Notley, Alice. “An Interview with Alice Notley.” By Edward Foster. Talisman, vol. 1, 1988, pp. 14-35. <https://voices.revealdigital.com/?a=d&d=BHJDIBJI198810.1.5&srpos=1&e=-------en-20--1--txt-txIN-notley--------------1>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2019.

*Introduction:* Following Ted’s death in 1983, Alice reconnected with Doug Oliver. Doug had been a student of Ted’s at the University of Essex, where he befriended the couple. In the late 80s, as a rising poet himself, Doug lived with Alice for a period of time in New York City. In 1988 – when this next interview was conducted – Alice was still living there with Doug. They were married the following year.

**AN INTERVIEW WITH ALICE NOTLEY**

Edward Foster

[This interview was conducted in the summer of 1987 and edited the following winter.]

**EF:** You lived in Needles, California, out in the Mohave Desert most of your life until you were eighteen or so, and after you moved east you once said it was still your "official hometown." Do you still think of it that way?

**AN:** Yes, yes it is. It remains that. In my legend.

**EF:** Not New York?

**AN:** I guess I resist thinking of myself as a New York poet. For some reason, it's really important to me that I come from the Southwest. It has to do with the way that I speak. Living in New York has made the way that I speak faster, but I think that I still articulate in a lot of ways that Southwesterners do and make sentences the way Southwesterners do.

**EF:** And you never stopped thinking of yourself as a Southwesterner.

**AN:** If you're from a place like Needles, you're always from a place like Needles. That landscape, that desert landscape is very powerful, and if that's in your story, you're going to have to keep it there. There's no way you can take it out of your story.

**EF:** How does it get into the poem—the landscape?

**AN:** It's only in my poems now, it seems to me, when I call on it, but you could correct me and tell me that you perceived it in my poetry. But most of the time that I am conscious of it as being in my poems, I have started out to summon it up for one reason or another—like when I got interested in John Ford's movies again last year and wrote the poem "Horn, Candle, Paper, Roses." I was interested in them from the point of view of someone from the Southwest.

**EF:** To what extent is your view of the Southwest shaped by the movies?

**AN:** Probably a lot. Probably those movies have a lot to do with my idea of the Southwest, but really it has to do with my relations and growing up in that terribly lonely landscape—in a very small town very far away from other towns. My relatives are kind of like people who are in those movies. There's no way around it.

**EF:** Did the Southwest sort of make itself confoirm to the movies' idea of the Southwest, or is it the other way around—the movies drawn from what the Southwest was or is?

**AN:** Well, it works both ways. John Ford's movies are these myth movies. I don't know how to talk about this right now, because I'm thinking about it a lot in terms of other cultures, in terms of the Greeks, and reading books about what myth is.

**EF:** Your poems make freguent use of narratives and images from films. Is there a reason aside from simply an interest in movies, in films?

**AN:** Well, it was what I had when I was young—when the basic input was the movies, and what you take in when you're very young is what's most important throughout your life. It's always what you read or what you see or what you do in childhood that stays fresh for you forever as an artist.

**EF:** How about narrative?

**AN:** I have a hard time with narrative. I once studied to be a storywriter, and the main drawback in my talent as a writer of stories was that I didn't know any stories. I can't tell a story, of anecdotes, story.

**EF:** What about your definition of narrative in the introduction to Jeff Wright's *All in All?*

**AN:** I don't completely remember what I said— something about how a story in a diaristic kind of writing, how a story gets formed. You can trap events from day to day. If you keep a diary, you slowly notice that there is a story formed or being told as you proceed from day to day, but you don't know what it is until you're at the end of a certain number of days. I do write a lot along that kind of line, but that's principally in the back of my mind, because if I keep it in the front of my mind, it won't work.

**EF:** Is that in any way connected with experiences like growing up in Needles?

**AN:** I don't think so. I think it's something I discovered from living in New York, from writing a lot out of daily details around here. In Needles, in the Southwest, in that landscape, I had no idea ... I don't think anything ever happened—there was no daily life, no density to daily life. It was very stark. It was very boring.

