaphor for life. George and Selzer further claim that if Burke is right, and poetry is “*our ultimate motive, the situation common to all*” (*P&C* 259), then “Burke’s aesthetic perspective was available to all, not just to the cultural elite” (138). In other words, the poetic metaphor—if indeed based on the most basic of human motivations—has the power to provide a perspective which encompasses all of humanity and gives us the common ground needed to understand each other.

Yet for its power to provide an all-encompassing view on social action, the poetic metaphor, as I’ve described it, fails to say much about what communication would actually look like in a poetic paradigm. Admittedly, it would be unfair to expect Burke to provide such a

description in *P&C*, simply because his poetic metaphor operates at such a high level of abstraction. Even as Burke asserts that “the poetic metaphor would give us invaluable hints for describing modes of practical action” (264), he also recognizes that a “completely systematized ‘poetic psychology’ should form the subject of another work” (266). Thus, we are left at the end of *P&C* with Burke’s call for a poetic perspective which is both powerfully suggestive and practically underdeveloped. Burke contests that the poetic metaphor has great potential for encouraging cooperation and reducing competition, stating that it “has the advantage of emphasizing the *participant* aspect of action rather than its *competitive* aspect” (266), that “[t]he ultimate goal of the poetic metaphor would be a society in which the participant aspect of action attained its maximum expression” (269-70), and that citizens of such a society would find success by “acquiescing to its many non-competitive ways of being ‘right’” (268). Yet we are left to ask the same question Burke asked Malcom Cowley in a 1934 letter after he described *P&C* as “an elaborate plea for the poetic metaphor”: namely, “What next?” (209).

In “Semantic and Poetic Meaning,” originally published in 1938, Burke takes up a “rhetorical defense of rhetoric,” arguing that “the ideal of a purely ‘neutral’ vocabulary, free of emotional weightings, attempts to make a totality out of a fragment” (138). In the process of defending this thesis, Burke theorizes on the nature of language, differentiating between “poetic” and “semantic” ideals which I believe echo the poetic and mechanistic metaphors he introduced in the conclusion to *P&C*. He describes the “semantic ideal” as a concept of communication which seeks the “elimination of a weighted vocabulary from the start” (149), with “the aim *to evolve a vocabulary that gives the name and address of every event in the universe*” (141). Here we see Burke define semantics not as the pursuit of language that is more accurate, but as the pursuit of language which is free from subjective moral and ethical judgment. Although Burke

claims that some morally neutral terms exist—his example is the word “shoe” (166)—he also holds that there are terms which can never be neutral, especially when we use words to describe other human beings:

On the other hand, when you have isolated your individual by proper utilizing of the postal process [the person’s “name and address”], you have not at all adequately encompassed his “meaning.” He means one thing to his family, another to his boss, another to his underlings, another to his creditors, etc. All such meanings are *real* enough, since at every point people act towards him on the basis of these meanings. . . . But though this kind of meaning *impinges* upon semantic meaning, it cannot be encompassed with perfect fidelity to the *semantic ideal*. You can’t give the names and addresses of all these subtle significances.

(142-43)

Thus, while it may be possible to give a person a name, to locate where she lives, to describe her hair and eye color, her weight, her shoe size, or her blood type, it is not possible to describe in unequivocal terms the subjective attitudes which are attached to her name by those who know her. Burke argues that the semantic ideal “would eliminate the *attitudinal* ingredient from its vocabulary” (150), and while he says that this sanitized language can produce its own kind of knowledge (167), he also insists that a “comprehensive vocabulary, for social purposes, will persistently outrage the norms of the semantic ideal” (159). His reasoning here is that any system of language which seeks to remove moral and ethical attitudes always “*assumes* an organization” in advance (140); it pushes motives, attitudes, and judgments of the speaker into the background, creating a linguistic space where everything can have a proper name and address.

The “poetic ideal,” on the other hand seeks “exposure to the *maximum profusion* of weightings” (149); instead of attempting to remove the “attitudinal ingredient” from language, it foregrounds the attitudes of the speaker. For Burke, the poetic ideal seeks to attain a “fully moral act” through language that freely expresses moral judgment. This language necessarily “has a *style*—and this style is an integral aspect of its meaning. . . . The style selected [by the speaker/poet] will mold the character of the selector” (148). To use Burke’s example, the phrase “Faugh! a chair!” (143) is expressed with a certain style, which betrays some sort of judgment about the chair, which in turn suggests something about the speaker’s moral relationship to it. Thus, the “style” of weighted language serves to assign moral attitudes to both the speaker and the spoken-about, turning “poetic” or “beautiful” writing into writing that assigns value to its subject matter by virtue of its stylistic elements: imagery, metaphor, repetition, voice, etc. Then when conflict emerges, Burke says, the poetic ideal would create a “*heaping up* of all these emotional factors, playing them off against one another, and seeking to make this active participation itself a major ingredient” (148). Burke claims here that resolving social conflict requires not the “total assertion” of a single poetic utterance, but the knowledge “attained through the battle” of many poetic utterances, a battle which, once survived, “will define situations with sufficient realistic accuracy to prepare an *image* for action” in the minds of individual citizens (148, 149, 150).

