Keelan, Claudia, and Alice Notley. "A conversation: September 2002-December 2003." *The American Poetry Review*, May-June 2004, p. 15+. *Gale Academic Onefile*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A116411094/AONE?u=gainstoftech&sid=AONE&xid=3a9c3b0c>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2019.

*Introduction:* Alice continued to live in Paris after Doug’s death in 2000, and of course continued to write new and astounding literature. *Mysteries of Small Houses* was out into the world in 1998. In 2001, Alice published *Disobedience,* which particularly details her experiences as a woman in France in mid-life.

**A Conversation**

The following conversation took place via e-mail, beginning in September of 2002 and ending December 31, 2003. I first wrote Alice in 2000 after reading her book length poem *The Descent of Alette.* The transcript of our discussion covers many issues, including notions of religion, authority, poetics, first influences, etc. For verity's sake, I've left some of the e-mail captions intact, because they give an accurate presentation of the time we spent together (we have never met). I also include, here in this brief preface, issues of fact left out of the interview.

Alice Notley was born in Bisbee, Arizona, on November 8, 1945, and grew up in Needles, California. She is the author of over 20 books of poetry, including The Descent of Alette, Close to me & Closer ... (The Language of Heaven), Desamere, Mysteries of Small Houses and Disobedience. A second-generation member of the New York School, she was married to the poet Ted Berrigan from 1972 until his death in 1983. In 1988 she married the British poet Douglas Oliver with whom she edited the journal Gare Du Nord in Paris, where she moved in 1992. Soon after I wrote her in 2000, Douglas Oliver was diagnosed and died of cancer.

Though Notley says that Ted Berrigan was "the single greatest influence on my being a poet and on the way in which I was a poet, ..." she says also that she "found it difficult to be influenced by his style." She cites her many influences as: first Faulkner (she studied fiction at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop), particularly in As I Lay Dying, Blake, Dickinson, Robert Creeley ("the first contemporary poet whose work I liked, ... but[I] didn't know what to do with it ..."), Edwin Denby's [sonnets](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=gainstoftech&id=GALE|A116411094&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&asid=3a9c3b0c); O'Hara and Whalen to whom she "opened [her]self enormously," Gertrude Stein, Kerouac's [novels](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=gainstoftech&id=GALE|A116411094&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&asid=3a9c3b0c) and "at a certain point all of Shakespeare, so Shakespeare's language was awash all over me and I can still summon that spirit up if I need to." It was Anne Waldman and Bernadette Mayer whose voices, Notley says, she was first able to develop "among":

 In ways that are difficult to describe, I was probably most

 influenced of all by a kind of development of voice which took place

 'among' myself, Anne Waldman, and Bernadette Mayer, when we were

 very young ... Anne, Bernadette, and I heard some things in each

 other's voices that hadn't been in American poetry before. We heard

 a way a young woman might sound--I'm talking about when I was 26

 years old--without imitating the literary sound of the famous dead

 men ... I was obsessed with the fact that there was no sound in

 American poetry that truly presaged mine; that there was no poetry

 that corresponded to my experience; that there was no poetry with

 motherhood as its subject. I had my first child in 1972, and there

 was virtually nothing there in the poetry to help me know who I

 was ... I can't overstate the case. So far I wasn't includable in

 American poetry, but I heard something in Anne's and Bernadette's

 work that might help me be included.

In all likelihood, I wrote Alice Notley because, as she had found "company" in the unheard sound she historically shared with Mayer and Waldman, I had heard in her work something I wanted in my own work. I'll call it a diagnosis, one that pointed to inequities of self-perception, of gender, of politics, of poetry, of culture itself, without either removing the self from the problem, or more problematically, using the self to propose the cure. While it was Nietzsche who first called artists and philosophers "physicians of culture," the French psychologist Gilles Deleuze pushed the definition to question issues of composition and the manner in which literary work implies a way of living, a form of life: "the aim of writing is to carry life to a state of nonpersonal power." In his essay "Literature and Life," he focuses on the "detours," of syntax, of point of view, in all issues of what we commonly call writerly "style," that must take place to reach this state. I point this out not so much to place Notley in a French, theoretical context (which she rejects), but to give a context for some of the questions I ask her regarding poetry and poetics.

The other context--literal this time--that Notley's work returns to again and again is the desert--specifically, The Mojave Desert, a region we now share, she by birth and I by transplantation.

**Date: 9/4/2002**

**To: Notleya**

**From: Utopical**

It's Claudia Keelan in Vegas. How are you? The last time I wrote, about a year ago, I think, I asked if you wanted to have a conversation, a conversation that goes on, about your poetry, etc. and you said yes. Are you still willing? If so, here's a first question.

Reading you, I've come to see that you believe poverty is important. At the same time, I can't see that you share faith with the Franciscans, or have any allegiances to system of thought or religious principles, do you? How did you come to believe that poverty is important?

