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Christopher Brennan's 'Piae Memoriae': a Translation

MICHAEL BUHAGIAR

PIAE MEMORIAE
PRAECEPTORIS DILECTISSIMI
R. P. PATR. KEATING S. I.
DISCIPULUS MAERENS
C. B.

TO THE SACRED MEMORY
OF A MOST BELOVED TEACHER
REVEREND FATHER PATRICK KEATING S.J.
FROM HIS GRIEVING DISCIPLE
C. B.

Εἴ τιν' ἐπιχθονίων χρῆν μὲν τραφέντ' ἐν
παντοδαπαῖς ἀρεταῖς
Μοισᾶν θ' ἀπαλαῖς βοτάναις ἐσλοῖς ὑπο
τερπνᾷ νεότατος ἐν ὥραι προσπελα-
σθέντ' ἀγλαίαις ἀταλαῖς
ὑμῶν χάριν σπένδειν γλυκεῖαν μὴ κακὰν
τιμὰν ἐπ' ἀποικομένοις εὐεργέταις
ἀμφαδὸν δειξαντ' ἀφ' οἴων ἐξέβλασταν·

τῷ καὶ ἐγὼ σέ, πάτερ, ψυχᾷ τὸ θεῖόν
μοι καταθέντα ποτέ
θρηνεῖν ἐθέλων ὑπὲρ ὧραν αἶρομαι
μὴ δὴ δακρῶν ἔτι λοιβὰν προφρόνως
αἶνον δὲ ταφαῖς ἐρατὸν
κρατῆρος ἀφνειᾷν ἀοιδᾶν ἐκχέαντ-
α ξυνὰ φιλοφροσυνᾶν εὐηράτων
τᾶν πάρος μναμεῖα θέσθαι καλλίνικα

εὐσεβῆς, θαητὸν εἶδος
καὶ φρὲν' ἀκοινοτέραν
ἦπιον τ' ἀρχῆς τρόπον ἄμμι πιφαύσκων
ἐξ ὀσίων ἠθέων,
οὐ θάνατος σὲ δαμαῖ-
μνήμην τε γὰρ ἐγκατέλειπας φιλτάταν
στήθεσιν ἠθέων,
ἔργοις δ' ἐνίκησας τ' ἀρεταῖς τε τεαῖς
τὸν βροτῶν πάγκοινων αἰπὺν δέκτορ' Ἄιδαν.

If fate should ordain a man from among mortals
to grow rich on manifold
finenesses, and be brought by mentors in the joy-
ful time of youth to the rich fields of the Muses,
at length to pour for your sakes
sweet unflawed honour in innocent beauties on
the great authors of old, then in revealing them
without disguise he would show whence he had sprung.

So I too, wishing to sing a lament for you,
Father, who once implanted
perfection in my soul, take up, though indeed not
zealously, this offering of tears and, pouring
out loving praise at your graveside,
the rich song of the bowl, dedicate to you, sir,
the beautifully victorious memories
that we all share, too soon, the warm radiance of

lovely things. And as I summon
your striking form, your rare mind,
your gentle manner of authority to us,
from a hallowed time of youth,
death does not overcome you.
For having left a most beloved memory
in the hearts of youths, you have
conquered by your deeds and virtues the steep recept-
ive Hell that is the lot of common humanity.

Christopher Brennan's lament for Father Patrick Keating, his first teacher of Greek, was first published in *Alma Mater*, the yearbook of St. Ignatius College, Riverview, in 1913, after Keating's death on 22 May of that year. A. R. Chisholm and J. J. Quinn later included it in their landmark *The Verse of Christopher Brennan* (1960: 234). In neither instance, however, was it accompanied by a translation; and, given the heartfelt depths from which it was composed, and the importance of the Greek tradition to Brennan's inner life, I thought it worthy of being rendered broadly appreciable by Brennan's admirers and scholars.