One seen in this light, the connections between the poetic metaphor and the poetic ideal become numerous. In the prologue to *P&C*, written by Burke in 1953, he describes himself as “concerned with thoughts of a Joining” at the time he wrote the book, and he claims that this led him to a focus on “joining in terms of *communication*, which in turn was conceived specifically as ideal *poetic* communication” (liii). This description most clearly refers to the last chapter in

P&C, “The Poetry of Action,” where Burke introduces his poetic metaphor. But his use of the word “ideal” in the prologue is an addition from “Semantic and Poetic Meaning,” not from *P&C*. He goes on to say that he had been “mulling over the possibility of a *neutralized* language,” and “could not help seeing that Poetry uses to perfection a *weighted* language” (liii). The terms “neutral” and “weighted” are central to Burke’s description of language in “Semantic and Poetic Meaning,” and they also can be found serving a similar function in the chapter “Causality and Communication” in *P&C*. Under the heading “Two Aspects of Speech,” Burke discusses the “scientific hopes for a neutral vocabulary” (178), to which he counters, “But speech in its essence is not neutral. Far from aiming at suspended judgment, the spontaneous speech of a people is loaded with judgments” (176-77). Burke also describes this weighted, spontaneous speech as essentially moral and poetic in this section (178), but his explanation is brief and incomplete. In “Semantic and Poetic Meaning,” we see his attempts to clarify and solidify the distinction he wanted to make between neutral (semantic) and weighted (poetic) language, along with his call for a poetic metaphor for communication which strives for an ideally poetic vocabulary. While there is no doubt that “Semantic and Poetic Meaning” was highly influenced by Burke’s contact with contemporary semanticists and other critics (see George and Selzer 190-93), I would argue that the essay is also a direct outgrowth of his thinking from *Permanence and Change*.

Although “Semantic and Poetic Meaning” presents the most robust treatment of what Burke saw as the two central functions of language, the semantic/poetic division continues to resurface in his subsequent writing. In later essays, Burke makes similar divisions between “poetic” language and other types of language with the express purpose of collapsing these divisions in order to highlight the poetic aspects of *all* forms of discourse. In “Terministic

Screens,” he makes the division between “scientific” and “dramatistic” approaches to the nature of language, stating that “[a] ‘scientific’ approach begins with questions of *naming*, or *definition*,” while a “dramatistic” approach treats language as “attitudinal or hortatory . . . stressing language as an aspect of ‘action’ that is, as ‘symbolic action’” (44). Defined in this manner, the scientific approach to language is very closely related to the semantic ideal, the only difference being that one approaches language with the expectation that it names and defines, while the other seeks to make language into a symbolic system which is concerned exclusively with naming and defining. Burke breaks down the scientific/dramatistic binary by showing that all language is selective, and thus biased and essentially persuasive (45).

Using the same Derridian tactic as before, Burke approaches the traditional divide between “Rhetoric and Poetics,” in his essay of the same name, by arguing that the two terms can never be fully separated. Here he defines “the Poetic” as “Art for Art’s Sake,” or “symbolic action undertaken in and for itself,” which he contrasts with “the Rhetorical”: “deliberative and forensic oratory as discussed in Aristotle,” used “for purposes of cooperation and competition” (295-96). After using numerous examples of art which is rhetorical and persuasion which is poetic, Burke presents his conclusion: “although some works lend themselves more readily to treatment in terms of Rhetoric than in terms of Poetics, or vice versa, even a work of pure science can be shown to have some Rhetorical or Poetic ingredients” (302). Thus we see Burke returning again to the semantic ideal, this time with the assertion that language will always be beautiful in some way, or persuasive, or both.

Based on his insistent deconstruction of these binaries, it might seem counterproductive to use Burke’s semantic and poetic ideals as the basis for an analysis of Obama’s writing. Yet, while Burke repeatedly insists that semantic meaning is inextricably tied to poetic meaning in

practice, his primary focus in “Semantic and Poetic Meaning” is on the pursuit of a semantic *ideal*, an abstract category of language which is possible to imagine, even if it is impossible to realize (“Semantic” 139). Burke thinks it unethical to pursue the semantic ideal because doing so will inevitably obscure the true biases and attitudes behind the resulting discourse, “keeping us without, providing a kind of quietus in advance” (“Semantic” 166-67), which ignores the true motivations and attitudes that create conflict.

