

## Robert Kennedy Recites from *Agamemnon*

His plane was in the air  
with tentative word  
It landed in Indianapolis  
where he found out for certain

He was making a campaign stop  
The Indiana primary was a few weeks ahead

He drove to the rally  
about a 1000 supporters  
who hadn't yet heard the news

RFK then delivered a spontaneous encomium  
in praise of Martin Luther King  
to a stunned audience

which included these lines:

“My favorite poet was Aeschylus

He wrote

‘In our sleep

pain

which cannot forget

falls

drop by drop upon the heart

until

in our own despair

against our will

comes wisdom

through the awful grace of God”

He'd first read those words

a few months after Dallas

when Jacqueline Kennedy had shown him Edith Hamilton's

*The Greek Way*

He read it carefully, also Hamilton's *Three Greek Plays*.

Did King's death alert Robert Kennedy to the danger  
out there in the gun-batty darkness?

or did it make him more quietly fatalistic

in the walled words of Greece

I decided to take a look at the ancient text  
which comes in the midst of a 223-line chant  
near the beginning of the play

A chorus of elderly men by the palace  
fills in the audience

on the Trojan wars

& the karmic knots & curse-based calamities  
that were soon to befall Agamemnon

and the Trojan princess Cassandra

whose boat was about to dock

at the end of the long bay near Argos on the Peloponnesus.

The chorus approaches Klytemnestra  
to learn about the news,

given by a signal-fire

that Troy had fallen.

In the original Greek  
the lines that Kennedy spoke  
are mainly delivered in cretics — ◡ —

and iambics ◡ — ◡ —

plus one example of the meter known as  
the dochmiac, used for times of high emotion

◡ — — ◡ — & a spondee! — —

— ◡ — | ◡ — ◡ —  
τὸν φρονεῖν βροτοῦς ὀδώ-

— ◡ — | ◡ — ◡ —  
σαντα τὸν πάθει μάθος

— ◡ — | ◡ — ◡ —  
θέντα κυρίως ἔχειν

◡ — — ◡ — | ◡ — ◡ —  
στάζει δ' ἐν θ' ὕπνω πρὸ καρδίας

— ◡ — | — ◡ — | — ◡ —  
μνησιπήμων πόνος; καὶ παρ' ἄ-

— ◡ — | ◡ — ◡ —  
κοντας ἦλθε σωφρονεῖν;

— ◡ — | ◡ — ◡ — ◡ —  
δαιμόνων δέ που χάρις βί-

— — | — ◡ — | ◡ — ◡ —  
αιος σέλμα σεμνὸν ἡμέων

—Agamemnon lines 176-183

What ARE these vowels and consonants?  
The Greek is very very difficult

Ahh, Robert Kennedy!  
what a thorny cluster of lines  
the bard has made  
his Argive elders chant!

In his translation of *Agamemnon*  
Robert Lowell  
elides together some 23 lines  
(including those the grief-numbered Kennedy spoke)  
into three:

Glory to Zeus, whatever he is:  
he cut off the testicles of his own father,  
and taught us dominion comes from pain!

And Ted Hughes in his translation  
does lines 176-183 as follows:  
(as best I can determine)

The truth  
Has to be melted out of our stubborn lives  
By suffering.  
Nothing speaks the truth,  
Nothing tells us how things really are,  
Nothing forces us to know  
What we do not want to know  
Except pain.  
And this is how the gods declare their love.  
Truth comes with pain.

Not nearly as true to gnarly Aeschylus  
as RFK.

The poet who visits  
the original chorus  
runs into the wall-like obstinance of genius

You have to pound it

verb by verb, and image by image  
into your pain-hardened brainland

But even after a long and pounding study  
how can a bard translate these lines  
with their cretics, iambs and dochmiacs  
in the starkness of current strife & war?

(& did the medieval copyists  
get all the verbs and endings exact?)

I decided to translate a larger section of the chorus  
beginning a few lines before the  
ones Kennedy chanted that stunned afternoon

to try to understand:

Oh Zeus! whoever he is!  
(if this to him is a pleasing  
name to be called)

This is how I name him  
and I am unable to come up with any other  
when I ponder it fully  
except Zeus, and so it's meet to  
hurl this follyful idea  
out of my mind.

Whoever once was great  
teeming with war-hunger  
shall not be said to have ever been alive,  
while he that later grew  
as a conqueror of land  
has come and gone

But someone who sound-mindedly shouts  
victory chants to Zeus,  
he shall build a wisdom of the All—

for Zeus, by leading mortals to  
think things over  
sets them on a useful road:

knowledge comes from suffering  
in magisterial mightiness!

It drip drip drips in sleep  
in front of the heart

—the relentless memory-pain—  
so that even against our will  
a wisdom of soul comes upon us!

thanks to the violent grace  
of our divinities  
in their sacred throne-place of rule  
(their σελμα σεμνον)

—lines 160-183

Be careful, o Robert Kennedy  
Please do not venture forth  
with the scars of Aeschylus  
making you heedless of the fatal anger

—Edward Sanders