THE CRESSET
A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs
Michaelmas 2008

rereading old books

The Real Deal?

Harold K. Bush Jr.

Barack Obama. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. New York: Times Books, 1995.

Barack Obama. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. New York, Crown, 2006.

As participants in a culture still bent on self-discovery and self-definition, American citizens are intrigued by those personalities and public moments that draw upon the tropes of the American Dream and the so-called "myth of America." The American tradition of "somethingness" is perhaps best highlighted by the likes of Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman in the nineteenth century, and John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Ronald Reagan in the twentieth, and as such is generally non-partisan in cultural memory. This tradition is also highlighted every four years in the presidential campaigns. Serious political wannabes all must try their hand at mimicking such rhetorical profusions. A successful candidate must reflect and become attuned to popular conceptions of America's "imagined community."

As James Hunter has put it, such a campaign is to a large extent a "struggle to define America." Much research indicates that there continues to be a surprising amount of consensus regarding the content of the "American Creed." Thus, poets, priests, and politicians all have consistently drawn upon this rich mother lode of myths and symbols that has offered hope and meaning to generations of American citizens, past and present.

And now, we have a brand new voice in the ongoing drama of the American creed: Barack Obama, who shamelessly identifies himself as a participant in a national culture still obsessed with self-discovery and self-definition. He is a gifted writer, part poet, part priest, and part politician. I say shamelessly, because it is now almost a commonplace among many educators and cultural elites that the idea of Nationalism in general, and "American Exceptionalism" in particular, are troublesome and outdated relics of a violent modern age, categories of thought fit only for the oppressors and colonizers of human thought and action, and thus destined for the scrap heap of history.

Presidential candidates and the typical American middle-class taxpayer think otherwise: they find comfort and hope in eloquent accounts of the meaning and destiny of the American nation. There is still the power of the mythic expressions of "E Pluribus Unum" themselves. Obama is alert to the subtle ways that American culture insists on a core set of values and beliefs about itself, beliefs that can bring us all together as one great community. Nowhere is this insistence more obvious than in Obama's two volumes, though the work each does is quite evidently different from the other. The first volume, *Dreams from My Father*, narrates the events of his early youth, his experiences growing up in Hawaii and Indonesia, his very white, Kansan grandparents, and his black, African father from Kenya. The effects of growing up a person of mixed race and without the attentions of a father are candidly discussed. We see honest confessions about drinking, drug experimentation, and running the streets, along with somewhat more subdued allusions to loose

sexual relations with women and forms of black rage. "Scoop the poop, you bastards!" his roommate would shout out the window of their Harlem apartment at the "white people from the better neighborhoods" walking their dogs on the sidewalks below.

Perhaps this candor and humor are among the book's best features. Obama starts with a steady account of his origins, particularly the phone call announcing the death of his wayward father, with whom he has spent almost no time for many years. By page eleven, we are already confronted with the word "miscegenation," and Obama reminds us that in 1960, the year of his birth, miscegenation was still illegal in half the states. Obama is forthright in making the mixing of races and his own multicultural roots the main theme of the first long section of the story. One forebear was a decorated soldier for the Union during the Civil War; another was a distant cousin to Jefferson Davis of the Confederacy. There's some Cherokee blood in there as well, along with some good old-fashioned Baptist and Methodist church-goers. His own childhood was split between Hawaii, our most exotic and multicultural state, "the one true melting pot, an experiment in racial harmony," and several years in Indonesia, which he sketches superbly as a locale even more exotic than Hawaii. He is truly our first multicultural candidate, it seems. And by foregrounding these elements, Obama is signaling a major shift in our twenty-first century conception of the American creed: our embrace of diversity and inclusion allows us to imagine the election of the first truly multicultural president.

Particularly endearing is the material about his white Kansan grandfather, a true American Dreamer, "something of a freethinker—bohemian, even." Obama writes,

> [He] has dreams, he has plans; he will infect my grandmother with the great peripatetic itch that had brought both their forebears across the Atlantic.... [he] sloshes around in the mud of France, part of Patton's army.... His was an American character, one typical of men of his generation, men who embraced the option of freedom and individualism and the open road without always knowing its price, and whose enthusiasms could as easily lead to the cowardice of McCarthyism as to the heroics of World War II.

