

VICTORY SPEECH

by James Wood November 7, 2008

A theatre critic once memorably complained of a bad play that it had not been a good night out for the English language. Among other triumphs, last Tuesday night was a very good night for the English language. A movement in American politics hostile to the possession and the possibility of words—it had repeatedly disparaged Barack Obama as “just a person of words” —was not only defeated but embarrassed by a victory speech eloquent in echo, allusion, and counterpoint. No doubt many of us would have watched in tears if President-elect Obama had only thanked his campaign staff and shuffled off to bed; but his midnight address was written in a language with roots, and stirred in his audience a correspondingly deep emotion.

On Tuesday night, Obama returned to his cherished theme, the perfection of the Union. Any victorious election speech must turn campaign vinegar into national balm, must move from local conquest to national triumph, and Obama cunningly used this necessity to expand epically through American space and time. Behind his speech were the ghosts of Lincoln’s First Inaugural, which moved anxiously over “every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land,” and his Second, which promised to “bind up the nation’s wounds.” Obama quoted from the end of the First Inaugural—“We are not enemies, but friends”—and the implication was clear: that the past eight years have been a kind of civil war.

Rhetorically, his speech sought to bind those wounds by binding us together. First, he moved through the people—young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight. Then he moved through the country—the back yards of Des Moines, the living rooms of Concord—ending, by way of the Gettysburg Address, with the earth: “from the millions of Americans who volunteered, and organized, and proved that, more than two centuries later, a government of the people, by the people and for the people has not perished from this Earth.” And then he moved through time, using the epic novelist’s trick of a heroine as old as the century. Ann Nixon Cooper, at the age of a hundred and six, had voted in Atlanta. Obama paused to imagine all that she had seen: woman suffrage, the “despair in the dust bowl, and Depression across the land”; the start of the Second World War, when “bombs fell on our harbor” (Pearl Harbor became simply “our harbor,” which was Obama’s way of reclaiming Hawaii from its recent alienation—his harbor and ours); and “the buses in Montgomery, the hoses in Birmingham, a bridge in Selma.” At the end of each witnessed decade, Obama appended a quiet “Yes we can,” extraordinarily moving in its sobriety. “Yes we can” had never been much more than a motivational vitamin, too close for comfort to Bob the Builder’s “Yes he can!” But by attaching the phrase to the past tense, to achieved history, Obama stripped it of its bright futurity and invested it with a measure of uncertainty, as if intoning both “Yes we did” and an implied “Yes we may.”

Besides Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., was the speech’s other founder. The allusions were deeper, and quieter, than the explicit reference to King’s famous phrase about how “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” (Obama said that we will put our hands “on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.”) When the President-elect warned that the road will be long, and that “we may not get there in one year or even one term, but

America . . . I promise you—we as a people will get there,” the word “promise” surely activated, however unconsciously, the rich narrative of exodus that found a culminating expression in King’s last speech, in Memphis: “And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you.” In the Memphis speech, King says that if God asked him which epoch he would like to inhabit he would want to go to Egypt in bondage, but also to Europe during the Reformation, and America when Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Borrowing, perhaps, from King’s epic radiations, Obama had Ann Nixon Cooper move through her American decades, then burst into world history:

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.

The language is plain but musical: the repeated “down” and the repeated “touched” enact the connection they describe. And then, at the end, as Obama returned once more to the Union (“that out of many, we are one”) and the promised land (“if our children should live to see the next century”), his language again invoked Lincoln (“and where we are met with cynicism and doubt, and those who tell us that we can’t”—that archaic “are met with” taking us back, allusively, to the Gettysburg Address): “We are met on a great battlefield of that war.”