

READINGS

[Essay]

THE AMERICAN VOID

*By Simon Critchley, from remarks delivered at the American Political Science Association in Boston on August 30 and at the New School in New York City on September 18. Critchley is the chair of philosophy at the New School. His most recent work, *The Book of Dead Philosophers*, is forthcoming from Vintage.*

There is something desperately lonely about Barack Obama's universe. One gets the overwhelming sense of someone yearning for connection, for something that binds human beings together, for community and commonality, for what he repeatedly calls "the common good." Of course, this is hardly news. We've known since his keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention that "there's not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America." Obama's remedy to the widespread disillusion with politics in the U.S. is a reaffirmation of the act of union. This is possible only insofar as we restore a sense of community to the nation. That, in turn, requires a belief in the common good. In the face of grotesque inequality, governmental sleaze, and generalized anomie, we need "to affirm our bonds with one another." Belief in the common good is the sole basis for hope. Without belief, there is nothing to be done. Such is the avowedly improbable basis for Obama's entire push for the presidency.

The obvious criticism one could make is that Obama's politics is governed by an anti-political fantasy. It lies behind the appeal to the common good, that "no one is exempt from the call to find common ground"; or "not so far beneath the surface, I think, we are becoming more, not less, alike." This, one might claim, is the familiar delusion of an end to politics, the postulation of a state where we can put aside our differences, overcome partisanship, and come together in order to heal the nation. The same longing for unity governs Obama's discourse on race, with his call for a black-brown alliance and his appeasing remark that "rightly or wrongly, white guilt has largely exhausted itself." Obama dreams of a society without power relations, without the agonism that constitutes political life. Against such a position one might assert that justice is always an *agon*, a conflict, and to refuse this assertion is to consign human beings to wallow in some emotional, fusional balm. One might add that the source of this longing for union is its absence. We anxiously want to believe, because we don't and we can't. The yearning for the common good comes from the refusal to accept that perhaps Americans have very little in common apart from the elements of a sometimes successful civil religion based around a sentimental, indeed sometimes teary-eyed, attachment to the Constitution and a belief in the quasi-divine wisdom of the Founding Fathers.

In the face of George W. Bush's ultra-political presidency—his massive extension of executive power and his prosecution of a politics of fear based on the identification of an enemy as morally evil—it is not difficult to understand the popularity of Obama's anti-political vision. Against the

[Symbology]

DEATH AND THE MAIDEN

By Mark Greif, from an essay published in September on the website of n+1.

There was some intelligence, in the control room at the G.O.P. convention, who could conceive of mastery on the grandest scale, a trafficker in political eschatology, unafraid to trespass on myths of the gravest consequence. Someone foresaw that the means of hatching a McCain triumphant was to make of him a risen God. The core conceit was that John McCain is already dead. Thus Sarah Palin's speech was a memorial. Her strange phrases conjuring McCain as *the kind of fellow whose name you will find on war memorials in small towns across this country hung fire until she qualified them—only he was among the ones who came home*. The true feeling was that he did not.

It was a speech drenched in blood and suffering. The gift of Palin that makes her so unbeatable is that she looks indomitable, fertile, fatted beneath the chin and sturdy of frame. The iron in her soul that makes her undebatable by anyone within Washington is that she is willing to sacrifice each one of her children for her beliefs. Her older son will be sent to bleed on the sand in Iraq. Her seventeen-year-old daughter Bristol, pregnant, will be sacrificed to Palin's sanctimony about abortion; the boyfriend, poor Levi, will be made the husband in an onstage shotgun wedding, as he takes Bristol's hand in front of millions of viewers. The motionless handicapped infant is a baby prop. At forty-four, Palin could still bear more. Her rude health is her means of service; above her hovers *the spirit*, the absent McCain, whose vaporous death-struck presence, lost in the past, has returned to shepherd all these sacrificial lambs.

