

Ideology, Prosody, and Eponymy: Towards a Public Poetics of Obama and *Beowulf*.

By Tom Clark

Abstract

This article examines and integrates the categories of poetics and rhetoric by comparing concepts of the poetic in Barack Obama's 2008 election victory speech with concepts of political rhetoric in the Old English long poem *Beowulf*. Using close readings, the paper explores a nexus between these two modes of communication which is revealed both in the politicisation of poetry and in the poetical praxis of political communications. That is, practitioners in both domains necessarily follow the integrating logics that this paper explores. It finds a political aesthetic of sceptical conservatism that underwrites the agendas of both these epic-heroic texts.

Keywords

Public poetics; Barack Obama; *Beowulf*; rhetoric; poetic formula.

Each thing in this world had, as it were, an eponym in heaven, a perfect form from which it was derived — and it shared this derivation with all the other members of its class, or genus.

— Kenneth Burke¹

1. Introduction

There is a view, which I vehemently support, that public language is a type of poetry, and that public speaking is therefore a type of performance poetry. Public language — by which I mean language produced for publics and/or by public figures and/or in a public situation and/or with a view to public purposes² — answers to priorities other-than-artistic, as we know. But it is not always distinct, of course — there has always been poetry oriented towards the public sphere, and there is no shortage of public sphere discourse that gets called ‘poetic.’ In other words, this paper³ explores an

¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives*, Meridian Books, Cleveland, 1962, p. 27.

² For a working definition of ‘public’ in this sense I am heavily reliant on the criteria set out in Warner’s signature essay, ‘Publics and Counterpublics’ (notwithstanding some caveats discussed in section 3). See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, New York, 2002, pp. 65-124.

³ This paper is based on a seminar I presented to the School of Communication and the Arts at Victoria University (Melbourne). In developing it, I have also been grateful to receive advice from Alex Jones, Alison Clark, and Daniel Drache.

aspect of *the poetic* within a domain of language whose strategic outlook is typically distinguished from the strategic outlook of poetry. Renegotiating that distinction is an important theme in Terry Eagleton's recent book, *How to Read a Poem*, in which he proposes that a 'poem is a statement released into the public world for us to make of it what we may.'⁴

This paper attempts a more systematic version of Eagleton's renegotiation. It proceeds by reference to two texts whose differences would normally be taken for granted, but whose collocation serves to illustrate a formal and purposive similarity that extends beyond merely figurative or heuristic considerations. Both texts straddle an important technological and cognitive divide between performed utterance and inscribed text.⁵ One of them, *Beowulf*, has been seminal in the study of English-language poetics.⁶ The other, Barack Obama's 2008 election victory speech, seems destined to become seminal in the study of English-language political rhetoric.⁷ Importantly, many commentators have attributed to each, respectively, the qualities of political sensitivity and heightened poetics — so much so that the 'political sensibility' of *Beowulf* and the 'poetic sensibility' of Obama are both clichés of the commentary on each. My focus in this paper is on what, in another cliché, we might call their 'crossover characteristics:' the extent to which *Beowulf* passes comment upon political communication and the extent to which Obama's victory speech

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, Blackwell, Maldon (Mass.) Melbourne Oxford, 2007, p. 32.

⁵ Cf. Umberto Eco, *Apocalypse Postponed*, ed. Robert Lumley, Flamingo, London, 1995, pp. 119-146; Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Routledge, London and New York, 1982, especially Chapter 3 'Some psycho-dynamics of orality;' Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Bath (UK), 1977 — but note Warner's criticisms of 'Whig-McLuhanite' techno-determinist approaches to media and culture in his *The Letters of the Republic: publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) and London, 1990, especially pp. 5-6.

⁶ Rather than consign to footnote an entire essay of material, one need look no further than the annual 'New Publications' and 'Research In Progress' listings published regularly in the *Old English Newsletter* journal to see how much this one poem attracts the attentions of those who study the language and literature of Anglo-Saxon England and related fields.

⁷ This is notwithstanding David Crystal's online caveat on the "greatness" of Obama's speech: *DC Blog* 9 November 2008, <http://david-crystal.blogspot.com/2008/11/on-obamas-victory-style.html> (accessed 18/3/2009). The more revealing point is that a welter of debate around the merits of a given text can bestow seminal status upon it.

reflects upon poetic communication. In doing so, we are able to identify a poetic aspect to what Burke has posed as a ‘dramatistic’ phenomenon.

Perhaps the most obvious reason for comparing these particular texts is that both hold such an overtly heroic interest value. Both portray ethnic outsiders who bring their superhuman capacities with them to the nations they serve and protect.⁸ In the case of *Beowulf*, the relevance of a Germanic heroic verse tradition is uncontroversial.⁹ In the case of Obama, a hero’s critical qualities of *sapientia et fortitudo*¹⁰ (‘wisdom and courage’) are evident in the extent of his success (winning an election for the political position most observers would reckon the world’s most powerful), in the uses to which he proposes to put that office (economic fireproofing, reducing human contributions to climate change, and demilitarising an extremely bellicose international polity), and in the widely shared and discussed sense that his success was particularly difficult to achieve (winning this election as an African American). That is, Obama’s heroism is proven by the historically transformative symbolism of his ascendancy to the presidency of the United States of America.

In addition to their moral and behavioural fathom of heroism, there are stylistic grounds to argue that both texts are pitched in an epic register. For *Beowulf*, that is a somewhat controversial statement: numerous commentators, at least since Tolkien,¹¹ have taken pains to distinguish it from the stylistics of classical Greek and Latin epic verse. Nevertheless, *Beowulf* is certainly epic in the sense that it relates an extensive series of episodes prominent in a grand sweep of (early Germanic) cultural history. It may also be epic in the self-conscious sense that it was composed by a writer familiar with the classical epic tradition, especially Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which seems most likely

⁸ Compare the case of Australia’s current prime minister, Kevin Rudd. At the official launch of his successful 2007 election campaign, Rudd declared, ‘I’m from Queensland and I’m here to help.’ AAP, ‘I’m Kevin. I’m here to help.’ in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April 2007, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/im-kevin-im-here-to-help/2007/04/27/1177459928740.html?page=fullpage> (accessed 18/3/2009).

⁹ Although close readings of the poem’s irony may go some way to complicate that relationship — see section 2 of this paper.

¹⁰ R. E. Kaske asserts this duality as a defining paradigm for heroic poetry in his ‘*Sapientia et fortitudo* as the controlling theme of *Beowulf*,’ *Studies in Philology* LV (July 1958), 423-457.

¹¹ JRR Tolkien, ‘*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,’ *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXII (1936), 245-295. Reprinted in Lewis E. Nicholson (ed.), *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame and London, 1976, pp. 51-103.

once we accept a literary theory of its provenance.¹² Obama's victory speech is objectively epic for the same reason as that his candidature is heroic: its relationship to a received history of the USA. We may also argue that it is self-consciously epic in the way it engages with epic traditions of religious and secular story, and the way it inhabits and co-opts their stylistic characteristics.¹³

And then there is the matter of naming. *Beowulf* is common among medieval poems in that its manuscript¹⁴ does not record its name. Editorial convention has it that this is the 'poem of Beowulf' – that is, the poem that relates the exploits of a hero called Beowulf – and so it merely assumes its chief protagonist's name. The naming reifies one aspect of the text, of course. It elevates the status-significance of this hero and his actions. Voloshinov makes a similar point about reification for those aspects of language that people identify as important through the act of reporting them in indirect speech.¹⁵ By creating an eponymous relationship between character and text, Voloshinov might argue, modern editors impart an ideology of valence: the naming decision is a valorisation; Beowulf becomes more intensely the focus of *Beowulf* once we are used to the idea that he is its name. Likewise, none of the alternative titles in the epic of Obama overshadows its principle title, which is his name. *Dreams from My Father*¹⁶ is in the epic of Obama. *The Audacity of Hope*¹⁷ is in the epic of Obama.