**Subj: How did you come to believe that poverty was important?**

**Date: 9/6/2002**

**From: Notleya**

**To: Utopical**

Hi Claudia,

I've been jogging so I may not be quite here but let's try. It's good to hear from you--what a year it has been for everyone I know (including me--I thought I would be better, in terms of my grief, but ...)! Anyway, yes to the conversation and so Poverty:

When I was young I attached great importance to certain ethical statements as received, viz. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ... And everything else about poverty in New Testament Christianity. It bothered me a great deal that I was taught these things by people who didn't practice them (it still bothers me--look at the Christian billionaire President and his praying Christian cabinet: I just read that Condi Rice gets down on her knees to pray every night ... Blessed are the peacemakers, yeah). I am not a Christian, but I think the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount is a superior one. It got into my system. Poverty also suited my temperament from an early age on: I am inept and shy, and I hate to work for people doing things I don't understand. I preferred being on my own to having money and never got a summer job in Needles. Though I respected my parents' hard work and meditated constantly on why one might spend one's life selling auto parts: it required accepting cars and then auto parts, and I've never accepted cars. But I do accept the fact that my parents grew up very poor and this was a way not to be poor: I didn't think they should suffer ... I became a poet and fell in with Ted Berrigan, who believed that writing poetry was work enough and that he shouldn't have to do other work that wasn't connected to being a poet. Of course, poet is the world's most underpaid job, but it was years before I caught on that no one respected it any more either and that hardly anyone really cared if there was poetry in the world or not and that was why it was underpaid. Still, I didn't want to work except for writing and a bit of teaching. I write every day. I read every day. Living with Doug Oliver I began to think more about how being poor one doesn't use, or take, what the truly poor--people in sub-Saharan Africa, say--ought to have. I don't feel entitled to more than anyone else's share of the world's money or goods. Although of course I automatically have that, even not having much by our society's standards. I have an Episcopalian Franciscan friend, a monk who has become a priest, and who took the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He told me that by far the hardest of the vows was poverty, since, for example, even in the monastery he automatically had health care and the people in his parish--Bushwick in Brooklyn--didn't. I feel clearer not having much; I don't feel part of the infernal and illusory machine which churns out jobs, objects, and the walls of the visible world.

**Subj: Sources**

**Date: 9/7/2002**

***From: Utopical***

***To: Notleya***

You sound like a Christian to me ... If you listen to Bush, his politics (poetics) are more attached to the Apocalypse, which was an added book, by dumb old John of Patmos ... If Bush is a Christian, then Jesus sure wasn't ... But that bit in the Sermon on the Mount about how to pray, by "going into the closet and begin newly, not with vain repetitions as the heathen do ..." Certainly your poems follow this?

Subj: Sources

Date: 9/8/2002

From: Notleya

To: Utopical

My mother always talked about going into the closet to pray except she quoted Paul. I always like the idea because it meant I didn't have to bow my head in public with everyone else: I detested public prayer, saluting the flag, and singing the school song. I recently attended a poetry reading where parts of the audience were supposed to respond with particular words at points in certain poems: it was quite amusing but I couldn't do it. I can't participate in a group.

I am not a Christian because I don't believe in god and I detest the idea of a male religious leader and/or model. I am extremely hostile to all the major religions. However, my thinking has been influenced by Eckhart, the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing, Buddhism to the extent I understand it (and given that I'm hostile to the Buddha), etc.

Are you a Christian?

**Subj: Sources**

**Date: 9/8/2002**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

Yes I am, not by affiliation to a religious institute, but by how convinced I am by the amazing gentleness in Christ's thought and his self-sacrifice. His father isn't interesting to me ... just another head of state who asks his child to bear the burden of his own decisions. Jesus is a son, not a father. I [love](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=gainstoftech&id=GALE|A116411094&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&asid=3a9c3b0c) the story of his life and believe in the actions he was compelled to choose. I asked about your ideas of poverty and faith because your work, at least from Desamere, is filled with children who live in the aftermath of their father's, or a powerful male figure's, decisions. The tyrant in The Descent of Alette is both a businessman and a father-figure, isn't he? The brother is also prominent, isn't he? And the narrator, or leading figure in Desamere and in The Descent of Alette is a woman who wants to--is the word remedy? The sins of the father?

**Subj: Desamere and The Descent of Alette**

**Date: 9/9/2002**

**From: Notleya**

**To: Utopical**

**Subj: fathers, brothers, tryants** [sic] **and bullies**

Let's see, the chronology of the work is as follows: first Alette, then Close to Me & Closer, then Desamere. [Note: The Descent of Alette was first published in The Scarlet Cabinet in 1992 and reprinted by Penguin in 1997. Desamere and Close to Me & Closer is a two-book edition brought out by O Books in 1995. CK] The dominant male figure is that of the tyrant, who is not at all the same as the father. The tyrant is the military-industrial-intellectual-artistic complex; he is how the made objects of the word have found their shapes. The father in Alette is the owl; a human transmuted into a purer nature by his death, and so able to teach Alette how to combat the tyrant. In Desamere there is the Satanic figure in the prose section, who is the Human as people sentimentalize it. And there is Robert Desnos. The brother is always the victim, in Alette and elsewhere, being a soldier and having been turned into a killer despite his sensitivity.