This is typical of Obama's clever and winning tone and style. The man can write, and in phrases like "the great peripatetic itch," we hear a writer who is able to take it to the next level. It's Tom Brokaw meets Jack Kerouac in this loving description of Gramps.

Obama depicts his college years in the rather predictable fashion of a coming-of-age story. The truest surprise comes when he shies away from corporate America and decides, in 1983, to give his time to community organizing on the South Side of Chicago. This story comprises the vast majority of the volume's mid-section, what Obama evidently wishes to see as the heart of his tale. It is a long and drawn-out episode, perhaps at times a bit tedious, but the tone displays the sort of tedium and near-despair that actually might accompany such organizing. How does one motivate people? How does one create alliances or get churches to work together effectively? Where can we find enough funding? These are the nuts and bolts of community work, and Obama shows himself steeped in these questions for almost half the book.

This material includes gestures of black nationalism: the near hero worship of Mayor Harold Washington upon his arrival in Chicago; Obama's experience with the black churches, many of which are entirely segregated by choice; and his reading list and intellectual mentors: "Baldwin, Ellison, Hughes, Wright, DuBois.... in Bigger Thomas and invisible men, I kept finding the same anguish.... Only Malcolm X's autobiography seemed to offer something different. His repeated acts of self-creation spoke to me." Slowly, Obama begins to identify closely with the people he engages on the South Side: "laid-off steelworkers, secretaries, and truck drivers, men and women who smoked a lot and didn't watch their weight, shopped at Sears or Kmart, drove late-model cars from Detroit and ate at Red Lobster on special occasions." Obama wants to be clear about his self-identification with African Americans, despite the introductory material's keen emphasis on his diverse biological make-up and childhood experience.

What motivates his vigorous service, he claims, is a "promise of redemption." Regarding his own redemption, the book offers a few brief glimpses and one lengthy, though somewhat vague, passage narrating a particular moment of grace. Though it seems that Obama is holding back a bit in his description, the spiritual encounter does occur, one Sunday in the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's packed-to-the-rafters morning service at the Trinity United Church of Christ. His description of Wright is admiring and cagy: Wright knows Greek and Hebrew and is steeped in Niebuhr and Tillich, along with the black liberation theologians. He is well-educated, urbane, funny, and highly effective in bringing real change into the lives of all kinds of people in his neighborhood.

The occasion of Obama's "conversion," if we dare to call it that, is after Wright's sermon, "The Audacity of Hope," by now made famous as the title of his second book. Obama resonates with Wright's transcendent account of hope. As the preacher rises in eloquence and adds layer upon layer to his depiction of hope, something begins to happen inside of Obama:

> I also felt for the first time how that spirit carried within it, nascent, incomplete, the possibility of moving beyond our narrow dreams.... I felt a light touch on the top of my hand. [The young boy sitting next to me] handed me a pocket tissue. Beside him, his mother glanced at me with a faint smile before turning back toward the altar. It was only as I thanked the boy that I felt the tears running down my cheeks.
> "Oh, Jesus," I heard the older woman beside me whisper softly. "Thank you for carrying us this far."

That is the very last passage of the entire Chicago section, this crucial moment of Obama's conversion, but there is much about it that is either left out or is neatly tucked away from public eyes. It is not even Obama who speaks the name of Jesus, of course, and the elusiveness of the incident's details and meaning are left up to the reader's imagination. The imprecision makes it a bit of a religious Rorschach test for readers: conservative evangelicals will dislike its shallowness, while liberal humanists will ooh and ahh over its emotion and depth.

