Kenneth Burke’s Poetic Metaphor and Obama as Poet

On October 17, 2014—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 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” (Gilgoff and Walsh). 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—not only create space for a reexamination of Obama as a writer/author, but they also connect Obama to Kenneth Burke through their emphasis on Obama’s aesthetic approach to political discourse.

Kenneth 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. It raises questions about what Burke means by the term “poetic metaphor.” Unlike the way he treats many of his other key terms, Burke seems to almost stumble upon his wording in *permanence and Change*, first calling for a “a purposive or teleological metaphor”1 (the metaphor of human action or poetry)” which he quickly

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1 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).
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 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” (148) of a single poetic utterance, but the knowledge “attained through the battle” (149) 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 (150).

While Burke repeatedly insists that semantic meaning can never be fully separate from 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” (Obama 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). His approach is much more philosophical, based on the assumption that the practices of American political discourse need to change. But the “how” of the change he is advocating is indeed missing from the book. 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.

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.”