**EF:** Boring?

**AN:** Yes, for me it was.

**EF:** You have that poem "After Ts'ang Chih" about wanting to get out.

**AN:** There weren't any people there, and yet I mean there was a lot of life happening if you were a grown-up. It just wasn't enough going on, for me. New York is very busy, and you can find a story any time you get sucked into it. You just have to go outside and stand on a corner, and if you stand on the same corner for a few minutes every day, you'll probably have a story.

**EF:** What about religion as a way of alleviating boredom in that type of world?

**AN:** Well, it's not that religion alleviates the boredom of it; it's that there's a big emptiness there, and the natural thing is to try to fill it with religion. It's a landscape that calls forth religious impulses from people. It's very, very empty and very, very big, and you feel either naturally religious or the opposite of that there—I mean in the way that you do relate to religion. You can't not think about it.

**EF:** And for you, growing up there, that was important?

**AN:** There were about twenty churches in Needles. They've only got about four thousand people in town, but they've got all these churches. I went to two or three of them. My mother liked the Church of Christ, but they didn't really have a good branch of the Church of Christ there. First I went to the Methodist church, and then I went to this church called the Christian Church. It's a very fundamentalist-type sect—like the Church of Christ. It's a Campbellite church. My father didn't go to church. He went to the Masons every Monday—which is the same thing. And everyone did something which related to church. The strongest churches in town were the Methodist and the Catholic, of course. They were the biggest churches.

**EF:** Does that religious background enter the poetry?

**AN:** Well, I've never dealt with it directly. I hated it, and I tried to forget about it. On the other hand, my mother was an avid Biblereader, and I learned a lot from that. I became an avid Biblereader, too, and I learned a lot about how to read and how to study and hold onto words from that aspect of churchgoing. We studied the text. That's what we did, studied the one text, and we didn't go outside of it. Like the New Criticism. So when I finally went to college and went to Barnard and started reading people like I. A. Richards and so on, it wasn't very different from hearing my mother talk about how to read the Bible. It was all right there on the page.

**EF:** So the Bible was "the text"—language as authority.

**AN:** Yes.

**EF:** How about music? When you were growing up, was music important?

**AN:** Well, I was a pianist. My father went to Prescott one weekend and got this upright piano for two hundred dollars and brought it to the house. That's when I was ten. And I started taking piano lessons, and I took piano lessons until I was about twenty-one years old, and it was a very important part of my life.

**EF:** When you were at Barnard…

**AN:** Yes, I studied music at Barnard, too, and a little bit in Iowa. I just always took it along and did it. I wasn't a very good pianist, but it was always important for me to be relating to music.

**EF:** What type of music?

**AN:** Classics.

**EF:** French or German or…

**AN:** I played a lot of Chopin and Bach, Schubert, a little Beethoven. I wasn't very good though. I wasn't very good at playing any of these people. Ravel, Debussy.

**EF:** Ravel and Debussy?

**AN:** Yes. Bartok.

**EF:** And jazz piano?

**AN:** No, I didn't know how to make any chord changes. I had no ear. No one ever taught me how to have one or let me know that was something you could go after.

**EF:** Was anyone else in your family interested in music?

**AN:** Yes, my sister is studying music at Yale, as a matter of fact.

**EF:** Where did your father work?

**AN:** Needles Auto Supply. It's this great store—my mom still runs it. I mean it's all full of auto parts, and you walk around inside of it, and it's all full of these strange objects and devices and things—hanging and being in boxes and in the back and front. Everything is all shiny and knobby and colored.

**EF:** Did he open the store when you moved to Needles?

**AN:** Yes, he did.

**EF:** And your father was once mayor of…

**AN:** Yes, he was the mayor of Needles for a couple years.

**EF:** Your father seems very important to your poetry—"How Spring Comes” and a number of other poems, “Alice Ordered Me To Be Made” and so forth.

**AN:** Well, I wasn't conscious of what my parents were like for a long time. You know, I lived with them, and then I rebelled against them, and I went to college, and I was still quietly rebellious. After I married Ted [Berrigan], I saw them through his eyes, and he thought they were really terrific people, and he saw my father in this really special way. Then my father died kind of young, and when someone dies young, you remake them. I tell my story of him. I tell it in different ways. Whenever I get ready to, I tell it again. I look like him.

