

Amy McCauley is a poet based in Manchester. Her work has been published widely in magazines and anthologies, including *Best British Poetry 2015* (Salt), *Best British and Irish Poets 2016* (Eyewear), *The Poetry of Sex* (Viking), and *Hallelujah for 50ft Women* (Bloodaxe). Amy was the recipient of a Northern Writers' Award for 2016, works as Poetry Editor for *New Welsh Review*, and has a PhD in Creative Writing from Aberystwyth University. Amy's *Auto-Oedipa* reinterprets and regenerates the Oedipus myth in the context of a modern seaside resort town and several millennia of philosophical and theatrical tradition. It began appearing in leading poetry journals in 2014 and will be published by Guillemot Press in 2018 under the title *Oedipa*. Other current projects include a book of essays (*Propositions*) on language, violence and desire, and a novel-in-verse about Joan of Arc.

Gareth Prior is a poet, librettist and reviewer based in Oxford. His poem-essay *Erinys: Three Studies* (Oystercatcher Press, 2016) looks at Francis Bacon's paintings in the light of his lifelong engagement with Greek tragedy; his collection of poems *ibant obscuri* (forthcoming from Knives Forks and Spoons Press) recreates a journey into the ancient underworld across different voices and time periods. In 2014 he co-edited, with Claire Trévien, the anthology *Other Countries: Contemporary Poets Rewiring History*. Gareth's libretto for Saffron Hall's inaugural children's opera *The Glass Knight* took the structure of 5th century BCE Athenian tragedy and applied it to a medieval local legend, compressing 500 years of a town's history into a single day.

Gareth interviewed Amy about her *Auto-Oedipa* as part of the Open University's colloquium, *Remaking Ancient Greek and Roman Myths in the Twenty-first Century*, which was held in London on 7th July 2016. Since then, the two poets have continued their discussion, some of which is captured in this follow-up to the colloquium.

This interview is online at <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2017/mccauley>

GP. The Oedipus myth is so pervasive in Western culture that (certainly for the past 100 years or so) it feels easier to list the writers who haven't engaged with it than those who have – to the point where we can't even talk about 'the anxiety of influence' without the ghost of Oedipus in the background. *Auto-Oedipa* engages with this legacy pretty explicitly but doesn't ever feel cramped or overwhelmed by it. How difficult was it to use material that's passed through so many hands/mouths and turn it into something fresh?

AMcC. I couldn't have written my own version without first engaging with the versions which went before, so I spent a lot of time researching the reception of Oedipus. I knew I wanted to absorb aspects of Nietzsche, as well as the Freudian reading, but quite early on I decided to limit my influences so as not to become overwhelmed. In the end, I was drawn to what we might loosely call 'experimental' twentieth-century receptions. The most useful to me were Martha Graham's *Night Journey* (1947), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Edipo Re* (1967), Ted Hughes' *Seneca's Oedipus* (1968) and Toshio Matsumoto's *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969).

I found these examples interesting because they play with the narrative possibilities of the story,

as well as the formal possibilities of how the story might be told. There is something wonderfully violent and impersonal in their aesthetic, yet each in its way is deeply tender. So I looked to these versions as instances of fresh, innovative and powerful renderings.

I read lots of interviews with the artists concerned and found their methodological approaches to the material extremely helpful. Matsumoto, for example, talks about his approach to filmmaking as ‘neo-documentarianism’. Documentary and the avant-garde are, in his words, ‘connected within a moment of mutual negation’.¹ This is something I sought to achieve with *Auto-Oedipa*. And I found Pasolini’s view of myth as a kind of continuous present tense fascinating. He says:

*[M]yth is a product [...] of human history; but then having become a myth it has become absolute, it is no longer typical of this or that period of history, it’s typical, let’s say, of all history. Perhaps I was wrong to say it is a-historic, it is meta-historical.*²

As Pasolini suggests, when we are dealing with myths we enter a space which does not recognise ‘time’ as time is broadly conceived of. Mythic space is that vast and continuous violence which exists behind everything. It represents everything ‘civilisation’ would prefer us to ignore in order that we don’t destroy the ‘civilised’ world. I suppose that violence – which is fully in the Sophoclean version – is what perhaps gives *Auto-Oedipa* some freshness.