Palin provides the flesh. McCain is a ghost. Palin is mother to others, daughter to him. He went *places where winning means survival and defeat means death*. He didn't come back. She puts forward an unfamiliar code of the small town: In her small town, love of country means only work and pain, not local solidarity. Love of country means death. With Vietnam and Iraq crowding in from either side, death means dying when the country is right, and dying when it is wrong. America's men *are always proud of America*. Whatever it does, wherever it sends them. Sarah Palin stands at home, beaming while they go.

messianic certainties of Bush II, Obama promises a return to a beatific liberalism whereby everything is seen *sub specie consensus*. This is a world where good old democratic deliberation replaces decisionism and where the to and fro of civil conversation replaces religious absolutism. Democracy is not a house to be built but "a conversation to be had." After eight disastrous years of gross mismanagement, secrecy, and lies, it sounds like an absolutely blissful prospect.

Of course, one might wonder how Obama's evacuation of power relations in the political realm goes together with his faith in the *agon* of capitalism, competition, and the salutary effects of free markets. One might also wonder how such a political position might genuinely begin to deal with poverty. But I don't want to go down the route of the classic critique of liberalism, according to which politics is evacuated in favor of the bifurcation of ethics, on the one hand, and economics, on the other, and the former is the veil of hypocrisy used to conceal the violence of the latter. I do not even want to propose a critique of Obama. Rather, I'd like to describe a puzzle that I don't think I am the only one to experience. What fascinates me is what we might call Obama's subjectivity and how it forms his political vision and how this might begin to explain his extraordinary popular appeal.

After watching countless speeches and carefully reading his words, I have absolutely no sense of who Barack Obama is. It's very odd. The more one listens and reads, the greater the sense of opacity. Take *The Audacity of Hope*: there is an easy, informal, and relaxed style to Obama's prose. He talks about going to the gym, ordering a cheeseburger, planning his daughter's birthday party, and all the rest. He mixes position statements and general policy outlines with autobiographical narrative in a compelling and fluent way. Yet I found myself repeatedly asking: Who is this man? I don't mean anything sinister by this. It is just that I was overcome by a sense of distance in reading Obama, and the more sincere the prose, the greater distance I felt. He confesses early on that he is not someone who easily gets worked up about things. But sometimes I rather wish he would. Anger is the emotion that produces motion, the mood that moves the subject to act. Perhaps it is the first political emotion.

At the core of *The Audacity of Hope* is someone who lives at a distance, someone distanced from himself and from others and craving a bond, a commitment to bind him together with other Americans and to bind Americans together. There is a true *horror vacui* in Obama, a terror of loneliness and nothingness. He yearns for an un-



4504 Van Nuys Boulevard, by Marc Trujillo, whose work was shown in April at Art Chicago 2008.

conditional commitment that will shape his subjectivity and fill the vacuum. He desires contact with some plenitude, an experience of fullness that might still his sense of loneliness, fill his isolation, silence his endless doubt, and assuage his feelings of abandonment. He seems to find this in Christianity, to which I will turn shortly.

But perhaps this opacity is Obama's political genius: that it is precisely the enigmatic, inert character of Obama that seems to generate the desire to identify with him, indeed to love him. Perhaps it is that sense of internal distance that people see in him and in themselves. Obama recognizes this capacity in an intriguing and profound remark when he writes, "I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views." He is a mirror that reflects back whatever the viewer wants to see. Somehow our loneliness and doubt become focused and fused with his. Obama's desire for union with a common good becomes unified with ours. For that moment, and maybe only for that moment, we believe, we hope. It is a strange-

ly restrained ecstasy, but an ecstasy nonetheless.

The occasional lyricism of Obama's prose is possessed of a great beauty. His doubts about being a father and a husband in the final chapter of *The Audacity of Hope* are touching and honest. And when he finishes the book, like a young Rousseau, by saying that "my heart is filled with love for this country," I don't detect any cynicism. Yet Obama writes and speaks with an anthropologist's eye, with the sense that he is not a participant in the world with which he so wants to commune. Experience is always had and held at a distance.

