

EDUCATING THE IMAGINATION

Alice Notley

Interviewed by Anselm Berrigan

*This interview was conducted in Paris, France, and by e-mail during January 2003. I wanted to talk with my mother, Alice Notley, about the experience of writing the epic poem *The Descent of Alette*, in large part because she set for herself the task of not only engaging the epic tradition, but changing it at the same time by creating a female protagonist. —Anselm Berrigan*

Anselm Berrigan: What kind(s) of knowledge does an epic poem contain?

Alice Notley: An epic is specific to a culture and contains tales of the origin of a people: their wanderings, their traditions, their heroes. Epics are stories of cultural consolidation (war is a means of cultural consolidation). Religious practices may be included, and the epic may even be tied to religious ritual.

Literary epics—written epics, rather than orally transmitted ones—usually handle the same kinds of materials. An epic has to do with the way a people, not a person, are or were. It assumes a body of people and a tradition of poetic storytelling. Dante and Milton, in their epics, were trying to know the materials and sounds of their cultures, even if their egos got in the way.

AB: Did you have this idea of cultural consolidation in mind at all when you started writing *The Descent of Alette*?

AN: Yes, *The Descent of Alette* is an epic in that way. I wanted to write the story of what had happened to women since the beginning of recorded history, the loss of their public voice and presence. I wanted to clarify how most of the cultures I knew, and above all the one I lived in, were the result of a consolidation that refused and suppressed the intelligence and talent of women. I wanted the story to include how everyone, female and male, has become enslaved to a warring male-ish idea of what the human is. I wanted to reverse the epic tradition by making the protagonist a female and her heroic deed symbolic rather than literally bloody as in a real war.

AB: How many, if any, of your poems since *The Descent of Alette* are epics?

AN: I haven't thought of my subsequent books as epics in that precise way, though several of them are longer than *The Descent of Alette* and their scope is perhaps more inclusive. I have two unpublished manuscripts, *Reason and Other Women* and *Benediction*, which are almost twice as long as *Alette* and have more cosmological concerns. They try to explain and explore, through the use of dream and trance and a general stretching of the mind, what we are. I basically think the species needs to be redefined and reinvented, in a way that finally includes women. This is an epic project. But I am not following the rules of epic as I was with *Alette*.

AB: You have spoken before of the impact of the Sumerian epic poem *The Descent of Inanna* on the writing of *Alette*, and I

wonder if you could talk a little bit about that here. How, or when, did you become aware of the story of Inanna?

AN: I became aware of a poem called *The Descent of Inanna* in about 1987–88. I was reading as many long poems as possible and also as many “early” poems as possible. I became focused on Sumer—modern Iraq—as the source of the first writings we know about. I read the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and then found out about *Inanna* in those little black Penguin editions. The first translation of *Inanna* I read was incomplete: there is a story of cuneiform tablets being divided between the University of Pennsylvania and somewhere in Turkey, the University of Ankara perhaps. The poem was gradually being assembled in two countries. Finally I found a complete translation by Dianne Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer.

I think that *The Descent of Inanna* is officially the world's oldest epic. The main protagonist is Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of heaven and earth. She makes a journey to the underworld, which is ruled by her sister Erishkegal, in order to try to master death—to understand it or to appropriate it as territory or whatever—but she goes where she can't. Her sister has no choice but to render Inanna dead. Death admits no possibility but death, and even if death is ruled by your sibling, the territory is absolute other. Inanna is stripped of all her powers and hung up for dead. The rest of the story has to do with how she is brought back to life and substitutes for herself, in the underworld, her consort Dumuzi, who shares the duties of dying each year—it is a story which establishes the Sumerian seasons—with his sister Geshtinanna.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* has a similar resonance in places, since Gilgamesh searches for immortality and must finally resign himself to the fact of death. This is also a theme in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*—humans have the gift of death, elves don't—a common epic theme. But in the *Iliad*, death becomes a matter of physiology, exact placement of weapons in war in order to discover what the toy body does when one dies. So it is modern like us. The point for me about *Inanna* was that the protagonist was a woman and her counterpart in death was also a woman.

AB: Within the frame of cultural consolidation that you mentioned before, there seems to be this aspect of epic poems that is very character-driven: that there has to be a strong central character or characters to facilitate the broader cultural implications of the story. And as you say, one of the major components of *Alette* is a female protagonist whose action was symbolic rather than blood-soaked. Can you elaborate a little on *Alette* and the process of her coming to life in your imagination to be this character?

AN: I began writing *The Descent of Alette* not long after my brother Albert had died his Vietnam-vet death. I was miserable, and when I went down into the subway I saw a lot of other miserable people. This was the late 1980s; suddenly there were a lot of homeless people. A number of the guys were vets, there were damaged women, and people with AIDS. I felt I belonged near them, and I began to con-

ceive of my character, nameless, really a device for recording the tableaux of my mix of reality and dreams and visions.

She is everyone; she doesn't know who she is, how she got there or what else there is but this underground world where everyone suffers. Thus it was possible to register the people and scenes of the first book without the interference of a personal story.