Burke claims that by instead allowing these attitudes to “battle” within a poetic paradigm of communication, individuals can “prepare an *image* for action,” which allows them to escape the sometimes esoteric, binary-by-nature, social and political rhetoric that relies solely on “rational” argument to prescribe programs for human action. While the “semantic ideal would attempt to *get a description* by the *elimination* of attitude,” the “poetic ideal would attempt to *attain a full moral act* by attaining a perspective *atop all the conflicts of attitude*” (147-48). Burke is adamant that true persuasive power comes by bringing conflicting moral attitudes together and allowing the audience to *feel* the “rightness” of a speaker’s conclusions.

Obama as Poet

The Audacity of Hope seems to fall right in between Burke’s poetic and semantic ideals. Obama first states that the topic of his book is “how we might begin the process of changing our politics and our civic life” (9), but in the next paragraph he modifies his mission statement to

personal reflections on those values and ideals that have led me to public life, some thoughts on the ways that our current political discourse unnecessarily divides us, and my own best assessment—based on my experience as a senator and lawyer, husband and father, Christian and skeptic—of the ways we can ground our politics in the notion of the common good. (9)

With his first statement of purpose, Obama has already departed from the usual purpose of campaign biography—at least up until the 1980s—of presenting the “favorable characteristics” of candidates by ensuring that they had the proper background and values which would be “beneficial to the American people” (Miles ix). In many ways, the success of *Dreams From My Father* and extensive research by the media free him up to do this; his origins and lifestyle were already publicly accessible and he no longer needed to defend himself against anonymity. But the “how” of the change he is advocating is indeed missing from *The Audacity of Hope*. He even claims he doesn’t know “exactly how to do it” (9). Rather, as the passage above indicates, *The Audacity of Hope* is primarily a descriptive project, describing both the state of “current political discourse” and the process by which the writer himself arrived at a perspective which could “ground our politics in the notion of the common good.” Obama’s book thus has both semantic and poetic aims: to describe the state of American politics, and to tell the story of the writer’s moral development on key political issues.

Ferguson, in his aforementioned review of *The Audacity of Hope*, criticizes Obama for what Joe Klein of *Time Magazine* calls “excruciatingly judicious on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-handedness,” stating that “[o]n one practical issue after another, at the end of long, tortured passages of chin-pulling and brow-furrowing . . . there’s never a chance that Obama will come down on any side other than the conventionally liberal views of the Democratic party mainstream. It turns out that much of his on-the-one-hand judiciousness is little more than a rhetorical strategy” (28). Ferguson’s criticism shows a misjudgment of both Obama’s stated intention and the expectations of a nationwide audience that had already made *The Audacity of Hope* a #1 best seller. To be fair, Ferguson did not misjudge his own audience—Republican conservatives who expect him to be critical of a mainstream Democrat—but, according to Burke,

Obama's "rhetorical strategy" would be ideal for crossing boundaries and inspiring action. What on the one hand might be labeled as equivocation, might on the other hand be seen as an effort to dramatize the author's conclusions by taking the reader "through the battle" of poetic influences which have shaped the author's perspective.

Take a phrase from the first chapter "Republicans and Democrats" as an example. Here Obama accuses contemporary politicians of "political gerrymandering," diagnosing them with a case of "arrested development" (36). He then praises politicians of the past like George Kennan and Bobby Kennedy for their less "abstract" approach. Then he ends the paragraph with a few sentences which seem to describe their worldview: "War might be hell and still the right thing to do. Economies could collapse despite the best laid plans. People could work hard all their lives and still lose everything" (36). Not only are these sentences good examples of what Burke would call "weighted" language—as all sentences are to some extent—they are also intentionally weighted in ways that foreground moral attitudes about subjects like war and economics. By calling war "hell" and "the right thing to do," Obama evokes a set of moral assumptions that are linked to religious ideology and common sense philosophy. The words themselves imply that there is a knowable "right thing to do," but even more importantly, they are phrased in the recognizable vocabulary and rhythm of everyday speech which is shared by a group of people who espouse these kinds of moral assumptions.

