Notley, Alice. Interview by Stevens Institute of Technology Students. 1980. *Pennsound,* <https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Notley/Notley-Alice_Interview-Stevens-Institute-of-Technology-students_1980.mp3>. MP3. Accessed 28 Oct. 2019.

*Introduction:* In 1976, Alice Notley and Ted Berrigan (who married in 1972) moved back to New York City after brief residences in Chicago and Essex. They lived at 101 St. Mark’s Place with their two children, Anselm and Edmund Berrigan, until Ted’s death due to Hepatitis C in 1983. During this time period, the couple was particularly tight on money, doing poetry readings (and, in Ted’s case, teaching) around the city to pay the bills. This interview with Alice from 1980 – the earliest interview I could find – was recorded at the Stevens Institute of Technology, where Ted taught at the time.

**Interview by Stevens Institute of Technology Students**

**Student One:** We are with Alice Notley. Let’s start off with, what is poetry?

**Alice Notley:** What is poetry?

**S1:** Well, to you.

**AN:** Poetry is these things I write in verse. It’s these words. It’s what I make when I sit down to write something on a piece of paper. It has a certain shape and size and a certain kind of tension between the words and tension between the lines, it’s a thing made up of words and lines. Williams says it’s a machine; I’m not too pleased with that, actually, I’m sick of that. I suppose it’s something like that. But I’m talking about a poem, not about poetry, that’s a really hard word to deal with. Poetry is a kind of, you know, a strange, a terrible word. It’s used to discuss springtime and romance and good feeling and despair and stuff and anyone’s life. I don’t know anything about that word. What do you think about it?

**S1:** That’s what I was asking. Alright. After I heard a lot of your poems over the [indistinguishable], you were here last year too…

**AN:** Yes.

**S1:** …they gave me a very good impression of your poems. They deal with a lot of feelings, and love, you know that kind of stuff. Can you make a definition of love?

**AN:** A definition of love… it’s a good thing Ed isn’t here! Ed thinks love doesn’t exist.

**S1:** Because he’s in Stevens.

[Alice softly laughs, as the student chuckles.]

**AN:** No, he thinks love is a kind of word that’s used to organize all these other feelings which are more primitive, I guess, more… [inaudible], or more violent, or more positively destructive than these feelings are once we call them “love.” And he may not be far from wrong – but once you say love then you’ve organized everything into something positive, you know, that can include the erotic feelings and feelings towards one’s fellow creature and feelings towards one’s children and parents… what do you want to know about love? It’s… I don’t have definitions of things, I don’t know how to define. I notice you *ask* for definitions though – when you interview. That’s what you did when you interviewed Phillip.

**S1:** Yes.

**AN:** And he answered very nicely. He’s…

**S1:** He’s a religious…

**AN:** He’s a religious person, and so his beliefs were kind of all settled for him in a way, and he could talk about them with great fervor and he had a system. I’m not sure I have a system, so it makes it hard for me to say what’s poetry, what’s not. I just go around being myself and hoping it all works out and hoping the poetry works out.

**Student Two:** Is there any particular reason? For what you do – write poetry, stories, everything? Do you write for any particular reason?

**AN:** No, I don’t know why I do it. I’m not sure any poets really do know why they do it. They all say they do, but I think they’re all, when they’re doing that, they’re just writing another essay.

[Alice chuckles.]

Some people think that you’re a poet, you become a poet when you’re four years old and it happens for no reason, anyone knows why. And I think that that’s probably true, and it seems to me that it happened to me when I was about four years old. The poet Picardo Racusi talks about this somewhere. I suppose that you find out when you’re about four that you get a certain kind of attention from being able to use words that you wouldn’t get otherwise. But I can remember something like that. I can remember a kind of vocabulary and impressing, suddenly impressing people with it. But what I find more interesting is the fact that I acquired the vocabulary and what made me be able to do that first - before I started impressing the people - I knew the roots first. But I’ve always loved words. I like the way they feel in my mouth and on my tongue… sometimes I like the words to be very beautiful and sometimes I like them to be… plain. And I really like words, and that’s why I write poems. Because I’m able to transfer all my feelings, a bit, everything towards words. Yeah… it’s like love.