**EF:** You do?

**AN:** Yes. And my son Edmund looks kind of like him.

**EF:** Are there other things about Needles that you should mention?

**AN:** No, I don't know how to tell about Needles.

**EF:** Why did you choose to go to Barnard?

**AN:** Because I wanted to get away from Needles, and it was in a big city, and it was as far away as I could go without leaving the country. But I didn't know the name of it, and I went to see my high school counselor, and he said there's a girl's college at Columbia, but I don't know the name of it, and then I went to see him again, and he said, it's named Barnard, and I said oh, and I applied, and then I got in, and I went there.

**EF:** You went there with the idea of majoring in English or music or didn't you have an objective?

**AN:** I've never had an objective in my entire life.

**EF:** Except to get out of Needles.

**AN:** Yes. I have very, very vague objectives. I have never thought in terms of how you major or what you do or how you be or anything. I can't do it. It's too finite.

**EF:** But then you wound up majoring in English, right?

**AN:** I majored in English with an emphasis on creative writing. They had these strange majors there, and if you were an English major, you could either be English literature, English writing, or English… just English speech, and I think that there were two kinds of speech majors, and I did English with emphasis on writing. I took these classes, and I wrote these weird stories. Actually they were straightforward stories. They were all about small-town events in Needles, and at first when I wrote, they had as their protagonists people like my friend Tony Garcia. He was this friend of mine, and he was later killed in the Vietnam war. But I made up this incredibly melodramatic story about him concentrated on physical details: what it was like to ride around at night in a car in Needles and what the air felt like and what it looked like and what kinds of small things you might sense. It was all about sense data. I think all of my stories I wrote were about sense data. Very contrived melodramatic plots because I thought that every plot must involve a death and so I would write these stories, and there would be a death on page nine or ten—sometimes on the last page.

**EF:** And after Barnard…

**AN:** Well, I was doing this thing with stories, and then school was over, and I didn't want to get a job. I knew that that was a mistake, and I didn't know quite what direction to put myself in, and I guess I figured I was going to be something like a writer, but I hadn't discovered writing poetry yet. And someone told me about the writing program at Iowa, and I went there as a storywriter.

**EF:** To study under…

**AN:** No one in particular.

**EF:** Do you want to talk about that—being at the Iowa . . .

**AN:** Well…

**EF:** In terms of the poetry, how that happened.

**AN:** Let's see, what happened? Graduated from Barnard, and I was living with this guy, and I went to work for Radio Free Europe.

**EF:** Really? In New York?

**AN:** Yes, in the summer. It was the kind of job that they would get you through Barnard. As a typist. And I just kind of observed the kind of things that went on there. I don't think this has any significance in this story, but that's what I did. And we saved, and he worked at the West End [a bar near Columbia University] or somewhere like that, or he worked as a chauffeur or something, and we saved up money, and we took a trip across the country, one of those important trips that you always make from coast to coast, and we went to Needles, and we went to San Francisco, and then I went to Iowa. And I really didn't know what the hell I was doing. Suddenly I was in Iowa with all these people who were aspiring writers, and they all—their aspirations were so strange, and there were a lot of different kinds of aspirations, and some people just aspired to be short-story writers, and some people were writing novels, and I met some people that were writing poems, and I thought that was really strange because I had never met anyone who wrote poems before. And they were writing poems, and I almost instantly started writing poems. And I was really fascinated by the fact that you could do all your manipulations on a single page, and that the material was right there in this block, and there were terrific kinds of control over words that you didn't have when you were writing stories, and it all came down to the words, and I guess that's when I found out that I was a poet. So it really turned out that I was more interested in words than I was in stories or a kind of narrative flow. I wasn't interested in creating a reality. I was interested in doing something with words and truth. And so somewhere in there I started turning into a poet, and I broke up with that guy, too. And I started becoming a poet, and I went to my first poetry readings, and I went to a first poetry reading by someone whose name I can't remember, and he was truly horrible. He was a really awful person. And I went to a poetry reading by another poet, and he ripped up his book at the end of the poetry reading. He ripped it in half, and I thought he was a complete cornball. And Bob Greeley came to town, and he gave a poetry reading, and I thought he was really wonderful, and I wrote a poem about the fact that he only had one eye. It was my second poem. And then I wrote a lot of poems that were no good like any beginning poet does, and they tended to be in three and four line stanzas, and I guess they had images or something. They had image and metaphor type constructs, but it didn't occur to me that I was making that. I didn't know who I would have been imitating. I had read a lot of Blake and Yeats and Emily Dickinson. Those were the poets I liked, but when I started writing poems, I thought I had to be like the people around me who were writing poems so I read a lot of bad poets of the midwestern, academic sort, and I can't even remember all their names now. And I read a lot of Bob Greeley, and the first year I was writing poems I was kind of handling that material. But I was also pursuing this storywriting line, and I was reading people like John Hawkes, Nabokov, and people like that, because that was what we read in the prose part of the workshop. And then I got really confused at the end of that year, and I didn't know what I was doing there or what was going on or why I was going to school, and everyone was getting assassinated, and Martin Luther King got assassinated, and I felt just slightly freaked out, and I saved up all this money from being an artist's model and went to Canada for one day. I thought I wanted to move there. And I realized I hated Canada so the second day I was in Canada I flew to San Francisco. And I worked in San Francisco. And then I took a trip to Morocco and Spain, and then I came back to the Writers' Workshop. And I met Ted, and after that everything was different, because after that I knew what poets to read, and I suddenly—and it all opened up for me, and I knew who I was as a poet and who my models and peers and so on were going to be. And what language I wanted to live in.