**Subj: Robert Desnos and Meister Eckhart**

**Date: 9/9/2002**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

**CK:** Your use of Desnos really interests me ... he's somehow a channel, yes? Is it Eckhart's mysticism, his direct connection to the divine that influences you? Is that a stance you seek as a poet?

**AN:** Desamere was the first work I wrote after arriving in France--fall of '92 I believe, into winter '93. For some reason, the minute I left the United States I perceived the reality of the global warming crisis, which had not penetrated my dim skull before. Desamere is my seeing of that. I was very lonely and went to a zoo here almost every day, the Jardin des Plantes. It is one of the world's oldest zoos, very small, and I stared at the animals dreaming up Desamere. I bought and read every book I could find on global warming and the greenhouse effect. Desamere is my version of summing up the second half of the twentieth century (like all the big-fat-tome male novelists; DeLillo's Underworld comes to mind) bringing it into the global warming desert future, pinning it down into specific lives, using dead Desnos to tell the story. Yes, he is a channel. I wanted someone French, and the form of the third part is from him; the form of the first part is from [Marie de France](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=gainstoftech&id=GALE|A116411094&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&asid=3a9c3b0c).

I'm not sure I know how to answer the Eckhart question. I suppose it is his connection to the divine. His heresy as perceived by the church was to make no difference between himself and god (though he didn't think he was doing this, it was obvious to everyone else that he was). I go with that. It is what I mean by being an atheist (which seems to me the only honorable thing to say one is right now). I like the ways he uses god and Christ, especially the latter, as metaphors for his experience--Christ is reborn in the individual soul each day. It sounds so grotesque in certain passages, and I get a kick out of that. I have a workshop I sometimes do where I lay out an Eckhart Sermon, Lawrence's "The Ship of Death" and O'Hara's "Joe's Jacket" next to each other. [A poem referencing Joseph Lesueur, O'Hara's partner. CK] Doug got a wonderful poem out of this workshop the first time I did it called "The Soul as Crumpled Bedsheet," so now I do the workshop using Doug's poem too, which stands up very nicely against "Joe's Jacket."

**Subj: Poet Be Like God**

**Date: 9/10/2002**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

**CK:** Well, [Emily Dickinson](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=gainstoftech&id=GALE|A116411094&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&asid=3a9c3b0c) didn't see any difference between herself and God either; it seems to me the history of Protestantism--radical Protestantism--makes that case, i.e. to be Antinomian, to go without name or company, which is why both Alette and Desamere seem to be--well, descendents--of that kind of spiritual quest. I guess I'm trying to get you to make a connection between spiritual practice and poetics. I know you say in your short essay "Disobedience" that there can be "no doctrines"! But both those poems are epics. Could you talk about your take on the epic, on the "new" protagonist?

**AN:** I find out everything I believe through writing. Most of my significant experiences, and most of the things I "realize" are found out through the practice of poetry, specifically during the performance, the literal writing of it. My poems seem to have gotten longer as the so-called quest has become more detailed, more exact. The Descent of Alette was a conscious attempt to write a traditional epic, first of all--not a modernist one. But what I was finding out--well in this case I had had an epiphany outside the poem, an incredibly negative one, about two things. One, I'd begun to know how bad my brother's actions had been in Vietnam in the context of that country (he didn't do anything very bad by "army standards") and of his own sensitivity (he was not what you'd call a natural sniper, if there is such a thing) and my own implication, as an American and his sister, in these actions. Second, that not one thing in the world, not one object and not one practice or habit had been invented, as far as I could tell, by a woman. Alette is about those facts, though most obviously the second one--but I wouldn't have chosen epic if I hadn't had to deal in some part of myself with the fact of that war. In the course of writing Alette, I mean in the story of Alette, there is the black lake and there is Alette's enlightenment, which is tied to her acquisition of natural "owl" powers. I became, after having written the poem, obsessed with the lake. Close to me & Closer is me wading into the lake, the black lake the other side of which is infinity. Desamere confronts, again, the necessity for a political stance and tries to combine it with the knowledge of the lake--which in this case is not the lake but the desert. Disobedience idiomizes all these themes, uses a flip, of-these-times voice and material out of a life lived in Paris to pull everything together in a more overt way. I have two other manuscripts, "Reason and Other Women" and "Benediction," in which I continue the research.

**Subj: Disobedience**

**Date: 9/16/2002**

**To: Notleya**

**From: Utopical**

**CK:** I'm intrigued by the detective in Disobedience and also by the notion of American-ness expressed in the first poem "Change the Forms in Dreams," where you write: "the only/thing American really worth bringing is the sense/that you must accept me, exactly./Not as your woman." What do you mean here? Do you consider yourself an expatriate writer, and if so, what does your exile serve?