This weighted vocabulary then becomes a voice for a certain orientation toward life and toward others—but not necessarily Obama's own orientation. Even within *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama shows much less certainty about "the right thing to do" than our sample sentence implies. Near the end of a lengthy discussion on the role of the United States internationally, Obama recounts a week spent traveling through Israel where he "pondered the possible futility of

believing that [the Israeli/Palestinian] conflict might somehow end in our time, or that America, for all its power, might have any lasting say over the course of the world” (322). There is an obvious contrast between the uncertainty expressed in this passage and the certainty expressed in “War might be hell and still the right thing to do.” One could argue that the uncertain statement better represents Obama’s actual position on war and foreign policy, but more importantly, it highlights the way in which Obama dramatizes the “battle” between conflicting moral or ethical assumptions. Not only does he present different viewpoints in conflict, but he presents them with a *style* that is necessary for communicating those viewpoints across political, religious, and social boundaries. His treatment of war in the style of moral certainty foregrounds the moral certainty assumed by that particular orientation, bringing the assumption itself into discussion and allowing Obama to validate this moral certainty, at least in that particular moment, as an assumption he can ascribe to. He then deliberately dramatizes another, conflicting perspective through similarly styled language, bringing the two moral attitudes into conflict. Burke describes the battle between poetic influences as a battle from separate sources (“Semantic” 149), but in the *Audacity of Hope*, Obama presents his own dramatization of the conflict between certain moral and ethical attitudes within a single work, using an “on-the-one-hand judiciousness” that enacts the moral journey of the author, resulting in “a perspective *atop all the conflicts of attitude.*”

Yet there are other points in *The Audacity of Hope* where Obama communicates a much more direct moral attitude through the use of poetic language. In the chapter entitled “The World Beyond Our Borders,” Obama begins with a series of narratives, two of them personal and one historical. Obama first shares memories from his childhood in Indonesia, with recognizable historical events and figures interspersed throughout. He then gives a brief history of US foreign

relations and recounts his visit to Iraq as a senator before getting into any specifics about contemporary US foreign policy. Rather than approach the subject semantically—trying to argue the “facts” about Indonesia, US history, or the reconstruction going on in Iraq—Obama states outright, “I don’t presume to have this grand strategy in my hip pocket. But I know what I believe, and I’d suggest a few things that the American people should be able to agree on” (303). By taking the approach of “belief” rather than “strategy,” Obama takes a risk by relying heavily on his own ethos—which many argued he had little of, being so young and relatively new to politics—but at the same time he takes himself out of any supposedly objective discussion on the subject, stressing instead the values and beliefs he believes he shares with the majority of Americans.

Obama uses the narratives at the beginning of the chapter not only to build his ethos as a thoughtful and internationally experienced individual, but also to practice a Burkean form of poetic rhetoric through the use of style. As he relates his experiences in Indonesia, he often inserts descriptions of experiences, places, or people that have a distinctly literary feel. His description the Jakarta he experienced as a child provides an effective example:

Jakarta was still a sleepy backwater in those days, with few buildings over four stories high, cycle rickshaws outnumbering cars, the city center and wealthier sections of town—with their colonial elegance and lush, well-tended lawns—quickly giving way to clots of small villages with unpaved roads and open sewers, dusty markets, and shanties of mud and brick and plywood and corrugated iron that tumbled down gentle banks to murky rivers where families bathed and washed laundry like pilgrims in the Ganges. (273)

This passage exhibits a variety of easily recognizable poetic devices, from simple personification (“sleepy backwater”) to a more subtle rhythm of “shanties of mud and brick and plywood and corrugated iron” which seems to tumble off the tongue as the shanties metaphorically tumble down the banks of the river. While many wrote off this literary quality as merely a pleasant surprise coming from a politician, Burke’s poetic metaphor provides a lens through which Obama’s writing becomes more than simply beautiful. Obama’s description of Jakarta is purposefully peaceful: a “sleepy backwater” where shanties “tumble down gentle banks” to a river which is compared to the Ganges during pilgrimage. This description contrasts sharply with Obama’s description of Jakarta’s development after he returned to America, as he writes about “a metropolis of almost nine million souls, with skyscrapers, slums, smog, and nightmare traffic” where, as a result the Suharto regime’s power, “[a]rrests and torture of dissidents were common, a free press nonexistent, elections a mere formality” (276). His explicit point in providing this contrast is to argue that the United States played a part in Jakarta’s growth and the helped create some of the problems that followed. While much of his poetic argument is made through the use of obvious “god” and “devil” terms like “families” and “torture,” Obama also approaches his descriptions with two distinct strategies. The Jakarta of his childhood is described with rich, thick detail intended to create a picture in the reader’s mind, while the Jakarta of subsequent years is described mostly with statistics and summaries of political and military regimes, in the terms of economics and politics (276-78). One writing style presents Obama as a poet engaging in a “*creative, assertive, synthetic act*” which emphasizes the author’s nostalgia for a peaceful past, while the other obscures the Obama’s presence as author, depicting a dehumanized, moral-less city.