**EF:** And who was it you began reading?

**AN:** Well, I began reading Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso and Ted's poems. And I read Anne Waldman and Ron Padgett. I read all of Ted's friends. I started seeing into Williams. I had read Williams before, but I began to see Williams in a different way. I began to see Williams in terms of the relationship between Williams and O'Hara, for example. And so I started seeing constellations of poets and what the real tradition was that the university didn't know about yet and wasn't going to know for a long time. And I became aware of who Whitman was and, therefore, who Kenneth Koch was—that kind of thing. And I saw it all. And I started reading Philip Whalen. And I read Keats in a different way. And things became this line—this line of poets—this tradition. And I saw that there was a place for me in it. And I haven't been the same since.

**EF:** In your "Tribute to Philip Guston" you said that in 1970 you returned to New York to "sort of formally undertake being a poet."

**AN:** Yes, I came here to be a professional poet. I graduated from Iowa, and I came here, and everything between me and Ted was all mixed up, and I wasn't living with him, and I lived in this apartment on 12th Street, the building that Allen and everyone lives in now, and I just wrote my poems every day. That's all I did, and I went to the readings, and I went to the art galleries and read a lot of books and did that. But I can't remember what I did for money. I must not have done anything as usual. Every once in a while I'd get my mother to send me about seventy-five dollars, or I'd go model for an artist. I modeled for George Segal. He did this incredible sculpture of me which is in this museum in Germany. And I modeled for some other artists, and I finally did… That phase only lasted for a few months, and then I did hook up with Ted, and then we traveled around together after that, and sometimes he would have a job, and sometimes he wouldn't, and I rarely had any work that was ongoing, you know, money-making work. And I pretty soon was having the kids anyway so I never provided much financial…

**EF:** 1970-71 you went to Southampton out on Long Island?

**AN:** Let's see, I came to New York in '70. I lived over on 12th Street until June. Then we went to Buffalo, and Ted taught this course at Buffalo which Charles Olson had started. Then we went to Southampton, and then we went to Bolinas and San Francisco, and then I became pregnant with Anselm, and we went to Chicago, and then we went to England, and I had another baby. Then we came back to Chicago. Then I was the person who had the babies, and then we came to New York and lived inside this little tiny space, and sometimes Ted worked, and sometimes he didn't, and I hung around and wrote poems, and we were always surrounded by these babies, who grew up.

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**EF:** Before, you were talking about this tradition, and an academic might understand there were maybe three parts to the tradition. You have New York poets and you have Beat poets and you have Greeley and Black Mountain poets. Is that kind of distinction artificial, meaningless?

**AN:** Yes, because those people are all friends. They all know each other, and they're all part of one tradition, which is modern American poetry. And most of those distinctions, those all break down. None of those people think of themselves as being that. They're all friends. They're enemies, too, but they're all friends.