**AN:** The detective arose gradually out of a dream process. I first had the dream of the detective looking for the woman in the back room: he wasn't recognizable. Then a couple of other dreams fed into the construction of this figure as a character in the poem, including a dream of a [childhood](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=gainstoftech&id=GALE|A116411094&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&asid=3a9c3b0c) friend named Tommy Harward (now lives in Boulder City) whose name suggested the name Hardwood. But then I got to a point, simply writing, where the next words that came out of me, because they sounded right, were "oh sure I can, I'm Robert Mitch-ham." At that point I knew I'd be able to talk to him for a whole poem. He became my friend.

I was recently looking at those lines ["the only/thing American really worth bringing is the sense/that you must accept me, exactly./Not as your woman ..." CK], trying to remember exactly what I meant. They are addressed really to the French, not to Americans--to the place where I now live. I am saying that I am not a member of your French culture, but I will not be a member of American culture, here; I am an exact entity, exact person. I am insisting on my individuality as an exactness. But then I knew the poem would be read mostly by Americans and that the statement works in both directions.

Expatriate is a funny word; I don't know anyone here who uses it, except for certain magazine writers. I've never heard anyone say "I'm an expatriate" though I know many people who have been here for years, are French citizens, etc. I'm not talking about writers particularly. You become part of an international community, Anglophones in Paris. I suppose I'm an expatriate at the moment--I've been here now for ten years. I don't feel that I belong either here or there, but it has become more interesting for me to write from here. My viewpoint is made more complicated by my being here, and my response to poetic language is shiftier. Language seems more substantial and less precise, more about texture and presence and less about meaning in terms of individual words. The experience of speaking and hearing French has made all language mysterious to me again.

*[Here the conversation stopped for several months and resumed again in February of 2003]*

**Subj: Becoming Animal**

**Date: 2/8/2003**

**To: Notleya**

**From: Utopical**

**CK:** The more I read of your work, the more aware I become of your interest in what you call "the forgotten possibility," which seems to be a figure more animal, more mineral, than human. Humans are always evolving into animals and plants in your imagery. Do you think that what we call progress is misguided, that we should in fact get closer to becoming animal? Is it an idea you got out of reading?

**AN:** I'll try to answer your question about the animal, but the answer seems so obvious I don't know where to begin. It doesn't come out of reading at all. We (my sons and I and then Doug) had a cat for fifteen years, named Wystan, who was very ugly, witty, and "good." He was a good being. If there is an afterlife, I would hope to see him in it (this sounds so corny). Recently I dreamed I had three sons and one of them was a cat. But this doesn't get at any of it. I "know" that animals and plants and rocks are as important and knowledgeable as we are. I don't think they are anything like the descriptions of them scientists make. But most of the scientists I know love animals and use science as a way to hang out with animals. Theory of evolution drives me crazy because of its pointing towards "man"--and being dreamed up by a "man." How come man is carnivorous if apes aren't? Chimps are somewhat, but humans are obviously unmerciful, inferior, etc. etc., so aggressive. I love the wild eyes of wild animals and how they don't even bother with people. You can't make friends with them through the eye--have you ever looked at a duck's eyes? I finally had an experience of burrowing owls last summer in Needles and their eyes seemed to take me in but they were doing their dance of trying to keep me away from their nest, which was somewhere on the high school lawn. I loved going through this with them. My Aunt Margaret said we were scaring them, but I don't think so. They were doing their job. Burrowing owls are in danger, as are most animals, desert tortoises, common frogs ... It's so unjust. I feel so stupid because I'm 57 years old and I know very little about animals, and except for roaches and rats and mice--and coyotes--they're disappearing. They're so much less destructive than we are. Their ethics are generally better, and they're so mysterious.

**CK:** Yeah, animals are pointedly what they are, unlike people. My dog Joe the Giant Schnauzer died in my arms about a month ago. He was definitely not good. He was Kingly and demanded respect but he loved me absolutely. I always had dreams about him and felt constantly that I wasn't loving him enough or rightly, that I didn't try hard enough to understand him.

I guess what I was thinking about in the question was how writing, when you are really writing, you're becoming ... Deleuze says: "writing is inseparable from becoming; in writing, one becomes woman, becomes animal or vegetable, becomes molecule, to the point of becoming imperceptible." Your writing seems dedicated to something like this ... the whirling, morphic style of Alette, and her dismemberment, etc ...

**Subj: Becoming animal**

**Date: 2/10/2003**

**From: Notleya**

**To: Utopical**

What Deleuze says make me nervous. I dislike it when men talk about becoming women in writing: I have heard other French men say such things. It means they don't want to give up power to women. They would rather say they are them. One imagines many things in writing but I'm not sure one becomes what one imagines. I am not Alette or Desamere: they are the ones who become. The dismemberment of Alette--the dismemberment of a woman--is something I've dreamed many times--still do--in many different ways: I know the dream well, it's terrifying. It's part of what's happened to me, on several levels.