¹² As argued by Kevin Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1999; cf. Mark C. Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition: Oral Poetics and Literate Culture in Medieval England*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2004.

¹³ These aspects are examined in section 3.

¹⁴ The manuscript is catalogued in the British Museum, London, as Cotton MSS, Vitellius A. XV, 129a-198b. There is a translated and annotated facsimile version of the manuscript: Julius Zupitza (ed.), *Beowulf. Autotypes of the unique Cotton MS. Vitellius A xv in the British Museum, with a Transliteration and Notes*, Early English Text Society, No 77, London, 1882. Kevin Kiernan has also edited a CD-ROM (HTML) facsimile of the manuscript: Kevin Kiernan (ed.) *Electronic Beowulf*, The British Library, London, 2004.

¹⁵ VN Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Trans. L Matejka and I Titunik, (London: Seminar Press, 1986), p. 117. Note the widespread belief that *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* was actually written by Mikhail Bakhtin — eg. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge and London: Belknap, 1984). This is not a question we need to resolve here.

¹⁶ Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 1995.

¹⁷ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, Three Rivers Press, New York, 2006.

His Democratic Party convention speech in 2004¹⁸ is in the epic of Obama. As are all his subsequent speeches. As is the election campaign tens of thousands of staff and volunteers built up around him. As is his past presidency of the *Harvard Law Review*.¹⁹ As is every news story that reports him, every public event he attends, every cause he supports, every bill he signs or vetoes as president of the United States of America. When we recognise that each of these episodes and many more beside them constitute the epic of Obama – when they are so named by his involvement in them – we reify him, its title.

These aspects are expounded at length in the coming sections of this paper. It is my aim to show how we may read these two texts, quite validly regarded the products of separate communicative genres, as products of the one family or species of language. In Eagleton's rendering, that is because they both are inherently political communications. But they both are inherently poems as well. In exploring the link between the formulaic poetics and the political dispositions of these texts, we are able to observe a crucial nexus that manifests both as the-political-in-the-poetic and as the-poetic-in-the-political. It is a nexus I have examined in some recent papers, in which I have set out to show a corollary of Eagleton's proposition: that public language (including its prominent sub-set, political rhetoric) is a species of poetry.²⁰ Those papers have argued that the styles of performed/uttered modes or categories of public

¹⁸ Barack Obama, '2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address,' *American Rhetoric* website, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/convention2004/barackobama2004dnc.htm> (accessed 18/3/2009).

¹⁹ Fox Butterfield, 'First Black Elected to Head Harvard's Law Review,' *New York Times*, 6/2/1990, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE2DC1631F935A35751C0A966958260&n=Top%2FReference%2FTimes%20Topics%2FPeople%2FO%2FObama%2C%20Barack> (accessed 18/3/2009).

²⁰ Tom Clark, 'Towards a formulaic poetics of contemporary public language: the poetic formula in focus.' *AUMLA* 111 (May 2009), 103-129; _____, 'Towards a Formulaic Poetics of Contemporary Public Rhetoric: A Politician's Prosody.' *International Journal of the Humanities* 6 (2008), No 6, 37-42; _____, 'The Cup of John Howard's Poetry,' *Overland* 190 (2008), 22-28; _____, 'Towards a Poetics of Contemporary Public Rhetoric: Reporting Platitude and Cliché,' *AUMLA* Special Issue (December 2007), <http://www.aulla.com.au/Proceedings%202007.html> (accessed 21/3/2009), 199-207; _____, 'Towards a formulaic poetics of contemporary public rhetoric: the interpretative processing of platitude and cliché,' *International Journal for the Humanities* 5 (2007), No 7, 205-214; _____, 'Towards a Poetics of Contemporary Public Rhetoric: The Performer's Need for Platitude and Cliché,' *International Journal of the Humanities* 4 (2006), No 2, 15-22.

language bear close and unmistakable relation to the formulaic styles that tend to characterise oral-traditional genres of poetry.²¹ As all traditions of rhetorical criticism observe, the nexus is simultaneously sensuous and intellectual — strategically speaking, it mobilises public response at both the syncretistic and the analytic level.²² That being true, we are able to contemplate political language agendas in aesthetic terms, just as we are able to contemplate the political significance of artistically motivated language. My argument to date has been that all public language is imbued with this nexus.

With self-consciously proficient public figures, critical awareness of this nexus becomes professional praxis. That is to say, professional communicators in the public sphere shape their practices according to an explicit theory of the nexus, and they rationalise the value of the theory to which they subscribe by reference to the practice that it informs. In talking about their own output, speakers and their speechwriters both clearly hold themselves accountable for working to a simultaneous and integrated brief for form and content.²³ In response, the nascent discipline of Leadership Studies has managed to utilise taxonomies from the classical (Graeco-Latin derived) tradition of rhetoric in constructing a highly aestheticised account of

²¹ In that respect, the theory is strongly influenced by the theoretical tradition of Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The collected papers of Milman Parry*, ed. Adam Parry, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971, and numerous successors. This paper is particularly influenced by the works of John Miles Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song*, University of California Press, Berkeley Los Angeles and London, 1990, and more recently of Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition*, who have given close attention to the poetics of *Beowulf* and other Old English poems. A case not yet made, but which I believe the research would support, is that the orality-derived styling of much modern-day written public language bears comparable relation to the orality-derived styling of much pre-modern literary verse (such as *Beowulf*).

²² This is to adopt the distinction made famous by Jean Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child*, trans. Marjorie and Ruth Gabain (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 134.

²³ Speechwriters and political advisers from numerous countries and from across the spectrum of partisan ideology make this point clearly and repeatedly. See, eg., Dick Wirthlin with Wynton C. Hall, *The Greatest Communicator: What Reagan Taught Me about Politics, Leadership, and Life*, John Wiley, Hoboken (N.J.), 2004; Graham Freudenberg, *A Figure of Speech: A political memoir*, John Wiley, Milton (Qld.), 2005; Mary Matalin, James Carville, and Peter Knobler, *All's Fair — Love, War, and Running for President*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994.

the new orator – today’s consummate leader, whether that be in the field of business, religion, sport, warfare, politics, or what have you.²⁴

Self-conscious reference to praxis in one’s work is a crucial feature of professional conduct; according to some it is the defining feature.²⁵ For the purposes of this paper, it may stand as a proxy, as a sign that the professional ethos is at work in a given situation. That is to say, if a given text reveals a self-conscious praxis with respect to that poetic-political nexus discussed above, we may take it as proof of a professional attitude towards public language. We should not be surprised to find such an attitude in a political speech by Obama, of course – he is a highly professional public communicator in an era of highly professionalised public communications – but it is remarkable how clearly a version of this consciousness is expressed in the Old English poem of *Beowulf*. When we see how poetic and traditionalised is this understanding of communicative praxis, it becomes instructive to trace it back into Obama’s intentionally poetic and tradition-rich rhetoric.