Without getting too mushy or doctrinal, though, something seems to have happened to Obama on that morning back in Trinity—it's just not exactly clear what. Prior to the episode, there have been several moments in the book where Obama expresses deep concern about church dogma, and confesses his doubts about Christianity and its historical claims. And yet the author is attempting to capture something real and sincere, without getting too specific. It exemplifies why skepticism has marked Obama's confessions of Christian faith throughout the campaign. Many readers will want to file this episode under "spiritual but not religious."

But the story does not end there (although any discussion of Christianity or the church certainly does). The shape of the narrative is highly dependent on the quest for his missing father, and by the volume's ending, Obama has returned to

Kenya, the homeland of his father, in search of his African roots. This close identification with Africa, and specific tribes back in Kenya, is certainly an astonishing wonder in a book written by the frontrunner for the presidency. The acceptance of this element by millions who are still willing to vote for him must be reckoned as one of the signal achievements in recent American cultural history. Just as the Chicago section ends with a gesture toward Christian communion, the Kenya section ends with a vision of the baobab tree as a living, mythic presence. "I remembered reading somewhere that the baobab could go for years without flowering, surviving on the sparsest of rainfall... I understood why men believed they possessed a special power—that they housed ancestral spirits and demons, that humankind first appeared under such a tree." Again, he is moved by an image of audacious hope—a tree that sustains itself, despite draught and heat.

It is this sort of emotion and candor, presented by a writer of true talent and imagination, that is on full display in Obama's memoir. *Dreams from My Father* is actually the superior book of the two. It was written years before the young Obama ever conceived of running for president, and its journey of awakening and identity formation come across as genuine and richly layered, in such a way as to invite serious literary analysis. It could easily be used in an upper-level or graduate course covering American autobiography or memoir.

Obama has followed up this earlier narrative with a decisive expression of American values and beliefs. Unlike *Dreams from My Father*, the more recent book has the ring of a campaign tract, with excellent and clear discussions of major policy issues. One might not like Obama's view of the Constitution, or of various issues of church and state, but his style is quite engaging, and he is a credible and convincing advocate for his positions. Its title, *The Audacity of Hope*, describes precisely the burden of Obama's message. His hope for America is truly audacious, in its goals and cosmic elements, and the term invokes once more his erstwhile pastor, again the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

It is debatable whether Obama has actually grasped the true nature of a cosmic (or Christian) hope, which is never for America alone, or for the individual alone; but is rather for an all-encompassing and never-ending community, centered in God. As Glenn Tinder puts it in *The Fabric of Hope* (43): "By 'community' I mean perfect unity among personal beings.... a love transcending justice and fully expressed in the absolute affirmation of the other which occurs in self-sacrifice. Accordingly, if hope is for God, it is for a triumphal community—for a final and eternal reunion of God and his human creatures." But Obama's account of hope centers on the pragmatics of such a concept. He wishes to "reach across the aisle" and evade the "Manichean struggle" of today's partisan politics, for instance, a concrete example of how to incarnate such an ideal as Tinder presents. A moment of real insight happens right at the beginning of the book, when Obama describes entering Congress "through the basement" and finding a lone speaker droning on and on. "In the world's greatest deliberative body," he says, "no one is listening." His picture of the current state of ugly Star Wars politics, with its "litmus tests, checklists of orthodoxy," and its rhetoric of being "with us or against us," is certainly familiar to most listeners, who already know without being told that Washington is a broken culture.

Obama's rhetoric addresses this gridlock, prominently, in the volume's opening section. Tellingly, he recruits a familiar figure in describing the appeal of this cosmic view of American community: Ronald Reagan. Obama writes, "Reagan spoke to America's longing for order, our need to believe that we are not simply subject to blind, impersonal forces but that we can shape our individual and collective destinies." Obama wishes to tap into this longing for "collective destiny"—in Tinder's apt phrase, a "triumphal community"—but it is a concept that has been spurned by many today, largely as a result of the tyrannies and abuses of the twentieth century.