Consequent on the early formative experience of encountering Father Keating at Riverview ('easily the most distinguished personality that I have ever met, a standard whereby to test and judge all others') (Clark 1980: 18) in 1886, at the age of fourteen, Brennan pursued for several years a scholarly fascination with Aeschylus, widely acknowledged as the greatest dramatist of the Classical age, which culminated in the publication in the *Journal of Philology* (1894) of his paper 'On the manuscripts of Aeschylus'. However, he would temporarily abandon this allegiance in 1894, shortly before the inception of his quest for the esoteric wisdom of the Hebrew goddess Lilith, with the Gnostics, William Blake, and moderns such as Swinburne and Mallarmé as his mentors. This quest would reach its fruition in *The Forest of Night* (1898-99), the central and longest movement of his magnum opus *Poems 1913*. The period of his renunciation of the Classics would last for approximately seven years, until the turn of the century. Axel Clark has demonstrated the resumption of Brennan's Classical interests at about this time (1980: 186); and I have shown elsewhere (2012) that *The Wanderer*, a significant portion of which was completed in 1902, is written entirely in a Greek lyric metre, as an expression of his return to materiality as a basis for the metaphysical quest, under the influence of the philosopher F. C. S. Schiller. Brennan's deeply emotional reaction to Father Keating's death (he broke down in tears at the graveside), and his dedication of this Greek poem, in the style of Pindar, to his mentor's memory, support the conclusion that Greek did in fact remain important to him, at least until 1916, in spite of his formal position at Sydney University being in German. *The Wanderer's* epigraph '1902—' is consistent with this scenario. Brennan candidly acknowledges in the fact that threnody to Keating the definitive influence of that adolescent experience on the *Bildung* of the adult man. Given the centrality to *Poems 1913* of Brennan's response to Greek, as I have shown, (Feb. 2012) this confession is of significance.

In translating this poem I had three aims: to replicate precisely the syllabics of the original; to translate every word that Brennan wrote; and to produce of it respectable English poetry. This triangulation promised, if successful, to lead to a worthwhile rendering. I can say that I succeeded completely in the first aim, and almost completely in the second. My canny selection of the word 'respectable' instead of, say, the suicidal 'inspiring', gave me a certain margin of error in the third aim. Undoubtedly it reads a little stiltedly in parts; but loosening it up would have impacted on the second aim, and I chose faithfulness to Brennan's words as being more important. I omitted only one word of the original, namely εὐσεβής, *eusebes* ('pious') (line 17). I felt that the cost to the harmony of the translation of including it would

have been quite high, and the benefit low, as Brennan's piety toward his subject is strongly implied in almost every line of the poem.

Some notes on the translation:

1. In line 5, I have translated ἀγλαίαις ἀταλαίς, *aglaiais atalais*, as 'in innocent beauties'. Interestingly, Brennan mentions in an essay on Mallarmé: 'The instinctive innocent soul (ἀταλαὶ φρένες, *l'anima semplicetta che sa 'nulla'*) knows nought of the ills of life: it must have been "stung with the splendour" of a higher sphere.' (1962: 362).
2. In line 6, I take ὑμῶν, *hymon* ('your'), to refer to the readers of *Alma Mater*, namely the boys of Riverview.
3. In line 8 I have translated ἀμφαδὸν, *amphadon*, as 'without disguise', to convey the sense of removing by translation the mask of obscurity from a foreign language.
4. In line 9, the strict meaning of τὸ θεῖόν, *to theion*, is 'divinity'. I have rendered it as "perfection", which was the divine (Greek rather than Christian) quality that Brennan most associated with Father Keating. Clark tells us that 'In Brennan's descriptions of Father Keating, his 'perfection' is emphasised more than any other characteristic' (18).
5. In line 16, the memories are καλλίνικα, *kallinika* ('beautifully victorious') because they conquer death, as Brennan will affirm again in line 21.
6. The technique of enjambement can look facile and lazy in English poetry, but it was a staple of Greek. I have used it (lines 3 and 24) sparingly and I hope judiciously, as did Brennan (lines 4 and 14).

I am indebted to my friend Dr. John Scahill, formerly Professor of English at Keio University, Japan, and an exceptional Greek scholar, for his helpful suggestions, which greatly benefited the untangling of Brennan's unusually challenging syntax.

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