But I was also inspired by literary versions of other mythic material – again ‘experimental’ works. Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Amalgamemnon*, Anne Carson’s *Antigonick*, Russell Hoban’s *Kleinzeit* (which uses the Orpheus myth), Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love* and Heiner Müller’s *MedeaMaterial* were especially important to me. And again, these works inhabit what I would call the space of myth. That is, they tap into that streaming source of violence which lies beside everything and bring some of it into the language.

In narrative terms, I wanted to foreground the struggle for autonomy within the mother-daughter relationship, interrogate the nature of ‘femaleness’ as a series of fragmented performances, and explore the desiring ‘female’ body using various ‘masks’. Since I’m refracting the myth through a lesbian lens, *Auto-Oedipa* also proposes the possibility of reading the Oedipus complex from a ‘queer female’ angle. The perspective a ‘queer’ woman brings to a conventionally male, heterosexual narrative of psychosexual development offers an interesting angle, I think.

Formally, the myth has allowed me to explore speech acts as forms of violence in our experience of the ‘self’ as constituted through performances of gender. Rather than view language as a ‘private’ system, I’m interested in speech acts as embodied performances which invoke theatrical aspects of public display, power and self-exhibition.

Ironically, perhaps, I think the fact I have ‘folded in’ aspects of various receptions actually gives *Auto-Oedipa* a new sort of energy. But if I’m honest, the freshness – if it comes from anywhere – comes from Sophocles.

GP. The Pasolini quotation is particularly interesting since *Auto-Oedipa* taps so powerfully into that ahistorical, archetypal quality of true myth, but at the same time situates itself in an

identifiable time and place. It feels as if there's an unresolved tension between the pull towards atemporal myth and the pull towards recognisable narrative detail (e.g. a northern seaside town) – especially with some of the Beckett-like use of modern props displaced from their naturalistic context – all of which becomes a further source of energy in the text. Was this something you consciously set out to do, or did it emerge as the work evolved?

AMcC. I think growing up in a fairly dilapidated seaside town like Scarborough – a place quite literally crumbling into the sea because of coastal erosion – has given me an unusual way of experiencing time. The fossils were there to be seen when the tide ebbed, the many retired inhabitants (Scarborough is sometimes referred to as 'God's waiting room') would patrol the municipal gardens, and culturally the place seemed stuck in a time-loop with 'turns' like Ken Dodd and Jim Davidson doing the rounds every summer.

The nineties was also a period in which the fishing industry was finally packing up. So I think economically, culturally, experientially, there was always a sense of looking back to a golden past. This meant the town had a weird, difficult and unresolved relationship to its own present. It existed in a perpetual state (almost outside of time) which seemed to conflate 'present' and 'past'. As a result, a mood of nostalgia (for something I had never witnessed or experienced firsthand) always ran through my experience of the present moment. The proliferation of fossils also carried a 'mythic' resonance for me, seeming to signify another world entirely yet being commonplace and accessible.

But how can one be nostalgic for the present?

I started to read philosophy at a very young age, when I would pick books up from car boot sales and charity shops. I read R.D. Laing, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre, de Beauvoir. I was struck by this line from Kierkegaard: Life must be lived forwards but can only be understood backwards. This seemed to me to get to the very heart of our existential predicament as human beings because it acknowledges our existential predicament is primarily a *temporal* predicament.

Absorbing these philosophical ideas allowed me to experience the struggles going on around me as somehow taking part in dialogue with the things I was reading. I never saw philosophy as separate from my own life. Instead, I saw these writers and thinkers as contemporaneous with my own experience; as commenting on, and narrating the people and events I observed around me. Since I'd had no formal introduction to philosophy, I simply read the books and applied what I read directly to the life around me.

For example, I was really into karaoke as a teenager and you would see the same tragic figures singing the same songs week in, week out. It was a ritual for them – the same thing every week. But somehow when they sang 'their' song they were transformed into these mythic archetypes – these examples from Nietzsche – who were striving, overcoming, triumphing, even in the midst of their own struggle, their own suffering. I found it marvellous. I'm still fascinated by this phenomenon.

I suppose I don't really see the atemporality, or metahistoricity of 'myth' and the recognisable local detail of a northern seaside town as being in any sense incompatible. I think there's maybe

something to be said for a kind of ‘mythic thinking’ – which is perhaps what I engaged in as a child – whereby one approaches one’s ‘present’ as somehow already part of the realm of myth. Perhaps, for me, this simply sprang from Scarborough’s peculiar conflation of ‘present’ and ‘past’.