**EF:** Which poets influenced you most in terms of rhythm?

**AN:** The ones who are probably most congenial to me are O'Hara and Whalen—offhand.

**EF:** But there seems to be a kind of nervous texture in your poetry that is not as insistent in theirs.

**AN:** It's pretty insistent in Phil. It can be. But he has a theory that he writes in the baroque, sixteenth-note pattern—is it?—or eighth notes. I've been pretty influenced by Kerouac's prose rhythms and probably by Gertrude Stein's rhythms, and, I don't know, I could name a lot of people who were some sort of influence on the music, but I would have a hard time thinking of who they are now. I think I was influenced a lot by my misunderstandings of people like Olson and Williams— it's totally misunderstanding.

**EF:** Of what they were trying to do.

**AN:** Yes. I've probably been influenced by O'Hara in that respect. And hardly at all by Ted, because his background was different from mine, but I was influenced by the way he spoke, very heavily by his speaking rhythms. I've been influenced by the rhythm of dialogue as perceived in the movies and on the street corner and in my own house. The rhythm—to keep the talking very rapidly to each other back and forth.

**EF:** Some of your poems are…

**AN:** I think the whole music of that has in an abstract way gotten into my total poetry. And the fastness of fast American poetry, it seems to me, comes out of dialogue, comes out of conversational dialogue, and I mean that's what O'Hara's all about. It's all about talking fast to someone. That's what we do. We talk fast to someone.

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**EF:** What about "workshop poets"? They claim to have learned from Williams, don't they?— and in a superficial way that seems to be true.

**AN:** There's this factory. You know, there are these factories around the country. They turn out these teacher-poets, and they make factory poems, and they go teach everybody how to make them.

**EF:** Is there any easy line between their work and the tradition?

**AN:** Well, I don't think about them. I mean I refuse to think about them. There's nothing to say.

**EF:** Nothing to say. Anything to say about poets who are political in obvious ways—like feminist poets, for example?

**AN:** Well, as with anything, it all depends on who's doing it. I mean that's the key to all poetry—is who the poet is.

**EF:** Ted once told me, "I have gods, and Alice has goddesses."

**AN:** I'm not sure that's true, but I made a point of calling my deities [sic] goddesses for a while because I like to turn everything around anyway, and I like to reverse sexual identities whenever possible—or I used to like to. I spent a number of years doing that in all my poems.

**EF:** Really?

**AN:** Well, Dr. Williams' Heiresses is about that. It's about my being able to relate to him and identify with him out of sexual reversal. I guess my theory was that it was easier —it was probably easier to be like Williams if you were a woman, because you couldn't be like him because you were a woman—and opposites can be same in spirit, and you could relate to a person like that in this whole opposite way—in a battle of the sexes way. I don't know if that makes any sense to you.

**EF:** Well, yes, but it's still…

**AN:** I don't do that anymore.

**EF:** No.

**AN:** No. But I've noticed I've been able to make use out of Olson. I think I relate to Olson a lot differently than men do, but I don't know how to talk about it.

**EF**: In any case, there is not a distinct poetry tradition for women and a distinct tradition for men?

**AN:** There's only one poetic tradition, and it's always changing. You change all of the history that went before you, and the moment I enter this tradition or this history, it ceases to be a male tradition, and its entire nature changes. That's how I see it.

**EF:** So that the men who follow you…

**AN:** I put back on it all this femininity that it never had—or bring it to light somehow. Suddenly the potential for me was always there, and it isn't a male, macho, sexist tradition. It's a tradition that I can be a part of. That I am a part of. That I always was a part of.

**EF:** Which is now there for men to use themselves?

**AN:** Yes. There has to be total give-and-take. You can't create this female tradition and keep it all for yourself. It isn't nice. It doesn't matter if men haven't been nice. You can't repeat their sins.

**EF:** Some women haven't been nice, too.

**AN:** Well, poets aren't very nice anyway.

**EF:** No?

**AN:** Well, maybe they are. That was just something to say in case you wanted to take it up, take it somewhere. Poets are very nice.