Words and deeds: towards a politicised praxis of communication in Beowulf

The Old English long poem we call *Beowulf*²⁶ is a literary work imbued with oral tradition. That is, scholars now usually agree that it was first composed in writing, rather than improvised in performance,²⁷ but it would have been performed for audiences including many illiterate people, and its literary composition was affectively styled after the aesthetic and topical characteristics of an oral-

²⁴ This scholarship is of variable quality, ranging from quite precise technical description to New Age mush. Its characteristic assumptions about leaderly oratory urgently need deconstructing. Jan Shaw has surveyed the Leadership Studies field in an unpublished paper presented to the 2009 Conference of the Australasian Universities Languages and Literature Association (at the University of Sydney, Australia).

²⁵ Eg. Anne Surma, *Public and Professional Writing: Ethics, Imagination, and Rhetoric*, Palgrave, Basingstoke and New York, 2005.

²⁶ To the consternation of some, the ‘industry standard’ edition of this poem remains Fr. Klaeber (ed.), *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed., D.C. Heath, Lexington (Mass.), 1950. I use Klaeber’s text in this paper, with the exception that the only syntactic punctuations I retain are full stops and question marks (*ie.* to indicate sentence ends) and capitalisation (*ie.* to indicate sentence starts and proper names).

²⁷ A case made cogently by Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*.

improvisatory Germanic heroic tradition stretching back into prehistory.²⁸ It was first written sometime before 1000 AD. The one manuscript that survives, albeit in damaged form, was written by two anonymous Anglo-Saxon scribes in the tenth century.²⁹ The story it tells concerns a hero from Scedeland (in modern-day southern Sweden), named Beowulf (‘Bee-wolf’), who had ‘the strength of thirty men in his handgrip.’ The gifted hero sets out across the Baltic because he has heard that Heorot (‘Hart’), the hall of the Danish king Hrothgar (‘Glory-Spear’), has been beset by a monstrous nightly visitor called Grendel. Hrothgar had previously sheltered Beowulf’s father, and so there is some measure of reciprocal obligation³⁰ in the hero’s decision to embark on this adventure. It is a long story, which covers three monstrous adventures, and plays out over 3182 alliterative ‘long lines’ of verse.

Aside from these skeleton details, and what action the poem relates clearly, there is enormous conjecture around the text on almost every imaginable level: its provenance, its concerns, and its meaning. Its allusive, appositive, and often cryptic style does plenty to amplify the ambiguities. Indeed, some critics have made ambiguity precisely the point, celebrating it as an aesthetic strategy of the poem.³¹ That said, the power of the Danish state is expressly a central concern. The first sentence is unambiguous in that respect (ll. 1-3), although a literal prose translation cannot do justice to the alliterative and rhythmic emphasis it places on the word *þrym*³² – ‘might’:

Hwæt we Gardena in geardagum
 þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon
 hu ða æðelingas ellen fremedon.

(*Well: we have heard of the Spear-Danes’ people-kings’ might, in days of yore, of how those nobles performed courage.*)

²⁸ This is a rather crude simplification of the argument made by Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition*.

²⁹ Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*.

³⁰ A concept emphasised by Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Duckworth, London, 1985.

³¹ See especially James W. Earl, *Thinking about Beowulf*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994.

³² The Old English letters *þ* and *ð* (upper case *Þ* and *Ð*) are equivalent to the New English ‘th.’ Old English *sc* is equivalent to New English ‘sh.’ Old English *æ* (upper case *Æ*) is usually pronounced as North Americans (and Australians) would pronounce the ‘a’ in ‘glad.’

The poem's introductory section goes on to prefigure the reign of Hrothgar, who ordered Heorot's construction, by setting out the life of his most famous ancestor, Scyld Scefing ('Shield, child of the Sheaf' — so-called because he was originally found as a 'destitute' baby floating in a bundle or basket of grasses in the water). Scyld's strikingly Mosaic origins commence the Scylding royal dynasty in Denmark. In Heorot's construction, apparently and ironically, is visible the end of that dynasty, which collapses soon after the death of Hrothgar. The resultant poetics are rich with doom (ll. 81b-85):

Sele hlifade
 heah ond horngeap heaðowylma bad
 laðan liges ne wæs hit lenge þa gen
 þæt se ecghete aþumsweoran
 æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde.

(The hall towered, high and great of gable; it awaited the storm of battle, the hostile fire; nor was it long to come then before the blade-hatred of in-laws would awaken.)

Indeed, *Beowulf* is a poem fascinated by political power. Its narrative enthusiastically explores power's rises and falls, its achievements and destructions, its orderings and hypocrisies. That exploration is effected by some superb poetry: the author had a finely tuned ear for juxtaposition, which is supported by the emphatic and elastic metre of alliterative verse, the appositive style of its phrasing,³³ and the digressive and cyclical style of its narrative.³⁴ These factors contribute to a poetics that is at once accumulative³⁵ and contrastive,³⁶ a political ideology that is both conservative and sceptical.³⁷ Taking a lead from Liggins,³⁸ I have previously argued

³³ This is the object of a magisterial study in Old English poetics: Fred Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1985.

³⁴ This was famously the object of a complaint by Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, p. lvii, but numerous scholars have seen past his 'lack of steady advance' lament. See especially John A. Nist, *The Structure and Texture of Beowulf*, University of Sao Paulo Faculty of Philosophy Sciences and Letters, Sao Paulo, 1959.

³⁵ Gillian R. Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1990.

³⁶ Raymond P. Tripp Jr., 'Digressive Revaluation(s),' in Harold Bloom (ed.) *Modern Critical Interpretations – Beowulf*, Chelsea House, New York New Haven Philadelphia, 1987, pp. 63-79.

³⁷ Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

that it is a profoundly ironical sensibility.³⁹ The result, if you accept that view, is that the ethno-political affiliations of the *Beowulf* poet become inscrutable, or even ambivalent. Whereas some have based their readings of this poem's politics on an inference of reverence and/or fondness towards the Danes,⁴⁰ the case for irony says that hints of reverence and/or fondness may be disingenuous, at least in part.

For all that, we have a heroic poem that explores the power of the Danish court in Germanic-legendary times, a topic that must have exercised the imaginations of power-brokers in England throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. Being framed as bound by heroic convention, the poem's observations and judgements are couched in the highly formularised phrasing and narrative tropes of traditional Germanic alliterative verse,⁴¹ a sure indication that the putatively historical characters are being judged according to the anachronistic standards of the Old English (Christian) poet, rather than of the Old Norse (pagan) milieu in which their actions take place.

'Judged' is hardly too strong a word (ll. 178b-183a):

Swylc wæs þeaw hyra
 hæþenra hyht helle gemundon
 in modsefan Metod hie ne cuþon
 dæda Demend ne wiston hie Drihten God
 ne hie huru heofena Helm herian ne cuþon
 wuldres Waldend.

(Such was their observance, the hope of the heathens: they thought of hell in their spirits; they did not think of Lord God, the Judge of deeds, nor in any case did they know to praise the Helm of the heavens, the Ruler of glory.)

³⁸ Elisabeth Liggins, 'Irony and Understatement in *Beowulf*,' *Parergon* 29 (1981), 3-7.

³⁹ Tom Clark, *A Case for Irony in Beowulf, with particular reference to its epithets*, Verlag Peter Lang, Bern, 2003.