If much of this sounds familiar, it may be due to the continuing influence of Obama's great rhetorical mentor: Dr. King, with his enchanting and often thrilling accounts of the "beloved community." Obama describes the skepticism many Americans have toward such metanarrative these days, which he admits might seem "hopelessly naïve, if not downright dangerous." But he insists that we need such a vision, and this motif continues throughout Obama's account of American hope: it is "the core of the American experience," the "running thread of hope" in our national story, our "notion of a common good," "that kernel of truth, that singular voice within each of us that reminds us of our deepest commitments."

The Audacity of Hope begins and ends with effusive accounts of America as the land of hope and vision. What comes in between are chapters on a wide variety of important policy and ideological issues. I find the book excellent even on those issues about which Obama and I disagree, and this is the mark of very fine argument. *The Audacity of Hope* provides the meat of Obama's positions on a plethora of crucial issues, and if any citizen wants a clear, well-written, and generally convincing account of those views, here it is. Additionally, *The Audacity of Hope* contains more songs about America. It is a paean, especially at the end, to the mighty tradition of America's dream about herself: standing at the Lincoln Memorial

in the book's final scene, Obama imagines "the crowd stilled by Dr. King's mighty cadence... [I think of] those like Lincoln and King, who ultimately laid down their lives in the service of perfecting an imperfect union.... My heart is filled with love for this country."

Thus does Barack Obama assert, in these two excellent and complementary volumes, that our attempts to locate a definition of "America," a consensus about central American values, and a common passion for the reawakening of the American Dream, can and must go forward. Obama both champions the desire to articulate the nature of the American ideology, and also embodies, both in his personal narrative and in his rhetorical dream, the central premises of that ideology. This combination helps explain why Obama is today, for many Americans and particularly for the young, as close to a living incarnation of what America is supposed to mean and be, as they have seen in a long time—perhaps, as far back as 1960s icons such as Dr. King. And like King, Obama wields a nifty pen and has the voice, delivery, and personal presence to exploit his fine writing gifts as gifted orator and charismatic icon. In short, Obama ranks right up there with any rhetorician of recent years. As Andrew Delbanco put it in his piece a few months ago in *The New Republic*, he looks to be the real deal.

Obama's sense of a direct connection with King was a centerpiece of his rhetorical performance on the final day of the Democratic convention in Denver on 28 August 2008. It was, auspiciously enough, the forty-fifth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s oration during the March on Washington in 1963. Obama's nomination speech was filled with reminders as well, such as his insistence on the Promise of America:

> What is that promise? It's a promise that says each of us has the freedom to make of our own lives what we will, but that we also have the obligation to treat each other with dignity and respect... That's the promise of America—the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation; the fundamental belief that I am my brother's keeper; I am my sister's keeper.

Interestingly, the speech also includes Obama's characteristic critique of the abuses of mythic accounts of America. But this is standard fare in jeremiads: even in King's "I Have a Dream" speech—though we often forget that aspect of it. Obama reminds us that the old story about the poor being solely responsible for their sorry state is not adequate: "Out of work? Tough luck. No health care? The market will fix it. Born into poverty? Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps—even if you don't have boots. You're on your own." King and Obama are not satisfied by pie-in-the-sky visions unless they find their way concretely into the lives of regular American folks. Both call unapologetically for fulfillment of the promise, for the incarnation of the American spirit. As such, both are latter-day Transcendentalists, with a capital T—but also Christian realists, in a manner heavily informed by Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr.

But as in his books, the most memorable aspects of Obama's rhetoric are not critiques of the American system but affirmations of the American promise. Thus can we see his rhetorical project as largely transcendental: founded in something beyond the material world, a gesture toward the way things ought to be, a "passion for the possible," as Kierkegaard once defined human hope. Obama's acceptance speech reminds us of the fundamental unity of our nation: "So let us agree that patriotism has no party. I love this country, and so do you, and so does John McCain. The men and women who serve in our battlefields may be Democrats and Republicans and independents, but they have fought together and bled together and some died together under the same proud flag. They have not served a Red America or a Blue America—they have served the United States of America." These lines echo the last words of *The Audacity of Hope*: "My heart is filled with love for this country." And like King, he reminded the millions of listeners of the concept of American spirit—something sublime and unnamable holding us all together, and making us unique in human history: "Instead, it is that American spirit — that American promise—that pushes us forward even when the path is uncertain; that binds us together in spite of our differences; that makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen, that better place around the bend."