As an adolescent, entertainment was hanging out in seedy pubs, dancing, singing karaoke. These entertainments relied on the arrival of the summer season when I would work as an usherette, chambermaid, waitress and barmaid. During the summer months Scarborough fulfilled its promise as a pleasure resort – but during the winter it would just go dead. Your job would disappear, it would go dark, and the place would empty of life.

Somehow this cycle of energy followed by collapse gave me an enlarged, exaggerated sense of being stuck in an odd, repeating sequence which felt as though it would go on forever. So when I read Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and then the plays of Beckett, I didn’t approach them as ‘literature’ *per se*: I approached them as absolutely realistic – the ultimate expression of reality. I think, in fact, the distinction between ‘realism’ and ‘myth’ has never entered the equation for me. They have always been one and the same. And the attempt to write ‘autobiographically’ is always, of course, an exercise in self-mythologising. Funnily enough, the first lines I wrote of the Oedipa project were:

Knock knock. *Who’s there?*
Oedipus. *Oedipus who?*
Fucked if I know.

I think this demonstrates the way in which the book is all about performance, which actually Scarborough is as well. Working in the tourist industry, you observe the way the place ‘sets out its stall’ and performs for its visitors every year. So setting an ancient Greek tragedy in a seaside town made perfect sense to me. It also helped me ‘stage’ the struggles of Oedipa as a performing adolescent. She constantly asks: Do we ever stop ‘performing’ (as bodily forms, forms of language, gendered forms and sexualities)? Is a ‘private’ self possible? Can we speak in voices which are not in some way already inherently ‘public’? And how does one inhabit a body, a language, a gender, a sexuality, a place, a time, and make the experience one’s own?

GP. Your reading of *Auto-Oedipa* at the Ancient Myths colloquium was a great example of ‘embodied performance’, making full use of the space, walking in amongst the audience, using a full range of dramatic registers and jettisoning any kind of pre-digested exposition between extracts – all of which had a visibly powerful effect on many in the audience. The work also exists (or existed at the time) in two versions: as a poem-sequence and as a play, and the effect in the colloquium reading seemed somewhere between the two.

Clearly the distinctions between ‘poem’ and ‘play’ are only as rigid as anyone usefully chooses to make them, but it feels as though the form of the piece – and in particular the shift between text and performance – is an important and perhaps usefully-unstable question for *Auto-Oedipa*?

AMcC. I think the question of performance absolutely underpins the ethics of the book’s compositional process.

Rather than view language as a ‘private’ system, I’m interested in speech acts as embodied performances which summon theatrical aspects of public display and self-exhibition. This notion of utterance as a shared, communal phenomenon – a mode of performance in itself – means I see language as a refusal of ‘privacy’. As such, I approached language-use in *Auto-Oedipa* as an essentially ‘performing’ phenomenon; one which draws upon strata of embedded etymological power structures and myths, and which might even be comparable to a kind of ‘collective unconscious’.

In *Auto-Oedipa* I also explore the performing ‘I’ as a ‘theatre of selves’ and in so doing, seek to place the concept of a stable, locatable and ‘authentic’ ‘I’ under pressure. In presenting the personae using deliberately overwrought acts of linguistic self-display – acts which rely on visual, oral and aural ‘curatedness’, and which wilfully draw attention to their ritualised, heightened status as speaking/spoken performances – I am attempting to ‘exhibit’ our never-ending project of performing our ‘selves’.

Equally I am examining the ways in which gender is performed and experienced as a cultural sensation, and the ways gendered identities take part in a wider affective economy within what we might call the ‘social imaginary’. As such, these questions are relevant: Can we ever see ‘feeling’ or ‘experience’ as separate from ‘wearing’, ‘inhabiting, and/or ‘embodying’ a performance, or series of performances? What comes first, performance or feeling? What role does language play in our experience of embodied role-playing? Is it possible to speak of, or as, a ‘private’ self?