⁴⁰ This reading is conventionally attributed to Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1951. Whitelock and her successors argue that *Beowulf* must have been written before the sack of the monastery island of Lindisfarne (793 AD), because its sympathies towards the Danes would have been unacceptable in England after that date; also Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, who argues that it was composed and written in a Danelaw court in 10th Century England.

⁴¹ That is notwithstanding the caveat, after Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition*, among others, that *Beowulf* is a highly literate work, which to some extent adopts an affect of traditional orality and oral traditionality – a 'formulaic aesthetic' – in order to blur distinctions between it and that tradition.

In this example, relatively early in the poem, we see the focus on power expressed as a normative judgement on governance. There are myriad such judgements passed by the narrator and by most of the leading characters throughout the text. Their normative qualities make them natural vehicles for both the conservatism and the scepticism of this poem's ideological disposition. As mentioned, their phrasing gives them a particularly conservative yet sceptical quality.

This paper is particularly concerned with the comments that characters and the narrator pass on the business of public language, because those comments reveal an explicit and normative praxis of political communication, a praxis inextricable from the poetics that couch it. There is a critical moment in the establishment of the story, when Beowulf and his 14 henchmen land on the shores of Denmark. A doughty coastguard spies the party and challenges them, asking why they have arrived fully armed without the express leave of Hrothgar to do so. Beowulf declares that he is bound for Heorot, where he has business with the Danish king. To this the coastguard replies with a caveat on the court and its culture (ll. 287b-289):

Æghwæpres sceal
 scearp scyldwiga gescad witan
 worda ond worca se þe wel þenceð.

(Between each of two things a sharp shield-warrior must know the distinction, between words and deeds, if he is thinking well.)

In isolation, this may sound like folkish sophistry. The metrical alliteration in *gescad* ('distinction') certainly invests it with a certain formulaic ring. But those formulaic qualities are essential to the epistemological system of the poem. The poetics that make them memorable (especially alliteration and emphasis) also make them trustworthy: a * *scearp scyldwigan gescad* ('sharp shield-warrior's distinction') has about it the phonic mantle of something that people have remembered and said over many years, handing this unit of knowledge down through the generations. In this, it resonates with the notion of 'rhetorically self-sufficient arguments' that numerous critical discourse analysts have applied to their readings of political rhetoric.⁴²

⁴² A significant portion of this research in the 1990s and subsequently has appeared in the journal *Discourse and Society*, much of it written by discursive psychologists. A recent example, which provides useful references for the literature of the field, is Mark Summers, 'Rhetorically self-sufficient arguments in Western Australian

Indeed, in this case we see how the poetic analysis of prosody and resonance can complement the ideational focus of critical discourse analysis.

I take these pains to address the epistemological properties of formulaic poetics,⁴³ partly because the aesthetics of folkishness do not inspire the same trust or confidence in a contemporary literate readership. It is important to allow for this quality in *Beowulf*, which could so easily pass us by, being readers rather than listeners. Reminding us of its importance, the poem brings the words/deeds dichotomy to our attention a second time. After Beowulf has slain the monster Grendel, an unnamed Danish *scop* (official poet) performs the story of the legendary fight in Frisia between Finn and the forces with Hengest. He relates how, in the nervous truce that followed the fight, soldiers on both sides were forbidden from attacking one another physically or verbally. He heightens the poetic effect of his digression by using anaphoric alliterations on *þ* and *ð* to highlight the relevance of the formula, and compounding l.1100's metrical alliteration with rhythmic symmetry (/x x /x | /x x /x), syntactic symmetry (— *ne* — | — *ne* —) and consonance (repetitions of *-r-*, *n-*, and the *-r-c-* compound) to amplify the formula's memorability (ll. 1096b-1100):

Fin Hengeste
 elne unflitme aðum benemde
 þæt he þa wealafe weotena dome
 arum heolde þæt ðær ænig mon
 wordum ne worcum wære ne bræce

(Finn, with undisputed courage according to the judgment of his councilors, pronounced oaths to Hengest, that he would hold those survivors of the woe in honour — that no man there should break the peace with words nor with deeds.)

In a simple sense, this prohibition on assaults by word or by deed points up an explicit understanding of communication as symbolic behaviour. That is a critical element of the political theory, because it both enables and requires the management of behaviour and interaction for symbolic political purposes. According to Edelman, that is the foundation of professional politics.⁴⁴

parliamentary debates on Lesbian and Gay Law Reform,' *British Journal of Social Psychology* 46 (2007), 839-858 — especially 841-842.

⁴³ Cf. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

⁴⁴ Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 2nd ed., University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1985.

In a more complex sense, both these excerpts point to a balance, an economy, between the symbolic and the actual, the purport and the outcome, the word and the deed. Near the end of the poem, the aged Beowulf and a dragon mortally wound each other. Throughout their hero's last combat, most of the Geat thegns keep a safe remove from the danger; only a younger thegn called Wiglaf ('War-Survivor') comes to Beowulf's aid. He castigates the others, and by implication the entire Geat nation, pointing to a diseconomy between pledges of support they had made and their performance on the proving-ground of battle (ll. 2633-2638a):

Ic ðæt mæl geman þær we medu þegun
 þonne we geheton ussum hlaforde
 in biorsele ðe us ðas beagas geaf
 þæt we him ða guðgetawa gyldan woldon
 gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe
 helmas ond heard sword.

(I remember that occasion when we partook of the mead, when we promised our lord in his beer-hall – he who gave us those rings – that we would repay him those war-trappings, the helmets and the hard swords, if this sort of need should befall him.)

In case the criticism was too subtle, Wiglaf goes on to make his complaint even clearer, concluding with a hypermetric (three-stress) verse (ll.2882b-2883):

Wergendra to lyt
 þrong ymbe þeoden þa hyne sio þrag becwom.

(Too few warriors gathered around the king when the trouble came at him.)

In other words, the concept of reciprocity binds symbolic and actualised behaviour in an ethics of political accountability.⁴⁵ Since leadership involves an inherently symbolic perspective on behaviour – leadership behaviour is always symbolic action – this ethics of accountability gives a particularly valuable account of leadership, as understood in a particular cultural time and place. (Never mind that we do not know conclusively where or when that time and place was.) This Germanic-legendary version of public language cleaves to a clearly articulated praxis – one we might also find in other texts from the premodern Germanic milieu – in which a

⁴⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

reciprocal relationship between symbolic behaviour and actual behaviour is the principal ethical criterion.

At the same time as *Beowulf* elaborates a praxis of political communication into its narrative, it embeds that praxis into its poetics in ways that become surprisingly revealing when we turn to modern examples. Such an inherently contrastive conceptual model finds ready expression in such a fundamentally contrastive style of verse as we see in Old English. As Robinson showed,⁴⁶ an ‘a-verse’ (the first half of a long line) very frequently serves as an appositive amplification of the previous line’s ‘b-verse.’ This tendency is a consequence of the method of composition, which normally seeks to fill each verse with a metrically sufficient phrase drawn from common poetic usage.⁴⁷ Because the metrical demands on a-verses are higher than b-verses,⁴⁸ it is very common for alliterative poets to reserve their substantial advances in narrative and conception for the b-verses, while using each a-verse as an opportunity to demonstrate their lyrical skills through an alliterative phrase that amplifies or otherwise plays off the previous line. When the one recurrent verse repeatedly meets these conditions, then it is demonstrably a phrase formula.