**EF:** Going back a moment, were you saying that what is "feminine" in poetry doesn't belong exclusively to women?

**AN:** I used to have this girl theory of poets, that all poets are essentially girls, and especially all the ones I related to, and that was what made all male poets different from other men. I think there's a corollary to it. I think that men who are poets have to be in touch with their girl selves in order to be good poets, and I'm beginning to think it's my responsibility as a woman poet to be in touch with my male aspects in order to work properly. I think that's probably true. The significant dreams that I've had this spring have been about being a father, my being a father. It's as important for me to be a father as it is to be a mother in terms of my poetry.

**EF**: Yes, androgeny [sic]. Maybe one shouldn't be half a person, but maybe that's also one reason people don't like poetry. They don't want that. Women should be women; men should be men.

**AN:** Well, a poet has to be in touch with the most delicate parts of his nature. He has to have this sense of delicacy. You do these small things with words. That's what you do. You know, almost as if it were with your fingers or something. There's this other part of it, which I can't define—you have to be a good father. You do. You have to be a good father; you have to give people direction. You have to build something.

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**EF:** What about "voice" in poetry? What is it?

**AN:** The voice is the personality that shapes the sounds that come out of the throat. That's exactly what the voice is. There's no getting away from the personality. Poetry is about personality. It's the writer or the poet giving her whole self, and a self is personality. And even if it's Chaucer, it's that. And I mean even if it incorporates all of these personalities and all of these personalities of the age, it's still Chaucer, and it's Chaucer's personality. Poetry is a display of pure personality.

**EF:** OK, Chaucer is in a different tradition.

**AN:** Right.

**EF:** So the poet works in the tradition, which is then newly shaped by the special nature of the individual voice?

**AN:** Yes.

**EF:** That is what continues the tradition? Keeps it alive.

**AN:** Yes, I like that.

**EF:** To what extext [sic] is the voice not words but rhythm and music in an abstract way?

**AN:** Well, as I said before, I think voice is organization of sounds, and I mean to a large extent it is that—it's a music. You know, it's pleasure in talking. People really do like to hear the sound of their own voice and the sound of others' voices, and you play with sound, and you play with durations, and you play with opening and closing your throat. And other kinds of play come in. And you're conscious of all sorts of rhythmic patterns and rhythmic organizations that come to you out of speech and out of music and out of jazz and out of classical music and out of babies and out of people screaming and birds, and, you know, all the ways that anything can sound when there's more than one sound. And that's play. You play with that all the time, but then you have your intelligence going, too, and so you make something that goes between, that uses mind and uses sound.

**EF:** Which is…

**AN:** Well, it's language mind. It's what-words-mean mind.

**EF:** There's the idea that the poet is the namer, the sayer, but that's very different from what we're talking about now, I think.

**AN:** Well, it's just another way of saying that. When you're saying that, you're saying that a poem is a name, that the whole poem is the name.

**EF:** Is the poem its own name or does it name something outside itself?

**AN:** Well, I think it probably does both. I don't think it would be any use to anyone if it didn't name something outside itself.

**EF:** Are you interested in linguistics?

**AN:** I don't know anything about it. I'm not uninterested. I'm just ignorant.

**EF:** What about the Sapir-Whorf position that language is its own internal coherence, that it's not referential?

**AN:** Well, I suppose it's useful to say that sometimes, but it is referential. I think that's why we have it.

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**EF:** What about love poems? When you have a love poem does it include the person to whom you're writing?

**AN:** Well, yes. Actually I think you write love poems out of an impulse to change the mind of the person you love, in some way. In some very specific small-time way, you are doing that, and you are trying to effect a change in the person addressed or show them something. Love poems are very personal, but you give them to the whole world, and at that point, they change. Someone said to me the other day that writing that kind of poem is like masturbation, but it isn't because you give it to everyone finally, and you show something to the whole world about love, and everyone likes it, and it isn't that. It's completely different.

**EF:** But if you take a seventeenth-century poem like Lovelace's "To Althea from Prison," the person the poem addresses is not in the poem.

**AN:** Yes, as I was making my answer I was thinking about times when love poetry has become a convention. On the other hand, that's true for that century, but it's not true for Wyatt, and I guess that's more at the beginning of a convention than at the end of a convention. I always believe that Wyatt is as miserable as he says he is, and that there is a real person behind each of those poems. And Wyatt is the one that we Americans like to read the most of all the love poets from the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth centuries. We like Wyatt and we like Donne. And there's certainly no one more real that the person Donne loves. We even know who it is—at least in the case of a lot of the poems.

