

Hey, look at this!

Neil Richardson writes 12 articles about his own poetic work and what people, ideas and influences led him to write some of his poems. The series will last for the twelve months of 2010.

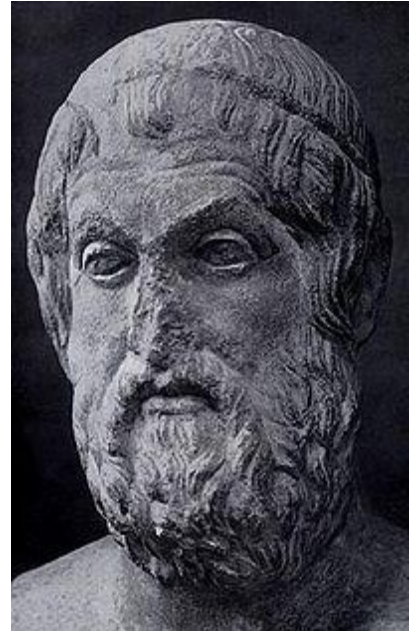
My Oedipus

Oedipus, my Oedipus, O where are you going?
On which path of pale and sun baked sand
Will you imprint the black mark of your foot?
The wind blows against me in an effort to dissuade me
From the path that I have chosen to choose me.
I lean precariously into the wall of wind
And tramp heavily the steep ladder of air.
Then why continue this comfortless journey?
What spring, once wound, must force its way
Out of its prison of pressure, slowly relaxing
Until expended, lying limp, unable to revive itself?
My mind is blank. My arms and legs move silently
Without effort from myself. I half believe that they are
Controlled, by other powers. How like an automaton I am.
Point me in the right direction and I will arrive.
No need to lead me, demoniac mechanic. No need to compute
My trajectory, thou Nasarite. But where, O where
Is the passenger in my chassis, my capsule?
Where are you going, Oedipus, my Oedipus?
Can a child find its way out of a desert?
Am I left here to die - Who has tied my feet?
Will nobody discover me in my helplessness?
Will nobody take me and create me a King?

Perhaps it is better if I die now, rather than live
To die later? What horrors may I perpetrate between
That thrilling possibility and that great uncertainty?
As I tread this road, am I to create disaster
Wherever I turn? And if I destroy some evil thing,
Shall I be rewarded with opportunities for doing evil?
Am I then to tread this path? Is there no other?

The path you tread my Oedipus, is the path you tread.
It is you who are the cursed. The path is blackened
By the soles of your shoes. The place dishonoured
Where you press your lips. The heart is broken
Where you win your love. The face disfigured
Which you gaze upon. Unhappy are the breasts
Which gave you suck. Each step you take along the path
Destroys a life. O savage beast.
You, procreation, breed death.

Oedipus, my Oedipus, where are you going? Who are you
Killing? And why do you let it happen? Why not struggle?
Because I change the path and go elsewhere, but
Always, underneath my feet, the earth turns black.



Sophocles?

Between 1969 and 1971, I was a teacher of English and Religious Education at Hampstead Comprehensive School. For me, these were two years of discovery as I came to the conclusion that I wasn't really cut out to be a class teacher. I think that I already knew it in my heart. I found that I didn't have the emotional maturity or attention to detail required to keep tabs on hundreds of children, and it was, literally, hundreds. The English classes were not so numerous, but there were only three members of staff in the R.E. Department and it felt as though I was teaching at least half the school for a weekly 30 minute lesson. The school was located between Hampstead and Cricklewood so it attracted a strange mixture of the children of the poor and rich. There was a high percentage of children from well-to-do but politically correct Hampstead dwellers who, despite having the resources to do so, resisted the temptation to send their child to private school, probably because they were hopeful of becoming Labour Members of Parliament, and it doesn't look good on the C.V!

I met some very challenging students, especially the more articulate girls who demanded to know what my drug-taking habits were, and did I smoke pot in particular. I tried to cover up my total ignorance of drugs, for despite having lived on the King's Road in Chelsea between 1966 and 1969, I never came across the opportunity. I often look back at this time, with Sargeant Pepper being released in 1967. I am one of those of whom it is said that since I can remember the 1960s, I can't really have been there!



One of the things I remember from these days is how deeply the story of Oedipus affected the 11 year olds I was teaching. They took it home and talked about it with their parents, and no wonder! The story has been attracting attention since 5 centuries before Christ. The heart of the story is the strange inevitability of bad things happening and how we fail to avert disaster, despite seeing it coming from a long distance.

The next time I looked at the Oedipus story was at Theological College in Salisbury where I was a student between 1971 and 1974. We had all been asked to do a piece of writing so that a staff member could assess our language needs and apply remedial teaching where

necessary. I admit to feeling a little offended, but I decided to write this poem and submitted it to the member of staff concerned. Oddly, when she returned it to me, I discovered that she had but the mark of 55% at the foot of the page. I never learned how she arrived at this assessment.

My poem was a reflection on my experience of finding things going wrong and walking into trouble, a trait which although having diminished with later years, is far from expurgated!

I think what interested the young students back in 1969 was the power of imagery involved in the themes of illicit sex, unnatural love, cruel punishment, imperious fate and the certainty of death.

The inescapability but unpredictability of where our paths lead makes a fine backcloth for Sophocles' famous drama but also provides a template for our daily lives in which so many of us are constantly surprised by events. Expect the unexpected is a good motto for many people, and always remember that although things seem tragic at the time, they also often work out for the better in the end.



Oedipus punished by having his eyes put out