We have seen here that one such formula in the a-verses of *Beowulf* is *word- X worc-* (‘word/-s [X] deed/-s’). The formula takes different endings depending on syntactical context, and its *X* stands for a conjunction, typically *ond* (‘and’) or *ne* (‘nor’). It is alliteratively tailored to fill an a-verse whenever this concept is an appropriate amplification of the immediately preceding narrative. That ‘whenever’ is a substantial one, because we have already seen that this formula names the critical topic in *Beowulf*’s praxis of political communication. That is to say, ‘word/-s and/nor deed/-s’ is inherently relevant to any discussion of leaderly behaviour in the conservative-sceptical conceptual system of this poem. For a story fascinated with political power, then, the poetics and the political ideology combine to make this formula a present possibility at the onset of each line. We hear its potential even when it is not uttered.

It is this relationship between verse and concept, prosody and repertoire, situation and communicative resources, that I wish to address as we turn to the rhetoric of

⁴⁶ *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*.

⁴⁷ For a detailed technical discussion of the relationship between poetic formula and meter in *Beowulf*, see Foley, *The Making of Homeric Verse*.

⁴⁸ An a-verse typically contains two metrical alliterations, whereas a b-verse must contain only one.

Obama. We have seen that *Beowulf* shows a poem imbued with a clearly politicised praxis of communication; the question for Obama's victory speech is whether we can infer from it a reciprocal value, a poeticised praxis of communication. As it happens, after the 2008 election, we find a wealth of commentary around Obama's difficult 2009 campaign to transform the American system of financing healthcare that inadvertently focuses its anxiety on this very question. It does this by asking whether the potential that Obama offered in 2008 would become the actuality he achieved once elected president. In other words, there is a widespread fear that the answer will be 'yes,' that rhetoric might somehow be proven the crowning achievement of the orator. Most of this commentary draws explicitly on the distinction between the untested promise of words and the proving quality of actions, an inherently problematic distinction in political discourse, where most action consists of the exchange of words and other meaningful symbols. An international newspaper leader immediately after his inauguration as president captures the mood, and one of the characteristic phrase formulas, of this discourse:⁴⁹

Obama moves quickly to put words into deeds.

Obama's poeticised praxis: change we can believe in

Obama's 'prepared remarks'⁵⁰ on the occasion of his November 2008 election victory have already received immense attention, of course. His reputation as an orator was already very well established — by popular convention, Obama's emergence as a recognised name, as an orator of acknowledged might, occurred during his highly autobiographical Democratic Convention address in 2004.⁵¹ His speeches throughout the 2008 election campaign had done nothing to detract from that reputation. Indeed, several times, Obama's strengths as a political communicator had demonstrably

⁴⁹ Ewan MacAskill, 'Obama moves quickly to put words into deeds,' *The Guardian Weekly*, 30/1/2009, p. 1. Other characteristic formulas involve a similar dichotomy: the distinction between 'talking the talk' and 'walking the walk;' the distinction between a 'speaker' and a 'decider;' and the distinction between a 'candidate' and (various phrases for) an elected official.

⁵⁰ National Public Radio, 'Transcript of Barack Obama's Victory Speech,' viewed 8/2/2009: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96624326>.

⁵¹ *Op. cit.*

influenced public perceptions of his campaign.⁵² On numerous occasions, his confidence and range in the set-piece events proved strikingly charismatic. Additionally, the victory his campaign had accomplished was quite extraordinary. There had been a consensus that it was not possible for an African American to win an election for the USA presidency. In this moment, his speech was both a declaration and a demonstration that those received norms of history were no longer valid. The occasion of his election victory was thus doubly newsworthy: a great media ‘talent’ had won a momentous and historic victory.

The occasion’s news value meant the speech was immediately published as video and audio recording and as transcript by countless internet news outlets. Television and radio stations played it, or excerpts from it, in their news bulletins and other programs. Newspapers and news magazines published it whole or as edited extracts. Additionally, it has subsequently received extensive attention from the critics: journalists, academics, and others who make a point of closely reading the rhetoric of politicians. While all these people have their distinctive reasons for paying such regard to Obama, two types of reason stand out across the coverage. The first is the historic importance of his candidature and especially of his success. While there was a widespread appreciation of his historical importance before the victory, it undoubtedly grew as his campaign progressed. In such a view, the victory speech is a moment of definition or fulfilment – an epiphany, if you will – in which his historical importance became strikingly apparent. The second group of reasons relates to the aesthetic significance of Obama’s communicating style. Language and rhetoric commentators who analyse his speaking style are legion.⁵³ They are accompanied by performance studies commentators who analyse his body language and on-camera movement,⁵⁴ by media studies commentators who analyse his campaign’s graphic and

⁵² For example Obama’s much-scrutinised ‘Speech on Race’ — in distancing himself from the racially bellicose remarks of his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, as published online by *CBS News*: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/03/18/politics/main3947908.shtml> (accessed 18/3/2009).

⁵³ For an example from linguistics, see David Crystal, *DC Blog*; an example from Leadership Studies is Shel Leanne, *Say It like Obama: The Power of Speaking with Purpose and Vision*, McGraw Hill, New York, 2009.

⁵⁴ See the ‘Political Theater’ blog by Shannon Steen, from the University of California (Berkeley), <http://www.politictheater.blogspot.com/> (accessed 18/3/2009).

phonic design,⁵⁵ and by at least two commentators on Obama's hypnotics, who analyse his audience manipulation techniques on a rather more subliminal level than most others seek to comprehend.⁵⁶ The stylistic aspect of the Obama phenomenon also had its observers before the victory, but there is no doubt that attention to his aesthetics grew as his campaign success grew.

When we compare the Obama victory speech to ceremonial declarations by other candidates for head-of-government positions, it is this latter dimension that makes his performance so radical, so innovative. If we compare the concession speech that John McCain gave as the defeated candidate that same evening,⁵⁷ we find fundamentally similar ideas, including that similarity-making idea of time to unite as a polity. Obama hints at the extraordinary achievement of an African-descended president, but so does McCain. Obama dedicates the last section of his speech to a 106-year-old voter in Atlanta, Ann Nixon Cooper (see below), but including eyewitness testimonial to past injustices is a commonplace in mainstream political speeches around racial reconciliation.⁵⁸

What content analysis cannot find is what stylistic analysis cannot miss. Obama makes consummate use of linguistic and performative techniques that most capable political speakers would avoid. For starters, as Crystal points out,⁵⁹ his syntax is often remarkably extensive. The first five sentences, each laid out as a separate paragraph in the officially released transcript, easily tame a level of clause complexity

⁵⁵ Eg. Katherine Hepworth, 'Yes we can: Barack Obama, graphic design and liberal democratic process,' *Re-public – re-imagining democracy* website, <http://www.re-public.gr/en/?p=352> (accessed 18/3/2009).

⁵⁶ Wil Horton and anonymous, 'An Examination of Obama's Use of Hidden Hypnosis Techniques in His Speeches,' published widely online, including the following Scribd resource: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/10494346/Obamas-Use-of-Hidden-Hypnosis-Techniques-in-His-Speeches> (accessed 18/3/2009).

⁵⁷ National Public Radio, 'Transcript of John McCain's Concession Speech,' 5/11/2008: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96631784> (accessed 18/3/2009).