In the first instance, *Auto-Oedipa* was actually written in the play format. I was drawn to the aesthetics of a script-like, theatrical poetic mode, and the masks used in tragic performance seemed to be perfect emblems for the ‘masks’ I see many people wear. Likewise, the magnified, ritual aspects of tragic spectacle (songs, stylised speech-forms, amplified gestures, para-semantic articulations) spoke to my fascination with the ritual aspects of ‘performing’ the self by way of embodied cultural grammars of gender.

In writing the poems using the vehicle of the play format I discovered a wholly different context within which to speak, and once I removed the ‘skin’ of the text (directions, acts of scene-setting, practical notes etc.) I found what was left resembled a kind of essential remainder.

The ‘poetic’ forms in *Auto-Oedipa* respond directly to the forms in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, while the idea of poetry as a spoken, dramatic medium is rooted in the ways of speaking found in Greek tragedy. Today we tend to think of drama and poetry as separate entities, and more often than not they occupy separate spheres of cultural life. But for Sophocles, poetry was rooted in the sphere of ritual drama: it was, of necessity, a mode of orality, aurality, and embodied performance. An event, a ritual, and a sacrifice.

It’s fascinating to consider that dramatic monologue – a mode most contemporary poets would recognise – is ‘so entwined with the ritual roots of drama that no distinct origin may be specified.’³

My idea of a 'performing theatre of the page' follows the example of Athenian tragedy, which at the time was viewed as a participatory cultural and civic occasion: a collective, public experience wherein the performance of the Chorus allowed the audience to see itself reflected back. Likewise in *Auto-Oedipa*, there is a present, communal audience in the form of a Chorus and Fates. At the point of writing, I held the idea of 'audience' and 'present chorus' rather than singular 'reader' at the forefront of my mind, and as such have attempted to speak 'performingly' across the text rather than approach the writing as an act of writing *per se*. I describe this using the idea of 'writing as an intentional act of dramaturgy'.

Since the voices in *Auto-Oedipa* are engaged in performing across time and multiple 'selves', they hurl their voices against a vast canvas of 'myth' as though speaking to all people at all times. The presence of this meta-amphitheatre necessarily requires amplified, heightened registers of speech: registers which 'carry' from the written document on the page to the ear of the reader.

Accordingly, I prioritised the oral and aural implications of speech during the writing process, and came to view the sonic effects of performance as being in a reciprocal dialogue with the visual effects on the page. In order to examine the relationship between the sonic and visual aspects, I began 'sounding' my written work as a way of mapping their relation. I recorded the voice which spoke, listened back, then held the written 'score' to account by comparing the aural implications of spoken language with the visual system of notation.

By moving between the written, verbal and aural worlds I increasingly came to experience the sonic and visual systems as temporal equivalents, and allowed the aural effects of voice to determine the structure of visual apparatuses. I came to think of voice as behaving on the listener's ear in an equivalent manner to the way in which form behaves on the reader's eye. This conversation loop between the visual, oral and aural enabled me to develop the voices, and to experience voice as a percussive, musical and embodied apparatus. I also began to experience the page in a different way, and increasingly worked using a 'discursive' method of composition, with the result that the oral and aural components 'infected' the visual presentation and vice versa.

This led to a reconceptualisation of the relation of the eye to the page, and I started to approach the reader as a 'spectator' and the page as a 'stage'. In this way, *Auto-Oedipa* is an attempt to reconfigure the page as a site for the visual 'trace' matter or inscription of speech-events, and therefore treats the book as a 'performing score' or 'mouth-map'.

The visual form of each utterance invites the reader to 'hear with the eyes', invoking a kind of 'performing page' which asserts its own status as a theatrical document. The script attempts to 'sound' its utterances using 'visual voices'; voices which place themselves self-consciously 'on display', as if 'I' were always performing before an audience in a theatre.

GP. The way you've described this sounds almost like a reimagining or rediscovery of the fundamental elements of Greek tragedy from first principles, as if all the accumulated literariness of later reception gets burnt away to leave only the raw essence – voice, music, mask,

performance – but that you’ve got there by an essential, almost physical process rather than anything intellectualised (in spite of the amount of learning and research that fuelled the project).