When I was writing Desamere I visited the zoo of the Jardin des Plantes, here in Paris, almost daily. I became fascinated with the animals there and got to know them pretty well--it's a small zoo. It has a collection of owls and also a collection of vultures. I visited this zoo because I had just arrived in Paris and had no friends. Doug went to work every day for long hours. Desamere catalyzed in me as a result of visiting this zoo and too of suddenly realizing the fact of global warming, doing a lot of reading about that. I think I partly wrote Desamere to house the zoo and my feelings about the animals there, but I probably got very little of that into the poem, which after all takes place in our own desert. I spent a tremendous amount of time with the vultures and then managed only one reference.

I am now in the process of writing about our desert again, and my desk is covered with books about desert wildlife. My favorite at the moment is A Field Guide to Desert Holes.

**Subj: Becoming animal**

**Date: 2/11/2003**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

**CK:** The fact of dismemberment--how did it occur to you, on what levels, and did writing Alette help? I'm in Alabama, away from the desert right now in the scary pine woods near the Birmingham jail. The desert is always somehow in your books ... esp. in Desamere and in the vision quest she seeks.

**AN:** Now that I'm pinning it down, it seems that I wrote about dismemberment, in Alette first, and then proceeded to dream about it at key times. I don't remember how it occurred to me, since I wrote Alette out of what I was dreaming and "seeing" and I "saw" the dismemberment. Later someone reminded me that that was a traditional shaman initiation: the body is taken apart and put back together with some new parts. And I had read that literature somewhat, particularly Eliade. But I wasn't thinking about it at all--shamanism, my reading--when I wrote that sequence in Alette: it was logical and I saw it. Since then I have had a number of dismemberment dreams, as if this is happening to me over and over, I or someone is being torn apart, sometimes eaten by people, sometimes stabbed repeatedly, sometimes attacked by birds. I have a number of poems, in my unpublished manuscripts, that refer to these dreams. In the dreams the corpse is not given the grace of being put back together. After Doug's death, I had a feeling of being remade out of metal parts. I think the poet becomes more and more of a shaman, getting older, in the sense that so much happens to one, and there's nothing left but the poetry function, which is a healing, ecstatic function, as much as it is anything else.

**Subj: Shamanism and Reading**

**Date: 2/12/2003**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

**CK:** Since there seems to be a dearth of shamans everywhere I've ever been, that seems like good news to me. I'm hearing that you don't like--or maybe more accurately--don't purposely bring your reading to bear when you write poetry. Is that right? If it is, does your resistance to that kind of empiricism have a lot to do with the disobedience you've described? Do you think, unlike many writing now, that the poet can find the same or like-knowledge in writing as in reading?

**AN:** All of that and more. I haven't had to read the literary theoreticians/philosophers because I don't teach except for workshops; I escaped having to read them in college, by virtue of my generational placement. I think they're mostly a factor in the university environment. I know what the conversation is like, from a perhaps minimal exposure; I haven't the slightest interest in what the theory people have to say. I tend to think of them as more men telling me what to think (I know that about three of them are women). And I, after all, am the poet. I also think of the French theoreticians as people writing for French society out of the French language: I have a sense that Americans misunderstand where they're coming from, how they're educated and what situations they're really speaking to. I do an enormous amount of reading, but if I want to find out about owls I read about owls, not becoming. My reading for Alette consisted of years of reading long poems, also a lot of reading about Australian aborigines, and ancient Sumer, reading of Sumerian literature, plus books about owls, snakes, etc. My reading for Desamere consisted of a few books about Robert Desnos, the lais of Marie de France (whom I used as a former model for the first section), and everything about global warming I could get my hands on.

**Subj: Theory, Social martyrs ... New York School**

**Date: 2/13/2003**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

**CK:** I know that I started reading theory and philosophy to help my teaching, so I believe you're right about theory and the university.

I want to switch gears for a while. I'm in Mississippi now, going to read for the Mississippi Review this afternoon. The editor of the magazine. Angela Ball, asked me about you as part of the New York School ... second generation New York School. I know you lived in NY with Ted, and your sons live there now. To what extent do you see your project in conversation with say, Bernadette Mayer, Ashbery, Koch, O'Hara?

**Subj: New York School**

**Date: 2/14/2003**

**From: Notleya**

**To: Utopical**

**AN:** I was probably part of the New York School until the mid 80's and I remain of it, to some extent, through friendships and certain interests. I've written a book of [essays](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=gainstoftech&id=GALE|A116411094&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&asid=3a9c3b0c) called Coming After, which is largely about second-generation NY School people. I changed after Ted died, and then again after some other deaths in the late 80's, and I needed to become my own school, if you wish. I was obviously deeply affected poetically by Ted. I, in fact, learned to be a poet from him. But his sense of community was much wider than the New York scene and included such figures as Phil Whalen and Bob Creeley, Anselm Hollo, certainly Allen Ginsberg, all of whom became my friends too. And all of whom have some New York School characteristics, such as humor, which I myself seem incapable of not having, no matter how I'm writing. I would define the New York School in terms of its relation to New York City, how those poets were or are affected by living in an international city which overwhelms one personally with its own story. In New York you construct a personal story or character for your poetry in accordance with how the city's going, with what the city tells you to say. I sometimes think of Alette as my last New York poem, since the first section of the poem reflects so strongly the presence of the homeless people in the city in the late 80's. In Mysteries of Small Houses, I consciously tried to revive some of my New York School styles in order to reflect the times of my life I was commenting on. And certainly some of the verve is in the style of Disobedience.