⁵⁸ Compare the national apology debates in the Australian and Canadian federal parliaments in 2008: Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates, *House of Representatives Hansard*, No.1 (2008), 42nd Parliament, <http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/reps/dailys/dr120208.pdf> (accessed 18/3/2009), pp. 26-33; Canada House of Commons Debates, *Official Hansard Report*, Vol.142 No.110 2nd Session (11/6/2008), <http://www2.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?DocId=3568890&Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=2> (accessed 18/3/2009).

⁵⁹ *DC Blog* 9 November 2008.

that would be likely to humiliate the rhetorical capacities of most of his colleagues. The sequenced coordinating clauses he uses in the second paragraph are reminiscent of some virtuoso gospel church sermonising,⁶⁰ notably including some artistic appropriations of the style,⁶¹ but quite unlike the party-political rhetorical tradition in America or elsewhere.

The stylistic feature most observed in Obama's 2008 victory speech has been another gospel church echo — the call-and-response sequence in its closing section:

This election had many firsts and many stories that will be told for generations. But one that's on my mind tonight is about a woman who cast her ballot in Atlanta. She's a lot like the millions of others who stood in line to make their voice heard in this election, except for one thing: Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old.

She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when there were no cars on the road or planes in the sky; when someone like her couldn't vote for two reasons — because she was a woman and because of the color of her skin.

And tonight, I think about all that she's seen throughout her century in America — the heartache and the hope; the struggle and the progress; the times we were told that we can't and the people who pressed on with that American creed: Yes, we can.

At a time when women's voices were silenced and their hopes dismissed, she lived to see them stand up and speak out and reach for the ballot. Yes, we can.

When there was despair in the Dust Bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs and a new sense of common purpose. Yes, we can.

When the bombs fell on our harbor and tyranny threatened the world, she was there to witness a generation rise to greatness and a democracy was saved. Yes, we can.

She was there for the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma and a preacher from Atlanta who told a people that 'We Shall Overcome.' Yes, we can.

A man touched down on the moon, a wall came down in Berlin, a world was connected by our own science and imagination. And this year, in this election, she touched her finger to a screen and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change. Yes, we can.

⁶⁰ See, eg, Michael Eric Dyson, 'A president-preacher from anaphora to epistrophe,' *Sydney Morning Herald* 19/1/2009, p. 11, who compares the rhetoric of Obama to pastors Frederick Sampson, Jeremiah Wright, and Martin Luther King Jr, as well as to the Muslim leader Malcolm X.

⁶¹ Eg. Stanley Crouch and Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr, 'Premature Autopsies,' in Wynton Marsalis, *The Majesty of the Blues*, CBS Records, New York 1999, where the syntax and the phrasing of the anecdotes about Ellington's travail are very similar to the stylistics of Obama's descriptions of voter hardship. Note that the same Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr, also mentioned in the previous footnote, is the principal object of disavowal in Obama's 'Speech on Race,' *op. cit.*

America, we have come so far. We have seen so much. But there is so much more to do. So tonight, let us ask ourselves: If our children should live to see the next century; if my daughters should be so lucky to live as long as Ann Nixon Cooper, what change will they see? What progress will we have made?

This is our chance to answer that call. This is our moment. This is our time — to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth that out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope, and where we are met with cynicism, and doubt, and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can.

As Crystal describes it,⁶² it is in response to the third uttering of 'Yes, we can' that the audience response becomes audible. From that moment, audience members join in the putative 'sense of common purpose' that Obama enjoins, and then all the remaining 'Yes we can' exclamations are echoed by the audience as well.

Importantly, 'Yes, we can' are words this audience – the audience in the room and the greater media audience to the speech – had heard before. After Obama had run second in the Democratic Party's New Hampshire primary behind Hilary Clinton, which caused many to believe she would surge to victory in the party's nomination contest, he made these three words his rallying cry in adversity. Admittedly, Obama uttered them with slightly different cadence then, a difference marked by the absence or presence of the comma after 'Yes.'⁶³ New Hampshire was a call to trust him, to continue to 'hope' for his success — there is none of *Beowulf's* fatalism here.⁶⁴

We've been asked to pause for a reality check. We've been warned against offering the people of this nation false hope.

But in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope. For when we have faced down impossible odds; when we've been told that we're not ready, or that we shouldn't try, or that we can't, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people.

⁶² *DC Blog* 9 November 2008.

⁶³ Note that this comma was present in an online video 'smash' of Obama's Nashua speech (see below), which erroneously included the comma in the transcription. It seems the Obama campaign team then incorporated this punctuation into its own typography before the Victory Speech. See will.i.am, 'WeCan08,' on *YouTube*, posted 2/2/2008: <http://au.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcx-mYY> (accessed 18/3/2009)

⁶⁴ 'Remarks of Senator Barack Obama after the New Hampshire Primary,' 8/1/2008, Nashua, as posted by the *Northwest Progressive Institute Official Blog*: <http://www.nwprogressive.org/weblog/2008/01/barack-obamas-speech-in-new-hampshire.html> (accessed 18/3/2009).

Yes we can.

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation.

Yes we can.

It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail toward freedom through the darkest of nights.

Yes we can.

It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness.

Yes we can.

It was the call of workers who organized; women who reached for the ballot; a President who chose the moon as our new frontier; and a King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the Promised Land.

Yes we can to justice and equality. Yes we can to opportunity and prosperity. Yes we can heal this nation. Yes we can repair this world. Yes we can.

And so tomorrow, as we take this campaign South and West; as we learn that the struggles of the textile worker in Spartanburg are not so different than [*sic*] the plight of the dishwasher in Las Vegas; that the hopes of the little girl who goes to a crumbling school in Dillon are the same as the dreams of the boy who learns on the streets of LA; we will remember that there is something happening in America; that we are not as divided as our politics suggests; that we are one people; we are one nation; and together, we will begin the next great chapter in America's story with three words that will ring from coast to coast; from sea to shining sea – Yes. We. Can.

In early 2008, this call to faith was remarkable on several levels, not least the amount of public attention it received. It was replayed and quoted extremely widely. What is more, it was reused and appropriated by myriad others. Subsequently the fame of the formula itself became a campaign organising principle. Musicians and video artists ‘smashed’ footage of Obama’s Nashua concession speech into their own creative work to reproduce it as a campaign slogan, an in-the-darkest-days-we-saw-the-coming-glory anthem, using YouTube and other online media to maximise the exposure for their work and his words.⁶⁵

It is a line they had heard others speak before Obama, too. The children’s animé series *Bob the Builder* springs to mind, but it is a bit misleading to pick out any one. The point is, this is a ubiquitous phrase, a tried-and-tested phrase, a cliché. To be maximally inclusive and minimally offensive is a virtue in political rhetoric. This phrase achieves those strategic objectives very convincingly. For all the lack of offense, though, its poetics are remarkably dynamic. As a clause, it has the two stresses of a normal Germanic half-line or verse: ‘*Yés we cán.*’ Printed (and performed) with three full stops, as in that last line of the Nashua concession speech,

⁶⁵ As we see with will.i.am, ‘WeCan08.’

it becomes hypermetric, a stress trimeter that stands out from the regular run of pairs: ‘*Yés. Wé. Cán.*’ This is a trick occasionally used for dramatic effect in Old English poetry. For example, the Old English verse rendering of *Exodus* depicts the destruction of the Egyptian armies thus: ‘*flód blód gewód*’ (‘the blood pervaded the flood’ — l. 463b). Lucas renders this as the first verse of a new sentence, opening a new theme with resonance,⁶⁶ but I am more convinced by those conventional editions which have it at the end of a sentence:⁶⁷ the verse triad that caps off an enjambment-sequence of pairs. That happens to be exactly how Obama has used it in Nashua. It is how Wiglaf has used it after the death of Beowulf (l. 2883b, quoted above). In any case, alpha or omega, the trimeter highlights a rhetorical *coup de grace*.⁶⁸