I’ve a hunch that this is somehow related to the difficulty you have in taking the opposition of ‘myth’ and ‘realism’ seriously – just as Sophocles or Aeschylus or the authors of the Homeric poems would have struggled to take it seriously. And somewhere mixed in with all of this I’m thinking of Francis Bacon (the painter, not the essayist) insisting on the primacy of paint that transmits ‘direct to the nervous system’ rather than ‘in a long diatribe via the brain’. It’s as if you have to strip away the symptoms of too much ‘literature’ to get at the thing itself – which is also a bit Beckett-y, I suppose. Sorry, that’s not a very well-formulated question, but does any of this resonate?

AMcC. Absolutely! The interviews with Francis Bacon by David Sylvester were really important to me when I was considering how to clear space for the creative act. I was asking questions about poetry’s capacity to produce a kind of somatic, corporeal shock – that form of bodily anxiety which hits the nerves directly. And I found Bacon’s ‘desire for [...] returning fact onto the nervous system in a more violent way’ to be exactly the kind of crisis I wanted to force with the reader.⁴ I think maybe that’s what art is for me: that which reaches towards the violence behind the image and the language. Because behind the poem, behind the painting is always some violence striving to be felt: as Bacon says, it wants to come leaping onto the nervous system. And this means getting rid of the ‘thinky’ part of your brain.

So I allowed the book to come from a really very physical place: a violent sense of despair, which I used in the work as a rhythm. I really believe the only way experiences can be ‘carried’ in any sense is as rhythms – that language is almost secondary. This is because you arrive at the language by way of a rhythm, and this rhythm is the affective, the physical structure. This rhythm is the starting place. It’s like you’re taking language unawares, or else language is taking you unawares – maybe a bit of both.

Violence became a key part of the aesthetic I was leaning towards – as you say, burning away the layers of reception to get back to something raw and crude. Bacon’s emphasis on a physical confrontation with the viewer – his phrase is ‘the texture of a painting seems to come immediately onto the nervous system’ – suggests art’s true power lies in its capacity to throw an emotional charge directly onto the nerves.⁵ So the real difficulty I had at this stage was ‘translating’ Bacon’s methodological principles from the realm of painting to that of writing: how might I arrange language so that it leaps ‘immediately onto the nervous system’ like Bacon’s images?

Referring to Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait* (c. 1659), Bacon says:

If you analyze it, you will see that there are hardly any sockets to the eyes, that it is almost completely anti-illustrational. I think that the mystery of fact is conveyed by an image being made out of non-rational marks. And you can’t will this non-rationality of a mark. That is the reason that accident always has to enter into this activity, because the moment you know what you do, you’re making just another form of illustration. But what can happen sometimes, as it happened in this

Rembrandt self-portrait, is that there is a coagulation of non-representational marks which have led to making up this very great image.⁶

I started to ask what literature's 'non-representational' or 'anti-illustrational' marks might look like. I also wondered how 'realistic' or 'figurative' approaches to language might be disrupted: how might a physical relationship between reader and text be established by way of 'accidental means'?

In the end I took Bacon's terminology from the interviews and applied it fairly directly to my work in language, though obviously this process took its energy from my own feelings about what poetry might be and do. But I knew I wanted to steep myself in the oils of scholarship and reception around the myth, and that when the time came to write I would have to haul myself out of that mode and 'forget' it. Because the act of writing has to be intuitive, operating straight off the nerves and the unconscious.

I was reading *Winter Pollen, Crow* and *Seneca's Oedipus* by Ted Hughes, and I knew I wanted to approach what Hughes calls 'the dream of an ideal vernacular' – a 'super-crude' language.⁷ To achieve this kind of language needed, it seemed to me, a super-crude methodology; a kind of wilful violence in the writing process. At the same time I was listening to a lot of blues music – Leadbelly and John Lee Hooker mostly – and thinking about blues as a model for what I wanted to do in *Auto-Oedipa*.

I think blues is one of the simplest, most utilitarian forms of music. It breaks melody down to its crudest elements, uses repetition to the point of banality, and the structures are inevitable, simple, terrible – a lot like the structures in tragedy. I started working out of the rhythms I was finding in this music, and wrote the first poems in the voices of the Fates and Chorus. These kind of stomping, urgent voices used a really crude, limited syntax and felt like they were made out of a rhythmic, sonic and textural imperative rather than a strictly 'meaning' imperative. In this way the writing was quite collage-like in its approach.