This sort of textual analysis looks a lot like literary criticism, and I think that is exactly the point Burke wants to make in *P&C*. His argument was for the inclusion of poetic language in public, even political discourse. As he put it, “Is not the civic process everywhere marked by acts of ingratiation and justification quite analogous to the motivations of art? Is not the relation between individual and group greatly illumined by reference to the corresponding relation between writer and audience?” (*P&C* 265). Within this metaphor, *The Audacity of Hope* becomes an attempt by Obama to justify himself to American voters by appealing to them through poetic language. From Burke’s perspective, Obama is taking his reader “through drama” to “observations that are as accurate, in the realistic charting of human situations, as any ideal semantic formula” (“Semantic” 159). Later in “Semantic and Poetic Meaning,” Burke added that poetic discourse prepares an “*image* for action,” which he argues is more powerful in motivating people to action—because it draws upon their most deeply held beliefs—than the “anesthetic” programs laid out by the semantic ideal (“Semantic” 150). Many criticized Obama’s campaign slogan, “Change we can believe in,” for its apparent vagueness; but in Burke’s philosophy the message was perfectly clear on an emotional, moral, and even aesthetic level as an “image for action,” which embodied the morals, values, and ideals of the Obama campaign. In the end, it is Obama’s style that carried the day.

Conclusion

In many ways, *The Audacity of Hope* provides the perfect test case for Burke’s poetic metaphor. It is a political document meant to sway the minds of voters, yet it comes from a man who had already made his name as the author of a literary memoir; thus it is both overtly persuasive and deliberately poetic. But it also matters that Obama wrote a book, instead of directing a film or acting in a play. As Burke himself was heavily involved in literary criticism

throughout the 1930s (see George and Selzer 6-57), and having completed his own novel in 1932, it is understandable that his focus would be on the language of poetry and literature. The way Burke defines (or doesn't define) his poetic metaphor in *P&C* allows for a much broader range of communication than just words on a page, but his discussion of poetic and semantic language restricts my analysis to words and writing.

Using Obama as an example of Burke's theory also highlights the enormous effort required to produce proper "poetic" communication. In his analysis of Burke and Obama, James Klumpp describes Obama's rhetorical approach as a dialectical merger of "synthetic opposites, the pairs of terms tracked by Burke—such as positive and ultimate terms, identification and division, merger and division, consubstantiality and identity, and permanence and change" (83-84). Klumpp argues that Obama successfully communicated a message during his initial presidential campaign that was somewhere in between the extreme ends of each of these dialectical pairs. He also argues that after Obama was elected, he ceased to practice the same kind of dialectical negotiation which had characterized his campaign rhetoric. Although Klumpp doesn't weigh in on why this might be the case, one obvious conclusion would be that the sort of dialectical negotiation he describes—which is not very different from Burke's description of a battle between poetic utterances—requires enormous effort on the part of the writer. Klumpp's primary examples of successful dialectical transcendence are passages from *The Audacity of Hope* and Obama's inauguration speech, while his example of the president's failed attempt at synthesis comes from a town hall meeting at a high school in Wisconsin. The major difference between these two situations is the prepared nature of the book and the speech as opposed to the unscripted dialogue of the town hall meeting. Both the speech and the book are full of carefully crafted, morally weighted, poetic language, while his comments in the town hall discussion are

understandably less polished. As Burke points out in *P&C*, we tend to automatically communicate in the terms of our own orientation, developing a “trained incapacity” to see things from (much less communicate things to) another point of view. Breaking outside of our own orientation, whether through poetic language, dialectical synthesis, or any other strategy is hard work and will often require preparation in advance.

Finally, the view of social life and American democracy provided by Burke’s poetic metaphor offers insight into the persuasive function of literature and other forms of art in American society. When he describes the poetic metaphor as “emphasizing the *participant* aspect of action,” Burke assumes a social environment where different perspectives are allowed to participate. Thus the successful operation of the metaphor depends upon a society like America’s where people are allowed to speak in weighted language that foregrounds the moral assumptions of any orientation they choose; and alternatively, if Burke is correct and experiencing the battle of poetic influences is required in order for each individual to gain “a perspective *atop all the conflicts of attitude*,” then the synthesis of perspectives in a society’s social consciousness also requires freedom of artistic expression. In this sense, the freedom to produce poetry is also the freedom to encounter and synthesize a variety of perspectives both as individuals and as groups; it is the freedom to call for social change on a moral or ethical level. Perhaps this explains why, in the advent of a totalitarian government, the artists are so quickly silenced.

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