**CK:** I felt your connection to the school in Mysteries of Small Houses--the sense of being in a present that has the past and future running right through it, like in O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died." I've always thought that the notion of time and its fluidity was one idea the poets of the NYS shared.

You talked about Ted helping you become a poet. You've also talked about your resistance to men telling you what to do ... but your poems are full of owl-men and maintenance men and detectives who often give sound advice. Do you feel a split between your resistance and allegiance?

**Subj: New York School, Marriage**

**Date: 2/15/2003**

**From: Notleya**

**To: Utopical**

Sometimes. But I have spent most of my adult life married, and am used to being in conversation with the golden partner--alas now not. I felt myself to be a sort of "school" with each of my husbands actually. Although Ted taught me how to be a poet, I did become his equal and he had no problem with that. He had a particularly selfless love for poetry itself. And with Doug. I engaged in a sort of internationally based school of narrative poetry, no problems. I like to talk to men and have another imaginary partner at the moment. (I'm not quite willing to talk about him yet.) I think I believe, or have believed, in dialogue, and one person speaking being formed out of the two present, the way when you talk to someone and you're enjoying it you lose consciousness of individual self--are the conversation. If men and women were engaged with each other in this way habitually, in all levels of life, there wouldn't be problems of power.

Ted's favorite quotation from Whitehead was, everything that is going to happen is already happening. It is the basic belief behind The Sonnets and he applied it to his life as he was living it. He also used to teach Frank's poems such as "The Day Lady Died" as past time playing back in the present and rendered as present. With my sons, I am now editing Ted's Collected Poems for the University of California Press--a very big book.

**Subj: How did Ted teach you to be a poet?**

**Date: 3/1/2003**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

**CK:** I'm curious as to how Ted taught you to be a poet.

**AN:** He was someone who was always being a poet so I too became someone who related everything I saw in life to my poetry. He had a lot of books, so I read all of his books. And we showed each other our poems, and he suggested changes (later I helped him). He also talked about forms, reading, further things to do. He quite literally taught me, though I never had him for a teacher at the Workshop. I hardly ever went to class in Iowa; I was sick of school by the time I got there. I feel as if I got my training from Ted after I graduated. I think I've said he was eleven years older than I was. He had already become this thing I wanted to be, but at great cost. He always said he couldn't have done it without pills--amphetamines--since he was a working-class guy from Providence; the pills had made his brain light up for the first time. I do believe that. I shared his predilections to a certain extent but my brain had actually started working when I was a kid in Needles and it didn't need that kind of stimulation. I was a liberated little girl and thought whatever I wished--somehow a possibility in the desert but not in Rhode Island where one behaves and thinks exactly as one's family always has and never ever leaves the state except to go to Massachusetts.

**Subj: Drugs and Vision**

**Date: 3/1/2003**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

**CK:** In Mysteries of Small Houses there's reference to drugs a lot, and a sorrow about it in the later poems. Did you and Ted use drugs for vision in the shamanistic sense? Did it work? What's your take on it now?

**AN:** I don't think I've ever used drugs for shamanistic purposes. I've had my most interesting visions without them. I view drugs now as mostly destructive but not more so than anything else we're up to: I think I compare cars and pills in Desamere. I probably consider the average drug addict to be more "moral" at this moment than the President or any of his company. I'm interested in the idea of addiction. Americans are addicted to lots of things: power, righteousness, fear, money, possessions, as well as the usual alcohol, food, gambling, pills.

**Subj: Addiction**

**Date: 3/2/2003**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

**CK:** At least one of addiction's appeals is changing one's sense of powerlessness to one of power. That propensity seems to be one you're protesting in many of your books, am I right?

**Subj: Addiction**

**Date: 3/3/2003**

**From: Notleya**

**To: Utopical**

**AN:** I think I listed power as one of the things that Americans are addicted to. In terms of drugs, the classic paradigm is less power than it is control: the addict, as in Burroughs's Junkie, takes total control over his or her life. Drugs are then both a regulating principle and a schedule: your life makes sense! You always know what you're doing. And you can live a very long time in this way, as Herbert Huncke did (I think he was approaching 80 and still addicted when he died). As far as poetry goes, there is a lot of power-wielding in our world even though the territory is usually pretty small. A lot of poets are interested in power. I find it hard to say whether this is anti-poetic or not. It isn't always cleanly outside the poem, either. Sometimes one is as good as the poem. I, of course, usually see all of this in terms of the male power bid; but there is also the mainstream poetry power bid, for example. This is the whatever-our-group-is power bid as well. There is also the sense that if one doesn't have any power, one can't do any good, can't even get published. As related to poetry, power is complicated.