Thus does Obama's convention speech end with a powerful peroration of his heavy debt to the likes of King.

> And it is that promise that forty-five years ago today, brought Americans from every corner of this land to stand together on a mall in Washington, before Lincoln's Memorial, and hear a young preacher from Georgia speak of his dream.... They could've been told to succumb to the fear and frustration of so many dreams deferred. But what the people heard instead—people of every creed and color, from every walk of life—is that in America, our destiny is inextricably linked. That together, our dreams can be one. "We

> cannot walk alone,' the preacher cried. "And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back."

This image of King on the Mall in 1963 is the same one that ended *The Audacity of Hope*.

The speech ends with the endorsement of heavenly hope "At this moment, in this election, we must pledge once more to march into the future. Let us keep that promise—that American promise—and in the words of Scripture hold firmly, without wavering, to the hope that we confess." It is a reference to Hebrews 10:23, slightly altered in tone and content, but a clear statement nonetheless that his vision is steeped in a biblical frame, as was King's. Of course, the writer of the book of Hebrews is most interested in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, the power of his blood sacrifice, and the hope of God's everlasting Kingdom, but such details do not make for good convention speeches, and thus are conveniently left out. It is in the best (or most dangerous) traditions of American rhetoric to blur the Kingdom of God with the Kingdom of America, and here Obama, like King, Lincoln, and countless others before him, does likewise.

In short, Obama's meteoric rise bespeaks the clear fact that we Americans are proud of our transcendental legacy, and that we still respond powerfully to King's words on that humid August day back in 1963, one of the most memorable accounts of that legacy. Obama's speechifying, like his books, is not jingoistic, or simple-minded. He is comfortable expressing moments of serious doubt, critique, and skepticism, just as King was. Indeed, Obama insists, we need *both* dreams and anxieties, vision and suspicion. In this way, Obama mirrors the modern theorists of culture, who have certainly mastered the suspicion part.

But as the philosopher William James insisted, certain truths will be hidden from us unless we go at least halfway toward them. As James wrote in *The Will to Believe*: "Here are, then, cases, where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. And where faith in a fact can help create the fact, that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the 'lowest kind of immorality' into which a thinking being can fall." Belief, sometimes, begins in the imagination.

It may turn out that people of faith who are intellectually conversant and theoretically savvy, but who also have the additional advantage of being willing, in the words of William James, to go "at least halfway toward" the sublime objects of the sacred, will have far more to say about what a new model of political work can look like in the twenty-first century. The emergence of a new kind of politician, in the form of Barack Obama, who unashamedly endorses an all-encompassing, mysterious, and sublime object of American hope, and is able to articulate it in convincing fashion to a vast number of American citizens, may be the most significant political phenomenon of recent American history, at least since the rise of the Reagan era. His evident gifts have begun to encourage a much-needed renewal of the idea that achieving our country is still historically possible after all.

The real deal, indeed—at least rhetorically speaking. He's so good with words that the Republicans have been making light of this skill, openly ridiculing it in television ads, as if it was all smoke and mirrors. The rhetoric, of course, does not prove that he will be an effective president, and the proof, as they say, will be in the pudding. But as did other great American leaders of the past, such as Lincoln, Obama understands we are living in a time when the "mystic chords of memory" need mending. For without a vision, the people really do perish (Prov. 29:18). And such mending begins, as always, with words—and with the power of the human imagination, and the steadfastness of hope. ♰

Hal Bush *teaches American literature and culture at Saint Louis University and is the author of two books and numerous articles on topics ranging from American literary figures to the pragmatics of teaching and reading. He recently was a short term Fulbright Senior Scholar at the University of Freiburg, Germany.*

Copyright © 2008 Valparaiso University Press www.valpo.edu/cresset