These elements of versification remind us of other ways in which Obama’s 2008 election victory speech echoes phrasing that people have heard before. I mentioned its intentional inhabitation of the gospel church oratorical tradition above. That is itself a style of echoes and reprises.⁶⁹ Obama cites Martin Luther King Jr (‘a preacher from Atlanta who told people that “We shall overcome”’) as a source of the tradition, but he also cites the sources cited in King’s most famous speech, ‘I Have a Dream’,⁷⁰ – the end of slavery, the experience of segregation, and the seminal role of that Republican White Male President, Abraham Lincoln. Obama conspicuously reprises King’s mythical universe, just as he purposively echoes King’s rhetorical flourishes.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Peter J. Lucas (ed.), *Exodus*, Methuen’s Old English Library, London, 1977, p. 133.

⁶⁷ Eg. George Philip Krapp, *The Junius Manuscript*, Vol. I of Krapp and Dobbie (eds.) *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records: A Collective Edition*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1931, p. 104.

⁶⁸ Occasionally, Obama couples his trimeters to especially memorable effect. Eg. his ‘Speech on Race,’ *op. cit.*, in which he reminds the audience that he was born to ‘a **bláck fáther** from **Kénia** // and a **whíte móther** from **Kánsas.**’

⁶⁹ Cf. Charlotte Higgins, ‘Foreword,’ in Henry Russell (ed.), *The Politics of Hope: the Words of Barack Obama*, New Holland Australia, Sydney, 2009, p. 11.

⁷⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., ‘I Have a Dream,’ 1963, *American Rhetoric* website, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm> (accessed 18/3/2009).

⁷¹ An illustrative example of how far this extends into popular representation comes from the Obama merchandising phenomenon: my father in law, Barry Batagol, gave me a quartz-powered wristwatch that commemorates Obama’s inauguration as President of the USA. With an angle-of-perspective rather reminiscent of the presidential busts at Mt Rushmore, it features a colour photograph of Obama’s face in the foreground, while a black-and-white photograph of King’s face hovers just behind Obama’s left shoulder.

What is more, Obama's Nashua speech clearly avows a desire to fulfil that Mosaic destiny which King appointed to himself in his final speech at Memphis⁷² ('a King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the Promised Land'). And so he echoes Beowulf also: Obama, the hero of his own epic, epiphany of racial equality, overthrower of Halliburton's profiteers and warmongers, liberator of Guantánamo, cooler of climates and rebuker of rising tides, comfort to the jobless and protector of the homeless, scourge of oligopoly wealth and privilege,⁷³ is a *Scylding of the Americans*. His name itself scans, rhythmically and alliteratively, as a metrical epithet,⁷⁴ an a-verse pointer to the hero his success and dedication might equal:

* Barack Obama Beowulfes mæg.

(Barack Obama, *Beowulf's kinsman*.)

But Moses to Scyld to King to Beowulf to Obama is clearly not the most obvious line of poetic resonance. A much more overt echo dynamic is the call-and-response relationship that Obama and his audience generate, itself profoundly resonant with vernacular rhetorical and performative traditions. The decision to join in an occasion of call-and-response is a salient example of symbolic action. The striking intensity of the chorus response bears out Berlant's contention that 'publics presume intimacy,'⁷⁵

⁷² Martin Luther King Jr., 'I've Been to the Mountaintop,' 1967, *American Rhetoric* website, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm> (accessed 18/3/2009).

⁷³ If this list of epithets seems arbitrarily histrionic, witness this comparison between Obama and King Canute in the speech Sarah Palin gave to the 2008 Republican Party National Convention, accepting its nomination for the position of vice-president of the USA: 'What does he actually seek to accomplish after he's done turning back the waters and healing the planet?' Sarah Palin, 'Speech to Republican Party National Convention' 3/9/2008, *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/09/03/sarah-palin-rnc-convention_n_123703.html (accessed 13/12/2009). I am grateful to Kayla Ramlochand for bringing this quote to my attention.

⁷⁴ As if anticipating this point, Burke argues that 'An epithet assigns substance doubly, for in stating the character of the object it at the same time contains an implicit program of action with regard to the object, thus serving as a motive.' *A Grammar of Motives and A Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 57.

⁷⁵ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2008, p. vii and *passim*. Berlant's account advances upon and modifies Warner's definition of

although in this case we need to see that the text Warner posits as the identifying characteristic of a given public is substituted by a living utterance. Indeed, it is arguable that the *text* of a political public is its politician, the utterer.⁷⁶ In amplifying the utterance, each extra voice demonstrates an affiliation to the orator and to her or his agenda. That is an affiliation to a political agenda, so of course it entails some measure of policy support, but it is more immediately an affiliation to an aesthetic: to a form that can be memorised and repeated, and which the audience is willing to memorise and repeat.⁷⁷

Assuming that Obama seeks intentionally to achieve this sort of result, one might surmise that his praxis of political communication is exceptionally aesthetic in orientation. This would be to confuse structure and competence, however. What is exceptional about Obama is the range and complexity of forms that he is confident to utilise in his rhetoric, but all professional public communicators answer to poetic standards — whether confidently or otherwise.⁷⁸

Additionally, we have the apparent problem of such unexceptional content. Or perhaps that should read ‘unexceptionable.’ There is an aesthetics of topical content as well as of phrasing style. According to topical criteria, Obama campaigned as a cautious social democrat, that is to say an agent for conservative aesthetics. This is a point of solidity, of credibility, amid his revolution of brilliant technique. Within the parameters of Obama’s principal election campaign slogan, ‘Change we can believe in,’ his topic selection represented – constituted – the *believability* that partnered the *change* his phrasing style offered: a new and consummate performance of all those topics we always knew mattered. In other words, ‘*chánge* we can *believe* in’ represented a finely honed praxis. It was an innovative recruitment of formulas from

publics as self-organising relations between strangers, the view set out in his essay on ‘Publics and Counterpublics,’ *op. cit.* (She explicitly discusses Warner’s notion of the ‘counterpublic’ on pp. 7-8, setting it in the context of Nancy Fraser’s work.)

⁷⁶ This point is essentially to reiterate a seminal nostrum from the Leadership Studies literature: namely, the eponymous advice in Roger Ailes and Jon Kraushar, *You Are the Message*, Doubleday, New York, 1988.

⁷⁷ Conversation analysis records a similar phenomenon in focus groups that discuss questions of political affiliation and ideology (as many do). See for example the discussion of ‘discursive repertoires’ in focus group responses to progressive racial policies: Martha Augoustinos, Keith Tuffin, and Danielle Every, ‘New racism, meritocracy and individualism: constraining affirmative action in education,’ *Discourse and Society* Vol 16 No 3 (2005), 315-340.

⁷⁸ Witness Hart Seely, *Pieces of Intelligence: The Existential Poetry of Donald H. Rumsfeld*, Free Press, New York, 2003.

numerous poetic traditions to advance a policy agenda whose main aspiration was credibility.