*[We were quiet then for about 10 months, during which time Alice was diagnosed with Hepatitis C and began treatment. The rest of the interview takes place in the waning days of 2003.]*

**Subj: Everything that is going to happen is already happening**

**Date: 12/23/2003**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

Last February you wrote that "everything that is going to happen is already happening" was Ted's favorite quote from Whitehead. Do you believe this too and how does it make you feel? I mean, here you've been with Hepatitis C for 30 years and didn't know it, Ted died from it, also without knowing it, and your brother was a sniper in a shitty war despite his goodness who later overdosed ... and all the other things "already happening," both good and bad.

**AN:** I think I do believe this statement, but it's important that "what is happening" has a lot to do with what you personally have done and are doing. You can sometimes change what is happening. As Ted used the statement, it was an amulet for self-recognition and actions (possible change). I got Hepatitis C from/with Ted--doing drugs--thirty years ago; he died of the disease without knowing that was what he had (I didn't know until last Fall), but I was crossing forbidden boundaries--so in a sense I "knew." However, it is clear to me that I wouldn't know anything if I hadn't crossed forbidden boundaries, and knowledge is part of what is happening and the key to change. My brother was in a bad war, because men have believed in war for a long time; war has been happening for a long time. He had already gone to that war before he was born. Virtually every man I've been close to, including both my husbands, has done military service. He got a very bad war, because the military-industrial complex and 20th century male politics were happening in their particular, very bad ways. So the big question is, how does one change what is happening? There are, I suppose, specific answers at specific points.

**Subj: How does one change what is happening?**

**Date: 12/26/2003**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

**CK:** That's a very good question. Your answer suggests that for you, changing what was happening involved knowing you were crossing forbidden boundaries, without fearing what the result or results would be. Has the achievement of knowledge always involved this dynamic?

**AN:** Not always directly. I've unfortunately learned so much from being near people who were dying, and then grieving for them later. But many of them had been "disobedient" and almost all the poets I know are disobedient--the vocation has that requirement somehow. No one wants you to be a poet; in being a poet one is disobeying society's wishes. But I've learned what I know from all the ways I've suffered, in disobedience and obedience, and that's the knowledge of my poetry. Society's interest is in having everyone who has disobeyed reform. I have only reformed very superficially: I'm loyal to everything I've done and all the people I've been close to. I'm loyal to Mitch-ham, the seedy detective, who is my Will in Disobedience. Finally, ideas like "the will" seem seedy in themselves, so why not have a dilapidated, not terribly good actor represent that? All ideas are pretty seedy, aren't they?

**Subj: Ideas and Fictionality**

**Date: 12/28/2003**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

Not the good ones, which I admit are few. The necessity of disobedience is a profound idea and has informed all the poetry, social movements, and even architecture that I love, structures where a new kind of "reform" is made alright, but a reform in service of the disobedience which opens categories to a further inclusiveness. Blake and his "without contraries there is no progression," Williams's Spring and All, the relationship of the civil rights museum's form in Memphis to King's notion of the "beloved community." All those structures "change what is happening," in conventional ideas of law of beauty, of responsibility. I'm not thinking of "the idea" as Wallace Stevens did, as something that is conceived in an individual imagination and then foisted upon a reader in place of the world, but as something more related to the French use of the word--the idee, a plan, a suggestion, a dream--which participates with the world, not exclusive of it. You're right that ideas like "the will" seem seedy, or simply empty, but Mitch-ham's presentation of your Will in Disobedience, his pathos, is something I follow and therefore know more about how you view deterministic ideas such as "the will."

On p. 94 in Disobedience where Mitch is talking about "the slip" as transgression and Alice steps in and says "I'm trying to be as clear as possible / as unfictional as possible / given that I have allowed 'fiction' in." What is your sense of the fictional? A lot of poets--I think of Stevens, Duncan, Susan Howe, others—promote the inherent fictionality of the word/world. I don't feel that belief when I read you.

**Subj: Fiction**

**Date: 12/29/2003**

**From: Notleya**

**To: Utopical**

A sense of our fictions is something I struggle with endlessly. I believe a fictional view of existence has been imposed upon us: that time and will and history are the result of other people's fictions taking over whatever the "everything" may be. I don't believe any of the stories I've been handed: the scientific story for example. And I'm not interested in what historical figures did: I don't think they did it like that. I believe the story my brother told me as I present it in Mysteries of Small Houses, but I omitted some events to make the events more streamlined and believable as art (can you feature that? More happened than even in the poem). I don't think my brother lived that so-called story as story. I think he lived it as shock and instances of--what--confrontation in chaos? But Mitch-ham is a Total, blatant fiction, so I really enjoy his presence. In Disobedience, I posit, rather than story or narrative as reality, the "tableau." That is, the scene impregnated with event and time crisscrossing back and forth. This is based on my sense of how things "happen" to me and also on the way my dreams operate. My dreams don't contain long stories, they contain these tableaux. Doug's dreams however were stories, and we used to discuss this, particularly when I was writing Disobedience. There may be a large gender difference, based on prevalent social perceptions and how one is brought up to be in "the story."