I really think this language is not about 'showing' the reader a world beyond the language: it's about *being* a world. That inhabitation of, and being inhabited by, language involves embodied human voices and, above all, tapping into the rhythms of language in our everyday physical experience of language as a verbalised, singing, dancing and performative phenomenon. This, I think, follows the Greek tragedians.

I like this description of mythic thought, which I think is what we find in Sophocles' *Oedipus*.

[Ernst] Cassirer calls myth a 'form of life' (Lebensform), a ritualized way of feeling, acting, and thinking in which repetition lends emotional and practical significance to life. Mythic thought is basically a pre-verbal symbolic form that remains close to bodily experience and feeling, even in its narrative expressions.⁸

This relates very much to your question, and for me it brings Beckett, Bacon, Hughes, Sophocles and blues music together. For example, in Beckett and Hughes I think rhythm is the imperative driving the production of language – a kind of violent rhythm which embodies the 'ritualized

way of feeling, acting, and thinking' referred to by Krois. Rhythm is the 'pre-verbal symbolic form' onto which they throw the language as if to see whether language sticks. You can hear it when their work is performed, but it's something that happens behind the language – it's something you intuit that carries the words into existence.

So yes, stripping away the 'symptoms of literature' to get at the thing itself is what I've tried to do. And perhaps the thing itself is nothing more than a rhythm onto which the voice is projected, or thrown.

GP. Re-reading *Auto-Oedipa* I'm struck by how many potential future directions it opens up, both in terms of subject matter and form (if that distinction is even remotely useful).

AMcC. Oedipa has opened up so many future directions, and I think that's largely down to my discovery of Greek tragedy. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that Greek tragedy prompted a spiritual and creative awakening for me. It offered me a philosophy, a space, a series of rituals, actions and myths, and a tradition into which I could place all of my griefs, traumas and desires. Michael Bell says that myth offers us a means of 'consigning our own internal violence to the past', and that very strongly chimes with my experience of tragedy.⁹

For me, the figures in tragedy offer a deeply-reaching emotional resource across times, cultures and geographies. And because these figures are built to carry extreme forms of psychic material they are terrifically hardy, and capable of carrying all of this repressed violence which emerges from personal and public psyches.

The other thing about tragedy is that it is always already crazily intertextual – and in so many divergent directions across cultures and time periods. I love this about it: the way you can throw whatever you've got – all your rage, your passion, your ugliness – and you can do this at whatever point in history you find yourself. But at the same time you can invoke a whole tradition of feeling. For me, tragedy is this resource of feeling you know you'll ever get to the end of, and it's plugged into the roots of (what we think of as) Western culture: it's like a tuber, sucking in all possible versions and inversions of itself.

Tragedy isn't a contemplative or meditative form: it's made of active, embodied speech-acts. And it's important to remember the figures in tragedy are not 'characters': they aren't people with 'identities'. They are simply carriers of feeling at the limits of articulation. So what I found in tragic drama is a way of speaking which deploys a range of non-linguistic sounds and para-semantic articulations, *as well as* language which ostensibly 'means'.

The real discovery for me was that tragic praxis treats *sound* as a valuable form, and as an expression of experience itself. In the para-semantic *aiai* for example, Nicole Loraux argues that 'grief seems to be expressed in perfect immediacy without the mediation of articulated speech.'¹⁰ In fact, the '*aiai* introduces us to a world in which there is no meaning other than sound itself.'¹¹ This emphasis on language as an effect of voice, and as a *sonic* apparatus has indelibly infected my way of working.

Tragedy deals not with the experience of an individual *per se*, but with the experience of an individual *as part and parcel* of wider society. It proposes that to utter is to be implicated in the social imaginary, is to enter civic discourse, is to necessarily be subject to the pressures, histories and social performances of other selves, as well as to the vertical and horizontal vicissitudes of etymology and language-use.

This enabled me to see speech-acts as communal acts situated within a vast gestural field of participation. I realised 'I' is, perhaps, not a 'private' phenomenon at all. Rather, 'I' is inevitably complicit with, or 'in conversation with' the array of performances, tropes, myths and masks which organise the discursive apparatus around, for example, 'I' as a gendered being, or 'I' as a poet, or 'I' as a daughter. In short, 'I' is always necessarily a social phenomenon, constructed through a palimpsest of cultural and linguistic mythologies which pre-exist 'I's attempt to narrate itself.