**S1:** Love for poems.

**AN:** Well, it’s like love of words.

**S1:** Words.

**AN:** It’s like loving a person.

**S1:** Communication.

**AN:** Pardon?

**S1:** A communication.

**AN:** No… it’s more like a self-proclamation.

**S1:** When you write poems, do you, like, propose a poem to someone to think of? Or, just…

**AN:** No…

**S1:** …to yourself?

**AN:** …when I write poems, I write poems to nobody, on the one hand, at least while I’m writing. While you’re writing, you’re not yourself or anybody; you’re just writing, it’s a magic. And you’re inspired and, it’s true, you’re inspired and at least while you’re doing it properly and you’re just doing, just writing, and you’re nowhere and you’re no one. It’s great. But… I like to impress people with my poems, but usually specific people. I think, you know, “I’d like this guy to see this poem. I’d really like for him to like this poem.” Or, “I think I’ll write something *X* would really like.” But then I don’t, that doesn’t usually happen. That’s kind of fog in the road. Two days later, you write a poem and you’re not thinking about that person at all, and then in bed three days later after that, you realize you’ve written a perfect poem to impress *X.* And that’s just the [unintelligible] of pleasure.

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**S2:** Do you wait for, like, one day of inspiration, or do you seek it out?

**AN:** I court it a lot. But you learn tricks for courting inspiration. I’ve learned a lot of them over the years. Simple things like you read a book by a poet you like, and you straighten up your desk, turn off all the lights but one light. You think of someone you like. You decide not to think about anyone you know. You put some music on, turn the television off and walk around five times. And then there are other tricks that have to do with writing too… get some words in your head, get two words, look through your notebooks to see if you have a line somewhere, write down the line, start writing. Things like that. Inspiration. Look out the window… where do you get your inspiration?

**S2:** Things like…

**AN:** Always?

**S2:** …just some stuff that I... just about, I mean, [unintelligible] are the time I deliberately set out to write something, or if I do, I’ll just basically keep it in my subconscience. Plus, the stuff I write, usually it’s, like, done in a period of about five or ten minutes and then I just refine it over…

**AN:** Mhm.

**S2:** …however long I keep looking at it. That’s basically the way it is, it usually comes to me in just bursts. I mean, I’ve been doing… the last week, I’d say I’ve probably put out about a full twenty pages worth of stuff. I mean, quality and whatnot…

**AN:** That’s a lot, that’s a lot.

**S2:** …sometimes I don’t do anything. I think it’ll… I’d say about half of that I didn’t… took about six hours. So about Friday night to Saturday morning. Stuff just kept coming out. So… that’s personally the way it works, you know, with me.

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**AN:** I walk around with a small notebook that I find, that… I don’t write in it so much anymore, I just… I used to walk around a lot looking for poetry. And back in that word which you asked me to define – which I guess is everything. And so I used to go out walking with my notebook and a pencil and look for it, you know, try to see where it was, or… what was going to [paper rustling makes Notley inaudible] itself to me that day, you know, what was [paper rustling] of it was going to turn me on. But I seem to be increasingly… as I get older, I can’t do it anymore. I feel like I’m using the world in this funny way, or using my life… I didn’t, I never used to feel that way before, but I don’t like to do it so much anymore, but I do overhear things, occasionally phrases, or I see words here and there, or I see someone and I remember what that person looks like. But I guess I don’t like to go looking for it. I just don’t like to go looking for it anymore. I prefer to have it come to me.

**S2:** Have you ever tried to –

**AN:** But I want to be turned on all the time! I want to have all my senses open and I want to be taking it in, but I don’t want to know I’m doing it all the time.

**S2:** Have you ever tried to rewrite other people’s poems?

**AN:** Oh sure! Well, I’ve done at least exercises and assigned other people to do those exercises lots of times. Do you mean, like, by your friends, or by famous dead guys? Or any of that, sure. That’s one of the things that you can do to loosen up or to have fun, which is the basic thing that… which is what you do when you write poetry: tremendous, profound fun.