The passage in *The Audacity of Hope* that both focuses this sense of distance and complicates the problem I want to address is the death of his mother from cancer at the age of fifty-two, when Obama was thirty-four. He writes, for once, in a flare of directly felt intensity:

More than once I saw fear flash across her eyes. More than fear of pain or fear of the unknown, it was the sheer loneliness of death that frightened her, I think—the notion that on this final jour-

ney, on this last adventure, she would have no one to fully share her experiences with, no one who could marvel with her at the body's capacity to inflict pain on itself, or laugh at the stark absurdity of life once one's hair starts falling out and one's salivary glands shut down.

His mother was an anthropologist. She died as an anthropologist, with a feeling of distance from others and an inability to commune with them and to communicate her pain. Perhaps this is the root of Obama's *horror vacui*. But to understand this, we have to turn to his discussion of religion.

Why do we need religion? Obama recognizes that people turn to religion because they want "a narrative arc to their lives, something that will relieve a chronic loneliness or lift them above the exhausting, relentless toil of daily life." The alternative is clear: nihilism. The latter means "to travel down a long highway toward nothingness." Religion satisfies the need for a fullness to experience, a transcendence that fills the void. Obama's path to Christianity plays out against the background of his anthropologist mother's respectful distance from religion.

Like many of us, Obama initially looks to what he calls "political philosophy" for help. He wants confirmation of the values he inherited from his mother (honesty, empathy, discipline, delayed gratification, and hard work) and a way to transform them into systems of action that "could help build community and make justice real." Unsurprisingly, perhaps, also like many of us, he doesn't find the answer in political philosophy but only by confronting a dilemma that his mother never resolved. He writes:

The Christians with whom I worked recognized themselves in me; they saw that I knew their Book and shared their values and sang their songs. But they sensed that part of me remained removed, detached, an observer among them. I came to realize that without a vessel for my beliefs, without an unequivocal commitment to a particular community of faith, I would be consigned at some level to remain apart, free in the way that my mother was free, but also alone in the same ways that she was ultimately alone.

Freedom, for Obama, is the negative freedom from commitment that left his mother feeling detached and alone, a solitude that culminated in her death. Such is the freedom of the void. Being anthropologically respectful of all faiths means being committed to none and being left to drift without an anchor for one's most deeply held beliefs. To have such an anchor means being committed to a specific community. The only way Obama can overcome his sense of de-

tachment and resolve his mother's dilemma is through a commitment to Christianity. More specifically, it is only through a commitment to the historically black church that Obama can find that sense of grounding and fullness. It culminates in his joining Trinity United Church of Christ under Pastor Jeremiah Wright on Chicago's South Side. Whatever one makes of it, the absolute centrality of black American Christianity in the arc of Obama's narrative is what makes his fractious relationship with Pastor Wright so important and intriguing. Ultimately, everything turns here on the relation between the prophetic word (Wright's "God damn America") and the activity of government ("My heart is filled with love for this country").

What is certain about Obama's commitment to Christianity is that it is a choice, a clear-minded rational choice, and not a conversion experience based on any personal revelation. He insists that "religious commitment did not require me to suspend critical thinking. . . . It came about as a choice and not an epiphany; the questions I had did not magically disappear." Although he goes on to add that "I felt God's spirit beckoning me," it is the coolest, most detached experience of religious commitment, without any trace of epiphanic transport and rapture. I can't help but feel that Obama's faith craves an experience of communion that is contradicted by the detachment and distance he is seeking to overcome. For example, when he is unsure what to tell his daughter about the question of death, he says, "I wondered whether I should have told her the truth, that I wasn't sure what happens when we die, any more than

I was sure where the soul resides or what existed before the Big Bang."

Such skepticism about matters metaphysical is understandable enough and has a fine philosophical ancestry. But where does it leave us and where does it leave the question of belief, the cornerstone of Obama's entire presidential campaign? We come back to where we started, with the common good. Obama wants to believe in the common good as a way of providing a fullness to experience that avoids the slide into nihilism. But sometimes I don't know if he knows what belief is and what it would be to hold such a belief. It all seems so distant and opaque. The persistent presence of the mother's dilemma—the sense of loneliness, doubt, and abandonment—seems palpable and ineliminable. We must believe, but we can't believe. Perhaps this is the tragedy that some of us see in Obama: a change we can believe in and the crushing realization that nothing will change.