Iconic political speeches contain some of the best remembered and most repeated passages in contemporary English language. Especially in the United States of America, what child doesn’t know Abraham Lincoln’s “fourscore and seven years ago…” or Roosevelt’s “the only thing we have to fear…”?

Taking as its source text Barack Obama’s campaign speech from 18 March 2008, A More Perfect / by Jimmy McInnes acts as a poetic translation of the rhetorical devices often used in political speeches. Like poetry, the campaign speech depends heavily upon the manipulation of language – the ways in which words are able to strategically twist intention and distract the eye. McInnes’ poetry exposes the inner workings of the political speech, as a genre of text as premeditated as any work of poetry or fiction. A More Perfect / blends both political and formal linguistic concerns in an entertaining and culturally poignant read – realpolitik never had it so good!

According to Thomas Hobbes (via Rachel Zolf’s Neighbour Procedure), power is the “capacity to give names and enforce definitions.” McInnes’ reverse rhetorical procedure on President Obama’s speech does two things: first it demolishes the monologic power of the spectacle and then it returns that power (now made dialogic) to the people, to the demos, and to language itself, by inviting us to participate in his gleeful and meticulous parsings. A More Perfect / is a gift of open form.

– MAT LAPORTE

Barack Obama’s eloquent and iconic 2008 speech on race, “A More Perfect Union,” is the master text underlying Jimmy McInnes’ ingenious poem. In the course of laying bare the devices of political rhetoric, McInnes presents an intricate lattice of tropes, formulas, gestures, and contexts. A More Perfect / reads like a performance theory handbook, a poet’s theatre script, and a grammar manual, all rolled into one concatenating barrel of tricks.

– CHARLES BERNSTEIN

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A More Perfect [ ]

Jimmy McInnes

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Jimmy McInnes

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I. Title.


PRINTED IN CANADA
In memory of Jack
[Begin Speech With]
Begin speech with relevant historical quotation:

quote plural pronoun definite article collective plural noun comma preposition verb idiom preposition verb indefinite article comparative adverb adjective noun period endquote
State how long ago these words were spoken. State exactly where they were spoken and the proximity to where we are now. Give a veiled idea of how many people were there. Gender these people who were there when these words were spoken.

Highlight the ease with which any collection of words is spoken and then contrast that ease with the potential impact that words could have on a country’s political ideology.

Allude to an engagement between the working class and the information class; allude to an engagement between the political class and a transcending term for those who love their country. Make mention that these groups had all congregated to where these words were spoken when these words were spoken for similar reasons these words were spoken and reference the specific legislative action that was taken following these words being spoken.
Be sure to highlight that the legislative action that was taken following these words being spoken was indeed a physical action and not merely a theoretical one.

Provide a disclaimer to the above statement that the physical action taken to fulfill the theoretical action remained in itself an incomplete action.

Remind the audience that [unanimously hated act of racial subjugation] not only delayed the physical and theoretical action that was taken following these words being spoken, but that also [unanimously hated act of racial subjugation] was fundamentally connected to the history of [relevant nation].

Make sure to note that the issue of [unanimously hated act of racial subjugation] was a particularly controversial one that divided [relevant nation] on geographic lines.

Make sure to note that the issue of [unanimously hated act of racial subjugation] divided those present when these words were spoken to the extent that the physical action taken to fulfill the theoretical action remained in itself an incomplete action with regard to [unanimously hated act of racial subjugation] for an approximate amount of time after these words were spoken.

Note that those present when these words were spoken chose a general term for a group of people to be born at a later date as the adequate party to take theoretical and physical action regarding [unanimously hated act of racial subjugation] as it pertained to legislative action.
Beginning with the use of an idiom:

Assure the audience that the theoretical action for [unanimously hated act of racial subjugation] was something fundamental to the physical action taken after these words were spoken.

Exclaim that the action taken after these words were spoken had essentially contained an ideal regarding the nature of fairness under an organized judicial system.

Add that the action taken after the words being spoken contained the following attributes:

1) Had promised freedom from arbitrary or despotic control.

2) Had contained the moral principle determining just conduct.

3) Had defined the terms for a group of political bodies with the ability and need to become the concept of the ideal over the progress of [an unspecified number of dates].
Interject this list of favourable characteristics regarding the theoretical action taken after these words being spoken by highlighting the fact that the theoretical action taken after these words being spoken was insufficient in materializing as a physical action regarding [unanimously hated act of racial subjugation].

Clarify in the second clause of this sentence that the theoretical action taken after these words being spoken should have, but failed to, apply in full to two of the genders included in all racial groups and all religious affiliations actively associated with [relevant nation].

Emphasize that the burden regarding [unanimously hated act of racial subjugation] had to be shifted to those who came after these words being spoken.

Divert mid-phrase in order to reinforce this point by providing broad examples.

Divert mid-phrase in order to reinforce this point by providing spatial examples.

Divert mid-phrase in order to reinforce this point by providing historical examples.

Underscore that those who came after these words being spoken stood to lose short-term in pursuing the above examples.

Now return to your original point, highlighting that those who came after these words being spoken remain with the burden of the disconnect between theory and practice of the action taken after the words were spoken in their particular historical context.
Bridge a connection between the action that was taken following the aforementioned words being spoken and the current historical moment as it pertains to those present.

Clarify that this has always been a policy objective of great importance.

Dramatize this connection between the action that was taken following the aforementioned words being spoken and the current historical moment as it pertains to those present by using a physical metaphor.

Emphasize that the physical metaphor you are using is helpful in articulating the goal of achieving [list of abstract ideals] for [relevant nation].

Transition now from the collective-we to the first-person-I while still emphasizing that your current status as a candidate for [relevant office] stems from a need for the collective-we.

Make the point that all contrasts inherent in the collective-we are derived merely from one's own personal narrative.

Confront these differences by emphasizing a list of similar personal aspirations.

Continue to flesh out this point by highlighting obvious differences of appearance and location.

Drive this point home by returning to the physical metaphor as it pertains to the need for the collective-we.

Articulate that the physical metaphor symbolizes improved conditions for one's own kin at a later date.
State that your optimism is grounded in the confidence that [list of flattering qualities] can be attributed to the citizens of [relevant nation].

Use this last statement as a springboard to reintroduce your own first-person narrative and how it pertains to the goals of the collective-we.

[Pause for applause]
[About the Author]

Jimmy McInnes was born and raised on Ontario’s Bruce Peninsula. His first chapbook, *Begin Speech With*, was released by Ferno House in the fall of 2013. His poetry has appeared in various journals, including *This Magazine, ditch, The Puritan, Descant*, and the *Capilano Review Web Folio*. His work has been shortlisted for the Great Canadian Literary Hunt and the Robert Kroetsch Award for Innovative Poetry. He lives in Toronto, where he completed his MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Guelph, and is currently employed as a political hack. *A More Perfect* is his first book-length work of poetry.