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**EF:** What is the importance of the way the poem looks visually on the page? Does it make a difference?

**AN:** Yes, it directs what you hear in your head, and it organizes your thinking-reading about the poem. It organizes your experience of the poem.

**EF:** What determines a line? In American poetry.

**AN:** Well, that's very interesting because as poetry has gotten away from being strictly oral, you know, and it's become something that works by combination of sound and by sight off the page, then a line has become a more complicated entity. It's a combination of something that you hear and something that you read. We're very complicated people now with regard to poetry, and we work off an experience that is both a heard experience and a read experience. And a line involves both hearing and reading, I think.

**EF:** It has to do with both duration of sound and duration of an idea?

**AN:** Duration of sound and maybe duration of energy. And sometimes you stop a line because the energy has run out and needs to click into a new energy. I say I write until I reach the end of a page, and I do tend to do that. I write in these books, and I write until I reach the end of the page, but when you know you're doing that, you accommodate yourself to that length, and you do things that make it be a line, and it's not just that you've gotten to the end of the page. You make sure that there's enough tension all the way across, and that it's a good place to end that sequence of sounds and a good place to end that sequence of eye information. I don't do tricks at the ends of lines; I consider that to be corny. But a lot of poets do. I don't like to do it, and a lot of my lines will run over into the subsequent lines, like there won't be a clear break in the sound—the line will run over. And when I'm doing the alternately long and short lines, the shorter line half belongs with the long line. I don't like to make things be cut-and-dry. I just don't like that. I'm not that kind of person. I don't like units with brackets around them.

**EF:** What determines shape in a poem?

**AN:** I don't know. Different things different times. It might be the form you've decided to use or the form that's taken shape, or it might be a decision to repeat words or a decision to be faithful to an anecdote you're telling or a decision to be relating to your physical setting. All those things give shape to a poem. Or a decision to use a vocabulary or a line length.

**EF:** So there's no special way of knowing when a poem is over?

**AN:** Well, you know when it's over when it's over. There's no special way of knowing unless you're writing in a preconceived form or if you tend to be writing a one-page poem nowdays [sic] or sometimes you go on long. I guess you have a sense of what length poem you're going to write usually. I always know when I'm about to write a ten-page poem as opposed to when I'm about to write a one-page poem, and there's also a one-and-a-half-page poem, which I don't get too often. And I get an entirely different feeling when I'm about to write that one. "Hurricane Belle" I wrote during Hurricane Belle. Do you remember Hurricane Belle? It was the hurricane in 1976, and I decided to write a poem that would be the shape of the hurricane and the duration of the hurricane, and so I started it at the beginning of the hurricane and finished it at the end of the hurricane, and in the middle of it, John Candelari pitched a no-hitter in Pittsburg, and so that's in there, too. And it's all about how the shape of a hurricane . . . You know, it's a valid psychic shape. There's a storm, and then the storm goes away.

**EF:** In your book on Williams you spend a lot of time discussing what he called "the variable foot."

**AN:** I can never remember what he meant by a "variable foot" unless I read what he said about the variable foot that instant. Variable foot… I know I say in my book that the variable foot has to do with tone of voice. In any American poetry, there is a search for a changing measure, not a fixed measure but a changing measure, and I think that's what that was about, and I am about that. We need something that's more than a foot or a line. It needs to be something that's more nebulous than that.

**EF:** You say in the book, "Variable foot is maybe about dominance of tone of voice over other considerations."

**AN:** Because you have to be able to change according to how you're speaking. American speech is different from English speech in the ways that it speeds up and slows down, and it has to incorporate more or less syllables at different moments in speaking. It can't have a rigid foot. I think that with the variable foot we are all involved actually in trying to find an American way of going on at length, and that's partly what that had to do with. If you want to write a long work, there isn't a clear way to go on and on and on the way you're supposed to in a long work, and what Americans do is they wind up writing long works that are composed of short works because Americans so far have just had to invent each line and each stanza as they go along, and that's what happened in *The Maximus Poems* and what happened in The Cantos. You invented the music of it as you went along so you didn't… you weren't going to have a flowing narrative, and I think Williams was working for something that would enable an American to have that, you know, to have a flow—to be able to tell something long and not have to have it be broken up into parts. And no one has… the variable foot has not been useful for that really. I mean he got to write "Asphodel," but the fact is there hasn't been a narrative poem, a long narrative poem. There hasn't. And that measure hasn't been found yet. That way of going on hasn't been found and might not get found. There are other problems involved because for one thing no one knows what story there is to tell. And if you're going to go on and on and on, there should be a story to tell, and if people tell these stories that aren't stories… what he also does in *The Maximus Poems* is that he uncovers data rather than tell it, tell as story.