**Subj: Fictions**

**Date: 12/29/2003**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

So then, I'm hearing you do believe we operate in, or struggle inside of, fictions imposed upon us--patriarchal fictions, scientific fictions, historical adaptations--but that sometimes something (awareness of the fiction, personal fear or love or desperation) breaks through and time becomes real momentarily? What your brother lived through, for example, and how he understood it, how he told you about it. A tableau suggests a series, a seriality, which given in individual conscience, would delineate the individual's preoccupations. The recurrence, for example, of the caves in The Descent of Alette and Disobedience, and the first woman who reappears as soul in Disobedience. Caves and reclaiming a first woman ... Fake male guides. Are you trying to write yourself out of the fictions when you write?

**Subj: Fictions**

**Date: 12/30/2003**

**From: Notleya**

**To: Utopical**

Sometimes, but not always. This is very sticky. One thing I often think is that everyone operates as if she/he were in a novel. To this extent, I find the rise of the novel, the novel itself, something like a culprit. (Followed of course by the film.) I think it would be a very good thing if the novel could be demolished, but not in a post-modern way where you just write another kind of novel. I love the narrative poem because it can create "extension" without all that psychological tyranny. In poetry, words themselves lead you out of time and the story: they stop you or they say "this part of the so-called story can be gotten through very quickly because the important thing, after all, is the poem." And why should anyone identify with a 'character' in a poem? I don't believe one escapes time by being within certain moments: I think it really isn't there. The first mother in Alette doesn't really correspond to the Soul in Disobedience. The first mother is the first woman--Lucy the African skeleton; the Soul in Disobedience is the narrator's soul. She isn't damaged as the First Woman is; she's whole.

With regard to seriality, tableaux are not necessarily experienced as serial and connective. In The Descent of Alette, the caves don't make a linear story together, they may be parts of something but they aren't all of them. Their order isn't terribly important (I had a music professor in college who compared a certain kind of medieval music to stringing beads). My brother didn't necessarily tell me his "story" in order--he told me these things that happened. My memory of what he told me imposed a second order (I have a set of notes from the meeting); then a third order was imposed by the writing of the poem in Mystery of Small Houses. When you're asked to think of everything, it tends not to come "in order." People who practice storytelling (in bars or professionally) give an order to events so they can remember them. Time becomes a mnemonic trick.

**Subj: Fictions**

**Date: 12/30/2003**

**From: Utopical**

**To: Notleya**

I suppose it's their "underness" that connects Lucy and the Soul for me. Both exist in a fiction which would keep them under, if Alette in the one case, or the Soul herself in Disobedience, didn't keep "retrieving" her. Perhaps Soul isn't broken, but she's definitely in conflict with the story she finds herself in.

Aren't the tableaux of your dreams cinematic in the same sense film is? At least "serious" film? The tableaux in The Descent of Alette also reminds me of Spenser and The Faerie Queene.

**Subj: Fictions, Auld Lang Syne**

**Date: 12/31/2003**

**From: Notleya**

**To: Utopical**

The First Man and the First Woman are standard figures in myth. The First Woman is that kind of First Woman. I read a lot of Native American myth before writing The Descent of Alette and was quite influenced by it, particularly Dine bahane, a translation/rendering in English of the Navajo creation cycle, by Paul Zolbrod. In Navajo and Hopi mythology there is an "emergence" of the first people through successive worlds--five in the Navajo story and four in the Hopi. My descending levels of reality in The Descent of Alette have more to do with this "emergence," reversed, than they do with, say, Dante. When I told my mother how Alette ends--how Alette kills the tyrant--she said, that sounds just like an American Indian story.

As for the tableaux, they're not cinematic, they're dream-like. The caves in The Descent of Alette--and much of the material in Disobedience--comes directly from either dreams or automatic (tranced) envisioning. The rule in The Descent of Alette was to take an element from a dream and then to "see" as quickly as possible whatever I "saw" with my eyes closed, to use it without judging it. That is, the initial element would trigger an automatic visionary sequence which would become a "cave." I've been studying my dreams for the past 20 years or more; much of my theorizing about the time and tableaux is based on these dream studies. I've also thought about the traditional relating of myth to dream, that a myth is a dream become more wakeful and made useful to more than one person. I never think about film; I know there are a couple of films in the caves, but they are dreamed.

I've already mentioned that I read a lot of books by Mircea Eliade right before I wrote Alette. He says, over and over, that among indigenous peoples, when someone died, when something bad happens, the only thing to do is to sing the world back into creation: start over again at the very beginning. My books always seem to be about trying to find that beginning in order to start over. I think I should point out that in such cultures, one must think about time in an entirely different way. Eliade (who knows how much he knows?) speaks constantly of sacred and profane time. The Australian aboriginal life was geared almost exclusively towards sacred time; there were sacred stories always going on--one lived them and they were embedded in the landscape (as Shiprock, in New Mexico, is one of the monsters killed by the Twins in the Navajo cycle).

I haven't read much Spenser; it's gorgeous but a bit too late for my purposes.

Happy New Year, Claudia! (We are starting over again.)

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