The Descent of Alette is meant to be a public poem. At the beginning of the second book, she then literally becomes "plural." When she enters the antechamber to the caves there is a sort of maintenance man who explains to her that the people she rode the last train with have become her, and when she looks at her body she sees that her hands, arms, and legs are plural. She is all of the people that chose to take the train that descends further down from the subway world into the suppressed worlds, the other reality. She is not allowed to have an individual character, because she is acting for all of them.

It's at the beginning of the third book that she loses all the others within her, including various demonic shapes, and becomes a single person again; it's only in the fourth book that she finds out her name and that her brother was killed in war (which Albert was not, not literally). Those are the only facts one ever knows about her. She is completely representative, no one. She experiences everyone's misery and then kills the Tyrant in a way that everyone must do individually, I suppose. The Tyrant is what has been bought into, literally. He is the culture and the economy. He doesn't exist but exists totally. He is a strange organic "plant" that must be ripped out.

AB: Is Douglas Oliver's *Penniless Politics*, which tells the story of a multicultural third party attempting to rise out of Manhattan's East Village in the late 1980s, an epic? Or is it more of a satire that shares certain territory with epic poetry? I'm also curious as to whether or not you read Anne Waldman's *Iovis* or Rachel Blau Duplessis's *Drafts* as epics.

AN: *Penniless Politics* is not an epic, and *The Infant and the Pearl* is not an epic. They are both satires. There is such a thing as an epic tone, which is general, tragic, and exalted. The problem *Penniless Politics* takes on is very specific and located; this narrows the explicit scope of it. The original *Pearl* poem is not an epic either, I think the characters are too few. Doug never spoke of any of his poems as epics, but he loved the long poem, the story poem, as I do. I think if you take on the quotidian at all—even as current events as *Penniless Politics* does—you lose the sense of the epic.

For instance, some years from now a Palestinian or Israeli poet may write an epic incorporating present events in the Mideast. That poet will probably speak in generalities of heroism and loss and overall result. If I were writing about it right now, I would be trying to get at what happens every day, the sheer attrition of what is Palestinian in terms of people and houses and institutions versus the obvious effect each terrorist bombing

has. An epic wouldn't talk about that. The daily detail—of whatever kind—and the epic are at odds with each other.

I don't think *Iovis* is an epic, or Rachel's *Drafts*; I don't think they were conceived that way. I definitely find both of them of use. But Anne calls *Iovis* something like a long poem containing history (in the tradition, or against the tradition, of Olson and Pound.) And Rachel says *Drafts* is a reworking of Modernism necessitated by the fact that the Modernists didn't do it right. Neither one is telling a story. Story is the primary mover of epic: one enters the poem through the story, and the sound of telling the story, as the two fuse. "Story"—as epic—is a poetic form. It is a big whole story taking up all the space usually filled with what contemporary criticism likes to talk about. But it's got the whole aching rejoicing culture behind it somehow. You don't feel, "this was written at a desk."

AB: Is nationalism inherent to epics?

AN: Nationalism is relevant if you take it in its broadest sense. *The Descent of Alette* is nationalistic for women—the nation of all women, and for the poor. Dante's epic is nationalistic for the Italy he comes down so hard on, and for the new written Italian language as opposed to Latin. Milton is nationalistic for a Protestant England. It's like that. Olson's *Maximus*, if it is an epic (I don't define it as such), is nationalistic for American poetry.

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AB: Can poetry still take the story and steal it away from prose, as you have suggested it needs to?

AN: Yes, poetry can still take the story and steal it away from prose. I think this is what I did. I'm doing it now in other ways, redefining story and character to do it. I use the workings of dream and trance to make story, without bothering to represent the world everyone thinks is there—I don't owe any obeisance to that sense of reality any more.

Edward Said has said, "I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents." That seems relevant to my sense of story and character. Actually I despise the word *character*, but I conceive of that as something all over the place, not disorganized or fragmented but so various and enmeshed in so many kinds of experience that only poetry can get at it, only poetry is flexible enough to handle it. I'm sick to death of the modern prose story.

AB: There's this artificial cultural demand to make poetry be as strictly representational of "real life" as possible. Yet it's

simultaneously clear that poetry, particularly epic poetry, is capable of creating different worlds, or alternate worlds that contain knowledge useful (and very foreign at the same time) to the world "everyone thinks is there." The stories of Alette, Inanna, and Dante's *Divine Comedy* rely on our world but certainly could not take place "in" it, no?

AN: Economic hierarchies and imposed notions of the sacred make us submit to one version of reality: How else would they get us to work on time? And if tradition tells us what god wants us to do we won't ever have enough energy left at the end of the day to find out if that really was god.

But there is another world, and there are moments when one, anyone, is there. One is Inanna standing at the doorway to the underworld facing one's sister death. Suddenly you are mythic, you have been touched by the "gods" and are in a true life-and-death or life-and-love moment, and the world as materialism vanishes. Epic has a connection to myth, and myth a connection to dream. Epic can be the poem of who you really are, of what in you has been forced down into dream.