Now I'm in a position to utilise the methods and ideas I developed in *Oedipa*, and to apply them within different contexts.

Since *Oedipa* grapples with the ethics of telling her life story and explores the narratives and counter-narratives performed by her (and others around her), the notion of the strictly 'autobiographical' is placed under scrutiny, and the veracity of the 'personal' narrative is questioned throughout the text.

This has led to me coming up with the idea of the 'auto-mythographic', or 'auto-frictive' self, which draws on research I conducted into ways of speaking in Greek tragedy. The 'auto-mythographic' self is an 'I' which speaks personal 'truths', but which simultaneously throws its 'private' emotion against the context or backdrop of very 'public' mythologies with long and complex histories of reception.

The 'double mouth' of the auto-mythographic writer speaks of specific incidents, characters and experiences; yet the specificity of autobiography is offset by the proportions and narrative ubiquity of a larger-than-life-size mythic canvas. These two 'notes' provide a species of counterpoint – that is, two 'pattern[s] of expectation [...] rather than a fixed or abstract constant' – which strike against one another and, in striking against one another, produce a dynamic of interplay, friction and exchange.¹²

This process isn't a means of 'channelling' private content through a public form; rather I want to find channels *between* the two frequencies (the mythic and the autobiographical) via my own over-receptiveness to and over-identification with mythic figures (e.g. Oedipus/Oedipa). I am now using this methodology in my new work, and I'm extending and developing my idea of the 'page as a stage'. In fact, all of the ideas I've mentioned apply directly to my work now.

GP. Do you have a sense of where you want to go next, now that the project is complete? Are you drawn to explore this intersection of myth, performance and identity further, or are there other spaces you want to inhabit first? In short, what next?

AMcC. I want to reach into resources of feeling while also entertaining the idea ‘feeling’ might in some way be a ‘cultural affect’ or ‘sensation’. That is, how do we know ‘feeling’ isn’t simply a product of our social imaginaries? So I am still pursuing the idea of the self as a performance – as a ‘carrier’ of mythic gestures and tropes.

I have recently finished a second book – *Propositions* – which is not really like *Auto-Oedipa* at all, although it collects some of the ‘waste product’ I accumulated during the Oedipa project. It is ‘autobiographical’ in the sense that everything really happened, either to me or to people close to me. But this book occupies the realm of fact in a way my poetry never could – not in a strictly ‘factual’ sense. Perhaps the best description of this work is ‘trans-genre’, or ‘auto-friction’. But then I have less and less patience with ideas of ‘genre’ or ‘form’. I should also say there is some writing on Phaedra, desire and shame in that book, and I’m also working on a book of dialogues inspired by Joan of Arc.

For me, all of this work suggests writing isn’t really about communication: it suggests, rather, writing is what happens when we reach the limits of what is communicable. It’s what language does with the lights off.

¹ Matsumoto, T., speaking in an interview with Aaron Gerow, published in *Documentary Box 9* (1996) available online: <http://www.yidff.jp/docbox/9/box9-2-e.html>

² Pasolini, P., ‘On Edipo Re’ (1969) reprinted in the sleeve notes for *Edipo Re* (Eureka: Masters of Cinema, 2012), p. 10

³ Greene, R., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Fourth Edition) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) p. 897

⁴ Bacon, F., *Interviews with Francis Bacon: David Sylvester* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975) p. 59

⁵ Ibid. p. 58

⁶ Ibid. p. 58

⁷ Hughes, T., speaking in an interview with Ekbert Faas published as ‘Ted Hughes and *Crow* (1970)’ in Faas, E., *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980) pp. 197-208; p. 202

⁸ Krois, J.M., ‘The Pathos Formulae of Mythic Thought’ in *The Persistence of Myth as Symbolic Form* eds. Paul Bishop and R.H. Stephenson (Leeds: Maney, 2008) pp. 1-17, pp. 1-2

⁹ Bell, M., Plenary Talk, Aberystwyth University (Arts Centre Cinema) Friday 26th April 2013

¹⁰ Loraux, N., *The Mourning Voice: An Essay on Greek Tragedy* (trans. Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings) (London: Cornell University Press, 2002) p. 35

¹¹ Ibid. p. 39

¹² Greene, R., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Fourth Edition) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) p. 308