**EF:** But the poem moves according to sound, not story.

**AN:** The poet organizes durations and silences. That's the most basic thing the poet does. And before you have the words, you have the sounds. And Americans like to keep the sound going, I think—Americans like me do, Americans from the West. To see how many sounds, how many buzzes. You try to keep something open as long as possible and shove as much into it as possible. Williams is always trying to get on top of that and organize it, organize it into these threes, you know, but inside each of those threes, you can actually say a lot of sounds. There are actually a lot of sounds inside each variable foot. You try to keep the throat open as Doug Oliver would say and the possibilities open, and it's like he's made a line that's also a stanza. And it's a line that's split in three, and it's a stanza at the same time. You don't know where line ends and stanza begins or however you would say that. It's all one thing. It's all bound up together. The distinctions aren't clear between line and stanza. That's American poetry, I think. And there are lines within the lines, too, obviously.

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**EF:** How about using other people's voices in your poems?

**AN:** The American way is to be inclusive rather than exclusive, isn't it? You know, you have to find new words and new things to say and new ways to sound. You get tired of your own voice, but the other voices you use, you're still the organizing intelligence, and those people never get to be themselves in your poem. They always end up being projections of you, poor things. Ted used to yell at me about that all the time. "You think that you're using my voice, but it's just you! It's always just you!" I try to keep myself open to all of the voices inside of me now, and hopefully there can be different ways of speaking inside the same unit—because it will all be organized by me, and I control it, and there won't be so many clashes, and therefore, all the aspects of me can speak and be united.

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**EF:** When you write a play, I would guess basically you write as a poet, but how is that different from what a person who is proffessionally [sic] a playwright would do?

**AN:** Well, for me the first consideration is language rather than plot, and I know writers who go at playwriting very seriously and follow all the rules, and they will not let language interfere with their stagecraft. And if I'm going to write a play, it's going to be language.

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**EF:** Is it possible to teach a person how to write poetry?

**AN:** No. It's possible to teach people how to change their poetry. It's just possible to teach people occasions for poetry, to show them occasions for poetry. And it's possible to teach people how to read poetry, and sometimes you have to learn how to read poetry by writing.

**EF:** And that is what you do in the workshops you teach?

**AN:** Yes, I think so. That's what I do.

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**EF:** Ted once told me that in order to write a poem, there had to be a risk, that you had to be in some way on the edge.

**AN:** That's probably true. It's hard to talk about. I guess I'm always on the edge. I live in an on-the-edge way. I never have enough money, and I never have enough space, and I never have enough room or time or anything like that, and that all creates a certain amount of edge. No one wants you to write poems anyway so there's this sort of built-in edge to writing poetry. Anyway it's almost a sort of forbidden activity. People don't mind that you write poetry, but they don't want you to do it all the time and offer it up as a profession or a commodity or something that's equal to all the other things people do. They really don't want that. Do you think people want me to be a poet?

**EF:** Do you know why?

**AN:** No, I don't. Sometimes I think I do, but inside me, I suppose…

**EF:** They really don't.

**AN:** No, they don't. Why do you think they don't?

**EF:** I don't know.

**AN:** What you offer with a poem is simply not obvious. It doesn't give any obvious kind of satisfaction. Music gives an immediate obvious satisfaction. But art is now a commodity. It's total commodity, and poetry is neither a commodity nor instant satisfaction of any kind.

**EF:** Maybe people no longer know what to expect from poems.

**AN:** Poetry has to do with truth more than anything else. Well, I don't think anyone's interested in truth, frankly. People are interested in the surface of life. They're not interested in truth. They think they are. I don't know. Poetry would interrupt, you know. It would just interrupt you.