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For release 03/03/09

(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “he might have learned what Ulysses already knew.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

AWASH IN DRAMATIC IRONY

How former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich misread Tennnyson.

By Stephen Burt

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The story of Rod Blagojevich—the foul-mouthed, thick-haired governor of Illinois accused of (among other corrupt activities) trying to sell Barack Obama’s Senate seat—didn’t seem to have much poetry in it: suspense, yes, and farce (How did he get elected?), but little of the dignity or verbal nuance we associate with serious poems. W.H. Auden defined poetry as “memorable speech”; the most memorable words from the disgraced governor were words most newspapers would never print.

Blagojevich changed that in December 2008, when he quoted Rudyard Kipling's “If—” in a defiant press conference; journalists took note—some even learned the history of that frequently quoted poem. The governor looked to another British poet in another speech on January 9, 2009. Again, he made national news. Just impeached by the Illinois House of Representatives, but not yet convicted by the state senate, “Blago” said that he would fight to remain in office, just as he fought for ordinary Americans. He concluded with a ringing quotation from Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the Victorian poet laureate who also wrote “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” (Some headlines read “Gov. Rod Blagojevich Quotes Tennyson.”) The governor used the same poem, he noted, that Senator Ted Kennedy cited in 1980, after losing the Democratic presidential nomination: “Ulysses.”

The governor quoted lines from the end of the poem, in which the hero of Homer’s Odyssey declares, in resonant blank verse, that he and his comrades still have strength to fight:

> We are not now that strength which in old days
> Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will,
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Resolute, determined, unwearied—appropriate, no?

Yet for anyone who knows the poem, Blagojevich might as well have quit on the spot. Tennyson's great monologue is not a show of defiance but a speech of resignation from office, by a ruler who admits he is unfit to rule.

How could a resignation sound so defiant? How could Blagojevich's speechwriter get this famous poem so wrong? Tennyson's poem does not take place during the Odyssey. Nor does it take place during the Trojan War, in which Ulysses, distinguished himself for inventive tactics (or, from the Trojan point of view, for dirty tricks): he was the Greek who devised the Trojan Horse. This Ulysses speaks years after the Odyssey ends, after he has rejoined his queen, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus, and re-established himself as the ruler of his native Ithaca. Ulysses begins by explaining that he no longer enjoys his job:

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

He's bored with his work and his home. (Blagojevich, who became governor six years ago, allegedly considered sending himself to Washington if he could not make the right deal for that Senate seat.) "I cannot rest from travel," Ulysses says: he is famous all over Greece ("I am become a name") "for always roaming with a hungry heart." So, he says, he will give up his throne to his son,

mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centered in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

Telemachus has just the virtues that Ulysses lacks: put simply, Telemachus will follow the law.

Having resigned, Ulysses and his fellow sailors ("Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me") will take to the seas in search of new adventures: they will "follow knowledge like a sinking star," and "sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until I die." He may never come back—not until he has found and conquered all the secret places of the world. The end of the poem (the part Blagojevich quoted) indeed amounts to a show of defiance—but what Tennyson's Ulysses defies is neither a host of enemies, nor a volley of accusations, so much as the limits to all human life.

Widely believed to harbor corrupt ambitions, impeached, and accused of soliciting bribes, the governor of Illinois has defended himself by quoting a poem that amounts to a resignation from executive office, spoken by a character who declares himself no longer fit to rule, who says he will leave his home state and never return, and who will, soon after he finishes speaking, probably go to hell for theft and fraud.

If that's not dramatic irony, I don't know what is—and dramatic irony is exactly what Tennyson's sort of poem invites. Few readers of Tennyson condemn Ulysses. After all, courage has value, and there is something noble in Ulysses' determination to follow his nature, even if we think that nature (as Dante did) incompatible with virtue, and even if it leads to his doom. And few readers think Ulysses ought to stay and rule Ithaca: Ulysses himself knows that it is time to resign. If only the governor read his Tennyson closely, he might have learned what Ulysses already knew.

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