

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 iambs ∪ — ∪ —
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