The correlation of rhetorical agendas with policy agendas can be only partial. The relationship between them is inherently arbitrary, being to some extent a relationship between signifiers and signifieds. Nevertheless, the one does clearly cast some light on the other, and vice versa. Obama's topical conservatism, taken in the context of his stylistic innovativeness, reflects a willing containment of policy reform. While his reformist aspirations are substantial, they are not boundless. The reform agenda is what he proposes, not more than that. In other words, Obama deploys an affectation of topical conservatism to communicate that he intends to 'change' few aspects of the political field other than those he has criticised directly.

It is here, in the relationship between stylistics and semantics, that the conservative-skeptical ethos raises its head most clearly. By contrast with medieval English literatures, the contemporary American polity renders any alternatives to a discourse of optimism – of 'hope' – particularly illegitimate. Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* pays its respects to this topical stricture,⁷⁹ just as his corpus of political speeches does,⁸⁰ just as other successful candidates before him have.⁸¹ In other words, references to hope are reminders of the banished alternative. The American polity is conservative in its refusal to discuss proscribed topics (what polity is not?) and skeptical in the moment that it pleads the permitted. By dint of genre, *Beowulf* is allowed a cynical take on the destiny of world events that an American political leader cannot afford to indulge, but the underlying desperation is identical.

Obama's victory represents a successful reframing of political-communicative aesthetics. Of course, that comes in the context of a broader reframing of political campaigns, a radical massification of campaign fund-raising, and an astonishingly disciplined approach to campaign business. It also comes in the context of widespread fear about the earth's changing climate, a looming economic recession, and worldwide blowback from years of military adventurism – these may stand as Obama's monsters, if you will – as well as his own determination to reform healthcare and the latent situational challenge of a severe downturn in the credibility of many of America's institutions of power. These and other contexts are critical to

⁷⁹ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*.

⁸⁰ Cf. Russell, *The Politics of Hope*.

⁸¹ Wirthlin and Hall, *The Greatest Communicator*, pp. 35-81.

the story here, of course. (It is not at all given that the same candidate with the same campaign style would have won under different circumstances.) But they are not the focus of this paper. This paper is interested in the communicative repertoire by which Obama and his campaign team encountered those contexts, and thrived in them.

The once and future poet

Whereas *Beowulf* begins with a historical frame on the coming narrative, Obama's victory speech ends by framing an understanding of the future through the eyes of a figure of 'living history,' the 106 year-old Atlanta voter, Ann Nixon Cooper. Such meldings of past and future are a classic framing technique for epic narrative, because they neatly establish the historical and/or legendary significance of the events narrated. For *Beowulf* the frame reiterates the (putative) might of the Danes 'in days of yore,' in whose realm the main narrative of the poem takes place. For Obama, it casts into relief the epoch-defining nature of the moment of his victory — an epochal quality that McCain also acknowledged, with grace and fine wordsmithing, in his concession speech:⁸²

This is an historic election, and I recognize the special significance it has for African-Americans and for the special pride that must be theirs tonight.

I've always believed that America offers opportunities to all who have the industry and will to seize it. Senator Obama believes that, too. But we both recognize that though we have come a long way from the old injustices that once stained our nation's reputation and denied some Americans the full blessings of American citizenship, the memory of them still had the power to wound.

A century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt's invitation of Booker T. Washington to visit — to dine at the White House was taken as an outrage in many quarters. America today is a world away from the cruel and prideful bigotry of that time. There is no better evidence of this than the election of an African American to the presidency of the United States.

In *Beowulf*, the past and the future are constantly alive in the main narrative, through its highly digressive style. Events are constantly compared to previous comparable events in legendary history, as well as to future events. History has its destiny; the future has its origins. They are also alive in the poetic genre to which *Beowulf* belongs — or, rather, the tradition to which it is affiliated. The verse style, the thematic concerns, the phrasing: these all reference poems past, as well as presaging poems to come. If you will forgive yet another cliché, there is a synergy

⁸² *Op. cit.*

between the past-and-futurity of *Beowulf*'s narrative and the past-and-futurity of its generic tradition.

This melding of memory and prolepsis is not simply epic in nature; according to Abraham,⁸³ it is a fundamental property of verse prosody. Abraham contends that poetic rhythm establishes language's meeting-point between a retained (remembered) past and a 'pretained' (anticipated) future. Within the versified moment of a poem, its patterned regularity and its creative potential, we are simultaneously aware of both dimensions. In simultaneously engaging hindsight and foresight, according to this view, *Beowulf* is making explicit the poetic fundamentals that carry its narrative. That narrative is framed in historic terms – both history of the retained past and history of the pretained future – because the grand narrative mode of history suits the legendary scale of epic. Aristotle argued that history looks backward, while poetry looks forward.⁸⁴ This theory has it that both do both.

In Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*, a verse-deaf London neurosurgeon called Henry Perowne comes to understand that 'Everything belongs in the present.'⁸⁵ His mother's dementia shows him how the present is the only moment in which past and future can exist for us. The ideologically expansive potential of this understanding becomes strikingly clear in moments where people communicate using aesthetically patterned sound symbols — these patterns are the prosody. Although Perowne can only comprehend prosody's power as a musical phenomenon, his elderly father-in-law, his pregnant daughter, and the home invader who intends to inflict suffering on them all understand that poetry can achieve it as well. That power of verse operates on a level which is not cleanly distinguishable from music.

As it goes with *Beowulf*, the same, surely, holds for Obama. A news article about his relationship to the rhetorical tradition of previous USA presidents quotes his account of the 'moment' of a president's speech:⁸⁶

⁸³ Nicolas Abraham, *Rhythms – On the Work, Translation, and Psychoanalysis*, trans. Benjamin Thigpen and Nicholas T. Rand, Stanford University Press, Stanford (California), 1995.

⁸⁴ S.H. Butcher (ed. and trans.), *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, Dover, New York 1951, p. 35, §IX.

Aristotle

⁸⁵ Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, Vintage, London, 2006, p. 164.

⁸⁶ Anne Davies, 'Obama brings a new dawn, with a dash of presidents past,' *The Age* (Melbourne), 17/1/2009, p. 15.

‘When you have a successful presidential speech of any sort, it’s because that president is able to put their finger on the moment we’re in,’ Mr Obama said.

It is a strikingly apposite view. Obama’s express, conscious, explicitly conceived purpose as a presidential orator is to bring his audience within the performative moment. That is to say, to bring their experiences into the ambit of verse, to induct his public into a poetics of leadership. The prosody, thematic range, and generic tradition that he employs are all instruments to that end. When those three aspects enable us to experience the dialectic between memory and foresight – the poetic moment – then, in Obama’s terms, it is a ‘successful presidential speech.’

Applying the concept to our main example of such a speech, that uncanny character in Obama’s African American epic, Ann Nixon Cooper, stands for more than a testimonial witness. She is like that seeress-narrator in the Old Norse ‘eddic’ poem of the creation, *Völuspá*.⁸⁷ That is, Cooper recounts a foundational history of her world and, by a kind of rhetorical proxy through Obama’s daughters, she anticipates a historical perspective on that world’s pretained future. Thus Obama’s listeners tap into a memory of the future, anticipated in the past, which is delivered in the poetic moment of his speech. All that sense of momentum, of potential, of panoramic or epic overview that empowers Obama’s language, and which enthral his supporters — it is a demonstrably poetic complex of effects. This paper begins with the notion that they are purposive, strategic, intentional affects.

⁸⁷ Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg, 1983, pp. 1-16.